

## **Teaching Refusals in an EFL Setting**

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**Level:** Intermediate-Low

**Time:** 8 lessons, 90 minutes each

**Resources:** For teaching Japanese learners, this chapter. To adapt for learners of other language backgrounds, L1 dialogues for comparison. Comparison graphs where available.

### **Goals**

- 1) Raising awareness that misunderstandings can be caused by differences in performing speech acts between Japanese and Americans.
- 2) Making learners aware of what they know already and encourage them to use their universal or transferable L1 pragmatic knowledge in L2 contexts.
- 3) Teaching the appropriate linguistic forms that are likely to be encountered in performing speech acts.

### **Description of the Activity**

This chapter presents activities to help learners become familiar with American English refusals. The lesson is organized progressively in five phases: Feeling, Doing, Thinking, Understanding and Using. These phases help students to realize that "speaking is doing," to think about their own language use, and to discover common and different aspects of conducting speech acts between Japanese and Americans. The activities in this chapter are based on the chapter on refusals from Yoshida, Kamiya, Kondo, and Tokiwa (2000) which covers a range of speech acts.

#### *Feeling (Warm-up) phase*

The listening comprehension task in this phase is designed to help students to get the feeling of the speech act being dealt with. The students hear two different dialogues in a sample hypothetical

speech situation and are asked to answer questions about what is happening and how the student feels about the two dialogues. The following two taped dialogues are played. One of the dialogues represents how Japanese learners of English typically refusing an invitation (dialogue 1) and the other one represents the typical American way (dialogue 2).

Narration: Mary asks Shinya to go camping with her next weekend, but Shinya doesn't feel like going.

Dialogue 1

Mary: Hi, Shinya. I'm planning to go camping next weekend with my friends. How about going with us?

Shinya: I'm sorry, but I'm busy next weekend. Sorry.

Mary: Are you sure you don't want to go? It should be a lot of fun.

Shinya: No, I really can't. I'm sorry.

Dialogue 2

Mary: Hi, Shinya. I'm planning to go camping next weekend with my friends. Would you like to come with us?

Shinya: Oh, I'd like to, but I can't go. I have a math test on Monday.

Mary: Are you sure you don't want to go? Come on, Shinya.

It should be a lot of fun.

Shinya: I wish I could, but I really need to study for that test.

Thanks for inviting me, though.

In this activity, students realize that the speech act can be realized in different ways, and they do have certain preference in the way it is conducted. At this phase I ask students to raise their hands to show which dialogue they preferred, and usually more Japanese students prefer Dialogue 1 of the given example. I also ask reasons why they chose one or the other. Some of my students would say that they liked Dialogue 1 because Shinya apologizes frequently. I do not tell students which dialogue is the American or Japanese way at this point, because that is for them to find out in the latter part of the lesson.

*Doing phase*

The students are presented with another hypothetical speech situation (called situation 1) in

which they are asked to write responses in a way similar to a discourse completion task, and to role-play the situation with their classmates. In refusal the chapter the following situation is given.

**SITUATION 1: Ski Trip**

A friend of yours, Jennifer, asks you to go on a ski trip with her and her friends next weekend, but you don't feel like going, because you don't like some of the people who are going.

The aim of this phase is to see what each learner can do with his/her present knowledge prior to any instruction dealing with cultural differences and linguistic expressions.

*Thinking phase*

In this phase students are asked to analyze their own speech act performance. Students are presented with various ways of performing refusals. These classifications are simplified versions of Speech Act Sets, which are often used in the analysis of interlanguage pragmatics research. With these, the learners can examine the strategies they used in Situation 1 in the Doing phase. For example, learners are given a rule of thumb, such as "Most refusals include expressions stating the reason why you are refusing. The following types of expressions can be used together with expressions stating the reason for refusing". Then the following five types of strategies and expressions for each strategy are introduced.

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Type A: Positive Opinion | That sounds wonderful, but ...<br>I'd like/love to, but ...<br>I wish I could, but ... |
| Type B: Thanking         | Thank you for the invitation.<br>Thanks, but ...                                       |
| Type C: Apology          | I'm sorry, but ...   |
| Type D: Alternative      | Maybe some other time.<br>Perhaps next time.   |
| Type E: Direct Refusal   | I can't go.<br>I can't make it.  |
| + Reason                 | I already have other plans.<br>I have to ...   |

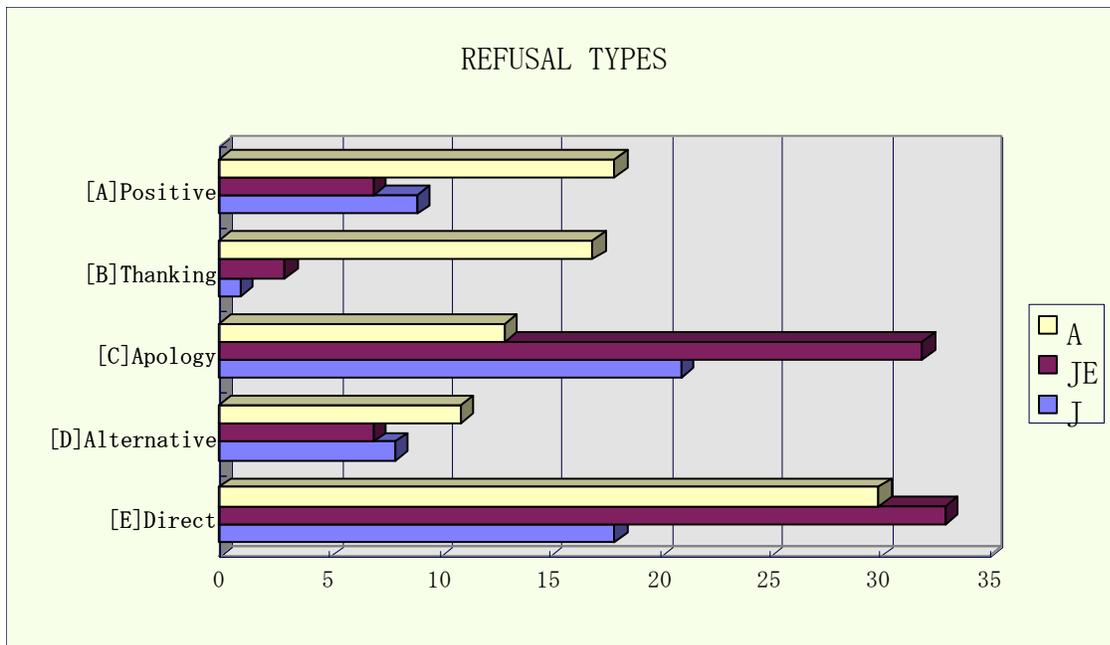
First a listening exercise is provided here to help students understand which expression falls into which type. In their analysis of their performance, students can choose more than one type of strategy depending on what they said in Situation 1. At the end of this phase I conduct a quick survey of refusal types by asking students to raise their hands so that they can see which type was most commonly used among them.

### *Understanding phase*

In this phase the learners are encouraged to discover the characteristic differences that exist in Japanese and American English when various speech acts are performed. The data presented here in the form of graphs come from the following three groups of college students who filled out Discourse Completion Tasks for Situation 1.

- 1) 50 Americans speaking English (A)
- 2) 50 Japanese learners of English speaking English (JE)
- 3) 50 Japanese speaking Japanese (J)

Students meet in groups and are asked to compare these three groups of speakers and to discuss similarities and differences in their way of conducting speech acts. In the refusal chapter the following graph is presented for the analysis and discussion (see Yoshida et al., 2000, for graphs comparing the production of other speech acts). The use of five types of strategies, which were introduced in Thinking phase, is shown on the graph.



\* One person may use more than one refusal type.

The important point in this phase is that the task is designed so that learners can be involved in active thinking, instead of passively reading descriptions on cultural differences. Analyzing the graphs also has the merit of helping the students to avoid extreme stereotyping, as the graphs show certain tendencies rather than "one or zero" phenomena. I believe that "it is vital that teaching materials on L2 pragmatics are research-based" (Kasper 1997).

After the small group discussion, I ask group leaders to share what they talked about with the rest of the class. Students realize that their performance in the Doing phase is similar to JE group in the data, and that sometimes they may experience pragmatic transfer from their native language. For example, they find that the strong Japanese preference for the apology strategy in refusals may be reflected in their English refusals as well. Similarly, the limited use of the thanking strategy in Japanese is transferred in their English refusals. They also realize that they sometimes cannot do what they can in their native language when they speak in English because of their linguistic limitations. Some students express the feeling that they are reluctant to use certain strategies

because of their cultural values. In the apology chapter, some learners said that they felt uncomfortable saying excuses, because in Japanese culture it is a sign of insincerity. These discussions successfully help students to raise pragmatic awareness.

### *Using phase*

Having gone through the four phases, the students by this time have satisfactory knowledge about how to use the vocabulary and expressions naturally in their verbal acts. The aim of this phase is to provide sufficient oral activity based on the knowledge students have acquired up to this point.

In the Using phase, model dialogues are presented for listening and role-playing. This exercise helps students to be able to use appropriate linguistic expressions useful in performing refusals. I ask them not only to read dialogues along, but also to pay special attention to rhythm and intonation so that they can put feelings and emotions into their words.

#### **Dialogue 1**

Brian: Hi, Satomi. I'm planning to go on a ski trip next weekend. How about going with us?  
Satomi: Oh, I'm sorry, but my family has already made plans.

#### **Dialogue 2**

Brian: Hi, Satomi. I'm planning to go on a ski trip next weekend. How about going with us?  
Satomi: Oh, I'd love to go, but I've got to work this weekend.

#### **Dialogue 3**

Brian: Hi, Satomi. I'm going on a ski trip with some of my friends next weekend. Would you like to come with us?  
Satomi: I can't afford to go on a ski trip right now. I used all my money for my new car. Maybe some other time.

#### **Dialogue 4**

Brian: Hi, Satomi. I'm planning to go on a ski trip next weekend. Can you come with us?  
Satomi: I can't make it this weekend. I've been invited to a party on Saturday.

#### **Dialogue 5**

Brian: Hi, Satomi. I'm going on a ski trip with some of my friends next weekend. Would you like to come with us?

Satomi: Oh, thanks for asking me, but I need to do homework for my biology class. Thank you for the invitation, though.

Then the following two new situations are given so that the students may practice writing responses and creating their own role-plays.

**SITUATION 2: Concert Ticket**

Your classmate, Tony, plays in a jazz band. He is going to have a concert soon, and he asks you to buy a ticket to the concert. You really do not want to go, because it will cost you \$23, and you feel this is too expensive.

**SITUATION 3: Party Invitation**

Dr. Kane, a professor at your college, invites you to a party at his house. But as you don't like him very much, you don't feel like going.

I encourage students to go around the classroom and find many partners so that they can have sufficient practice. If time allows, students are asked to think of other possible situations for their further role-play practice. The students end their practice not by just memorizing and repeating 'an ideal model dialogue,' but by creating their own dialogue without losing their identities all together. As Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) put it, "Successful communication is a matter of optimal rather than total convergence". The last phase of activities offers students opportunities for such optimal convergence.

**Procedure**

1. Feeling (Warm-up) phase

Listening to two different dialogues and answering questions

2. Doing phase

Discourse Completion Task and role-play

3. Thinking phase

- (a) Looking at the classification of different types of a given speech act
  - (b) Listening to dialogues and writing down key expressions of each type
  - (c) Analyzing their own speech act performance according to types
4. Understanding phase
- (a) Looking at the graphs and making comparison of speech act performance by Japanese, Americans, and Japanese learners of English.
  - (b) Discussion in class
5. Using phase
- (a) Listening and role-play practice of model dialogues
  - (b) Discourse Completion and role-play tasks on new situations

### **Rationale**

Instruction in pragmatics helps students realize that "speaking is doing," to think about their own language use, and to discover common and different aspects of conducting speech acts across cultures. Various class activities, such as listening comprehension and role-plays, help students improve their linguistic skills as well. For example, the graph-reading activities not only allow learners to come to their own conclusions about speech act realization in difference cultures, it reinforces an analytical skill often taught in ESL/EFL academic courses. Asking learners to reflect on their feelings about trying out patterns of speech act production typical of another culture encourages them to reflect on how far they want to go in adapting or adopting the target language realizations. Some students express the feeling that they are reluctant to use certain strategies because of their cultural values. This has also come up when I teach apologies: Some learners said that they felt uncomfortable saying excuses, because in Japanese culture it is a sign of insincerity.

## **Alternatives and Caveats**

The basic format for this teaching unit contains five phases (Feeling, Doing, Thinking, Understanding and Using) that can be used with any speech act (see Yoshida et al., 2000) or with a wide range of conversational features. Because I teach English in Japan, these lessons are specifically designed for Japanese EFL students, but the format can be modified for groups with other first backgrounds. In a mixed first-language group as found in ESL classes, students can be responsible for bringing in representative L1 dialogues. I have used the technique of having students write down their role plays before acting them out (this also results in a written record for later comparison), but more orally focussed groups might enjoy oral planning before the performance. In that case, one group in the audience can be asked to take notes on one role play for the subsequent class discussion.

## **References**

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