Japanese learners' refusal and apology problems: A pilot study

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Many Japanese English students have difficulty using appropriate expressions in situations where they need to show politeness. The purposes of this pilot study are to explore what problems Japanese college students have in expressing refusal and apology in English and what causes those problems. Fifty-three Japanese college students were requested to write an email message to their teacher to explain that they would not be able to attend dinner because of an urgent matter. Their messages were compared with those written by eight native English-speaking (NS) teachers. In addition, three typical samples written by Japanese students were evaluated by NS teachers. The results indicated that many of their expressions of refusal and apology were not appropriate, and NSs considered them abrupt or rude. The inappropriateness often came from incorrect transfer from their first language, Japanese, and lack of pragmatic knowledge.

多くの日本人学生にとって、丁寧さを示すべき場面において適切な英語表現を使うことは難しい。本稿は、日本人大学生が英語で断りや謝罪を表現する際にどのような問題が生じるのか、またその原因は何なのかを探るためのパイロットスタディである。53人の大学生が、急用で食事会に参加できなくなった旨を先生に伝えるEメールを書き、8人のネイティブの英語教員が書いたEメールと比較された。また、学生が書いたEメール3例についてネイティブ英語教員に評価をしてもらった。その結果、多くの学生の断り表現や謝罪表現が適切ではないことが明らかになり、ネイティブ・スピーカーに丁寧さの不足や無礼を指摘された。そしてその主たる原因は、母国語からの不適切な語用論的転移や、語用論的知識の不足にあると推察された。

For English learners, it is not enough to speak or write grammatically correct English in real communication. They also need to use pragmatically appropriate English. However, Japanese English education has not placed emphasis on instruction of pragmatic usage. In junior high and high schools, students usually have few opportunities to receive pragmatic instruction in English classrooms. As a result, many Japanese learners have difficulty using appropriate expressions in situations where they need to show politeness. They are sometimes considered to be rude by native speakers (NSs) because they lack pragmatic knowledge.

This study was performed as a type of needs analysis to see where students need the most help. Although there are a variety of situations where pragmatic competence is needed, such as making an apology, request, complaint, compliment, refusal, and showing gratitude, this study focused on refusals and apologies. These were chosen because refusing is one of the most difficult speech acts, which Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990, p. 56) described

as "a major cross-cultural 'sticking point' for many nonnative speakers," and apologizing is very important to mitigate the negative effects of a refusal. This study also focused on pragmatics in writing an email message, which is one of the most frequently used communication tools today.

Several studies have been conducted on pragmatic differences in refusing and apologizing between Japanese English learners and NSs. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) compared Japanese ESL and EFL learners and NSs, focusing on refusal, and reported that evidence of transfer from Japanese was found in both ESL and EFL learners. They also suggested that more transfer was found in EFL learners. Although they expected that higher English proficiency would be positively correlated with pragmatic transfer because of their English fluency, the results did not display a clear correlation.

Beebe et al. (1990) maintained that negative pragmatic transfer was found among the responses of Japanese English speakers on at least three levels: the order, frequency, and content of the semantic formulas. For example, Japanese English speakers expressed gratitude much less frequently than American NSs when they refused an invitation from their boss. Japanese English speakers also gave less specific reasons when they refused something than the NSs in many situations.

Robinson (1991, as cited in Cohen & Olshtain, 1993) conducted research with 12 female Japanese students. She found that the respondents sometimes accepted the request even though they had been instructed to refuse it. This was attributed to their cultural background.

Hill (1997, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 2002) suggested that Japanese advanced learners were more likely to transfer from their first language (L1), such as overusing apology moves. However, Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper and Ross (1996) did not support this finding. In their study investigating apologies, the results did not show any significant difference between advanced and intermediate learners.

These previous studies displayed the pragmatic differences between Japanese English learners and NSs, especially in refusing and apologizing. However, they did not clearly state which differences were perceived to be problematic by NSs. Furthermore, those studies focused on pragmatic differences during speech. There have been few studies which focused on the differences in writing. However, with the rapid spread of the Internet, especially email, writing is more important than ever as a daily communication tool. The current study focused on the problems Japanese learners have in expressing a refusal and an apology in writing.

The purposes of the current study are: 1) to evaluate problems Japanese college students have in expressing a refusal and an apology in writing, and 2) to explore the causes of those problems.

Method

Participants

Fifty-three Japanese college students (15 males and 38 females) and 10 NSs (7 males and 3 females) participated in the current study. The students were all first-year students in the humanities. The NSs were all teachers, from different continents (including America, Europe, and Africa) and generations (30s to 50s).

From the perspective of genuine comparison, it would have been better to compare the Japanese students with a group of college students from an English-speaking country. The variety of nationalities and ages in the teacher group also made comparison difficult. Stricter comparisons will be needed in future research.

From another perspective, it seems to be significant to find what kind of differences exists in terms of pragmatic awareness between Japanese students who send a message and NSs who

receive it. In other words, we should know what is recognized as a pragmatic problem by NSs. This study attempts to identify problem areas in Japanese students' replies.

Procedure

First, the Japanese students were given the following task:

> "You were going to have dinner with your teacher on Friday. However, an urgent business matter has arisen. Therefore, you will not be able to go to the dinner. Please write an email to the teacher explaining this."

The NSs were asked to complete the same task. After completing the task, the NSs were asked to comment on the three samples of student email messages below. These samples were chosen because they were comparatively good and contained typical features of the emails written by all the students.

- Sample A: Dear Prof. XX, Hello. I'm really sorry that I cannot go to dinner with you on Friday. I have to study for the examination. I am very sorry. Sincerely yours, XX.
- Sample B: I'm sorry I will not be able to come to dinner on Friday because of urgent business.
- Sample C: I have to apologize to you. I will not be able to go to dinner on Friday. Could you invite me another day?

Results

The comparison of Japanese students and native speakers

The emails written by Japanese students and eight NSs (two NSs did not write emails) were analyzed, and five major components were identified: apology, refusal, excuse, mentioning an alternative, and disappointment. For example, if a response was "I'm sorry I will not be able to come to dinner on Friday because of urgent business," it was regarded as consisting of [apology] [refusal] and [excuse]. The frequencies of each component were compared between Japanese students and NSs. Table 1 presents the results. While 100% of the NSs gave an explicit refusal and an excuse, 17% of Japanese students failed in giving an explicit refusal, and 26% failed in giving an excuse.

Table 1. Comparison of component frequencies

	Apology	Refusal	Excuse	Mentioning an alternative	Disappoint-ment
Japanese Students (*N*=53)	47 (89%)	44 (83%)	39 (74%)	26 (49%)	11 (21%)
Native Speakers (*N*=8)	7 (88%)	8 (100%)	8 (100%)	4 (50%)	3 (38%)

Expressions of each component were then examined and compared between Japanese students and NSs.

The expressions of apology were examined first and classified into three types: 1) using "sorry" (e.g. "I am sorry.") 2) using "an adverb + sorry" (e.g. "I am very sorry." or "I am really sorry.") 3) using "apology / apologize" (e.g. "I apologize."). Table 2 presents the results. Eighteen out of 47 Japanese students used "an adverb + sorry," while only one NS used this. Furthermore, it was found that Japanese students were more likely to repeat an apology. For example, some started their email with an apology, such as "I am sorry I will not be able to come to dinner,"

and ended with an apology again, such as "I am really sorry." In short, when expressing an apology, Japanese students were more likely to intensify it or repeat it.

Table 2. Expression of apology

	sorry	adv.+ sorry	apology / apologize	apologizing twice
Japanese Students (N=47)	22 (47%)	18 (38%)	7 (15%)	10 (21%)
Native Speakers (N=7)	4 (57%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)

Expressions of refusal were also examined and classified into four types: 1) using "cannot" or "can't" (e.g. "I cannot come to dinner.") 2) using "couldn't" (e.g. "I couldn't come to dinner.") 3) using "will not be able to" (e.g. "I will not be able to come to dinner.") 4) using other expressions (e.g. "I have to cancel the appointment."). Table 3 displays the results. A distinct difference was observed between Japanese students and NSs. While most NSs used "will not be able to," only three Japanese students used it. The majority of Japanese students used "cannot" or "can't." One fourth of Japanese students used "couldn't," which is grammatically incorrect.

Table 3. Expression of refusal

	cannot can't	couldn't	will not be able to	others
Japanese Students (N=44)	25 (47%)	11 (25%)	3 (7%)	5 (11%)
Native Speakers (N=8)	0	0	7 (88%)	1 (12%)

The excuses were then examined and classified into two types: 1) specific excuses, and 2) general excuses. Table 4 presents the results. Although it was expected that NSs would be more likely to prefer a specific excuse, the results indicated that Japanese students were more likely than NSs to give a specific excuse.

Table 4. Giving a specific/general excuse

	Specific excuse	General excuse
Japanese Students (N=39)	14 (36%)	25 (64%)
Native Speakers (N=8)	1 (12%)	7 (88%)

Mentioning of an alternative was examined and classified into three types: 1) asking to reschedule, 2) asking for an invitation, and 3) just mentioning another time. Table 5 shows that 23% of

Japanese students asked the teacher to invite him/her again.

Table 5. Mentioning an alternative

	Asking to reschedule	Asking for an invitation	Just mentioning another time
Japanese Students (N=26)	13 (50%)	6 (23%)	7 (27%)
Native Speakers (N=4)	2 (50%)	0	2 (50%)

Finally, expressions of disappointment were examined and classified into two types: 1) stating disappointment explicitly (e.g. "I'm disappointed.") and 2) stating disappointment implicitly (e.g. "I was looking forward to the dinner."). Table 6 shows that there was not a big difference between Japanese students and NSs. In both groups, not many subjects stated disappointment, and if they did, most did it implicitly.

Table 6. Stating disappointment

	Explicitly	Implicitly
Japanese Students (N=11)	3 (27%)	8 (73%)
Native Speakers (N=3)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)

Native speakers' comments on the emails written by Japanese students

Eight NSs gave comments on three samples written by the students. The samples are reproduced below and followed by the NSs' comments:

Sample A: Dear Prof. XX, Hello. I'm really sorry that I cannot go to dinner with you on Friday. I have to study for the examination. I am very sorry. Sincerely yours, XX

Two out of eight teachers stated that this was fine, and another two said this was not bad. One of them indicated that this was a bit over the top. However, the other four suggested that this was vague and not polite enough because the reason was weak.

Sample B: I'm sorry I will not be able to come to dinner on Friday because of urgent business.

One out of eight teachers stated that this was the best, and another two said this was fine. However, the other four suggested that this was abrupt.

Sample C: I have to apologize to you. I will not be able to go to dinner on Friday. Could you invite me another day?

One teacher stated that this was the best except for the grammar, while another teacher indicated that this was the worst. Five out of the eight teachers pointed out that one should not invite oneself.

Opinions varied among the NSs, likely influenced by personality, nationality, gender, age, or other reasons.

Discussion

Japanese students' problems

Even though opinions varied among the NSs, the comparison of emails written by Japanese students and NSs, and the NSs' comments on the sample emails has revealed several problems Japanese college students had in expressing a refusal and an apology in writing.

There were pragmatic problems that led to emails that were often not polite enough or simply rude. For example, some failed to give a refusal or an excuse explicitly. This was not a problem for any of the NSs. Many students wrote, "I cannot come to dinner" instead of "I will not be able to come to dinner." The former sounded too direct and strong to NSs. Some students gave a weak or inappropriate excuse, such as "I have many things to do" or "I have to prepare for the exam." These weak reasons sounded impolite to NSs. Some asked for an invitation, such as "Please invite me again." It sounded strange to NSs; they thought one should not invite oneself. Some used expressions that were deemed too casual by NSs, such as "Sorry" and "Let's go." Some used oral expressions for writing, such as "I'm sorry, sir."

Although being rude is more problematic, some emails were too polite. As mentioned above, Japanese students were more likely to intensify an apology and repeat it. It was suggested by some NSs that this style is a bit too much.

There were also linguistic problems, which led to the inappropriate choice of words, such as "I have another schedule" and "It is inconvenient for me." Many also made grammatical mistakes, such as "I'm sorry I couldn't come to dinner."

The causes of the problems

Pragmatic transfer from Japanese

Examining the problems mentioned above, pragmatic transfer from Japanese was recognized to be the main cause of the problems. For example, asking for an invitation, which is definitely a problem from the perspective of NSs, is caused by pragmatic transfer. Japanese often ask for another invitation when they refuse an invitation, such as "*Mata kikai ga areba osasoi kudasai*" [Please invite me again when you have a chance.] It is acceptable in Japanese culture because it presents the speaker's willingness to maintain association with the party. It can be considered to be one of the most positive politeness techniques, according to Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 103), which a speaker uses to indicate that he wants to "come closer" to a hearer.

Some Japanese students used excuses which were considered to be vague or weak by the NSs, such as "I have to prepare for an exam" and "I have to write a report." NSs suggested that students should have prepared for an exam or a report earlier, so it is rude to use this kind of excuse for cancelling an appointment. This problem also seems to be caused by pragmatic transfer. Excuses related to study, such as an exam, a report, and homework, are considered acceptable in Japanese culture.

It was pointed out by NSs that some Japanese students' emails were too polite. They intensified an apology and repeated it. This is also pragmatic transfer from Japanese. When Japanese apologize for something in writing in Japanese, they often apologize at the beginning and at the end, such as "*Taihen moushiwake gozaimasen ga… Hontouni moushiwake gozaimasen*" [I'm very sorry but ... I'm really sorry.] It is common in Japanese culture.

Lack of pragmatic knowledge

Many wrote "I cannot come to dinner" instead of "I will not be able to come to dinner." This problem happened because Japanese usually learn that "cannot" is equivalent to "not be able to" at junior high school. They don't learn the difference between the two expressions.

Some students used oral expressions for writing, such as "I'm sorry, sir." They don't know that "sir" as a vocative should not be used for writing,

Overgeneralization of pragmatic knowledge

Many students used direct or casual expressions, such as "cannot," "sorry" and "let's go." They may have overgeneralized a stereotype such as "all native English speakers speak in a direct/casual way."

Lack of linguistic knowledge

Many students made mistakes in vocabulary and grammar because of a lack of linguistic knowledge. Some mistakes were caused by linguistic transfer from Japanese. For example, some wrote "It is inconvenient for me," which is an inappropriate expression. This happened because the Japanese phrase "*tsugo ga warui*," which is often translated to the English word "inconvenient", is a common Japanese excuse when people reject an invitation or cancel an appointment.

Eleven students used "couldn't," such as "I'm sorry I couldn't go to dinner," which is grammatically incorrect. This mistake seems to be caused by an overgeneralization of grammatical knowledge. They know when they make a request "Could you" is politer than "Can you." They seem to have overgeneralized this knowledge and used "couldn't" instead of "cannot."

Conclusion

Many of the Japanese students failed in writing an appropriate refusal and apology email message in terms of pragmatics as well as vocabulary and grammar. The results of this study suggest that some problems are caused by lack of pragmatic competence, including inappropriate pragmatic transfer and lack of pragmatic knowledge, while others are caused by lack of linguistic competence, such as in vocabulary and grammar.

This seems to imply that we need to incorporate more pragmatic instruction into English education so that students can develop better communicative competence. For example, we should help our students be aware that pragmatic transfer from their L1 (e.g. self-invitation) is not always appropriate. We also should inform them that there are different levels of politeness among similar expressions (e.g. *cannot come* vs. *will not be able to come*). This does not mean that teachers should force students to follow all the native standards of English-speaking countries, ignoring their own identities. In fact, as mentioned above, there are many varieties of English even among NSs. However, students should be provided with opportunities to acquire at least basic pragmatic knowledge in the target language so that they can avoid cross-cultural misunderstanding due to ignorance and they can make informed choices. Rose and Kasper (2001, p.8) claim that there is "a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary, for the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability." It is important for teachers to try to find the best way to teach students pragmatics while respecting their unique cultural identities.

Limitations of this study

The author acknowledges some limitations in this study, besides the small size and the inequality of the two groups mentioned above. First, the task was not completely clear to the respond-

ents: was it a dinner for two people or a larger group? Second, a follow-up report (written or oral) should have been done by the subjects to find out why they responded the way they did. Lastly, effects of other factors such as English proficiency, pragmatic instruction experience, and gender, should have been examined.

Bio data

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