

A Contrastive Study of the Speech Act of Refusal between Iranian EFL Learners and Persian Native Speakers

UNE ÉTUDE CONTRASTIVE SUR L'ACTE DE DISCOURS DE REFUS ENTRE LES APPRENANTS ALE IRANIENS ET LES LOCUTEURS NATIFS PERSES

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Abstract: The current study was an attempt to investigate the similarities and differences in using the speech act of refusing between Persian learners of English as a foreign language with some Persian native speakers in Iran. The data of this study was gathered from thirty students in Iran by discourse completion questionnaire, usual interaction, and role play. On the whole, the research findings revealed that Persian native speakers' refusals were as formulaic in pragmatic structures. These participants were not economical at making excuses and tended to offer different indirect reasons in refusal to avoid annoyance. On the other hand, Iranian EFL learners are more frank and are more likely to refuse their friends' requests, suggestions, and invitations. Moreover, social distance and power play a vital role in production of refusal among Persian native speakers. More detailed findings and implications are discussed in the paper.

Key words: Speech Act; Refusal; Speech Act Of Refusal; Discourse Completion Test (DCT); Persian Native Speakers; Iranian EFL Learners

Resumé: La présente étude a tenté d'étudier les similitudes et les différences dans l'utilisation de l'acte de discours de refus entre les persans qui apprennent l'anglais comme une langue étrangère et certains locuteurs natifs persans en Iran. Les données de cette étude ont été recueillies à partir d'une trentaine d'étudiants en Iran en utilisant le questionnaire de complétion de discours, l'interaction habituelle, et le jeu de rôle. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats de recherche ont révélé que les refus des locuteurs natifs persans étaient formalisés dans les structures pragmatiques. Ces participants ne sont pas laconiques à faire des excuses et ont tendance à offrir de différentes raisons indirectes comme refus afin d'éviter des désagréments. D'autre part, les apprenants ALE iraniens sont plus francs et plus susceptibles de refuser les demandes, les suggestions et des invitations de leurs amis. Par ailleurs, la distance sociale et le pouvoir jouent un rôle vital dans la fabrication de refus chez les locuteurs natifs persans. Des résultats plus détaillés et des implications sont discutées dans l'article.

Mots-clés: Acte De Discours; Refus; Acte De Discours De Refus; Test De Complétion De Discours (TCD); Locuteurs Natifs Persans; Apprenants ALE Iraniens

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INTRODUCTION

Speech Act of Refusal in English and Persian

A speech act is an action performed by means of language, such as requesting something, complaining about something, or refusing something. According to Austin (1962), a speech act is a functional unit in communication. It is an act that a speaker performs when making an utterance.

In other words, speech acts are everyday activities of informing, describing, ordering, threatening, complaining, and rejecting for which we use our language. Speech acts are things people do through language. The essential point is that in using language we not only make propositional statements about objects, entities and states of affairs, but we also fulfill functions of language (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

The present study concentrates on speech act of refusal, which unlike other speech acts has received little attention in recent years. In this study, the researcher tries to compare the speech act of refusal between some Persian learners of English in Iran and native Persian speakers.

All languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universals, yet the form used in speech acts is different in various cultures. Refusing is a complex speech act in which the speakers directly or indirectly says "no" to the request, offer, or invitation of another person and is usually challenging for native speakers and especially for non-native speakers (Nunan, 2001). Refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener, because it is not compatible with his or her expectations, and is often realized through indirect strategies (Al-Eryani, 2008).

Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate how the performance of Persian learners of English differs from their performance in their first language. In other words, the main aim of this research paper is to explore the similarities and differences in using the speech act of refusal between Persian learners of English as a foreign language and some Persian native speakers in Iran. Therefore, the current study was conducted in order to find out appropriate answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What are the realization patterns of the speech act of refusing in English and Persian?
- 2) To what extent do the strategies used by the Persian learners of English deviate from those produced by them in their first language?

1. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Learners' refusals have been studied in a series of investigations that the researcher refers them briefly. Different speech acts were analyzed by different people. Cohen and Olshtain (1981) worked on apology speech acts. Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Holmes (1988) analyzed compliment speech act. Beebe and Takahashi (1989), Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Beebe, Takahashi, and Ulliss-Weltz (1990) are the most popular researchers of refusal strategy. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) studied refusals by native speakers of English, native speakers of Japanese, Japanese English second language students in the United States, and Japanese English foreign language students in Japan and found that there was a strong native language influence on foreign context. Some researchers claim that the advanced students had greater facility at speaking English which allowed them to express complex notions in Japanese like 'being deeply honored' to receive an invitation (Ellis, 1994).

In another study, Robinson (1991) asked twelve native Japanese-speaking women to answer a written discourse completion task, calling for refusals of requests and invitations in English. He found that there was a sociocultural problem in the respondents' refusals since Japanese women are brought up to say yes, or at least not to say no and thus the task of refusing was a difficult concept for them (Robinson, 1991).

Another study is the research of Abdullah Ali Al-Eryani from Panjab University of India. He used twenty Yemeni learners of English and required them to answer in English to six situations in which they performed refusal strategy. Then he compared the result of this phase with native speakers. This study showed in spite of the existence of similar strategy in both languages, big variation was evident in the frequency and content of semantic formulas used by each speaker (Al-Eryani, 2008).

A further analysis of cross cultural refusals was conducted by Knwo (2004). This study compared the use of refusals by the native Korean speakers and American English speakers. The main finding of the study was that Korean used more diverse reasons and more indirect words or expressions to refuse others. Finally, Tickle (1991) conducted a refusal research in which he concentrated on pragmatic transfer in English second language refusals made by Japanese speakers in a business setting. The result of the study implied the difference between direct and indirect refusal strategies with regard to social relationships and social power (Robinson, 1991).

2. METHODOLOGY

The intent of this study, as mentioned earlier, was to examine the similarities and differences in using the speech act of refusing between Persian learners of English as a foreign language and some Persian native speakers in Iran.

2.1 Participants

To accomplish the purpose of the research, two groups of participants took part in this study. All participants were native Persian speakers; half of them were learners of English as a foreign language. They were selected for this study from a language school in Tehran, Iran. They enrolled in the seventh term and were studying Top Notch books. The participants of this group were male and possessed similar level of proficiency in English and their ages ranged between 16 and 20 years old. Another group consisted of Iranian native speakers. They were also male and between 17 and 20 years old. This group had never studied English and was not familiar with any foreign language. Furthermore, the participants of this group did not have the experience of living in an English-speaking country.

The rationale behind choosing these groups was the availability and lack of enough facilities. Due to difficulty in having access to English native speakers in Iran, the researcher had to select the participants from amongst the learners of English for this research paper.

2.2 Instrumentation

To carry out any type of investigation, data must be gathered in order to test the hypothesis. Many different instruments and methods have been developed to aid the acquisition of data. In this research, the researcher has tried to choose the most appropriate instruments to collect data. Therefore, the researcher utilized Discourse Completion Test (DCT) for Iranian English learners and recorded the interactions of Persian native speakers by mini-size MP3 wireless recorders.

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT), first developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Welts (1990) was the instrument used for data elicitation in this study. Kasper argues that a DCT is an effective means of data collection when the purpose of the study is to “inform about speakers’ pragma-linguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented, and about their socio-pragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate” (Kasper, 2000, p. 329).

For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was translated into Persian with the necessary changes in the names of people and places to make them more familiar with the situations.

So, the materials of the study were questionnaire and mini-size MP3 wireless recorders.

2.3 Procedure

To collect appropriate data for this study several steps were taken.

First, the Persian learners of English were asked to respond, in written, to a discourse completion questionnaire consisting of three situations calling for the speech act of refusal. In other words, the DCT is a form of questionnaire depicting some natural situations to which the respondents are expected to respond making refusals in three different situations. These situations were intentionally designed to reveal the participants’ use of semantic formulae when refusing and how these formulae vary in the degree of the severity of offence.

One basic advantage of discourse completion questionnaire is that students and participants feel free to express themselves without any embarrassment or limitation. Mini-size MP3 wireless recorders were used to record the participants’ role play and interactions.

Then the participants from the two groups completed the questionnaires constructed based on the role plays and interactions. The participants were asked to answer the three different situations of refusal in the questionnaire. These three situations include one request, one suggestion, and one invitation. The Persian native speakers also responded to the questionnaire.

It is worth mentioning that these three situations are common in life and could happen to the subjects and do not require them to assume different and special personalities or instruction. The questions of the three above-mentioned situations are as follows:

One of your friends asks you to drink a glass of beer or wine. You had never drunk beer or wine. In order to refuse him, you say.....

You are a worker, your head worker offers changing your work, but you are unwilling. You state your unwillingness by.....

A friend invites you to dinner, but you really cannot accept his invitation. You state this by

3. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

As it was discussed previously, the current study investigated the similarities and differences in using the speech act of refusal between Persian learners of English as a foreign language and some Persian native speakers in Iran. Based on this issue, the following questions were raised to be investigated through this research paper:

- 1) What are the realization patterns of the speech act of refusing in English and Persian?
- 2) To what extent do the strategies used by the Persian learners of English deviate from those produced by them in their first language?

In order to analyze the data and find out the answers to the research questions, the participants' responses to each situation were analyzed. The data analysis was based on the answers of the participants.

About eighty-five percent of the English learners answered the questions directly and rejected it freely without any consideration. They applied some expressions, such as "no never" and "I won't be able to do that" to the request of drinking beer or wine. They used some expressions like "I don't think I want to do that" and "no, I'm easy here" to the suggestion. Finally, they used some answers like "I have to work" and "Sorry, I can't" to the invitation for the party.

However, based on the collected data, unlike the answers of the English learners that were direct and offensive, the responses of the Persian native speakers were indirect. They used some expressions like "می ترسم حالم بهتره مشروب نخورم", "هر چی شما بگین، اما، اگر امکان داره بمونم", "اگه لطف کنین بمونم", "حالا که، گرفتارم اما سعی می کنم بیام", "زحمت کشیدید چشم اما..." to the first request. Persian native speakers responded to the suggestion by "اگه امکان داره بمونم", "اگه لطف کنین بمونم", "حالا که، گرفتارم اما سعی می کنم بیام", "زحمت کشیدید چشم اما..." Almost ninety-five percent of them could not reject invitation and said "اگه لطف کنین بمونم", "حالا که، گرفتارم اما سعی می کنم بیام", "زحمت کشیدید چشم اما..."

4. RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

Contrastive studies of the speech act of refusing have been conducted by many scholars. The findings of this study are partially consistent with the results of previous studies on speech act of refusal. The results of this study depicted that nearly all Iranian EFL learners made direct and decisive responses to different speech acts. They really refused their friends' requests, suggestions, and invitations. On the other hand, Persian native participants gave extremely cautious and careful answers. About twenty-six of the English learners used "no or can't", but the answers of Persian native speakers were far from "no". Figure 1 shows the proportion of participants' answers across the two groups.

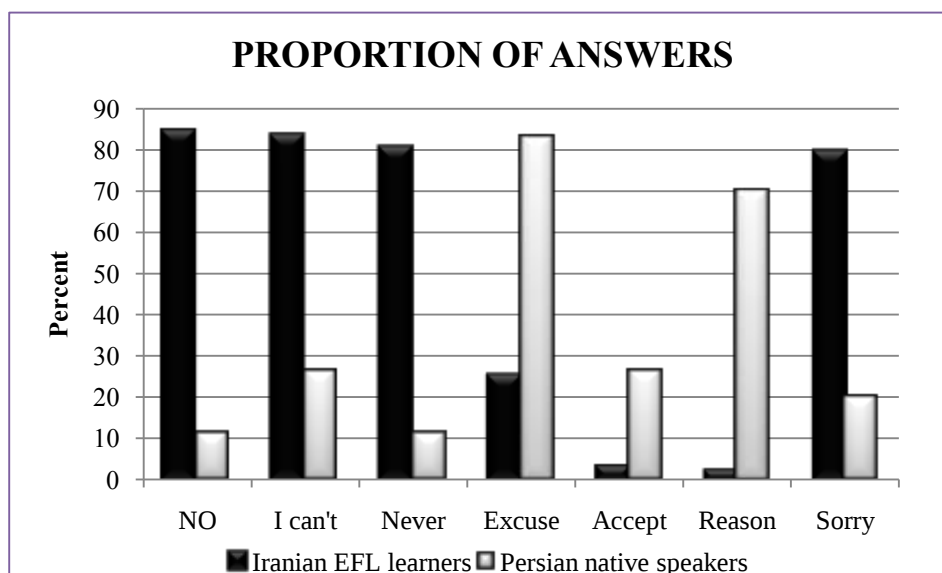


Figure 1: The Proportion of Participants' Answers across the Two Groups

The findings also indicated that Persian native speakers use reasoning, explaining, and excusing in response to others' requests, suggestions, and invitations. Nevertheless, Iranian EFL learners stated replies like "no, never, I can't, I'm sorry, I never think about it, I won't be able to do that, I'm busy". Table 1 represents the exact number of each refusal strategy that both groups used.

Table 1: The Exact Number of Each Refusal Strategy across the Two Groups

Participants	The Number of Refusal Strategies across the Two Groups					
	No	Never	I can't	Sorry	Excuse	Reasoning
Iranian EFL learners	25	24	26	24	7	4
Persian native speakers	4	4	7	9	24	14

As the figure and table represent, about twenty-four to-six of the Iranian EFL learners refused their partners' or friends' requests, suggestions, and invitations by direct and firm expressions, but Persian native speakers preferred to justify their lack of desire to accept a request, suggestion, or invitation. When the second group of the study (native Persian group) was exposed to a request like drinking a glass of wine or beer, about eight Persian native speakers said "no or never". Most of them started to explain about the disadvantages of beer or wine, and tried to convince their partners that wine is harmful. When Persian native speakers encountered an invitation to a party and could not take part in the party, instead of frank rejection they accepted it. About fourteen participants in this group accepted the invitation and about eighteen Persian native speakers apologized and justified their rejection. Only seven Persian native speakers said "no I can't, I'm busy".

The important point is that in spite of the existence of reasons or problems, a considerable percentage of participants in the second group accepted the invitation. About nine participants of this group used "I'm sorry", however, about eighty percent or twenty-four of them used some indirect strategies like "That's a good idea, but..." or "I'm really happy, but" or "Thank you for your suggestion, but...". These expressions were used to avoid hurting or annoying others. It is obvious, from the statistics, that Iranian EFL learners easily rejected the requests, suggestions, and invitations and firmly said "no, I can't, I'm busy". Furthermore, when the researcher compared the answers of the participants in both groups, he found out that some expressions are common between two groups, but the order of using them is different. Iranian English learners who used "I'm sorry" tried to shorten or summarize their utterances and changed the topic rapidly. On the other hand, native Persian speakers explained or lengthened more and more. Another feature that should be mentioned here is the weak frequency of offer to compensate which is seen in the answers of Iranian English learners. All in all, only about fifteen percent of the English learners tried to soften or compensate for their refusals, but about seventy-five percent of Persian native speakers offered repair.

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