

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Language is an important element of human life. It is deemed as powerful tool for communicating and/or expressing meaning, so a person who wants to play an important role in society has to master it. According to the Speech Act Theory developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969); when people use language they are not only using it to convey information, they are also using it to perform certain acts. Such acts are generally referred to as speech acts.

In recent years, many studies have been done to examine the performance of speech acts in various languages. Investigations of speech acts such as acts of compliments, thanks, refusals, requests and so forth, have shown that people from different cultures often perform those speech acts differently (e.g. Wolfson, 1983; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Beebe, et al., 1990; Cohen and Olshtain, 1993). Thus, learning speech acts in English as a foreign language can cause difficulties, misunderstanding, and even communication breakdowns due to the cultural differences (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986).

Chung, et al. (2007) elaborated that some expressions with similar meanings can be used differently between cultures, and other expressions with different meanings can also be used for the same purpose in different cultures. For instance, Americans often say "sure" in response to "thank you" or "I'm sorry" whereas Koreans often say A NI EYO, meaning "No" in response to thanks or apologies. In this case, "sure" and "no" are used in the same situation although they have almost opposite meanings. The differences between cultures have also been shown in a study by Al-Khateeb (2007), who found that in the Arabic culture, a person is expected to offer the watch he is wearing if another person pays a compliment over its elegance while an American is expected to say "Thank you" or "My mother gave it to me on my birthday." Furthermore, Rizk (2003 as cited in Al-Falasi, 2007) also reported that in West African society, praising a girl for being fat is considered a compliment while

it is perceived as an insult in an American context. That is to say, what is considered appropriate in one language might not be so in another (Al-Falasi, 2007).

Among the speech acts we use in our daily life, refusals are one type that differs considerably from culture to culture (Thammo, 2005). Wannaruk (2008) stated that making refusals in one's native language can be awkward and is naturally even more awkward in a second language. Since they are speech acts that people use in order to reject the wish of their interlocutors, they are recognized as face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Moreover, Beebe, et al. (1990) stated that refusals are a major cross-cultural difficulty point for non-native speakers. For this reason they are especially important for second language and foreign language learners (Lauper and Julie, 1997). Fraser (1990) and Smith (1998) further remarked that refusals are complicated because they are influenced by several social factors including gender, age, social distances, social status, and level of education. For example, American speakers have similar responses to persons of higher and lower social status, but give different reactions to persons of equal social status while Japanese speakers tend to be more inclined to respond differently to each of the social status (Beebe, et al. 1990 as cited in Mumsam, 2009). Thus, while making refusals, the speaker should consider and understand the cultural background of others in order to be successful in cross-cultural interactions (Chung, et al. 2007). In other words, to communicate successfully, speakers need to acquire both linguistic competency and communicative or pragmatic competency. Linguistic competency is defined as the mastery of the grammar and vocabulary whereas communicative or pragmatic competency refers to the ability to use language forms in a wide range of socio-cultural contexts (Gass and Selinker, 2001).

Communicating with speakers of another language is a complex skill that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competencies (Al-Falasi, 2007). Since these competencies are influenced by the culture associated with the speech community (Pauwels, 1995), learners of English as a foreign language (EFL learners) who have not yet mastered English as a second language often experience problems when they are engaged in intercultural communications. Most of the problems are related to the inability to form appropriate speech acts in English. By taking these difficulties into account, there have been many studies conducted to investigate refusal strategies in

The US, Israel, and Japan (Nelson, et al., 2002). More recently, many studies such as Sairhun, 1999; Promsrimas, 2000; Thammo, 2005; Songsukrujiroad, 2005; Wannaruk, 2008; Mumsam, 2009 were conducted in Thailand as well. From 1999 to 2009, several studies demonstrated that Thai EFL learners found it extremely difficult to produce and understand the speech act of refusals in English. Since they were not exposed to the target community and culture, they used different refusal strategies from the native speakers. Although it was revealed that second language (L2) proficiency affects speech act production (Taguchi, 2006), it remains unclear whether or not English proficiency levels (measured by the number of years of English study or lengths of English study) influences their choice of refusal strategies.

As previous mention, although many studies have examined the speech act of refusals in Thailand, few studies have focused on the refusal strategies among the participants with different years of English study and/or compared and contrasted the participants' refusal strategies. Consequently, the information on the refusal strategies among the participants with different years of English study in Thailand seems inadequate to use as a resource for developing English teaching and learning for Thai EFL learners. In light of these problems, this study was designed to use a cross-sectional study method to analyze different refusal strategies among EFL students whose first language is Thai in different years of an undergraduate university. This is a relatively easy way that allows the researcher to focus on certain population groups and understand the wider picture (Shuttleworth, 2010).

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this cross-sectional study were to investigate refusal strategies used by English-major undergraduate students - in the first and the fourth years - at Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand, and to examine the differences between refusal strategies used by these two student groups in order to determine whether or not the number of study years has an impact on refusal strategies used.

Therefore, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the refusal strategies used by the English-major students in the first and fourth years?

2. Is there any significant difference between refusal strategies used by first-year students and fourth-year students, whose major is English?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study was a research survey in a questionnaire format using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to collect data. The study was designed to investigate the differences between refusal strategies in response to requests by 50 first-year and 50 fourth-year students, whose major is English, at Naresuan University, Phitsanulok. Additionally, the study was conducted in the first semester of the 2012 academic year. The study employed Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification in order to analyze the refusal strategies of the participants. Thus, the results could not be generalized for all Naresuan University students or students of other universities. Moreover, this was a knowledge survey in a DCT form; thus, it dealt with the ability to write a refusal, not to speak it.

Significance of the Study

It was hoped that the findings from this study revealed the similarities and differences in refusal strategies used by the first- and the fourth-year students. The results could serve as a resource to the teaching and learning of English for communication in EFL context. In addition, it helped in raising awareness of the significant of cross-cultural knowledge and practice when learning a foreign language. It could also be an information base for further studies in related fields.

Definition of Terms

Cross-sectional study is a study of a group of different individuals or subjects at a single point in time, in order to measure or study a particular topic or aspect of language (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 1992).

DCT refers to the Discourse Completion Test which included 12 situational descriptions, followed by a short dialogue with a blank for the respondents to write their responses that they think fits into the given context.

Interlocutor refers to the respondents in the DCT who were the first- and the fourth-year English major students. In addition, interlocutors refer to the persons who are supposed to be participating in a conversation with the speakers.

The Number of Years of Study refers to the participants' lengths of exposure to English instruction in an undergraduate university or their year levels. This is one of various criteria, which is used to measure levels of language proficiency.

Refusal Strategies are one or more ways that the refuser uses to reject his/her interlocutor's request.

Request is a situation where the interlocutor asks the subject or the interlocutor to do something e.g. asking for a key to get inside a classroom.

