# THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE BY JAPANESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH*

Tomoko Takahashi
and
Leslie M. Beebe

*Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to report on a study examining the developmental pragmatic competence of Japanese learners of English as compared with native Americans. Their pragmatic competence was analyzed qualitatively in terms of the tone and content of their refusals. Qualitative assessments of transfer strategies were also given.

The data are based on the written refusals of 80 subjects – 20 native speakers using Japanese and 20 native speakers using English, as compared with 40 Japanese students speaking English (20 EFL and 20 ESL). Within the ESL and EFL categories, 10 students are at the graduate level and 10 at the undergraduate level, categories which reflect approximate level of proficiency.

Tomoko Takahashi (Ed.D., 1984, Columbia University) is engaged in research in the TESOL/Applied Linguistics program at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Leslie Beebe (Ph.D., 1974, University of Michigan) is Chair of Languages and Literature at Teachers College. She is editor of a forthcoming book, *Issues in Second Language Acquisition: Multiple Perspectives.*

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International TESOL Convention, Anaheim, California, March 6, 1986. We wish to thank Shigenori Tanaka, Hajime Abe, Robin Uliss-Weltz, and Hiromi Takahashi for their assistance in data collection for the study.

We address the issue of pragmatic transfer as a function of learning context (ESL vs. EFL) and proficiency level. Taylor (1975) has demonstrated that beginners have the highest level of transfer, with transfer *decreasing* as proficiency increases. We hypothesize that this does not occur in our sample at the pragmatic level. Our reasoning is that the lower proficiency students do not have the fluency in the target language to give reign to pragmatic transfer phenomena. Based on the results of the study, we attempt to explain the developmental pragmatic competence of Japanese EFL/ESL students.

本稿では、日本人英語学習者におけるプラグマティックスの発達課程がいかなるものであるか、その調査結果を報告し考察を行う。ここでは、招待等の「断わり方」に焦点をあて、日本語と英語では返答のし方に違いがあるとの推測のもと、それぞれの言語（第二言語又は外国語としての英語、母国語としての英語と日本語）における返答の内容及び語調を比較対照した。さらに、日本人英語学習者における母国語の影響の度合を調べることも試みた。

研究データは、以下の4グループ（各20名）がそれぞれの言語で答えたアンケートに基づく：(1)日本人が日本語で、(2)アメリカ人が英語で、(3)英語を日本で学ぶ日本人が英語で、(4)英語をアメリカで学ぶ日本人が英語で。(3)と(4)の2グループは、それぞれ大学と大学院のレベル（各10名）にわかれ、英語能力の違いも考慮に入れた。

本調査では、母国語の影響は、英語を学ぶ環境(英語をアメリカで学ぶ場合と日本で学ぶ場合) 及び英語習得レベルによって左右される可能性があることを予測する。例えば、テイラー (1975) は、母国語の影響は、初級学習者において最も強く、学習が進むにつれ減少する、との調査結果を発表しているが、本調査においては、プラグマティックスのレベルでは、同じ現象は見られず、むしろ学習がある程度進んだ者ほど母国語の影響を受け易いと予測する。これは初級学習者には、プラグマティックスのレベルで、日本語のディスコースを導入する英語能力に欠けるとの理由からである。これらの予測のもと、日本人英語学習者のプラグマティックスの発達課程の一考察を行うものである。

## Introduction

One of the major cross-cultural "sticking points" for ESL students in English-speaking countries is the art of saying "no." The inability to say "no" clearly and politely, though not too directly, has led many non-native speakers to offend their interlocutors. The problem seems to stem in part from cross-cultural differences in refusal patterns.

The consequences of failing to recognize pragmatic differences between languages can be serious in international political situations where conversation is translated for foreign diplomats and politicians. For instance, in 1974, the late Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Sato, was asked by President Nixon whether he would agree to self-imposed restrictions on the export of fabrics to the U.S. Mr. Sato answered,

"Zensho shimasu." This Japanese expression was literally translated into English as, "I'll take care of it." When used by politicians, however, this expression actually consitutes a polite refusal in Japanese. Later on, of course, Mr. Nixon became very angry because the Japanese did nothing.

At the interpersonal level, too, we find many problems which stem in part from cross-cultural differences in the rules of speaking (see Hymes, 1972; Wolfson, 1983 for discussion of rules of speaking). In our large-scale project, we have been examining the problems which non-native speakers face in making refusals in a second language (L2). The major purpose of the project is to present some evidence of "pragmatic transfer" in the ESL/EFL learners' refusals. Pragmatic transfer is defined here as transfer of first language (L1) sociocultural communicative competence in performing L2 speech acts (cf. Beebe, in press; Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, in press).

Our previous study (Beebe *et al.*, in press) has demonstrated that pragmatic transfer exists in the order, frequency, and intrinsic content and tone of semantic formulas used in ESL refusals. For instance, as compared with American native speakers, both Japanese speaking Japanese and Japanese speaking English as an L2 tend to use expressions of regret (or apologies) more frequently with higher-status interlocutors, but less frequently with lower-status interlocutors. It has been also found that Americans typically started a refusal with an expression of positive opinion such as "I would like to." Then they expressed regret. Thirdly they gave an excuse. When refusing equal status interlocutors, Japanese subjects (both in Japanese and in English) started with an apology or a statement of regret and then gave an excuse directly after that as their second formula. That is, they often omitted an initial expression of positive opinion in their refusals. A difference between American and Japanese refusals was also found in the actual content of the formulas used. Japanese excuses are often much less specific than American

excuses, but in general Japanese refusals often sound more formal and sometimes even "philosophical."

A great deal of other work on pragmatic transfer has also focused on speech acts – how they are realized in native languages (NL) and how non-native speakers realize them in their L2. Cohen and Olshtain (1981), for instance, analyzed the apologies of 44 college students in Israel – 32 native speakers of Hebrew learning intermediate-level ESL and 12 native English speakers. They compared native English, native Hebrew, and Israeli ESL apologies. In written role-played responses, they found that Israeli ESL students were less likely to offer repair, were less likely to acknowledge responsibility, and expressed less intensity of regret than American native speakers of English. Cohen and Olshtain argued that their patterns often (though not always) reflected sociocultural transfer of native Hebrew patterns.

Olshtain (1983) reported on a related study of apologies in Israel where the target language (TL) was Hebrew, rather than English. She examined data from 27 subjects from L1 English or Russian backgrounds using Hebrew as an L2 as compared with data from 36 subjects (12 each) using native English, Russian, or Hebrew. She found that English had the highest rate of apology on all semantic formulas. Hebrew had the lowest on all except the offer of repair. Thus the general pattern appeared to be: English → Russian → Hebrew.

Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) examined both native and non-native expressions of gratitude. Their subjects came from 15 different language backgrounds. Subjects were asked to write on a questionnaire what they thought they would say when they received a gift, favor, reward, or service. The researchers found all kinds of difficulties, especially grammatical and lexical problems (e.g., "I very appreciate").

There exist many other studies focusing on the acquisition of L2 pragmatics (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1982). Comparing such studies, however, we have come to realize that some studies

convincingly argued for the importance of pragmatic transfer, while others discussed more general problems not necessarily arising from NL transfer. It has also come to our attention that subjects who had participated in these studies on speech acts had varying levels of L2 proficiency. Subjects were also from different learning contexts (e.g., EFL and ESL). No study that we know of, however, has investigated the effects of different L2 proficiency levels and of the EFL vs. ESL context upon the development of L2 pragmatics.

In the present study we will continue to examine the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer while investigating developmental aspects of L2 pragmatic competence as well. Will there be evidence of pragmatic transfer in both learning contexts (EFL and ESL) and at both proficiency levels (lower and higher)? Will there be a difference in the amount of transfer according to different learning contexts and proficiency levels? Regarding the answers to these questions, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

1. There will be evidence of pragmatic transfer in both the EFL and the ESL contexts.
2. There will be evidence of pragmatic transfer at both the lower and higher proficiency levels.
3. There will be more pragmatic transfer in the EFL context than in the ESL context.
4. There will be more pragmatic transfer among higher proficiency learners than among lower proficiency levels.

The first three hypotheses may seem to be "common sense" to the researcher since evidence for them is well established in the literature. The fourth one, however, is less expected. Evidence exists in the literature to the contrary. For example, in the area of L2 morpho-syntax, Taylor (1975) has demonstrated that beginners have the highest level of transfer, with transfer *decreasing* as proficiency increases. It is possible, however, that this generalization does not hold at the pragmatic

level. Our reasoning is that lower proficiency learners lack the fluency in English to fall into the negative transfer trap. It is the higher proficiency learners who already have a certain fluency who will more often fall prey to transfer. We would suggest that transfer at the pragmatic level is not exactly parallel to transfer at the phonological or morpho-syntactic level because pragmatic transfer requires competence at the lower linguistic levels (e.g., phonology, grammar, lexicon). We expect that lower proficiency learners may not be able to encode translations of socioculturally appropriate Japanese patterns. They will have to resort to a simplification strategy. More advanced learners, however, will be able to encode English phrases that reflect Japanese norms of politeness, or perhaps indirectness. Thus transfer will be possible. With very advanced learners, the amount of transfer will again decrease because they will reach near native ability in the second language. In sum, we expect a skewed bell curve as the developmental pattern for pragmatic transfer. And we anticipate that the high point for pragmatic transfer will occur later than the high point for phonological or morpho-syntactic transfer.

## Method

### Subjects

Eighty subjects took part in the study:

(1) 20 Japanese speaking Japanese in Japan (JJJ)
(2) 20 Japanese learners of English in Japan (JEJ)
(3) 20 Japanese speakers of English in U.S. (JEA)
(4) 20 American native speakers of English (AEA)

Both categories JEJ and JEA are English learners, the primary focus of our study. However, JEJs are EFL learners in Japan while JEAs are ESL learners in the United States, thus they are differentiated by learning context. Within the EFL and

ESL categories, 10 students are at the undergraduate level (JE-lo and JEA-lo) and 10 at the graduate level (JEJ-hi and JEA-hi), categories which were chosen in order to obtain two different levels of English proficiency. [Mean Age: JEJ-lo, 21.4; JEJ-hi, 26.0; JEA-lo, 21.3; JEA-hi, 28.2]

All JEJ subjects (Japanese speaking English in Japan) were students majoring in English at a university in Japan. They had studied English for an average length of 11 years. Four out of the 20 JEJs (all four from JEJ-hi) had traveled in the United States, but for less than one month. The other 16 had never been in any English-speaking country before. Although they had been exposed to a limited amount of natively spoken English, they had a good command of English especially in reading and writing.

All JEA subjects (Japanese speaking English in America) were living in the New York City area. The undergraduate students were all ESL students from the Queens College English Language Institute. They had spent an average of 7 months (range: 4 months to 1 year) in the United States. None of them had majored in English before coming to the United States, accordingly they had less academic training in English than the JEJs. The graduate students were in different majors, e.g., TESOL, business, art and comparative literature, at four different graduate institutions. They had been in the United States for an average of 4 years (range: 1½ years to 8 years) and were fluent in English.

### Materials and Procedures

All 80 subjects were asked to fill out a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), a questionnaire consisting of 12 written role-play situations. Each situation contained a blank in which only a refusal would fit. The word "refusal" was not used in order to avoid biasing the respondent's choice of response. The 12 situations were categorized into four stimulus types

eliciting refusals: requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. One of each group required a refusal to a higher status person, one to a lower status person, and one to a person of equal status. Examples of the role-play situations were refusing a worker's request for a raise, refusing an invitation to the boss's house for a party and refusing an offer to pay for a broken vase.

**Data Analysis**

The refusals were analyzed as consisting of a sequence of semantic formulas (see Appendix A). For example, if a respondent refused an invitation to a friend's house for dinner, saying "I'm sorry, I have theater tickets that night. Maybe we could come by later for a drink," this response would be coded as consisting of three formulas: [expression of regret] [excuse] [offer of alternative].

In analyzing the data, we coded the order of semantic formulas used in each refusal. The total number of semantic formulas of any kind used for each situation was obtained for each subject group. In addition, we calculated the frequency of each formula (e.g., the number of excuses) for each situation. We also noted the content of certain semantic formulas. For example, "I'm busy" and "I have three final exams tomorrow" are both coded as excuses; however the two clearly differ in specificity and persuasiveness.

In generalizing about the typical order of semantic formulas, we focused only on formulas which were used by 40% or more of the subjects in each group. In some cases, however, independent formulas in a similar category were grouped together. If they reached a frequency higher than 40% and if there was a strong tendency for them to be placed in the same order, these formulas were also considered in the overall sequence. For example, [positive opinion], [pause filler] and other adjuncts tended to be placed in initial position. Adjuncts

are formulas which, if standing alone, do not constitute a refusal. In the case of adjuncts, each one separately might not reach 40% frequency. However, they were sometimes lumped together to bring out the generalization that they were frequent alternatives in the initial slot.

## Results and Discussion

In the course of our analysis, we first examined the typical order of formulas for Japanese speaking Japanese natively in Japan (JJJs) and Americans speaking English natively in America (AEAs). Next we examined the patterns of the Japanese non-native speakers of English to see if they resembled native Japanese patterns (thereby reflecting NL transfer) or if they resembled native English patterns (thereby reflecting TL acquisition). The following are some examples of pragmatic transfer.

First, in the situation of refusing an employee's request for a raise, there is clear evidence of transfer (see Table 1). Japanese native speakers began with a statement of positive opinion (e.g., "I would like to help you") and/or a statement of empathy for the employee's predicament (e.g., "I understand your situation"). All four groups of Japanese learners of English used the expression of empathy to begin with, whereas American native speakers never did. This pattern was clear evidence of transfer.

Secondly, in the situation of refusing an invitation to a friend's house for dinner, there was again reason to suggest pragmatic transfer (see Table 2). Japanese native speakers typically began with an apology, while all groups of Japanese learners of English also began with an expression of regret except the most advanced students who were living in the U.S. (JEA-hi). Since "I'm sorry" can be an apology or a statement of regret, we considered the Japanese learners' choice of "I'm sorry" in the initial position as evidence of transfer. The most

advanced Japanese learners of English typically began with an expression of gratitude, an expression which Japanese native speakers occasionally began their utterances with and Americans tended to end with.

**Table 1**

**Typical Order of Semantic Formulas**

**In Refusals of Employee's Request for a Raise**
**[Refuser in a Higher Status]**

| Group | Order of Formulas | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| JJJ (NL) | empathy or positive opinion | excuse | can't | — |
| JEJ-lo | positive opinion empathy, filler | excuse | — | — |
| JEJ-hi | positive opinion empathy, filler | excuse regret | can't | — |
| JEA-lo | positive opinion or empathy | can't | excuse | — |
| JEA-hi | empathy or pause filler | positive opinion | excuse | can't |
| AEA (TL) | positive opinion | regret | excuse | can't |

Key:
JJJ = Japanese speaking Japanese in Japan
JEJ = Japanese speaking English in Japan
JEA = Japanese speaking English in America
AEA = American speaking English in America
-lo = lower proficiency (subgroup)
-hi = higher proficiency (subgroup)

**Table 2**

**Typical Order of Semantic Formulas**

**In Refusals to Invitation to Friend's House for Dinner**
**[Refuser in an Equal Status]**

| Group | Order of Formulas | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| JJJ (NL) | apology or adjuncts | excuse | — | — |
| JEJ-lo | regret* | excuse | — | — |
| JEJ-hi | regret* | excuse | — | — |
| JEA-lo | regret* | excuse or can't | — | — |
| JEA-hi | gratitude | excuse | — | — |
| AEA (TL) | positive opinion | regret | excuse | gratitude |

Note:
*Apology and regret are distinct in Japanese, but both may be realized as "I'm sorry" in English. JEJ and JEA responses are coded as regret, not apology, although they could be a translation from Japanese apologies.

In the situation of refusing the boss's invitation to a party, transfer was again apparent (see Table 3). The native speakers of Japanese sometimes began with a statement of positive opinion, but also typically began with an apology. This latter pattern appeared again in three of the Japanese groups which began with an expression of regret. American native speakers typically began with a positive opinion (e.g., "That sounds wonderful") and then expressed regret secondarily, before

leading into their excuse. Starting off with regret sounds a little abrupt to the American ear. It must be also noted that the Japanese native group sometimes ended with an apology, as did the most advanced Japanese group (JEA-hi).

**Table 3**

**Typical Order of Semantic Formulas**
**In Refusals to Boss's Invitation to a Party**
**[Refuser in a Lower Status]**

| Group | Order of Formulas | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| JJJ (NL) | positive opinion or apology | excuse | avoidance or apology | — |
| JEJ-lo | pause filler gratitude or regret* | regret* excuse | excuse | — |
| JEJ-hi | regret* or adjuncts | excuse | can't | — |
| JEA-lo | regret* | can't | excuse | — |
| JEA-hi | positive opinion gratitude, or pause filler | excuse | regret* | — |
| AEA (TL) | positive opinion or gratitude | regret | excuse | — |

Note:
*Apology and regret are distinct in Japanese, but both may be realized as "I'm sorry" in English. JEJ and JEA responses are coded as regret, not apology, although they could be a translation from Japanese apologies.

Finally, the refusal to accept the cleaning woman's offer to pay for a broken vase was another situation where transfer appeared (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

**Typical Order of Semantic Formulas**

**In Refusals to Cleaning Woman's Offer to Pay for a Broken Vase [Refuser in a Higher Status]**

| Group | Order of Formulas | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| JJJ (NL) | let interlocutor off the hook | philosophy | let interlocutor off the hook |
| JEJ-lo | let interlocutor off the hook | philosophy explanation | let interlocutor off the hook |
| JEJ-hi | let interlocutor off the hook | philosophy explanation | let interlocutor off the hook |
| JEA-lo | let interlocutor off the hook | explanation | let interlocutor off the hook |
| JEA-hi | let interlocutor off the hook | philosophy | let interlocutor off the hook |
| AEA (TL) | let interlocutor off the hook | explanation | — |

Note:

The semantic formula "let interlocutor off the hook" is a subcategory of "Attempt to dissuade interlocutor" (see Appendix A).

All Japanese groups led with an attempt to let the cleaning woman off the hook (e.g., "That's okay," "Never mind"), as did American native speakers. The difference was in the fact

that all Japanese groups tended to make a statement of philosophy second (e.g., "Things with shapes eventually break," "To err is human") and to return thirdly to another attempt to let the interlocutor off the hook (e.g., "You can forget about it"). Americans typically let the interlocutor off the hook once and did not feel the need to do so again or to philosophize in addition. They were much briefer.

These four examples have shown that transfer, though not ubiquitous, is a fairly common strategy. Even among our relatively advanced subjects in this study, transfer seems to exist in the order of semantic formulas in one third of the situations.

Transfer is also evident in the frequency of semantic formulas used by each group. Table 5 presents total frequency counts of semantic formulas (or combined categories) used by each group in 12 situations. Preliminary evidence of pragmatic transfer was found in the frequency of some formulas. For example, the frequencies listed under the category "Dissuade" in Table 5 seem to reflect a tendency for all Japanese groups (both in Japanese and in English) to try to dissuade the interlocutor. The category "Attempt to Dissuade" includes such semantic formulas as: (1) threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester, (2) guilt trip, (3) criticize, insult, or attack the interlocutor, etc.

More interesting than the difference in frequency was the difference in range of situations where dissuasion was used. Japanese groups tended to use "dissuade" formulas in many different situations, whereas Americans used such formulas in only a few situations (e.g., when refusing the second offer of a piece of cake, or a friend's suggestion to try a new diet). It seems that refusals by Japanese groups in general tend to show a wider variety and range of semantic formulas than the American group.

As previously mentioned, both in Japanese and English, the Japanese groups tended to make a statement of philosophy in refusing the cleaning woman's offer to pay for a broken vase.

Similarly, Japanese groups tended to make a statement of principle (e.g., "I make a rule to be temperate in eating," "It's our regulation that we should take care of all business matters in the office"). Both the statements of philosophy and the statement of principle contributed to a formal tone in Japanese.

In summary, this discussion indicates that Hypotheses 1 and 2 of the study were confirmed. That is, there is evidence of pragmatic transfer in both the EFL and ESL contexts and at both the lower and higher proficiency levels.

**Table 5**

**Total Frequency Count of Semantic Formulas Used by Each Group in 12 Situations**

| Formula or CATEGORY | Average Frequency per Subject* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | JJJ | JEJ-lo | JEJ-hi | JEA-lo | JEA-hi | AEA |
| I. DIRECT | 2.1 | 2.3 | 2.8 | 6.0 | 3.7 | 4.1 |
| II. INDIRECT | | | | | | |
| A. Regret** | 4.4** | 3.5 | 2.3 | 4.5 | 3.0** | 3.1 |
| B. Wish | .2 | .1 | .7 | 0.0 | .9 | .6 |
| C. Excuse | 9.9 | 8.9 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 9.2 | 9.5 |
| D. Alternative | 1.9 | .9 | 1.2 | 1.3 | 1.8 | .8 |
| E. Conditions | .7 | .2 | .4 | .5 | 1.0 | .7 |
| G. Princ./Phil. | .9 | .8 | .8 | .1 | 1.1 | .3 |
| H. Dissuade | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.9 | 2.8 | 1.8 |
| I. Acceptance | .4 | .6 | .6 | .8 | .3 | .3 |
| J. Avoidance | 4.3 | 1.1 | 1.4 | 1.1 | .5 | 1.5 |
| Adjuncts | | | | | | |
| 1. Pos. Opinion | 3.0 | 2.6 | 1.4 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 3.8 |
| 2. Empathy | .7 | .5 | .5 | .2 | .4 | 0.0 |
| 3. Pause Filler | .9 | 2.9 | 1.7 | 2.1 | 3.0 | 3.0 |
| 4. Gratitude | 1.8 | 1.5 | 2.6 | 2.1 | 3.0 | 3.0 |

Note:

*Obtained by dividing the total frequency count of formulas used by each group in 12 situations by the number of subjects in the group.

**Includes apologies.

Let us now focus on Hypotheses 3 and 4, regarding the amount of pragmatic transfer as a function of learning context (EFL vs. ESL) and proficiency level. Hypothesis 3 states that there will be more pragmatic transfer in the EFL context than in the ESL context. The data in Table 6 confirm this hypothesis.

**Table 6**

**Comparison of Interlanguage Patterns with the NL and TL Patterns**

| Stimulus Type* | Refuser Status | Situation # | EFL | | ESL | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | JEJ-lo | JEJ-hi | JEA-lo | JEA-hi |
| Request | Higher | 1 | NL | NL | neither | both |
| | Equal | 2 | NL | both | neither | TL |
| | Lower | 12** | TL | TL | TL | TL |
| Invitation | Higher | 3** | neither | neither | neither | TL |
| | Equal | 10 | NL | NL | neither | neither |
| | Lower | 4 | neither | neither | neither | NL |
| Suggestion | Higher | 8** | neither | neither | neither | TL |
| | Equal | 5 | NL | NL | NL | TL |
| | Lower | 6 | neither | neither | neither | neither |
| Offer | Higher | 7 | NL | NL | both | NL |
| | Equal | 9 | both | TL | TL | TL |
| | Lower | 11 | neither | neither | neither | TL |

Note:

*Refusal of Request, Invitation, Suggestion, or Offer

**In these three items the patterns are quite similar in native Japanese and native English.

Key:

NL, TL = similar to NL or TL patterns
both = similar to both NL and TL patterns
neither = similar to neither NL nor TL patterns

Table 6 presents a holistic comparison of ordering patterns dominant in each proficiency group. In the table the resemblance between the interlanguage (IL) patterns and the NL or TL pattern is indicated by "NL" or "TL" respectively. In some cases the IL pattern is a "composite" (see Beebe, 1984), i.e., a merger of NL and TL variants. This dual resemblance is indicated by the word "both." In other cases the IL pattern is unlike either the native or the target pattern. This is indicated by the word "neither."

If we examine the data in Table 6, we see that transfer is more prevalent in the EFL groups (JEFs) than in the ESL groups (JEAs). Note that there are nine situations for the EFL groups which resembled NL patterns – i.e., where transfer was the dominant strategy. By comparison, there were only three situations for the ESL groups which resembled NL patterns. An equal number of situations reflected composites (indicated by "both") for the EFL and ESL contexts. Note that the greater amount of transfer in the EFL context cannot be explained away as a function of lower proficiency. Based on overall impression, the JEF-lo group had higher proficiency than the JEA-lo group. In other words, the lower proficiency Japanese speaking English in America (JEA-lo's) were clearly the lowest proficiency group.

Hypothesis 4 is the most controversial hypothesis, and accordingly the data relating to it are the most difficult to interpret. The hypothesis states that there will be more NL transfer displayed by the higher proficiency learners than by the lower proficiency learners. From looking at Table 6, it can be seen that the hypothesis is weakly confirmed by the ESL data. It is even more weakly refuted by the EFL data. In the ESL situations the higher proficiency level group displayed NL transfer in two refusal situations, whereas the lower proficiency group displayed transfer in only one. As for the EFL groups, the situation was the reverse. The higher proficiency group displayed less transfer than the lower proficiency group.

More specifically, the higher proficiency group displayed NL transfer in only four situations, whereas for the lower proficiency group there were five situations where the pattern typically reflected NL transfer. Clearly no definitive support for the hypothesis can be claimed on the basis of these data. However, the authors would like to argue that the evidence favors confirmation of Hypothesis 4, namely, that higher proficiency learners transfer more than lower proficiency learners.

First of all, we would like to suggest that the expected proficiency difference in the EFL subjects (the JEJs) simply did not exist, or that it was so negligible as not to be apparent. Our original intention was to gather data from two very different proficiency groups by studying EFL graduate students versus EFL undergraduates in a Japanese university. We did in fact gather data from these two groups but were not able to ascertain a proficiency difference between them -- at least not from our pragmatic data. It could be that pragmatic competence is not significantly affected by just a few years' difference in school in the EFL context. Or it could be that pragmatic competence in general is affected, but that something so conversational as refusals is not. In any case, we did not perceive a proficiency difference between the so-called JEJ-lo's and the JEJ-hi's. So the weakly disconfirming evidence from these groups does not seem convincing.

On the other hand, there is very clearly a real proficiency difference within the Japanese ESL students living in the United States. The undergraduate JEA-lo's were much lower in proficiency than the graduate JEA-hi's. As we have said, however, the confirming evidence from Table 6 is somewhat weak. This evidence is based primarily on the order and frequency of semantic formulas in refusals. We have not yet looked at the content and tone of the refusals. Turning now to this content analysis, we find additional evidence for Hypothesis 4 suggesting that transfer is indeed more prevalent

among the higher proficiency learners than among lower proficiency learners. We will examine only the ESL data in this regard since it is only in the ESL context that we are confident of having found a real proficiency difference.

One aspect of the content/tone of refusals that seemed to support our hypothesis was the level of directness used. In our analysis semantic formulas are divided into two categories: direct and indirect. The "direct" category consisted of "performative" (e.g., "I refuse"), "No," and "expressions of negative willingness/ability" (e.g., "I can't"). In this study we have found that direct expressions, especially "I can't," were used by the lower proficiency ESL group (JEA-lo) with a very high frequency. As indicated in Table 5, subjects in this group used direct expressions in an average of 6 out of 12 situations. On the other hand, subjects in the higher proficiency ESL speakers (JEA-hi) used direct expressions in an average of 3.7 out of 12 situations. The point is that the higher frequency of direct expressions among lower proficiency learners is not a function of NL transfer, but rather most probably a developmental stage where simpler, and also more direct, expressions are being used.

More important than the difference in frequency was the difference in tone (i.e., degree of directness) used by the two groups. The lower proficiency ESL group (JEA-lo) often used the expression of negative ability "I can't" accompanied by the expression of regret "I'm sorry," which, it seemed, was added in order to soften the directness of the refusal. The higher proficiency ESL group (JEA-hi) also used these expressions, but they seemed to have a wider range of expressions and more flexibility to adjust their level of directness according to different situations. For example, when refusing the boss's invitation to a party, one lower proficiency ESL speaker said briefly, "I'm very very sorry, I can't go." In the same situation, one higher proficiency ESL speaker gave the following more elaborate refusal. "I'm terribly sorry, but we

made up another plan for next Sunday long time ago. So I feel awfully sorry to say no to your wonderful invitation." The higher proficiency Japanese ESL group used a variety of expressions such as "I won't be able to," "I don't think I can," and "I must say no," as well as the commonplace "I can't." Similarly, it was found that the higher proficiency group frequently used a variety of intensifiers (e.g., "really," "awfully," "terribly," "truly," "deeply," and "extremely"). The overuse of such varied expressions reflects the learners' desire to soften the directness of their refusals. It also reflects the Japanese norm of avoiding direct expressions and sounding as polite as possible, especially when talking to a higher status interlocutor, like the boss.

The higher proficiency Japanese speaking English in America (JEA-hi) also reflect more transfer than the lower proficiency learners if we look at the formality of their tone. American native speakers typically refuse an invitation by starting out with a statement of positive feeling, such as "I'd love to. . ." Both the lower and higher proficiency learners made use of these statements. In fact, the frequency of such statements was about the same for the two groups. But the tone of the expressions was different. And the higher proficiency ESL speakers seemed to be more prone to transferring in a typically Japanese formal tone than the lower proficiency learners. Again, it may be that only the more advanced speakers have "the rope to hang themselves with," – i.e., the control over English vocabulary to express Japanese sentiments. In any case, the lower proficiency group (JEA-lo) used typical American expressions such as "I'm glad," "I'm happy," and "I'd like to." On the other hand, although the higher proficiency group also used such expressions, they often over-intensified their positive feelings, lending a formal tone. For example, in refusing the boss's invitation to a party, one highly proficient ESL speaker said, "I am very *delighted and honored* to be asked to attend the party, but. . ." When refusing the offer of a promo-

tion and raise, another subject said, "I feel *honored* to be given that offer but. . ." Saying one feels "honored" in the same situation was found to be quite common among the Japanese native group. Thus, it is evident that this usage reflects NL influence. And since it is the higher proficiency group that is using it, the level of NL transfer is higher for them than for the lower proficiency group who stick to the less formal American expressions, probably because they are simpler on the developmental continuum.

The high level of formality transferred in by the higher proficiency Japanese learners appeared in places other than the initial adjuncts of positive feeling, such as "I'm honored. . ." They also appeared in apologies and expressions of gratitude that were part of a full refusal. For example, higher proficiency ESL speakers favored expressions such as "I have to *apologize* for not being able to come to your party," "I really *appreciate* your offer," and even "I *deeply appreciate* your work." The lower proficiency learners never used such formal expressions although they were typical of the native Japanese patterns. Particularly the apology is instructive. Whereas American native speakers tend to say "I'm sorry" when apologizing, rather than using the performative, "I apologize," native Japanese use a performative very frequently. It is often transferred as the literal translation, "I apologize," but it is more properly translated idiomatically as "I'm sorry" in English. Thus, the data seem to show once again that the higher proficiency learners are transferring more than the lower proficiency learners in that their refusals use the formal tone found in native Japanese.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have presented evidence that transfer exists in both the EFL and ESL contexts, and that native language influence is generally stronger in the EFL context.

We have also shown that transfer exists at both the lower and higher proficiency levels. Thus pragmatic transfer is pervasive – not limited to one phase of L2 learning. We have also been at pains to argue that transfer increases as the learner's proficiency increases, i.e., that transfer is greater among our higher proficiency learners than among lower proficiency learners. We did not obtain a discernible proficiency difference in our EFL data, so only the ESL data was considered in this regard. Analysis of the content or tone of the refusals suggested that there is some basis to our hypothesis: higher proficiency ESL learners were more subject to native language transfer than lower proficiency learners. We have suggested that their fluency gave them "the rope to hang themselves with." It was precisely their ease with English that allowed them to say what they wanted to say, and in several cases they wanted to express notions that seemed typically Japanese – for instance being "deeply honored" to receive a simple invitation.

We suspect that the evidence provided in this paper is just the tip of the iceberg. Studies are needed to investigate level of transfer (problematic as it is to measure) in relation to level of proficiency. As we suggested earlier, we anticipate a skewed bell curve for level of transfer against a horizontal axis of increased L2 proficiency. The peak of the curve would be expected to fall at higher proficiency levels than the peak of the curve for phonological or morpho-syntactic transfer. Similarly for the developmental curve of any one individual, we would expect phonological and morpho-syntactic transfer to rise to their peaks earlier than pragmatic transfer since pragmatic transfer requires more fluency to surface.

Our data have several limitations. For one thing, they are based on questionnaires; i.e., written role plays. Our natural spoken data are only available for native speakers of English (see Beebe & Cummings, 1985). Secondly, as mentioned, we did not have a proficiency difference in our EFL subjects. The third concern is that we had only two levels of L2 profi-

ciency. We would recommend that future studies have several levels. We suspect that our high proficiency ESL subjects (JEA-hi's) were simply too advanced to display the highest levels of proficiency starting with the least advanced students capable of understanding and responding to the refusal situations and leading all the way up to the near natives. This, we hypothesize, would lead to a bell curve in level of transfer.

One of the problems in interpreting our data is that there are multiple manifestations of transfer. For example, we may find no transfer in the order and frequency of formulas used, but there may still be a hard-to-quantify transfer in the tone of the refusal. Our higher proficiency ESL speakers had acquired most of the English refusal patterns in terms of order and frequency, but any native speaker could discern a foreign element in the tone of their refusals.

At the risk of making yet another clicheed call for further research, we would like to invite others to help us test out our hypothesis. We feel that the challenge of our hypothesis is just as important as the preliminary evidence itself.

## Appendix A
## Classification of Refusals

I. Direct
   A. Performative (e.g., "I refuse")
   B. Non-performative statement (e.g., "No," "I can't," "I won't")

II. Indirect
   A. Statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry," "I feel terrible")
   B. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help you. . .")
   C. Excuse, reason, explanation
   D. Statement of alternative
   E. Condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have. . .")
   F. Promise (e.g., "I'll come next time")
   G. Statement of principle or philosophy
   H. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor (e.g., threat, guilt trip, criticism, let interlocutor off the hook, self defense)
   I. Acceptance which functions as a refusal (e.g., unspecific or indefinite reply, lack of enthusiasm)

J. Avoidance (e.g., non-verbal – silence, hesitation, do nothing, physical departure; verbal – topic switch, joke, hedging)

Adjuncts to refusals

1. Statement of positive opinion (e.g., "I'd love to. . .")
2. Statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation")
3. Pause fillers (e.g., "uhh," "well," "uhm")
4. Gratitude/appreciation

## References


Beebe, L. 1984. Myths about interlanguage phonology. In S. Eliasson (Ed.), *Theoretical issues in contrastive phonology.* Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag.

Beebe, L. (in press). Sociolinguistic transfer from the native language. Chapter 1 in L. Beebe, *The social psychological basis of second language acquisition.* Longman Inc. Series in Applied Linguistics and Language Study. London: Longman.

Beebe, L., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (in press). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. Scarcella, S. Krashen, & E. Andersen (Eds.), *On the development of communicative competence in a second language.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Beebe, L., & Cummings, M. 1985. Speech act performance: A function of the data collection procedure? Paper presented at TESOL '85. New York, NY, April 1985.

Blum-Kulka, S. 1982. Learning to say what you mean in a second language: A study of the speech act performance of learners of Hebrew as a second language. *Applied Linguistics,* 3(1).

Cohen, A., & Olshtain, E. 1981. Developing a measure of sociocultural competence: The case of apology. *Language Learning,* 31(1).

Eisenstein, M., & Bodman, J. 1986. I very appreciate: Expressions of gratitude by native and non-native speakers of American English. *Applied Linguistics,* 7(2).

Hymes, D. 1972. Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J.J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Olstain, E. 1983. Sociocultural competence and language transfer: The case of apology. In S. Gass & L. Selinker (Eds.), *Language transfer in language learning.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Rubin, J. 1983. How to tell when someone is saying "no" revisited. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Taylor, B. 1975. The use of over generalization and transfer learning strategies by elementary and intermediate students in ESL. *Language Learning,* 25, 73-108.

Wolfson, N. 1983. Rules of speaking. In J.C. Richards & R.W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication.* London: Longman.

**Anthony S. Mollica**
**Editor**

Linguistic and pedagogical articles, book reviews, current advertisements and other material of interest to teachers of French, English, German, Italian and Spanish, as second languages at all levels of instruction as well as to teachers of Heritage languages.

Subscription rates:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ Individual | $25.00 | Sustaining | $ 50.00 ☐ |
| ☐ Institutions | $35.00 | Patrons | $100.00 ☐ |

(U.S.A. and Overseas Subscriptions in U.S. Funds)

**Canada's Voice in Language Teaching and Learning**

Founded in 1944.
Published regularly in October, January, March and May. Occasionally, a special supplementary issue is also published.
Cheques or money orders payable to *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Review canadienne des langues vivantes* should be sent to - Managing Editor, *CMLR/RCLV*, 237 Hellems Avenue, Welland, Ontario L3B 3B8 (Canada).
Sample copy of the journal will be sent on request.

- - - -