

The Use of Refusals in Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

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1. Introduction

This study focused on the speech act of refusals. Refusals contain an element of expressing the speakers' negative feelings and/or attitudes toward the hearer. In refusing, we might run the risk of offending the other person, so indirectness and mitigation are often used to avoid offense and maintain good human relationships. The form and content of refusals change according to the eliciting speech act (e.g., request, invitation, offer, and suggestion) and are affected by the status of the interlocutor (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz, 1990)³⁾. That is, a refusal is a difficult speech act even in the mother tongue. It is still more difficult and complicated when refusing in a foreign language. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990)³⁾ mentioned that they are major cross-cultural "sticking point" for many non-native speakers, and for that reason, refusals are important for second language educators and others involved in cross-cultural communication (p. 56).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the teaching of refusals to requests as found in junior high school English textbooks. In this study, we analyzed the textbooks used in Japanese junior high schools that have been approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology⁸⁾. First, we identified the requests and refusals found in conversational sentences in the textbooks. Second, we analyzed the semantic formulas of those refusal expressions. Third, we analyzed the types of excuses used in the textbooks.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Studies of Speech Act

Austin (1962)¹⁾ defines a speech act as an act that a speaker performs when making

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utterances. A speech act has three levels:

1. Locutionary act: an act to say something.
(e.g.) I hear something noisy outside.
2. Illocutionary act: an act that is done at the same time with locutionary act.
(e.g.) "I hear something noisy outside." might be speaker's indirect request to close the door.
3. Perlocutionary act: an act, feeling or thought of hearer from the effect of locutionary act.
(e.g.) Someone closed the door because he thought that it was speaker's indirect request.

As stated above, communication consists of these three acts, which are related to the attitudes of the speaker and hearer. Austin explains that a locutionary act is controlled and an illocutionary act is uncontrolled by language and social convention. Searle (1975)¹⁰⁾ classified indirect speech act: saying things indirectly, and direct speech act: saying things directly, as illocutionary acts. "The illocutionary act is the minimal complete unit of human linguistics communication. Whenever we talk or write to each other, we are performing illocutionary acts" (Searle, 1969, 1999, p. 136)⁹⁾.

Refusals are significant speech acts to investigate cross-culturally because an offense is inherent in the act itself (Beebe and Takahashi, 1989)²⁾. Chen (1996)⁵⁾ investigated the pattern differences between native and non-native refusals in English by using an discourse completion test (DCT). The refusals of the Japanese participants involved more variety in semantic strategies than those of Chinese, Korea, and German participants. Direct refusal was not one of the most common strategies. The participants, regardless of their language backgrounds, appeared to prefer circumlocution such as an expression of excuse or a suggestion of unwillingness. She pointed out that this gave rise to the occurrence of miscommunication. This demonstrated the native and non-native language groups' refusal patterns.

We have described that refusals and requests are both performed in human speech acts and can be categorized as illocutionary acts. People across different cultures and countries generally refuse a request by using an indirect speech act.

2.2 Studies on Refusals

According to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990)³⁾, refusals are a major cross-cultural difficulty for many non-native speakers. In refusing, the refuser runs the risk of offending the initiator of the request. To communicate smoothly, the person who refuses may

need to mitigate the force of the refusal. In other words, the second language learner needs to be able to refuse in a way that is appropriate and expected in the target language culture.

Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz investigated the English language refusals of Americans and Japanese with people of higher, equal, and lower status by using a discourse completion test (DCT). Their findings showed that compared to Americans, Japanese frequently used expressions of regret such as "I'm sorry" with people of higher status. However, expressions of regret were used less frequently with lower status people. Japanese refusals started with expressions of regret and were followed by an excuse, such as "I'm sorry, I am busy." On the other hand, American refusals started with a positive opinion such as "I'd really like to help you but..." and then regret and excuse in that order. Japanese excuses were often less specific than those of Americans. In contrast, Americans favored an "airtight" excuse such as "I have to meet Mr. Brown at 6:00 PM." Japanese used excuses that were extremely vague such as "I'm busy," or "I have a plan." They found three examples of pragmatic transfer with Japanese speakers of English: less use of specific statements to make excuses, more use of statements of principle such as "I never yield to temptation," and more use of statements of philosophy such as "Things with shapes eventually break."

Kitao and Wakamoto (2000)⁶⁾ examined Japanese speakers' refusals of requests in both English and Japanese by using a DCT. Their study compared refusal strategies between close friends and acquaintances. In both English and Japanese, participants commonly used an expression of regret and a reason. No differences were observed between English and Japanese speakers related to expressions of negative willingness or giving reasons or explanations. On the other hand, saying "no" along with statements of regret was much more common when speaking in Japanese, regardless of the size of the request or the closeness of the relationships. The results showed that Japanese used direct expressions of refusal more frequently in English than native English speakers.

Matsumura (2010)⁷⁾ investigated the relationship between Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' knowledge of native English speakers' speech act realization strategies and their preferred strategies in specific situations. Participants included 425 Japanese university students majoring in intercultural studies. He used a multiple-choice knowledge test and a multiple-choice preference questionnaire. The findings indicated that their knowledge and preference showed a close association. However, the degree of association was not high enough to conclude that second language (L2) learners' preferred strategies were dependent on whether they knew native realization strategies. Regarding the speech act

of refusal, the results also showed that the students who had knowledge of the native speech act realization strategy and whose preferences converged with it were the most frequently observed type. The students who neither have knowledge of the native strategy nor a preference to use it were the next highest group. The students who did have knowledge of native realization strategies but opted for different strategies were more frequently observed in the act of refusal than in requests or apologies. This suggests that L2 learners do not always choose to behave like native speakers, especially when making a refusal, even though they know how to do so. Because of the resulting shift in relationship between the speaker and the hearer in a refusal and the students' considerations about living in Japan's hierarchical society, the power differential between the speaker and the hearer appears to affect the choice of strategies in a refusal. The fundamental notion of Japanese sociocultural norms and values, particularly the importance of harmony with others can be a means of developing a good relationship even with a refusal.

Non-native speakers sometimes speak a target language according to their own sociocultural norms and this may lead to miscommunication. Japanese learners of English need to understand the expressions that will help them retain their relationships with native English speakers because the differences in the sociocultural norms may affect their use of Japanese and English.

2.3 Research Questions

In this study, we looked at the following research questions.

1. What tendencies can we find regarding refusals to requests in conversational sentences in English textbooks used in Japanese junior high school?
2. Do Japanese junior high school English textbooks teach limited patterns of expression to refuse requests?
3. Do Japanese junior high school English textbooks teach vague excuses to refuse requests?

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

This study investigated how junior high school English textbooks teach Japanese students to make refusals in English.

3.2 Materials

Eighteen English textbooks were selected for this study. We examined six types of EFL

textbooks. COLUMBUS 21, NEW CROWN, NEW HORIZON, ONE WORLD, SUNSHINE, and TOTAL ENGLISH, developed for junior high school students (from first year through third year). All of them have been approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology⁸⁾ and are used at junior high schools in Japan.

3.3 Procedures

We analyzed the textbooks used in junior high school by counting the numbers of requests and refusals found in conversational sentences. Blum-Kulka (1987)⁴⁾ classified indirect requests as follows: mood derivable, performative, hedged performative, obligation statement, want statement, suggestory formulas, query preparatory, strong hints, and mild hints. We counted the numbers of requests inspired by the study of Blum-Kulka. To analyze the data, we compared the qualifying age of the textbooks and the use of requests and refusals.

The investigation was implemented as follows. First, we identified the requests and refusals found in 18 textbooks and counted them. Second, we categorized the refusals according to semantic formulas. Each refusal was categorized using Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990)³⁾ refusal classification system (See Appendix B). Finally, the excuses for refusals were analyzed as either specific or unspecific excuses.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 In Response to Research Question 1

In order to determine in detail the textbook refusal tendencies to requests, we counted the responses to the requests and more specifically, the number of acceptances, refusals, or multiple choice responses in which: students can choose their responses (See Appendix C). In our study, we counted the requests and refusals found in both main conversational sentences and book notes of the textbooks; these frequencies are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Requests Used in Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

Target Age of the Textbooks	Requests Used in Main Conversational Sentences n	Requests Used in Conversational Sentences in Book Notes n	Total n
First Year of Junior High school	14	2	16
Second Year of Junior High school	14	13	27
Third Year of Junior High school	13	14	27
Total	41	29	70

Table 2 : Refusals Used in Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

Target Age of the Textbooks	Refusals Used in Main Conversational Sentences			Refusals Used in Conversational Sentences in Book Notes			Total		
	n	()	%	n	()	%	n	()	%
First Year of Junior High school	4	(14)	28.6	0	(2)	0	4	(16)	26.7
Second Year of Junior High school	2	(14)	14.3	10	(13)	76.9	12	(27)	44.4
Third Year of Junior High school	0	(13)	0	3	(14)	21.4	3	(27)	11.1
Total	6	(41)	14.6	13	(29)	44.8	19	(70)	27.1

More requests were found in the main conversational sentences (41) than in the book notes (29) of the textbooks.

Table 2 shows the number of refusals that were used in conversational sentences in the textbooks. The numbers in parenthesis next to the refusals in Table 2 indicate the total numbers of requests found in the conversational sentences.

As indicated by Table 2, refusals were used more often in book notes (44.8%) than in the main conversational sentences (14.6%) of the textbooks. In the textbooks for third-year students, no refusal expressions were included in the main conversational sentences.

Thus, the answer to Research Question 1 is that refusals to requests were rarely used in conversational sentences in Japanese junior high school English textbooks. They were more often used in book notes than in the main conversational sentences for second- and third- year students.

4.2 Response to Research Question 2

Let us now focus on Research Question 2, regarding the order of semantic formulas for refusal responses to requests in the conversational sentences of the textbooks. Table 3 demonstrates the combined numbers of refusals found in both main conversational sentences and book notes.

As previously mentioned, Japanese refusals tend to start with expressions of regret followed by an excuse (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz, 1990)³⁾. The results of our study showed that “Regret + excuse” was one of the most typical semantic formulas used for refusing requests in the textbooks. Therefore, Japanese learners of English would likely use “Regret + excuse” when refusing requests because they know it from their culture as well as from the English textbooks.

However, the most common semantic formula used in the textbooks was “Regret +

Table 3: Typical Order of Semantic Formulas in Refusals in Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

Target Age of the Textbooks	Regret (I'm sorry) + excuse n	Regret (I'm sorry) + negative willingness (I can't) + excuse n	Excuse only n	Regret + negative willingness n	Others n
First year of Junior High school	0	3	1	0	0
Second year of Junior High school	3	2	0	2	5
Third year of Junior High school	2	1	0	0	0
Total	5	6	1	2	5

Note. Semantic Formulas of “others” are three types of refusal sentences such as :

- a) regret + excuse+ alternative (Maybe ~ can help you. Shall I ask him / her?) (3)
- b) regret + negative willingness + criticize (You have to do it yourself.) (1)
- c) regret + promise future accept (Please wait a minute.) (1)

Numbers in the parenthesis are numbers of each semantic formula in the textbooks.

negative willingness + excuse.” We still need to determine why Japanese do not use this semantic formula as frequently as “Regret + excuse” in their daily conversations in English.

Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz demonstrated that most Americans refuse requests by starting with a positive opinion. However, in our study, none of the textbooks used positive expressions to refuse the requests. Therefore, according to the results in Table 2, the answer to the research question 2 is, Japanese junior high school English textbooks teach conventional expressions to refuse requests.

According to the results in Table 2, the answer to the Research Question 2 is that Japanese junior high school English textbooks teach limited patterns of expression to refuse requests.

In addition, three textbooks researched in our study suggested the way to say “no” in the additional information. Two of those textbooks encouraged speakers to say “Sorry, I can’t” and “give an excuse.” Another textbook encouraged speakers to say “I’m sorry” and “give an excuse.” These set patterns may influence students’ knowledge of refusals.

The results of our study indicate the need for the Japanese junior high school English

Table 4 : Classification of Excuses to Refuse Requests in Junior High School English Textbooks

Excuses	n
Specific	8
General	8
Total	16

textbooks to include positive refusal expressions such as “I wish I could but...” in the conversational sentences to refuse requests. Also, since English teachers in Japan usually teach from the main conversational sentences or main reading paragraphs, it is quite possible that English teachers and students do not even open or use the pages of book notes when teaching or studying in English textbooks, where the other types of refusals are found.

4.3 Response to Research Question 3

The data were also analyzed according to the types of excuses for refusals. Analyzing the excuses was important because they were given to justify the refusals. The results of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990)³⁾ indicated that Japanese tend to use more vague excuses than Americans. To analyze the excuses, all excuses for a specific situation were classified as either general (e.g., “I have plans”) or specific (e.g., “I’m going to go shopping with my mother this weekend”).

The results for Research Question 3 indicate that specific and general reasons to refuse requests were equally used in the textbooks. The textbook examples of vague excuses were “I’m busy,” “I have no time,” and so on. These types of responses contained typical unspecific excuses that did not mention place, time, and other details about the excuses. As shown in the study of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz, Americans favor an “airtight” excuse.

The Japanese tendency to use vague excuses may sometimes affect interpersonal relations in a negative way. Therefore, in English textbooks, it is important to include more examples of specific excuses than general excuses for refusing requests.

5. Conclusion

This analysis yielded only very general findings. However, the general results showed that there was limited information about refusal strategies in Japanese junior high school English textbooks.

Refusals to requests were rarely used in the conversational sentences of Japanese junior

high school English textbooks. In addition, they included a small repertoire of refusal patterns, most commonly "Regret + negative willingness + excuse" and "Regret + reason." "Positive opinions" which American native English speakers prefer to use, were not found in these textbooks. To effectively communicate, second language learners must acquire the sociocultural strategies used by native speakers of a target language as well as their vocabulary.

With respect to the excuses used to justify refusals, a similar frequency was found between general and specific excuses. However, Americans favors specific excuses in their refusals, so it would be useful to expand students' knowledge in this area and to stress this format.

The data in this study were limited to Japanese junior high school English textbooks. In addition, the focus was limited to the types of refusals for requests. All these limitations demonstrate a need for additional study of second language learners' acquisition of refusals. It would be useful to gather data from high school English textbooks in order to compare both datasets in future studies. Moreover, a comparison of the different refusals given for invitations, offers, and suggestions would produce more interesting results.

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Appendices

Appendix A : Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

Textbooks	Author	Publisher	Published Year	Published Place
<i>COLUMBUS 21 English Course 1~3</i>	Tōgo, Katsuaki et al.	Mitsumura Tosho Publishing CO., Ltd.	2011	Tokyo
<i>NEW CROWN English Series 1~3 New Edition</i>	Takahashi, Sadao et al.	Sanseido Publishing CO., Ltd.	2006, 2011	Tokyo
<i>NEW HORIZON English Course 1~3</i>	Kasashima, Junichi et al.	Tokyo Shoseki Publishing CO., Ltd.	2011	Tokyo
<i>ONE WORLD English Course 1~3</i>	Matumoto, Shigeru et al.	Kyoiku Shuppan CO., Ltd.	2011	Tokyo
<i>SUNSHINE English Course 1~3</i>	Sano, Masayuki et al.	Kairyudo Publishing CO., Ltd.	2006, 2011	Tokyo
<i>TOTAL ENGLISH New Edition 1~3</i>	Horiguchi, Shunichi et al.	Gakko Tosho CO., Ltd.	2011	Tokyo

Appendix B : Classification of Refusals by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990)³⁾

I . Direct

- A. Performative (e.g., "I refuse")
- B. Nonperformative statement
 1. "No"
 2. Negative willingness / ability ("I can't." "I won't" "I don't think so.")

II . Indirect

- A. Statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry..."; "I feel terrible...")

- B. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help you...")
- C. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., "My children will be home that night."; "I have a headache.")
- D. Statement of alternative
 - 1. I can do X instead of Y (e.g., "I'd rather..." "I'd prefer...")
 - 2. Why don't you do X instead of Y (e.g., "Why don't you ask someone else?")
- E. Set condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have...")
- F. Promise of future acceptance (e.g., "I'll do it next time"; "I promise I'll..." or "Next time I'll..." – using "will" of promise or "promise")
- G. Statement of principle (e.g., "I never do business with friends.")
- H. Statement of philosophy (e.g., "One can't be too careful.")
- I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
 - 1. Threat or statement of negative consequence to the requester (e.g., "I won't be any fun tonight" to refuse an invitation)
 - 2. Guilt trip (e.g., waitress to customers who want to sit a while: "I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.")
 - 3. Criticize the request / requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion) ; insult / attack (e.g., "Who do you think you are?"; "That's a terrible idea")
 - 4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.
 - 5. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., "Don't worry about it." "That's okay." "You don't have to.")
 - 6. Self-defense (e.g., "I'm trying my best." "I'm doing all I can do.")
- J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
 - 1. Unspecific or indefinite reply
 - 2. Lack of enthusiasm
- K. Avoidance
 - 1. Nonverbal
 - a. Silence
 - b. Hesitation
 - c. Do nothing
 - d. Physical departure
 - 2. Verbal
 - a. Topic switch
 - b. Joke
 - c. Repetition of part of request, etc. (e.g., "Monday?")
 - d. Postponement (e.g., "I'll think about it.")
 - e. Hedging (e.g., "Gee, I don't know." "I'm not sure.")

Adjuncts to refusals

- 1. Statement of positive opinion / feeling or agreement ("That's a good idea..."; "I'd love to ...")
- 2. Statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation.")
- 3. Pause fillers (e.g., "uhh"; "well"; "oh"; "uhm")
- 4. Gratitude / appreciation

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Appendix C : Responses to Requests in Japanese Junior High School English Textbooks

Responses to Request	Responses Used in Main Conversational Sentences	Responses Used in Conversational Sentences in Book Notes	Total
	n	n	n
Accept	34	18	52
Refuse	4	6	10
Multiple Choice: Accept and Refuse	4 (Accept: 2, Refuse: 2)	13 (Accept: 6, Refuse: 7)	17
Total	42	37	79

Note. The total for responses to requests was more than 100% because four multiple choice responses, including both accept and refuse, appeared in the main conversational sentences and thirteen multiple choice responses to requests appeared in the conversational sentences in the book notes. In addition, a set of request and response situation was not included in the data because it provided five multiple choice requests and two multiple choice responses (accept, refuse) in the book notes of the textbooks. We did not include this last situation in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 to make the data reliable as possible.