

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Human beings communicate in a variety of ways i.e. by gestures, body positions, facial expressions, etc. Most significantly, human beings communicate by language. (Penhallurick, 2003, p.1) Human beings not only use language in conveying information, but also use it to perform actions while they are saying something. This is known as speech acts. (Cutting, 2002, p. 16)

In recent years, many researchers have studied the comparisons of speech acts from different cultures (e.g. Al-Issa, 2003; Choa-Chih Liao, et al., 1996; Kwon, 2004; Nelson, et al., 2002), revealing that the same speech act may be realized differently across cultures, according to norms of usage which are specific to the given speech community. In 1986, Eisentein and Bodman studied the use of gratitude strategies by native speakers of American English and non-native speakers (Russians, Chinese, Koreans, Spanish and Japanese) and found that Japanese speakers express an excuse before saying thank you. For example, in the case of expressing gratitude to the boss for a raise in salary, a Japanese employee says "I'm sorry, I will try harder in the future." American speakers, on the other hand, said, "Thank you. I'm glad you appreciate my work" in a similar situation. On this point, American speakers reveal that expressing gratitude in Japanese culture is complex and difficult to understand. Moreover, it may cause the receiver of the message to become confused and misinterpret the message.

As mentioned earlier, the difference between Western and Asian cultures may lead to communication breakdown. This difference has been shown in speech act conventions of a resource book for students by Cutting (2002) who stated that Indian people express speech acts of "praise" and "congratulations" by the words "How fat you are!" because it refers to prosperity and health in India where there is malnutrition. In Great Britain, however, there are words for expressing a speech act of "deploring" or "criticizing" since the fashion and diet food industries, and possibly

health education, have conditioned many into thinking that “slim is beautiful”. Additionally, most American people use the words “*yes*” and “*no*” to express their individual views. Sometimes, Americans’ individual views may have a strong degree and may effect the perception of listeners. For example, a boss may refuse a worker’s request for a raise by saying “No, I can’t do it”. In contrast, Ma (1993) stated that the Chinese (as well as many other East Asians) say “*yes*” for “no” or “*no*” for “yes”, which is largely a reflection of indirect approach to communication. This expression is called “contrary – to – face – value”. It is an aspect of Asian communication that can make the American speakers (as well as many other people from the west) confused. Ma also revealed the instance of Asian contrary- to face-value language in a request situation. For instance, “It’s O.K, don’t turn the air conditioner on,” shows that the speaker uses “no” to say “yes” The statement implies that “I say *no*, but you should know I really mean yes. You should know that turning on the air conditioner will make me feel more comfortable.”

In using a second language to express feelings and perform actions, refusal is one troublesome aspect for second language learners. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) stated that refusals are known as “a sticking point” in cross-cultural communication. Thus, the speaker needs to be aware of the different cultures and the status of the interlocutor while they are making refusals. Kwon (2004) revealed that the selection of refusal strategies depends upon the status of the interlocutors. For instance, American speakers have a similar reaction to higher and lower status people, but give different responses to an equal status person, while Japanese speakers tend to be more inclined to make different responses to both types (Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz, 1990).

Nelson, et al. (2002) stated that, while approximately 75 percent of many published studies have been investigated in the US, Israel and Japan, the studies on refusal strategies of Thai learners in terms of cross-cultural communication have received relatively little attention (Sairhun, 1999; Promsrimas, 2000; Thammo, 2005; Songsukrujiroad, 2005). Besides, in the findings of these studies from 1999 to 2005, it was shown that Thai speakers use different refusal strategies from American native speakers. Many teachers analyzed that Thai students lack knowledge about the cultural background of the target language because they hardly have any opportunities to

communicate with native speakers. In addition, the researcher indicated that Thai students have studied English in compulsory education for 12 years, but continued to have problems with communicating in English.

As mentioned above, the researcher purposes to re-investigate the use of refusal strategies between Thai EFL students and American native speakers, because this study can reveal the use of refusal strategies of Thai students at present. On this point, the researcher stated /supposed that the American native speakers in her study might perform somewhat differently from the native speakers of American English in the study of Songsukrujiroad (2005) because the American native speakers in this study lived in Washington D.C. and behaved according to the American culture and would be a reliable subject for avoiding Thai cultural norms. If there were different results in making refusals between Thai and American native speakers, it might be a sign to keep us aware of learning cross-cultural communication and social skills for refusing in the English language in Western styles. In addition, this study will accentuate English teachers to support and increase refusal strategies for Thai students so that they can use refusal strategies in the same ways that native speakers do thus decreasing miscommunication.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to investigate different refusal strategies used in request situations by Thai students and native speakers of American English living in Washington D.C. The study also aimed to find out the relationships between the refusals used by Thais and Americans. Therefore, it was conducted to answer two major research questions as follows:

1. What were the refusal strategies used by Thai and American speakers of English?
2. Was there a significant difference between refusal strategies in request situations used by Thai students and those used by native speakers of American English?

Scope of the Study

This study was a survey study that aimed at investigating the differences between refusal strategies used by fifty Thai students at the university level and fifty native speakers of American English who lived in Washington D.C. Additionally, the researcher selected request situations frequently encountered in daily life. The situations were adopted from Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz, (1990; Liao and Bresnahan, 1996; Nelson, et al., 2002; Chen, 2007). The study was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2008 at Udonthani Rajabhat University.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study would be useful for students learning English and English teachers. For students learning English, this study can lead to an awareness of cross-cultural knowledge wherein students will be aware that mere grammatical or phonological knowledge is insufficient for communicating with English native speakers, especially in certain refusal situations. Learning refusal strategies can increase choices in making refusals for non-native learners. They can also learn about the structures and strategies of refusal that native speakers use in different situations. Furthermore, learning refusal strategies can help non-native learners create and employ their own refusals clearly and appropriately in the context of western culture. For example, Thai learners may use gratitude strategies alone to refuse an invitation in their culture. In the West, however, people are likely to put their gratitude in the last sentence after the statement of refusal (Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz, 1990 as cited in Promsrimas, 2000)

In the case of EFL learners, using English correctly and appropriately can be difficult; it becomes more difficult when learners have to speak in refusal situations. Refusals require a high pragmatic competence which is a sensitive pragmatic task that poses a risk for the interpersonal relations of the speaker. Einsentein and Bodman, (1986; Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1998) stated that non-native speakers with a high level of grammatical competence did not always perform target languages appropriately. This is related to the studies of Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Raynolds, 1991 in that “speakers who do not use pragmatically

appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting”.

Therefore, this study would be useful for English teachers in applying refusal strategies to teaching pragmatics in language classrooms, especially in teaching English for specific purposes such as business, tourism, medical fields, etc. The findings of this study revealed sociolinguistic knowledge about using refusal strategies in the request situations of Thai students compared with those of American native speakers. This study will be useful for students’ preparation in English communication before going out to work in many places, as the subjects of this study need to use English in job training and working. If students learn to communicate appropriately in class, they can reduce the risk of culture shock in real situations.

Limitation of the Study

The study had three major limitations. First, the participants’ proficiency level was not taken into consideration in selecting the Thai participants. Most students tended to have low-intermediate levels of proficiency in English (Sairhun, 1999). Therefore, they may have used grammar incorrectly when they produced their refusal statements. However, this study aimed to focus on refusal strategies that Thai speakers produced on the discourse complement test (DCT) which did not concern grammatical errors. However, in the participants’ proficiency level, it was more likely that they would rely on the Thai culture when communicating in English. Second, for the convenience of distributing the DCT questionnaire, this study did not control the time of responding taken by the American respondents, because they lived and worked in different locations of Washington D.C. and the questionnaire was distributed via email. Similarly, the study focused on the American culture of American respondents living in Washington D.C. Thus, the findings of this study could only be applied to the subject groups studied. Finally, the differences between social statuses, gender, age, English proficiency levels and occupations were not considered.

Definition of Terms

Refusal strategies are one or more strategies the refuser selects to deny or express unwillingness to comply with a request.

Request is a situation where the interlocutor asks a favor of the subject or the interlocutor to do something e.g. asking to borrow class notes.

DCT refers to the Discourse Completion Test which includes a short dialogue generally beginning with an “opener” followed by a blank indicating an unfinished dialogue wherein the American and Thai respondents have to write refusals under different given situations (E.g. refusing a request).

Interlocutors refer to the respondents in the DCT who are 50 Thai students and 50 American native speakers. Additionally, interlocutors also refer to the persons who are supposed to be conversing with the speaker.

