

NEGATIVE TRANSFER AMONG ADULT AND L2 PROFICIENCY: BREAKING THE GRIDLOCK IN THE RESEARCH



Rod E. Case¹⁺
Mathew Nall²

¹College of Education and Human Development, University of Nevada,
Reno, USA.

Email: rcase@unr.edu

²Faculty of Foundational Academics, Miyagi University, Japan.

Email: mathewgarynall@gmail.com



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 30 July 2021

Revised: 21 February 2022

Accepted: 7 March 2022

Published: 17 March 2022

Keywords

Discourse completion task

Negative transfer

Pragmatics

Second language acquisition

Second language proficiency.

The ongoing question of whether negative transfer of speech acts increases or decreases with gains in L2 proficiency has brought mixed results, with some arguing that negative transfer increases with gains in L2 proficiency (Bu, 2012; Morkus, 2018) and others arguing the opposite (Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 2006). In response, this study measured the frequency and content of refusals among 33 beginning and 49 intermediate Japanese students of English. Twenty-three English-speaking Americans and 28 Japanese-speakers served as reference groups. Data was collected using a discourse completion task developed by Beebe et al. (1990) which included 12 scenarios in which participants must make a refusal to one of four potential stimulus types: 1) refusal to a request, 2) refusal to an invitation, 3) refusal to an offer or 4) refusal to a suggestion. Three levels of interlocutor status were measured according to the participant's status level: 1) higher, 2) lower, and 3) equal. The frequency of negative transfer was measured using a statistical analysis using a chi-square test for goodness-of-fit suggested that negative transfer increases with L2 proficiency. Intermediates relied on negative transfer in three of the four lower-status scenarios and in all equal-status scenarios. Negative occurred once in the lower-status scenario and once in the higher-status scenario among the beginners. A qualitative analysis revealed that the content of adjuncts was only sensitive to L2 proficiency in equal-status scenarios among the intermediate group. Future research should examine the interconnections between content and the patterning of negative transfer.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the ongoing discussion on if negative transfer increases or decreases with gains in second language proficiency. Findings demonstrate that intermediate learners not only engage in more negative transfer than beginning learners but also adopt a different tone that approximates English-speaking Americans.

1. INTRODUCTION

Refusals are challenging for second language (L2) learners because they not only require a high level of language competence to execute skillfully (Chang, 2009) but also derive cultural knowledge from the target language community (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Morkus, 2018). When language or cultural knowledge is lacking, learners may erroneously transfer linguistic or cultural knowledge from their first languages. The resulting miscommunication, according to Richard (1980) can "have much more serious consequences than errors at the levels of syntax or pronunciation" (p. 150). The violation of a sociocultural rules of speaking, as Thomas (1983) observes, may lead the listener to believe that the speaker is impolite or rude.

This type of miscommunication is also referred to as negative transfer. Researchers have found that L2 learners rely on one of the two types of pragmatic transfer: positive or negative. According to Kasper (1992) positive transfer occurs when the first language (L1) and L2 share pragmatic norms, and, according to Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse (2018) often leads to acquisition. The use of negative pragmatic transfer is studied more often, according to Morkus (2018), and occurs when “a pragmatic feature [e.g., direct, or indirect strategies, mitigation devices] in the interlanguage is the same as in L1 but different from L2” (Kasper, 1992).

Research which explores negative transfer has examined its connection to L2 proficiency but has been split for several decades. Some have argued that a positive correlation could be found between low L2 proficiency and high levels of transfer (e.g., (Bu, 2012; Kwon, 2003)) while others have found that the frequency of negative transfer increases with gains in L2 proficiency and thus argue for a negative correlation or relationship (e.g., (Maeshiba et al., 2006; Trosborg, 1987; Yamagashira, 2001)). According to Kwon (2003) one explanation for the lack of agreement on the relationship between L2 proficiency and negative transfer may be an incomplete articulation of the relationship between the content and frequency of responses in relationship to L2 proficiency. While Kwon (2003) called for more research which draws connections across the three constructs, research has instead turned to investigations of face and the influence of Confucius-based values to explain the disjuncture in the research (e.g., (Bu, 2012; Chang, 2009; Wu & Takahashi, 2016)). Important connections between the constructs of face and negative transfer have emerged, but, ultimately, left the question open as to the ways in which the connections between negative transfer and L2 proficiency may be connected. In response, the current study compares the frequency and content of negative transfer in relationship to L2 proficiency between intermediate and beginning Japanese learners of English in Japan. Consistent with Kwon (2003) the broader purpose of the research is to examine the extent to which the connections between the content and frequency of responses may contribute to broader debate around the connections between L2 proficiency and negative transfer.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early research by Takahashi and Beebe (1987) examined the occurrence of negative transfer as a factor of place of residence and L2 proficiency. The results demonstrated that place of residence did not influence the amount of negative transfer. Both EFL and ESL groups used negative transfer. L2 proficiency, however, did predict negative transfer. The more advanced learners were more likely to rely on negative transfer than the learners at lower levels of proficiency. The results seemed counter-intuitive, as one might expect that higher levels of L2 proficiency would allow the students to more fully access L2 norms. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) explanation was that the higher level of L2 proficiency allowed the learners to better access what L2 phrases that more closely resemble L1 cultural norms. It was not until learners approached very advanced levels of L2 proficiency that negative transfer decreased. This was referred to as a skewed bell curve. Negative transfer of phonological and morpho-syntactic forms was the last to be abandoned by the advanced learners. In the research which followed, researchers examined the relationship between L2 proficiency and negative transfer across three variables: 1) the frequency of occurrences of negative transfer, 2) the syntactic and lexical patterning of responses, and 3) the content of the responses. The research into L2 proficiency and negative transfer is reviewed below with respect to these three variables.

Bu (2012) for instance, compared the negative transfer of requests between 10 Chinese learners of English at a low level of proficiency and 10 learners at higher levels of proficiency. Overall, results indicated that the more advanced learners relied less on negative transfer than the learners at lower levels of proficiency. Findings concerning the specific patterning of responses demonstrated that the more advanced learners used fewer direct strategies, lexical down-graders, and imperatives than their less proficient counterparts. Bu (2012) described the findings as favoring a correlation between L2 proficiency and negative transfer. More recently, Jiang (2015) examined L2 proficiency and negative transfer among 87 Chinese learners. The groups consisted of a reference group of Chinese speakers and a second reference group of American-English speakers. The learner groups were at

lower and advanced levels. Findings indicated 14 instances of negative transfer among the less advanced English learners and nine examples among the advanced group. Patterning of responses demonstrated a preference for direct responses among the more advanced learners than the less advanced learners. Excuses paired with an explanation were the most common formulation for the Chinese-speaking groups while the English-speaking reference group relied on direct refusals most often. When the findings were parsed in terms of status, Jiang (2015) found four instances of negative transfer in which the participant occupied a higher status, three in which the participant occupied the lower status, and five in which the participant occupied an equal status. Jiang's findings, however, are limited by the fact that the study used just four of the 12 scenarios from the research instrument. Jiang (2015) acknowledged this limitation and called for additional research which employed all 12 scenarios.

Other researchers have found that high L2 proficiency did not predict lower amounts of negative transfer (e.g., (Chang, 2009; Kwon, 2003; Maeshiba et al., 2006; Trosborg, 1987; Wu & Takahashi, 2016; Yamagashira, 2001)). In a study of Korean learners of English, Kwon (2003) found that the frequency of negative transfer increased with L2 proficiency, but the strength of research was in the analysis of adjuncts to refusals. Kwon (2003) demonstrated how an increase in the use of adjuncts was based on L1 norms according to levels of L2 proficiency. Beginners were bound to short responses and deviated from the L1 and L2 forms. Intermediate students had a greater ability to express polite forms transferred from the L1 than their peers in the beginning group. Advanced learners readily drew on L1 sociocultural knowledge and matched the philosophical and use of figurative language used in the L1. Adjuncts, according to Kwon (2003) were important because they were used to represent a change in tone that was transferred from the L1. To explain the increase in transfer as students grew in proficiency, the study argued that the advanced learners' greater L2 proficiency allowed them to use more sophisticated L1 sociocultural knowledge in their responses. Wu and Takahashi (2016) similarly found that a group of intermediate Taiwanese learners of English transferred more of their L1 norms than did the beginning group. The beginning learners tended towards less elaborated response forms and relied heavily on a simplification strategy to construct their responses; while the intermediate learners not only increased the length of their responses but also relied on more elaborate forms. In contrast to Kwon (2003) findings, the advanced learners in Wu and Takahashi (2016) transferred less than the intermediate group and began to approach L2 norms. Wu and Takahashi (2016) confirmed Takahashi and Beebe (1987) explanation for the variation in frequency of negative transfer between beginning and intermediate learners, only Wu and Takahashi (2016) fully confirmed Takahashi and Beebe (1987) findings the trajectory of negative transfer from beginning to advanced learners.

In a study of 30 advanced and 30 intermediate Japanese learners of English, Maeshiba et al. (2006) similarly found negative transfer increased with L2 proficiency. Intermediate learners (2 instances) were more likely to transfer L1 apology forms than advanced learners (6 instances), and instances of negative transfer were split between high- and low-status situations. The learners did not rely on negative transfer in equal-status situations. An analysis of the patterning of refusals demonstrated that the advanced group's responses were longer and resembled the apologies of the American-English speakers. Like the American-English speakers, the patterning of advanced Japanese learners' apologies employed strategies such as showing regret, e.g., "I am sorry", using more intensifiers, e.g., "very" or "truly" and expressing sympathy, e.g. "I hope I didn't upset you." While Maeshiba et al. (2006) did not equate these changes in patterning to tone and they are not examples of adjuncts, they do suggest a change in tone and consequently build on Kwon (2003) work. Maeshiba et al. (2006) did not offer an explanation as to why the advanced learners engaged in more negative transfer than the intermediate participants.

Similarly, Chang (2009); Chang (2011) did not find that L2 proficiency predicted gains in negative transfer. Chang (2009); Chang (2011) however, was able to demonstrate how the content of refusals could be understood in terms of Confucius-based cultural mores, in general, and the concept of face, in particular. Chang (2009) examined the negative patterning and content of refusals among two groups of English-major seniors, English-major freshmen, and Chinese sophomores. Not unlike research into Japanese learners (e.g., (Chang, 2009; Maeshiba et al.,

2006; Trosborg, 1987; Yamagashira, 2001)) showed that the Chinese speakers used more indirect refusals, primarily expressed in the use of adjuncts, than Americans. The reasons contained in the refusals provided by the Chinese speakers were less specific than the Americans. Moreover, both groups of Chinese speakers differentiated their use of refusals by giving more specific refusals to subordinates and less specific refusals to superiors. Chang (2009) was not able to detect a significant difference in the use of adjuncts between either the learner or reference groups, thus weakening the argument around the differentiation between the connections linking face to the content and transfer of refusals. Later, a research by Guan (2020) did not explore the connection between L2 proficiency and negative transfer but instead examined the negative transfer of refusals in terms of their sociocultural dimensions. As such, Guan (2020) linked the use of indirect refusals and the use of adjunct to saving face and the broader values of Confucius philosophy within Chinese society.

An examination of the above research provides several clues concerning the frequency, patterning, and content of refusals within the larger discussion of L2 proficiency and negative transfer. With regards to the content of refusals, there are solid claims that learners across language groups rely on status-directed decisions, as indicated by the use of direct and indirect refusals. Research by Chang (2009); Chang (2011) would suggest that the differentiation of direct and indirect refusal according to status could be understood within the larger discussion of Confucius-based culture and face, but Chang (2009); Chang (2011) was not able to find a significant difference in the use of adjuncts between learner or reference groups which would validate the argument. Kwon's (2003) research did not invoke the use of face to examine the content of refusals, but, instead, relied on the measurement of adjuncts to argue that increases in negative transfer in content is connected to a change in tone. Kwon's (2003) argument that tone changed in response to L2 proficiency was, in some sense, an addition to Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) work, suggesting a need for further research into the tone and its connection to L2 proficiency and negative transfer.

With regards to the relationship between L2 proficiency and the frequency of negative transfer, contemporary research into L2 proficiency and negative transfer has yet to follow up on Kwon's (2003) initial call for research. In response to this gap in the research, this study compared the frequency of refusals between a group of beginning (BEG) and intermediate (INT) Japanese learners of English to determine whether the frequency of negative transfer of refusals varied with L2 proficiency. Second, consistent with research changes in tone to the use of adjuncts, (Kwon, 2003) a content analysis was performed which examined use of tone across the learner groups. The purpose was to determine if changes in tone were sensitive to L2 proficiency.

3. METHODS

This section presents a review of the methods, materials and analytical procedures used to conduct this study.

3.1. Research Design

A mixed-methods design was used which included quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative data was collected through the use of a DCT and allowed for measurement of the frequency of negative transfer. Qualitative data collection allowed for the identification of negative transfer in the content of refusals. Consistent with past research into negative transfer (e.g., (Chang, 2009; Kwon, 2003; Morkus, 2018)) and informed by Ellis (1993) discussion on research design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected among two language learner groups and two reference groups. Ellis (1993) gives the following more specific description of a research design appropriate for the study of negative transfer. Ideally, the study of illocutionary acts in learner language should involve the collection of three sets of data: (1) samples of the illocutionary act performed in the target language by L2 learners; (2) samples performed by native speakers of the target language; and (3) samples of the same illocutionary act performed by the learners in their L1. (p. 162).

Consistent with Ellis (1993) notes on design, this study included a group of American college students in the United States who served as the target language English-speaking group or reference group. Responses to the

DCT from the target language group of English speakers were used in determining the occurrence of negative transfer. Their responses were compared to the learner groups and to a second target language group of Japanese college students. Japanese college students living in Japan represented second target language Japanese-speaking group or reference groups. They provided responses in Japanese. While this group represented a fourth group and was technically not needed, it was added in an effort to strengthen the corpus of Japanese refusals. Finally, two groups of Japanese students studying English were recruited as the learner groups. They were at the intermediate and beginning levels of proficiency in English. They completed the DCT in both English and Japanese.

3.2. Research Questions

- 1) Does the frequency of negative transfer differ according to L2 proficiency?
- 2) Is the use of adjuncts in the content of a refusal sensitive to L2 proficiency?
- 3) Is there evidence of negative transfer in the tone of the content that is sensitive to L2 proficiency?

3.3. Research Constructs

The study draws on the constructs of negative transfer and tone. Negative transfer, as described above, according to Kasper (1992), means “a pragmatic feature [e.g., direct, or indirect strategies, mitigation devices] in the interlanguage, which is same as in L1 but different from L2” (p. 194). Tone is more loosely defined. Extrapolating from research by Kwon (2003), tone can be described as the employment of sociocultural norms in the content of the speech act. Negative transfer of tone occurs when the sociocultural norms of the L1 and the L2 differ and the interlocutor draws on sociocultural norms from the L1. Positive transfer of tone occurs when the L1 and L2 share sociocultural norms in the content of the pragmatic form, allowing the learner to reference L1 sociocultural norms without making an error. Kwon (2003) and Morkus (2018) argued that the use of tone can be localized to the use of adjuncts.

3.4. Instrument

The instrument was based on the discourse completion task (DCT) developed and implemented by Beebe et al. (1990). While use of the DCT has been criticized for limiting the scope and content of participants' responses (Morrison & Holmes, 2003), it is still used in this research because it allows for the careful manipulation and control of selected variables that this research required. The DCT consisted of 12 scenarios in which participants must make a refusal to one of four potential stimulus types: 1) refusal to a request, 2) refusal to an invitation, 3) refusal to an offer or 4) refusal to a suggestion. Each scenario prompts participants with a detailed description of the context that allows them to infer their social status relative to the interlocutor. Three levels of interlocutor status are measured according to the participant's status level: 1) higher, 2) lower, and 3) equal.

The original Beebe et al.'s (1990) survey was modified in several ways to fit the language levels and sociocultural background of the participants. An example of a refusal was added to the directions portion of the survey in English and Japanese to ensure that participants fully understood the task. Some of the language used in the Beebe et al.'s (1990) survey was simplified to ensure the text was not above the proficiency level of the participants. Next, five descriptive survey questions were added to the opening of the survey to gather information about the participants and the ways in which they used English in Japan. Participants were asked whether they had studied English abroad and, if so, when and for how long. Participants were also asked how frequently they used English outside of the classroom. They could select from one of four choices: 1) never, 2) once a month, 3) twice a month, or 4) once a week or more. A short-answer question asked the participants to write their reasons for learning English. They were given the following prompt, “What is your goal for learning English? For instance, I want to learn English to...,” and asked to write their responses. Finally, the instrument was also translated into Japanese by two qualified native Japanese speakers. One held an advanced degree in language education. The

second held an undergraduate degree in English from the United States. Consistent with [Brislin's \(1970\)](#) discussion of back-translation, the translation was done by two native speakers of Japanese who did not have any knowledge of the survey. They were asked to back-translate the survey from Japanese to English and then from English to Japanese. Back-translation helps to ensure accuracy of the translation and helps to capture the nuances of a particular text. Back-translation was only conducted during the development of the instrument and not in the interpretation or analysis of the data.

3.5. Participants

The selection of participants was consistent with [Ellis \(1993\)](#) advice for examining L2 transfer according to proficiency levels. Learner groups included a beginning group (BEG) (n=33) and an intermediate group (INT) (n=49). To establish levels of L2 proficiency, participants in the learner groups were determined by their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The INT learners had TOEIC scores ranging from 405 to 600, and the BEG learners had scores between 255 and 400. As mentioned above, two reference groups were also employed to collect samples in Japanese and English. The Japanese reference group (JREF) (n=28) resided in Japan. All Japanese students attended the same university and the same English course. The American reference group (AREF) (n=23) of college students was recruited to collect samples in English. The AREF group belonged to various departments within the social sciences at a public research university in the western United States.

3.6. Administering the Questionnaire

The DCT was given using the online Qualtrics survey software for the AREF group, and Google Forms for the BEG, INT and JREF groups. Following a consultation with the researcher in Japan, the English and Japanese versions of the DCT were pilot tested with 12 students. Following the completion of the pilot-test for the DCT, respondents indicated that they understood the questions and were able to complete the DCT online without trouble. Next, the copies of the DCT were given online to both the learners and the reference groups. Consistent with [Ellis \(1993\)](#), the learner groups took the survey in both English and Japanese. The JREF group completed the survey in Japanese. All three groups completed the survey over a two-week period. The AREF group completed their survey over the course of three months.

3.7. Data Analysis

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data was conducted by identifying the frequency of negative transfer through the use of the DCT while the qualitative analysis relied on a content analysis of the students' responses. With regards to the quantitative analysis, the first task was to determine the frequency of negative transfer. The criteria for determining the presence of negative transfer were drawn from works like [Beebe et al. \(1990\)](#) and [Kasper \(1992\)](#). First, the reference groups, JREF and AREF, should show significant differences in the total number of direct and indirect refusals. No significant differences should be detected in the frequency of refusals between the learner groups, BEG or INT, and the JREF group. Parity between the learner groups and the JREF group was important because it suggested that borrowing from the L1 pragmatic strategies, a key element in the identification of negative transfer, was in place. Differences, however, should be detected between the AREF group and the learner group, as the refusal formulation should mirror that of the L1 not the L2.

Consistent with the criteria above, this study employed the following processes to identify negative transfer. Data were placed on an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed as semantic formulations and grouped according to the classification system described in [Beebe et al. \(1990\)](#) (See [Appendix A](#)). The semantic formulations identified among learner and reference groups were compared using a chi-square test for goodness-of-fit. Negative transfer which could be accounted for by L2 proficiency was identified when all conditions described by [Beebe et al. \(1990\)](#) were met. Concerning the identification of direct and indirect refusals, the use of both indirect and direct refusals in a

single response is common, and so it can be difficult to classify whether a refusal is direct or indirect. One solution, according to Félix-Brasdefer (2003) is to distinguish the use of direct versus indirect refusals by the use of head acts. According to the Félix-Brasdefer (2003) a head act serves as main the component of the refusal, expressing its “illocutionary force” (p. 605). The first semantic formulation in the head act can be used to determine whether a head act is direct or indirect.

An independent *t*-test was used to determine if the frequency of negative transfer differed significantly across learner groups and if those differences could be attributed to negative transfer. A content analysis was performed across all scenarios. A goodness-of-fit chi-square test was also used to determine if differences in the frequency were present and if those difference could be attributed to L2 proficiency. The qualitative analysis of the students’ responses focused on the use of adjuncts. Initially, the collective use of adjuncts, i.e., gratitude, pause, empathy and alternative, was calculated across all scenarios. Next, in response to question two, the total use of adjuncts between the BEG and the INT groups was compared to determine if they differed. In response to question three, the content of the refusals was analyzed to determine if there was evidence of either negative or positive transfer.

4. RESULTS

The findings are presented below in the following sequence. Results from the short survey of the learner groups experience in Japan is presented first to establish the broad context of language learning and use. Second, the results of independent *t*-tests comparing the use of direct and indirect refusals for learner and reference group are presented. Third, findings on the use of negative transfer between both groups from the DCT are presented.

Consistent with the organization of the instrument, the findings were also divided into four groups: 1) negative transfer of refusals to requests, 2) negative transfer of refusals to invitations, 3) negative transfer of refusals to offers, and 4) negative transfer of refusals to suggestions. This data employed the question one with respect to the frequency of negative transfer while questions two and three were used to present the findings of the content analysis with respect to the content of the refusals. Consistent with work by Kwon (2003) these findings reported on results of the use of adjuncts across both learner groups for all scenarios.

4.1. Language Learning Survey

Results from the survey indicated that none of the participants in the BEG group or INT group had studied English abroad. Twenty-eight of the BEG group participants reported that they did not use English outside of class while the remaining two reported that they used it once a month and every week respectively. Six participants within the INT group reported using English six times a month outside of the classroom; three reported using English twice a month, and two estimated that they used English outside of class on a weekly basis. When asked about their purpose for learning English, a little more than half wanted to travel abroad and “talk to an English-speaking person” and/or make new friends with foreigners abroad or occasionally in Japan. About one-third reported that they wanted to watch American movies or read books written in English. Five hoped to work abroad, and one wanted to help lost English-speaking people.

4.2. Negative Transfer and L2 Proficiency

4.2.1. Use of Direct and Indirect Refusals.

An independent *t*-test revealed no significant differences in the use of direct refusals between reference groups. Significant differences in the use of direct refusals were found in the use of higher- and lower-status scenarios (See Table 1).

When an independent *t*-test was used to determine differences in the use of direct and indirect refusals among the learner groups, no significant differences were detected across the three status levels for direct refusals.

Significant differences, however, were detected for the use of indirect refusals in lower- and equal-status levels but not for the higher-status scenarios (See Table 2).

Table 1. Comparison of indirect refusals between reference groups.

Refuser Status	DCT Items	JREF Group (n=28)		AREF Group (n=23)		t	Cohen's d
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Lower	4, 6, 11, 12	25.75	3.34	18.75	1.78	3.19*	2.65
Higher	1,3,7,8	27.25	2.86	17.00	4.06	3.57**	2.91

Note: *p<0.05 ** p<.001.

Table 2. Comparison on learner groups' use of indirect refusals across status levels.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	BEG Group (n=33)		INT Group (n=49)		t	Cohen's d
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Lower	4, 6, 11, 12	23.50	1.70	46.25	3.75	7.66**	7.81
Equal	2, 5, 9, 10	21.50	1.00	42.50	4.43	9.23**	6.53
Higher	1, 3, 7, 8	24.25	5.90	37.75	9.67	2.38	1.685

Note: **p<.001.

4.2.2. Negative Transfer of Refusals to Requests

Table 3a and 3b reveal four instances of negative transfer in the use of excuse/non-performative (NP) and regret/excuse. The equal number of occurrences of negative transfer between the two groups suggests equal influence of L2 proficiency. Status-related differences in the use of negative transfer are indicated for both groups.

The goodness-of-fit chi-square test was used to determine if there was a preference in the use of excuse/NP between the AREF and the JREF groups across scenarios one and two and the use of regret/excuse in scenario 12. Significant differences in the use of excuse/NP were detected for scenarios one, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 9, p = 0.002$ and two, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 4.5, p = 0.003$. A significant difference in the use of regret/excuse was detected in scenario 12, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 13, p < 0.001$.

Table 3a. Situation 1: Frequency of negative transfer to requests.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	Scenario	Semantic Formulation	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
				JREF (n=28)	AREF (n=23)	INT (n=49)	BEG (n=33)
Higher	1	Request a raise	Excuse/NP	33%	0%	6%	18%*

Note: *p<0.05.

Table 3b. Situation 1: Frequency of negative transfer to requests.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	Scenario	Semantic Formulation	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
				JREF(n=28)	AREF (n=23)	INT (n=49)	BEG (n=33)
Equal	2	Borrow class notes	Excuse/NP	25%	4%	18%*	3%
Lower	12	Stay late at work	Regret/Excuse	46%	0%	36%*	15%*

Note: *p<0.05.

In scenario one, a significant difference was not detected in a comparison between either of the learner groups and the JREF group. There were no occurrences of excuse/NP among the AREF group, and so the differences between the BEG and AREF were significant, $X^2(1, N = 56) = 6, p = 0.014$. This indicated negative transfer among the BEG group participants. Negative transfer was not found with the INT group, as no significant difference was detected in a comparison between the AREF and INT group.

In contrast, scenario 12 demonstrates evidence of negative transfer for both groups and suggests that L2 proficiency did not play a contributing role in negative transfer. Both learner groups demonstrated no significant difference in the use of regret/excuse when compared with the JREF group. Significant differences between the INT and the AREF groups were detected, $X^2(1, N = 72) = 18, p < 0.001$ as well as between the BEG and AREF groups, $X^2(1, N = 56) = 7.34, p < 0.001$. In scenario two, findings suggest evidence of negative transfer for INT group, as there was no significant difference between the INT and JREF group. Also, no significant difference between the AREF and the INT group in the use of the regret/excuse formulation was found. Finally, a significant difference was not detected between the INT group and the AREF groups. A significant difference detected in the use of regret/excuse formulations between the BEG and the JREF groups, $X^2(1, N = 61) = 4.5, p = 0.003$ was detected, suggesting that they were not borrowing L1 forms.

4.2.3. Negative Transfer of Refusals of Invitations

Table 4 reveals one instance of negative transfer for scenario 10. The influence of L2 proficiency is a possible explanation for negative transfer, as the BEG group did not engage in negative transfer.

Table 4. Situation 2: Frequency of negative transfer to invitations.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	Scenario	Semantic Formulation	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
				JREF (n=28)	AREF (n=23)	INT (n=49)	BEG (n=33)
Equal	10	Dinner at a friend's	Regret/excuse	53%	21%	36%*	27%

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Scenario 10 demonstrated a significant difference, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 5.0, p = 0.25$, between the two reference groups. Neither the INT group nor the BEG group demonstrated a significant difference in a measure of the frequency of regret/excuse formulations when compared with the JREF group. However, only the INT group's use of regret/excuse was significantly higher than the AREF group, $X^2(1, N = 72) = 7.348, p < 0.0067$.

4.2.4. Negative Transfer of Refusals to Offers

Table 5 reveals two instances of negative transfer, both among the INT group, which suggests that negative transfer of the excuse/NP formulation was distinguished by L2 proficiency and by status. A comparison of the use of the excuse/NP formulation between the reference groups demonstrated significant differences, in scenario 11 and 9, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 10.7, p = 0.019$. No significant differences were found between the INT and the AREF groups in scenario 11 or 9. No significant differences were detected between the learner groups and the JREF group in scenarios 9 and 11, indicating use of negative transfer for both learner groups. Also, no significant differences were detected between the BEG group and AREF group in scenario 9 (See Table 5).

Table 5. Situation 3: Frequency of negative transfer to offers.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	Scenario	Formulation	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
				JREF (n=28)	AREF (n=23)	INT (n=49)	BEG (n=33)
Equal	9	Piece of cake	Excuse/NP	28%	4%	8%*	0%
Lower	11	Promotion with a move to a small town	Excuse/NP	28%	4%	14%*	0%

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

4.2.5. Negative Transfer of Refusals to Suggestions

Situation four provides evidence of three instances of negative transfer among the participants in the INT group and one in the BEG group (see Table 6a). A significant difference was found in the use of the excuse

formulation in scenario six between the reference groups, $X^2(1, N = 82) = 8.04, p = 0.004$, scenario five, $X^2(1, N = 82) = 5.76, p = 0.016$ and scenario eight, $X^2(1, N = 51) = 5.26, p = 0.021$. When use of the excuse formulation was measured between the INT and the AREF groups, a significant difference was detected in scenarios six, $X^2(1, N = 72) = 11.56, p < 0.001$ and five, $X^2(1, N = 72) = 16.94, p < 0.01$. Finally, in measurements of the frequency of the excuse formulation, no significant differences were detected between the INT and JREF groups, suggesting that the INT group relied on L1 norms in the use of the excuse formulation.

Table 6a. Situation 4: Frequency of refusals to suggestions.

Refuser Status	DCT Item	Scenario	Formulation	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
				JREF (n=28)	AREF (n=23)	INT (n=49)	BEG (n=33)
Higher	8	More conversation practice in foreign language class	Excuses	21%	73%	20%	9%
Equal	5	Try a new diet	Excuse	50%	21%	59%*	18%
Lower	6	Write little reminder	Excuse	60%	17%	42%*	18%

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

When the frequency of excuse formulation was compared between the AREF and the BEG groups in scenarios five and six, no significant differences were detected. A comparison between BEG and JREF groups demonstrated a significant difference in the occurrences of the excuse formulation in scenario six, $X^2(1, N = 61) = 5.26, p = 0.021$, further confirming no evidence of negative transfer for the BEG group.

Negative transfer was detected in scenario eight among the participants in the BEG group, confirming a status-related differences in the use of negative transfer in situation four. A significant difference was detected between the BEG and the AREF group, $X^2(1, N = 56) = 9.8, p < 0.01$ while no significant difference was detected between the AREF and the INT groups. No significant differences were found in the use of the excuse formulation between the JREF group and the INT or the BEG groups.

4.3. Content Analysis and Adjuncts

The content analysis analyzed questions two and three. With regards to question two, the total number of adjuncts was nearly equal. The BEG group used adjuncts a total of 103 times for all 12 scenarios while the INT group used them 106 times. The groups, however, could be distinguished across status levels. In lower-status scenarios, the BEG group drew on adjuncts 40 times while the INT group used them 51 times. Higher-status scenarios' use totaled 46 and 36 times among the INT and BEG groups respectively. The largest differentiation was in the equal-status scenarios where the BEG group used adjuncts 28 times and the INT group used them 55 times. The total number of adjuncts, which included gratitude, pause, empathy and positive, used by each group in the equal-status scenarios, are included in Table 6b.

Table 6b. Use of adjuncts in equal-status scenarios.

Scenarios	Reference Groups		Learner Groups	
	JREF	AREF	INT	BEG
2	19	7	5	2
5	7	11	10	10
9	6	25	24	8
10	4	17	16	8
Total	36	60	55	28

A goodness-of-fit chi-square test was used to conduct an analysis of the totals. Results revealed a significant difference in the use of adjuncts between the two learner groups, $X^2(1, N = 82) = 7.38, p < 0.01$ and a significant

difference between the JREF and INT groups, $X^2(1, N = 91) = 3.96, p < 0.046$. No significant difference was detected between the BEG and the JREF groups or between the AREF and INT groups. This suggests an overall pattern in which the INT group has departed from the L1 norms in the use of adjuncts and moved toward AREF norms. Scenarios 9 and 10 are reviewed below. They revealed differences in the use of gratitude and alternative that illustrate differences between the learner groups in the use of tone and its relationship to transfer. The INT group drew on L2 sociocultural norms and use of adjuncts which resulted in a tone in their refusals that closely resembled the AREF group. The BEG group, however, drew on L1 sociocultural norms and choice of adjuncts. These differed from the L2 and so can be identified as negative transfer. Specifically, gratitude was identified 20 times in the INT group but just eight times in the BEG group. The high use of gratitude for the INT group was a departure from the JREF group, which drew on gratitude just four times. The INT group, however, found parity with the AREF group, which drew on gratitude 17 times.

In terms of sociocultural norms, examples reveal that the INT, BEG and JREF groups most often drew on the one-part “No thank you,” but the INT group used their higher level of L2 proficiency to extend the refusal with an excuse or a colloquial expression. Examples that were used several times included, “No thank you. I am stuffed,” or “Thanks, I have big party tonight!!” The BEG and JREF groups restricted their responses to much shorter responses such as, “No thank you,” or “No thanks.” In fact, the JREF group used the “No thank you,” refusal three out of the four times, and the BEG used it six out of eight times but pairing it with the excuse, “I am full,” two times. Like the responses from the INT group, the refusals given by AREF group were longer. However, they relied on several colloquialisms that the INT did not use, such as using ‘bro’ to address the other interlocutor or saying, “I am good,” instead of “No thank you.” One student’s comment was typical, “No thanks bro. I am really full...couldn’t eat another bite.”

Scenario 10 also showed sharp contrasts in the use of alternatives. The INT group’s use of alternatives was the highest at nine times, followed by positive at four and gratitude at three. The use of alternatives was a departure from the JREF and BEG groups which only drew on alternatives one and three times, respectively. The remaining adjuncts, pause and empathy, were not used. Sixteen uses of the alternative set the INT group apart from the other Japanese speakers but was at near parity with the AREF group, which drew on alternative eight times.

As in scenario 9, the INT and BEG group relied on L1 sociocultural norms, they differed, however, in their use of adjuncts. The INT drew on L2 norms in their use of adjuncts. With respect to the use of sociocultural norms, neither group used the colloquial expressions and references to American pop culture found in the AREF group’s refusals. For instance, one participant in the AREF group wrote, “We could watch Game of Thrones instead,” while another proposed that they “spend a girls-night out,” instead. The INT group did not reference American pop culture but simply referred to doing something in general or something different, “No thank you, but we could do something else,” or an invitation to do something else, “Please invite me again.” The BEG and JREF groups also relied on general alternatives, but they were decidedly more formal. The most common formulation was regret/excuse and use of the reference to an appointment in the excuse was common. One BEG student wrote, “I am sorry, but I have another appointment. You could invite another friend.”

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research draws on English-learner groups at two different levels of proficiency and reports on findings from a DCT, a brief survey of English use in Japan and a content analysis. Following a discussion of how these findings addressed the specific questions posed in this study, the broader question of how these findings might inform the ongoing debate in the research as to why there are such differences between the two bodies of research is taken up. Before moving on to a discussion the findings, a brief discussion of the limits of this research is necessary. The study reviewed learner groups at the beginning and intermediate levels. While findings demonstrated marked differences, the inclusion of advanced group in future research might have given clues as to whether or not changes

in the use of adjuncts and the employment of negative transfer continues into advanced L2 learners and further added to work by [Kwon \(2003\)](#).

With regards to question one, findings from the DCT demonstrated that the frequency of negative transfer varied according to proficiency level, favoring the argument that higher levels of L2 proficiency accompany increased negative transfer (e.g., [Maeshiba et al., 2006](#); [Trosborg, 1987](#); [Yamagashira, 2001](#)). When the patterning of indirect and direct formulations was considered, the findings suggested a departure from previous research (e.g., [Chang, 2009](#); [Jiang, 2015](#); [Maeshiba et al., 2006](#)). All formulations used for negative transfer were indirect, but their patterning differed from research by [Maeshiba et al. \(2006\)](#) who found that Japanese learners often split the use of negative transfer between lower- and higher-status scenarios.

These status-related differences differed from works of [Jiang \(2015\)](#); [Guan \(2020\)](#) and [Chang \(2009\)](#) who argued that the construct of face within the context of Confucius culture explained these distinctions. In contrast, results from the *t*-test in this research demonstrated a significant difference in the use of indirect refusals between the learner groups, favoring the INT group in the lower and equal-status scenarios. Similarly, use of negative transfer among the INT group was restricted to lower- and equal status scenarios while the BEG group drew on negative transfer in the lower- and higher-status scenarios.

With respect to questions two and three, findings revealed that the use of adjuncts was sensitive to L2 proficiency in equal-status scenarios and coincided with use of negative transfer and a shift in tone. Findings from this research only lend partial support to [Kwon \(2003\)](#) assertion that tone more closely approximated L1 norms as learners grew in L2 proficiency and was accompanied by an increase in the frequency of negative transfer. Findings from scenario 10 demonstrate that the INT group used their higher level of L2 proficiency to approximate L2 sociocultural norms and use of adjuncts in the content of their refusals while findings from scenario 9 suggest the opposite. In both scenarios, the BEG group relied more on L1 norms in their use of adjuncts as well as their decisions. The BEG group resorted to L1 norms both in the selection of adjuncts and the use of sociocultural content in their refusals in scenarios 9 and 10.

[Wu and Takahashi \(2016\)](#) and [Kwon \(2003\)](#) both base their explanations as to why the frequency of negative transfer might increase with gains in L2 proficiency on the research by [Takahashi and Beebe \(1987\)](#). The findings from this research both compliment and complicate this explanation. Consistent with [Wu and Takahashi \(2016\)](#) findings from this research would suggest that as learners make gains in L2 proficiency, they are more likely to turn to negative transfer at the intermediate levels. [Kwon \(2003\)](#) suggests that at least among the Korean learners in her study, their goals were to gain enough proficiency in English to superimpose L1 pragmatic norms onto the target language. Findings of the language learning survey in this research, while limited to just five questions, supported [Kwon \(2003\)](#) assertion. Both learner groups indicated clear goals to use English for social purposes, e.g., traveling abroad to make friends and talking to English-speakers in Japan. However, neither group had regular contact with English speakers or used English regularly outside of class to serve as a basis for language use.

While this research was an examination of negative transfer and not classroom instruction, the findings do offer important implications for teaching EFL. These implications are particularly relevant for students at the beginning and intermediate levels. First, the rise in negative transfer, as students enter intermediate levels, despite the fact that both may use English under similar circumstances and share similar goals and for learning English, is a call for instruction more heavily focused on noticing L1 and L2 differences.

[Tateyama's \(2009\)](#) comparison of different conditions for the instruction of direct instruction seems most relevant to the interests of learner groups in this research. Specifically, [Tateyama's \(2009\)](#) measured the use of explicit instruction in activities such as telephone messaging, watching videos and other kinds of in-person and social media type activities. Participants who received direct instruction followed by communicative practice showed the strongest improvement when compared with participants who did not. These were precisely the kinds of activities which motivated the learner groups in this study. As such, EFL instructors could benefit from a brief

survey similar to the one employed in this research. The results could be used to form analogous teaching scenarios and then paired with explicit instruction of pragmatic forms and meta-pragmatic instruction. The goal of the exercise would be to increase noticing of L2 forms and thereby improve pragmatic competence.

To break the gridlock in the research on L2 proficiency and negative transfer, future research would benefit from a more detailed exploration of both sociocultural and contextual influences. The sociocultural explanations for negative transfer given by Chang (2009); Chang (2011) and Guan (2020) provide important insights into the potential influences of Confucius-based culture, but more research is needed which should couple detailed questioning of the students' goals for learning English, their experiences learning English inside and outside of the classroom and detailed measurements of L2 proficiency. For the EFL researcher, such research would create a deeper understanding of the learners' experiences with English and establish a clearer pathway between research into negative transfer and the instruction of pragmatics.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

REFERENCES

- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Sprouse, R. A. (2018). Negative transfer versus positive transfer. In J. I. Lantieri (Ed.), *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1-6). NJ, USA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. Scarcella, E. S., Andersen, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *Developing communicative competence in second language* (pp. 55-73). New York: Newbury House.
- Brislin, R. W. (1970). Back-translation for cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 1(3), 185-216. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910457000100301>.
- Bu, J. (2012). A study of relationships between L1 pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency. *English Language Teaching*, 5(1), 32-43.
- Chang, Y.-F. (2009). How to say no: An analysis of cross-cultural difference and pragmatic transfer. *Language Sciences*, 31(4), 477-493.
- Chang, Y. F. (2011). Refusing in a foreign language: An investigation of problems encountered by Chinese learners of English. *Multilingual*, 30(1), 71-98.
- Ellis, R. (1993). *The study of second language acquisition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. C. (2003). Interlanguage refusals: Linguistic politeness and length of residence in the target community. *Language Learning*, 54(4), 587-653.
- Guan, J. (2020). Pragmatic refusals in requests by Chinese university of ESL learners. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 27(4), 248-275.
- Jiang, L. (2015). An empirical study on pragmatic transfer in refusal speech act produced by Chinese high school EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 8(7), 95-113.
- Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research*, 8(3), 203-231.
- Kwon, J. (2003). *Pragmatic transfer and proficiency in refusals of Korean EFL learners*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. University of Michigan Press.
- Maeshiba, N., Yoshinaga, N., Kasper, G., & Ross, S. (2006). Transfer and proficiency in interlanguage apologizing. In S. Gass & J. Neu (Eds.), *Speech Acts Across Cultures: Challenges to Communication in a Second Language* (Vol. 40, pp. 155-190). Essay: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Morkus, N. (2018). Negative pragmatic transfer and language proficiency: American learners of Arabic. *The Language Learning Journal*, 49(1), 41-65.
- Morrison, A., & Holmes, J. (2003). Eliciting refusals: A methodological challenge. *Te Reo*, 46, 47-66.
- Richard, J. (1980). Conversation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14(4), 413-432.

- Takahashi, T., & Beebe, L. M. (1987). The development of pragmatic competence by Japanese learners of English. *JALT Journal*, 8(2), 131-155.
- Tateyama, Y. (2009). Requesting in Japanese: The effect of instruction on JFL learners' pragmatic competence. In N. Taguchi (Ed.), *Pragmatic competence* (pp. 129–166). Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91-112. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>.
- Trosborg, A. (1987). Apology strategies in natives/non-natives. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11(2), 147-167. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(87\)90193-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(87)90193-7).
- Wu, H.-C., & Takahashi, T. (2016). Developmental patterns of interlanguage pragmatics in Taiwanese EFL learners: Compliments and compliment responses. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 18(1), 130-166.
- Yamagashira, H. (2001). Pragmatic transfer in Japanese ESL refusals. *Bulletin Academy Kagoshima*, 31, 259-275.

APPENDIX A

Coding Scheme

- I. Direct
 - a. Performative
 - b. Non-Performative
- II. Indirect
 - a. Regret
 - b. Wish
 - c. Excuse
 - d. Statement of Alternative
 - e. Condition for Future or Past acceptance
 - f. Promise for Future Acceptance
 - g. Avoidance
 - h. Verbal
- III. Avoidance
 - a. Topic Switch
 - b. Joke
 - c. Repetition
 - d. Postponement
 - e. Hedging
- IV. Adjuncts to Refusals
 - a. Positive Opinion
 - b. Empathy
 - c. Pause
 - d. Gratitude/Appreciation

From: Beebe et al. (1990).

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.