

**Wannaruk, A. (2008). Pragmatic transfer in Thai EFL refusals. *RELC Journal*, 39(3), 318-337.**

Wannaruk's article contributes to a canon of research focusing on interlanguage pragmatics and pragmatic transfer. She begins with a brief background on research in interlanguage pragmatics and highlights the fact that errors in pragmatics are more severe than linguistic errors. Linguistic errors result in the hearer perceiving the speaker as being less proficient in the language whereas pragmatic failure can result in the speaker being perceived as disrespectful or impolite. One of the speech acts Wannaruk says commonly results in communication breakdown are refusals. Refusals are complex in that they are influenced by a variety of factors such as gender, age, social distance, power relationship, etc. Wannaruk points out that pragmatic transfer (when speakers apply rules of the L1 culture to another language) has a complicated relationship with language proficiency in that the proficiency level of a speaker doesn't necessarily match their pragmatic proficiency. Wannaruk's study investigates the similarities and differences in American English and Thai refusals and seeks evidence of pragmatic transfer. She hopes this will help teachers develop their student's pragmatic competence.

For her study, Wannaruk used a *discourse completion test*; this consisted of a role play in which participants responded to written scenarios where refusals were likely to occur with an interviewer. Her participants were 40 native English speakers (American), 40 native Thai speakers and 40 Thai EFL learners. Each group had 20 males and 20 females. Ages ranged from 22-40. All participants were graduate students in various majors in different universities. The English proficiency of the EFL students was described as ranging between low-high intermediate. The data was analyzed using an adapted classification of linguistic actions into categories such as positive feeling, gratitude, explanation, etc. For example, when refusing an advisor's offer of a teaching assistantship, saying, "I'd really love to teach but...", *I'd really love to teach* was classified as a positive feeling.

Wannaruk's results covered many different types of refusals such as refusals to invitations, to suggestions, of offers, and to requests. She presented her data in charts that showed the types of responses of the native English speakers, the native Thai speakers and the EFL learners in categories and percentages of usage for each category. She also separated the

results, showing the differences in refusals of interlocutors of different status (eg. higher, lower or equal status). Each chart was accompanied by an explanation of the results.

Wannaruk found that most of her results aligned with previous research that demonstrates a high level of similarity between native English and native Thai refusal strategies. However, there are specific strategies which are very different between the two languages such as the use of gratitude (eg. thanking an interlocutor for an invitation as a component of refusal of it), which is much more popular in English than in Thai. The study found that this stratification predictably existed between the native English and Thai speakers but the EFL learners fell in between these two extremes. This demonstrates a negative pragmatic transfer from Thai to English as an English interlocutor might interpret the EFL learner's lack of gratitude for an invitation as being rude. The fact that the EFL learners used gratitude even partially showed that they were aware of the politeness of using gratitude but their proficiency wasn't to the point where they knew to use it in all the situations that called for it. Wannaruk continues by itemizing other instances of pragmatic transfer in the use of regret, future acceptance, and explanation as strategies of refusal.

In conclusion, Wannaruk says that her study has implications for language pedagogy in bringing awareness to specific areas of pragmatic failure that teachers can focus on and give additional classroom practice that would help alleviate them. She points out that her study only focuses on two social variables, status and distance of interlocutor, and that future studies should account for more. Also, she points out that the role play tool she used to present the refusal scenarios might yield different data that more naturally occurring language use might. Finally she recommends that future studies might also want to focus on pragmatic transfer between two non-native English language users, as these interactions are becoming more frequent.

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I found the topic of Wannaruk's study to be very intriguing. The concept of interlanguage pragmatics seems like such an important component of communicative competence that I am surprised I haven't encountered it more frequently in my studies. I have often wondered how much cross-cultural influences contribute to second language acquisition. Wannaruk's study has

given me a small but flavorful taste of this field in English language teaching.

Regarding the structure of the study itself, I find myself with the same criticisms that Wannaruk mentions in her conclusion, that she examines limited variables, with a tool that may not provide the most naturally occurring language use. The fact that she examined only two variables, social distance and power relationship, isn't that bad. No one study can account for all the variables, but it would have been reasonably easy for her to display her data with gender information and this could have provided pertinent information. Also, the use of role play is understandable, but hardly yields exciting data. Finding and recording naturally occurring conversations in English from a target population and then hoping that a refusal is included in the conversation isn't practical but would provide more solid data. Perhaps using an interview process where the interviewer subversively creates refusal appropriate scenarios to an unsuspecting interviewee might work. In any event, Wannaruk's findings are not statistically significant but the qualitative nature of her data analysis does reveal some valuable insights in pragmatic transfer; namely the use of 'gratitude' markers between the participants.

One of the more noteworthy issues of this study is the use of EFL students in the study of pragmatic transfer. These are English language students living in their native language country, Thailand. In this context, there isn't much exposure to target language culture, nor is their much motivation for assimilation into the culture of the target language. In fact, some of these students might even be purposely resisting the pragmatics of English language culture as a way of solidifying their Thai identity. Even using the term *English language culture* to refer to American culture is problematic, despite the fact that the native English speaking participants of Wannaruk's study were American. As is well known, English is used by a variety of people, some of which may not even be aware of the culture of inner circle countries such as the U.S. Wannaruk does mention this by saying that future studies should involve non-native speakers of English of different cultural backgrounds but she doesn't justify her use of EFL students. For a study like this it seems obvious to me that *ESL* students, who are studying English while living in the culture of the target language, would make preferable subjects for interlanguage pragmatic research.

Lastly, Wannaruk makes a few sweeping assessments of Thai culture, calling it "a

hierarchy-sensitive society” and that they are “given to being modest”. Perhaps it is difficult to avoid these types of generalizations in interlanguage pragmatic research but it would have been wise to mitigate the absolutism of these statements by saying that individual variation in culture is a prominent feature of society. Wannaruk does have a healthy number of participants in her study, which would alleviate the possibility of individual cultural preferences in her data but when she itemized the specific linguistic actions that she found to contain pragmatic transfer she did not say how many occurrences of the form there were. This led me to think that it might have been a sole example, produced by only one participant. Of course the example is still interesting, but it would have strengthened her study if it occurred with more than one participant.

Despite the shortcomings of the study itself, I enjoyed Wannaruk’s study on topic of interlanguage pragmatics. One of my favorite parts of English language teaching is the cultural exposure it affords. How these cultures influence the acquisition of English is an area of interest of mine that I intend to pursue.