

Mitigation in Turning down Business Proposals across Cultures: The Case for Pragmatic Competence Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Writing 'bad news' messages in English constitute a skill critical to interpersonal effectiveness in today's global marketplace. This study investigates the rejection (or refusal) strategies that native and non-native speakers use naturally, i.e. without the help of explicit pragmatic competence instruction. The data consist of the letters of rejection written by higher education students in response to a business proposal. These letters were analyzed in terms of four dimensions: meaning components, organizational approach and indirectness (using a framework derived from Félix-Brasdefer 2006) and the speech acts of apologizing and thanking (Wannaruk 2008). Results show that the student rejections display more variation, and even randomness, than predicted by the literature. Additionally, national culture and language appear to be much less of an explanatory factor than the students' shared subcultural identity and exposure to similar models of communication. Overall, the data allow us to conclude that not only non-native but also native student writers would benefit from pedagogical interventions aimed at raising genre awareness and improving their intercultural pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Intercultural business communication; rejections; indirectness; English for Specific Purposes; second-language writing; pragmatic competence instruction

INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges in higher education is to decide *what* to teach. Seeing that classroom time tends to be limited, and more often than not, student groups are large, learning targets have to be selected carefully. Various decision criteria both compete and collaborate in identifying and eventually prioritizing course content. In the case of intercultural business communication, utility is obviously one such criterion and so is frequency. Together, those two criteria fully qualify rejections (or refusals) as a relevant learning target since business proposals are prevalent in international business and the act of turning them down a useful skill. More generally, the ability to write 'bad news' messages has long been recognised as being critical to interpersonal success and effectiveness in many people's professional lives (Salerno 1985). Yet, rejecting is a form of 'high-stakes' communication that requires considerable tact and diplomacy. How businesses go about writing their rejection letters affects corporate reputation, client base, competitive advantage, growth, profit, and other critical factors (Brandt 2005).

The question that this paper seeks to address is how much instruction business and management students need in order to communicate these negative messages effectively. Frequency and utility do not in themselves justify explicit teaching and classroom practice. On the other hand, there is no assurance that students will acquire the skill at a later stage through mere exposure or experiential learning in the workplace. For that reason, business letter-writing

textbooks typically include model letters, theory, guidelines, and checklists as to how to deliver ‘bad news’ successfully (Taylor 2004, 2005, Bovee & Thill 2008). However, would student writers perform equally well when left to their own devices? Additionally, are native speakers of English better equipped to write letters of rejection, or is linguistic proficiency alone insufficient to guarantee communicative success? Both native and non-native speakers of English face the same challenge of how to say ‘no’ politely, or put differently, how to *mitigate* the ‘bad news’ in an intercultural encounter. In pragmatics, more specifically, the term *mitigation* is used to refer to the “wide set of strategies by which speakers attenuate one or more aspects of their speech” (Mey 2009, p. 645). The rejections examined in this study emerged as a locally adequate communication step within a student-managed cross-national business writing activity (see the *Methods and Materials* section). Teams of students were drawn from two universities, one in the US and one in Europe (Belgium).

Two research concerns will guide analysis and discussion of the rejection letters written by these two groups of student writers:

1. What kinds of strategies do native US speakers of English and non-native Belgian students adopt when turning down a business proposal? Specifically, how much rhetorically and culturally appropriate mitigation do their rejections contain?
2. Do the results provide further evidence for explicit writing instruction and especially the teaching of intercultural pragmatics?

Answers to these questions are directly relevant to determining the extent of explicit pragmatic instruction that may be required. Note that in terms of Hyland’s (2002) conceptual approach to writing research, the data will be analysed both as ‘texts’, i.e. as products of writing with formal surface elements and discourse patterns, and as forms of meaningful social ‘interaction’ in which writers balance their task-oriented and people-oriented goals with the expectations of their intended readership.

REJECTIONS AS A FACE-THREATENING ACT

The letter of rejection can be regarded as a ‘face-threatening act’ (Brown & Levinson 1987). In conversation analysis, rejections are viewed as dispreferred second pair parts in adjacency pairs like INVITATION, OFFER, SUGGESTION OR REQUEST – ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION, and thus, are taken to require redressive or mitigatory action in the form of delayed execution, apologies, justification, etc. The reason is that people do not only want to get the message across, they are also interested in creating, preserving and developing good interpersonal relationships – and to achieve the latter, politeness, good manners, cautiousness, and mindfulness are essential. The same holds true for written business communication.

The following two letters illustrate how Belgians and Americans, respectively, turned down a particular ‘solicited proposal’ (Taylor 2004). Only the bodies of the letters are shown, not any of the other components (e.g. letterhead, date, inside address, salutation or signature).

(1) Although we are pleased with your company’s proposal, we have to reject your offer. While we have contacted multiple companies to send us proposals, we have chosen a different company for which we have accepted the proposal. Therefore your company does not need to start recruitment activities and select people from your database. Please accept my apologies for the rejection. We feel it is best for both parties not to contract. Feel free to contact us if you have any further remarks.

(2) Thank you for your prompt response to our letter requesting information about your international business communications training program. The courses you offer are highly impressive. However, we have decided to go in a different direction at this time. Please keep us on your mailing list and keep us informed of any new course offerings you think would be of interest to our company. We may be in need of your services at a later date. Thank you again.

To minimize the interactional risks associated with turning down the proposal; both letters use such devices as justification, disclaimers, impersonal statements, and also, *indirectness*. The latter notion refers to the phenomenon that the illocutionary force (or intent) of an utterance is not immediately reflected in the lexis or syntax of the sentence, thus necessitating inferential work on the part of the reader (for a recent detailed discussion, see Lempert 2012). The utterance “we have decided to go in a different direction at this time” (Example (2)) has to be interpreted, therefore, as an indirect refusal. Indirectness is a mechanism to convey politeness in social interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987). It allows participants to meet their positive and negative ‘face’ wants (Goffman 1967) and to achieve, where called for, ‘mutual face-protection’ (Ting-Toomey 2005).

REJECTIONS AND THE INDIRECT ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH

It is clear that Examples (1) and (2) differ in terms of language proficiency (*a different company for [?] which we have accepted the proposal*), style and tone. However, do they also differ in terms of selection, organisation, and linguistic realisation (including indirectness) of the content? And what should the content consist of?

For decades business communication researchers have tried to identify the features that contribute to the pragmatically appropriate rejection of a business proposal. Despite research to the contrary (see below), there is a relatively strong, if often implicit, preference among textbooks (Bovee & Thill 2008, Guffey & Loewy 2013, Taylor 2004) for the so-called ‘indirect organisational approach’. This strategy includes

- (i) a buffer opening meant to soften the rejection as a potentially face-threatening act
- (ii) an indirect refusal rather than a flat ‘no’
- (iii) one or more reasons for turning down the request or proposal, and
- (iv) a positive ending

A similar discourse pattern can be found in Taylor (2004, p. 94), who adds that the positive ending may take the form of a counter-offer or a “suggestion that there may be other opportunities to do business together”. She also mentions the importance of thanking the supplier for their trouble and expressing regret at the inability to accept the proposal. The claim behind this kind of mitigated approach is that it will help deliver the ‘bad news’ content without jeopardizing the relational dimension.

The various meaning components identified above can be illustrated, using Examples (1) and (2) above. Buffer openings can be found in both letters: *we are pleased with your company’s proposal* and *the courses you offer are highly impressive*. Both also contain indirect refusals: *we have chosen a different company for which we have accepted the proposal* and *we have decided to go in a different direction at this time*. These rejections are indirect as they do not explicitly state that the proposal has been turned down. It is left to the reader to infer the intended meaning.

Curiously, neither letter gives a reason. Another letter, a Belgian one, however, includes the following direct reason: *you're offered [?] Training program wasn't really what we were looking for*. Finally, both examples end on a positive note, with an invitation to get in touch again while Example (2) also contains an expression of thanks.

Brent (1985), Limaye (1988) and Locker (1999) were among the first scholars to question the effectiveness of this indirect organisational approach by investigating reader responses rather than focusing on the writer's perspective. Brent (1985) found that the use of buffer openings to lessen the impact of a 'bad news' letter is misguided as these openings wrongly suggest that it actually contains good news. He recommends, therefore, an upfront "thesis-and-support structure", as in, "We cannot grant your request because ...". In fact, placement of the rejection before or after the buffer does not correlate with readers' perceptions of the writer's politeness at all, as shown by Limaye (1988).

The major contribution in this respect comes from Locker (1999). Her much cited study reveals that responses fail to correlate with the presence or absence of a buffer in the rejection letter, and the most unfavourable responses occur when the negative message is unexpected. Locker's (1999) article is especially relevant to the present study as she suggests an alternative formula for writing negative letters. Perhaps her most surprising finding is that generally neither buffers, nor positive endings are necessary. Instead, writers are advised to begin their letters with the rejection itself and then to give as many detailed reasons as needed, followed by alternatives (like a counter-offer) and/or compromises if they exist. Fifteen years on, the overall realization is that much depends on perceived context. Bovee and Thill (2008) and other recent business communication titles all acknowledge that there are in fact alternative strategies –usually divided into direct and indirect approaches –depending on type of audience, whether the negative news concerns a routine business matter, whether it pertains to organisational changes, employment matters, and so on. A detailed discussion is outside the scope of this article.

REJECTIONS AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE INSTRUCTION

Hypothetically, if the rejection strategies used by native US speakers of English and non-native Belgian students are too divergent, then this might lead to pragmatic failure, intercultural misunderstandings, and even conflict. Over the past twenty years, there has been considerable interest in topics like this as part of the growing field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), i.e. the study of how non-native speakers acquire, comprehend, and produce pragmatics (Kasper & Dahl 1991). Specifically, there has been a great deal of research into whether pragmatics should and can be taught, either within a second-language (L2) learning context or as a stand-alone subject (Vásquez & Fioramonte 2011). Interestingly, Okamura and Shaw's (2000) research into *academic* communication found that what is missing among the non-native speakers of English is "knowledge not of how to approach the [transactional] letter but of how to phrase the content" (p. 12), i.e. how to make the most appropriate lexical and syntactic choices. Zhang's (2013) recent study of international *business* communication, however, concludes that linguistic proficiency is only one criterion for evaluating a non-native writer: business practitioners and professionals equally highlight the importance of genre knowledge and intelligibility. In light of these and related studies, is there a case to be made for teaching intercultural pragmatics or should the focus be on lower-level linguistic features?

As a result of inconsistencies in the research, answers to this question naturally tend to differ. Rose (2005) observed that instructional effects research "has a long way to go" (p. 385), a

statement that still applies today, largely due to the relative neglect of pragmatics in second language acquisition research but also the methodological problems involved (see also *Conclusions*). More recent reviews of the literature (Bell 2011), however, conclude that *explicit* instruction in pragmatics can indeed improve pragmatic performance. A major finding is that direct pragmatic competence instruction is more likely to benefit learners than no instruction (Eun & Tadayoshi 2006). Okamura and Shaw (2000), for one, argue that non-native professionals should be equipped with model letters and fixed phrases in order to improve their writing. Tanck (2002) claimed that producing pragmatically appropriate refusals and complaints requires awareness-raising among students as well as instruction (especially semantic formulae). Vergaro (2004, p. 203), on the other hand, argues for fostering in students “the development of a metacognitive awareness about their own culture’s writing conventions and thus help them observe and experience other cultures conventions”. Also Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and DeCapua and Findlay Dunham (2007) see a role for pedagogical intervention with regard to instruction in appropriate speech act performance. Wannaruk (2008) quite rightly points out, however, that explicit instruction may only make sense where exposure to the target language norms of appropriate social interaction is non-existent or low. Vietnam and Iran may be examples in point. Nguyen (2013) reports positive effects of explicit meta-pragmatic instruction on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners’ ability to soften criticism. Kia and Salehi’s (2013) recent study of Iranian undergraduate students equally lends support to Wannaruk’s (2008) observation; their findings show superior effects on performance of thanking and complimenting for explicit –over implicit –teaching methods. It is to these ongoing discussions that the present study hopes to make a contribution.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data consists of 21 rejection letters written in response to business-to-business proposals. Both letters and proposals were produced as part of an international business communication game between students at IUPUI (Indianapolis, Indiana, USA) and Lessius Hogeschool (Antwerp, Belgium). Ryan (2010) explicitly mentions this inter-university activity as an effective “career-related, in-country” way of providing students with a “meaningful short-term immersion experience” (p. 309). Acting as companies, native and non-native students alike composed their own letters and documents in real time and in response to each other’s communication moves. Within the semester-long simulation, the student teams at one point sent out invitations to perform specific work under particular conditions to which some of them then received proposals from one or more prospective suppliers. It is these proposals that were either rejected or accepted by the students in the two countries, and which form the data for the present study.

Out of those 21, 12 rejection letters were written by advanced non-native Belgian students and 9 rejection letters written by native-speaker American students. A total number of 80 students took part in the collaborative writing activities that generated the letters. The Belgian students all had at least six years of L2 English instruction in their secondary schools and one or more years of English for Business and Economics at business school level. Important is that unlike discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role plays and similar language elicitation methods commonly used in intercultural pragmatics (Wannaruk 2008, Sattar, Sah & Suleiman 2011, Aliakbari & Changizi 2012, Al-Shboul, Maros & Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin 2012, Kia & Salehi 2013, Nguyen 2013), our data display much higher levels of process and product authenticity and intrinsic motivation – a feature that also uniquely differentiated the activity from

the business correspondence exercises available in the pedagogical literature. It is not enough for students to write an error-free and pragmatically appropriate request for information in highly controlled research or pedagogical settings, they should also be able to write such a request as part of a longer exchange of initiating and response moves with real people at the other end and with real deadlines to keep (De Rycker 2006). It is for these reasons that the data can be considered *naturally occurring discourse*, successfully bridging the gap between ‘writing at college’ and ‘writing at work’. For a recent overview and critical discussion of the data collection instruments used in ILP, see Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2011). For present purposes, it is important to highlight the high observational reliability of our discourse data compared to those collected through DCTs and role plays, the two methods “most widely used” (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan 2011, p. 51).

Given the pedagogical objectives motivating this business simulation project at the time as well as the timing and scheduling problems typical of international projects, we provided no explicit rhetorical or cultural awareness instruction (on how to communicate negative news or how to make cultural adjustments). Though this was initially perceived as a shortcoming, it was realized that it would help gauge the ‘effect of no instruction’. How well would student writers perform the various real-life tasks of the project *in the absence of* business and intercultural communication teaching? It is in this respect that the present study differs from the types of ILP studies reviewed elsewhere in this article: our focus is not on the effect of meta-pragmatic intervention, whether explicit or implicit, but on that of ‘non-intervention’. Additionally, rather than working with treatment and control groups of only EFL learners, the current study includes both native and non-native speakers. This will allow us to gain first-hand insight into the pragmatic abilities of the former –supposedly superior –group, as compared with the latter, in the same intercultural communication context.

The data were analysed in terms of the following four dimensions. Counting and coding was done by the author.

1. meaning components
2. indirect organisational approach
3. (in)direct rejections and/or reasons
4. apologies and expressions of thanks

For the first three dimensions, the coding scheme used was based on the literature, and distinguished the following meaning categories: buffer, (in) direct rejection/reason, positive ending, procedural information, other (see *Background* section). Note that Félix-Brasdefer (2006) uses an alternative, slightly more elaborate system of classifying refusal strategies adapted from Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1999). Given the high degree of overlap in meaning components used (flat versus mitigated refusals, reasons, apologies, gratitude, postponement, etc.), it is unlikely that this way of coding the corpus data would have produced markedly different results. In fact, there is one strong reason for not employing Félix-Brasdefer’s system or the original (see also Al-Eryani 2007): they both fail to distinguish between direct and indirect reasons/explanations for performing the speech act of rejecting. When investigating degrees of (in) directness, however, this is a distinction that cannot be overlooked. As for the fourth and final dimension, a separate analysis was conducted of expressions of apologies/regret (*We regret that ...*) and gratitude (*Thank you for ...*) given the importance of these speech acts for handling face concerns during rejections (Hollett 2007, Wannaruk 2008).

RESULTS

A first major finding is that Belgian and US writers are very similar with respect to the meaning components used in their respective rejection letters: buffer, (in) direct rejection/reason, positive ending, procedural information, and other. When taken together, both groups use practically the same template, mitigating their negative message with buffers, reasons, and positive endings: 95% of all letters have a buffer paragraph; 91% of all letters end on a positive note; 81% of all letters give reasons for the rejection. Neither student group includes meaning components irrelevant to the social and discursive practice of turning down a solicited proposal. Note that some letters contain holiday and New Year's wishes (e.g. Example (3) below) as the final stages of the simulation coincide with the end of the fall semester for both participating institutions.

As the data show, the majority of both Belgian and US writers depart from the traditional indirect organizational approach and use either a direct or a mixed kind of pattern: 58% of all Belgian letters and 56% of all US letters. Conversely, it is still the case that a sizeable percentage of both Belgian writers and US writers do use the traditional indirect organizational approach: 42% of all Belgian letters and 44% of all US ones. Only 1 letter out of 21 comes close to using the “direct rejection, reasons, positive ending” approach recommended by Locker (1999).

(3) After evaluating different proposals from training companies [procedural information], we regret to inform you that you have not been selected to complete the training course in our company [direct rejection]. Nevertheless we would like to thank you for your effort of sending us your well-detailed proposal. We would like you to accept our best wishes and all the best for a fruitful new year [positive ending].

All other rejection letters, however, open with a buffer. And 71% of all the rejection utterances are direct.

While the majority of Belgian writers choose a ‘direct rejection, direct reason’ approach (25%) or an ‘indirect rejection, indirect reason’ approach (25%), the biggest US category consists of 44% who combine an indirect rejection with an indirect reason:

(4) Thank you for the information that you have provided us [buffer]. Although [sic] I am sure that your company and or [sic] individuals can offer us a wide range of services [buffer continued]. We have decided to choose a company [indirect rejection] with a better understanding of our business objectives [indirect reason]. We appreciate the time and the effort that were spent on your proposal. We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavours [positive ending].

See also Example (7) below. The next biggest group is made up of 22% who reject the business proposal without giving any reasons at all.

As a final observation, Belgian students differ markedly from US students in the expression of apologies and gratitude. Well over half of the Belgian rejection letters (58%) contain an utterance expressing regret, as in the final paragraph of Example (1), which is repeated here for convenience:

(5) Please accept my apologies for the rejection [apology]. We feel it is best for both parties not to contract [indirect rejection]. Feel free to contact us if you have any further remarks [positive ending].

By contrast, apologies can be found in only one US letter, namely the formulaic *We regret to inform you that* in the following opening:

(6) Thank you for responding to our inquiry about your training programs [gratitude]. However, we regret to inform you [apology] that your proposal did not meet our business needs [indirect reason].

Unlike their Belgian counterparts, US student writers express thanks significantly more frequently: an average of two utterances of thanking per letter compared to one for the Belgian letters. A more detailed breakdown of the results, however, reveals that three of all Belgian letters account for 50% of all the thanks, with one in three letters not expressing any form of gratitude at all. There is no US letter that does not contain at least one expression of gratitude. A recurrent discourse pattern is for the US companies (i) to thank the supplier for submitting a proposal, (ii) to express appreciation for the time and effort taken, and (iii) to close the rejection letter by thanking the supplier again, e.g.:

(7) Thank you for your response to our request for proposals [gratitude]. We at Alpha Publishing appreciate the attributes that your company has to offer [gratitude, buffer]. However, we had [sic] decided to choose another company [indirect rejection] that has expressed a desire to expand into a broader base of foreign cultures [indirect reason]. Thank you again for your interest [gratitude, positive ending].

As a final comment, expressions of gratitude are often formulaic and ritualistic, especially in business correspondence. For example, ‘thank you’ often signals the routinized closing or pre-closing of an interaction sequence rather than a sincere show of appreciation (Jautz 2013). However, no instances of this function were found in either set of rejection letters.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the analysis shows that both groups of writers use an indirect organisational approach (i.e. buffer, positive ending, and procedural information) though not exclusively. In fact, when left to their own devices, both students groups are very flexible and even random in combining direct and indirect discourse strategies. Belgian writers in particular use a combination of both approaches (45%). Though some degree of flexibility is typical of business genres, especially in international communication (Zhang 2013), the lack of quality in many of the rejection letters suggests that genre flexibility alone cannot account for the variability observed in the data. There is no evidence either, however, that the findings can be attributed to perceived similarities and/or differences in national culture between Belgium (and more generally Europe) and the US.

As far as formal rejection letters are concerned, neither group behaves according to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) or Hofstede’s (1999) descriptions. When turning down business proposals, the US participants are not more direct or assertive than the Belgians, and the Belgians are not more ‘face-conscious’ than their US counterparts. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, p. 100), Americans are a “specific culture” rather than a “diffuse” one, separating their private and public lives and putting a high value on being direct, to the point, precise, definitive, and transparent. Belgians, by contrast, belong to a largely ‘diffuse’ society, with a high concern for privacy and keeping people’s face. However, if anything, the rejection letters show that Americans and Belgians are equally indirect, mitigatory and face-conscious. In view of the observed similarities in content, organisation, and (in)

directness, the question can be raised how culturally dissimilar Belgian and US college/university students are in reality.

Interestingly, the same observation is arrived at in Jinghui Lui's (2009) analysis of the rhetorical patterns used by Chinese and US students in English-language argumentation. In trying to account for the similarities, she concludes that "English writing instruction and textbooks were the most significant factor of influencing rhetorical patterns in both contemporary Chinese and American students' English essays" (p. 105). In our study, however, no such explicit English writing instruction took place, thus ruling out the influence of US business writing standards as a likely explanatory variable. As in Okamura and Shaw (2000), perhaps the most relevant factor in the present study is the writers' subculture. They all are college/university students, and thus, belong to a social group that has certain unique characteristics. It is not unlikely that these characteristics (e.g. attitude towards the writing tasks in the business game) have influenced the data for both Belgian and US students in comparable ways, and hence, have led to the many similarities attested. This conclusion lends support to Atkinson's (2004) conceptualisation of how various cultures other than the national one interact in an educational setting, most notably in our study: "student culture" and "classroom culture".

In addition, Belgian students' writing in English may also have benefited from the interactive nature of the business game, in which student teams on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in a meaningful exchange of messages. This may well have limited the need for, or risk of, transfer of first-language (L1) writing strategies. Admittedly, not all university students the world over will have the same opportunity for direct interaction or more generally the same exposure (Kia & Salehi 2013). In the case of, for example, Malay university students' rejections of proposals in English, pragmatic transfer (Beebe 1999) from the mother tongue and Malay culture is still very much in evidence (Maros 2006, Sattar 2011). Having said that, a recent study by Al-Shboul (2012) qualifies this statement, "Malays were found to be direct in their refusal; This change marks a different attitude to life which could be due to exposure that the group has encountered that influence their ways of interaction" (p. 37). It seems safe to conclude that findings in interlanguage pragmatics require regular updating in view of broader societal changes and varying levels of international exposure (through increased travel and new social media) rather than trying to interpret findings in light of culture or linguistic proficiency only.

In the current study, there is, however, one difference where national culture may have played a major role. The US rejection letters express gratitude more often –and express regret far less –than the Belgian ones. It is well known that the US is a 'thank you' culture rather than a 'sorry' one (Hinkel 1994, Hollett 2007), an observation that fits in with the relatively low "power distance index" that characterises the American cultural mindset (Hofstede 1999, p. 37). Belgian student writers' lack of expressing thanks corroborates Hinkel's (1994) principal research finding, namely that many advanced non-native speakers of English "perceive the speech act of giving thanks as one of incurring indebtedness or asserting a reciprocal social relationship" (p. 73); note that this may explain why these speakers would avoid or under-use expressions of gratitude, also when communicating a negative message. The Belgians resemble, in this respect, the Asian, Arabic and Hispanic participants in Hinkel's (1994) study. As far as rejections or refusals are concerned, the Belgians' pragmatic choices are similar to those found for Arabic speakers (Nelson, Al Batal & El Bakary 2002) and for Thai EFL learners and native speakers of Thai (Wannaruk 2008). This cross-cultural difference "might lead to pragmatic failure, in that native speakers of English may find them [the Thai] rude" (Wannaruk 2008, p. 332).

Though a more detailed discussion falls outside the scope of this article, there is no immediate evidence of such culturally motivated communication breakdowns in our business correspondence data. In fact, a recent study into international business communication has found that “being personal and friendly in workplace texts [e.g. expressing gratitude] may add value but is not compulsory” and, secondly, that international business practitioners –whether native speakers of English or not –value “mutual intelligibility rather than native-likeness” (Zhang 2013, p. 151–152). An utterance like *Please accept my apologies for the rejection* (see Example (5) above) is socio-pragmatically awkward and may indicate a lack of genre knowledge (Tardy 2009, Zhang 2013); however, the current study does not warrant the conclusion that the more frequent acts of apologising have affected the overall effectiveness of the Belgian students’ rejection letters.

As for the similarities among Belgian, Arabic and Thai rejections, it can be argued, following Hofstede (1999, p. 37), that all three of these national cultures have significantly higher power distance indices and score ranks than the US (ranked at 38), with Belgium and Thailand closely together (at respectively 20 and 21/23) and Arab countries the highest (at 7) after Malaysia (1) and Latin America (2–6). Their stronger sense of hierarchical differences and power inequalities may, to some extent, account for differences in thanksgiving and apologizing, at least when compared to the US rejection letters. In Wannaruk’s (2008, p. 325) study, for example, apologies are especially typical of *lower-status* Thai interlocutors: “regret conveys the message of feeling guilty for being unable to comply” (p. 330). Al-Zumor (2011), on the other hand, reports that native English speakers and Arabic speakers not only assign “different degrees of severity to the same situation” (p. 28) but also interpret expressions of regret differently: among Arabic speakers, expressions of regret are “not as embarrassing and discrediting as in the Anglo-Saxon culture” (p. 28). By contrast, in the US, no blameworthy offence is committed by turning down a business proposal so apologies are not in order (Guffey & Loewy 2013, p. 182). It seems that also some of the Belgian student writers assign a relatively high degree of severity to the rejection, motivating their use of apologies.

More research is required, however, to find out whether this is due to national culture rather than a lack of genre familiarity, a lower degree of L2 proficiency or the demands of the business correspondence simulation (see earlier in this section). For example, a closer look at Wannaruk’s (2008) results reveals that refusals only rarely include apologies when performed in response to an offer (a speech act similar to the business proposal in our data); it is only in response to suggestions and invitations that expressions of regret occur frequently. It should also be emphasized that in our study, the offers are *elicited* while in Wannaruk’s DCT scenarios – and all of the intercultural rejection studies cited so far – they occur spontaneously.

CONCLUSION

The present study has shown that both native and non-native student writers are far more flexible and unpredictable in selecting and organising their rejection letters than can be expected on the basis of the literature. The analysis returned many similarities but no significant differences. This is not to say that the non-native group demonstrates near-native language proficiency. In fact, as the examples given above show, the quality of both the native and non-native rejections leaves something to be desired: Belgian and US letters alike are lacking in content and structure. It can be concluded from Zhang (2013) that this lack of quality –if not addressed –may negatively affect a business student writer’s identity as a future member of the community of (international)

business practitioners: “the production of a professionally recognisable text requires enacting the relevant professional role by displaying [...] genre knowledge” (p. 154). Apparently, when left to their own devices student writers do not spend enough time researching the specific business genre to be produced or planning, drafting and post-drafting their letters, resulting in rhetorically slightly awkward and slipshod products. It is conceivable that other factors like the teamwork and collaborative writing context of the simulation may have played a role in this as well.

Generally speaking, the above research findings should be interpreted as all the more reason for introducing pedagogical writing interventions and –for the L2 writers –some forms of explicit language teaching and feedback (Ferris 2004). Teaching genre and interlanguage pragmatics, though shown to be effective, remains a challenge. El-Okda (2011), for one, lists the following: paucity of exposure to target language, lack of appropriate L2 learning materials and communication course books, too much of a focus on assessment and testing, and insufficient teacher training. Other challenges include curricular constraints and even student resistance (Vásquez & Fioramonte 2011). Our study shows that ‘no instruction’ is definitely not an option, not just for the non-native but also the native business student writers, and additionally, that without proper pedagogical framing, business communication simulations may not suffice to enhance intercultural pragmatic competence. The present study is aligned with Zhang’s (2013) recently reported finding that learning to write for international business requires a high level of genre knowledge and that this can perhaps best be achieved through scaffolding student performance and providing directed exposure to authentic business writing.

As a final comment, the present analysis finds its origin in classroom activities and thus has certain features (and limitations) in common with what Hyland (2002, pp. 149–151) calls “practitioner research”. However, methodologically, the kind of purposive non-probabilistic sampling used to collect the data is more likely to represent *authentic* student interaction than DCTs – even when the latter are administered orally (Al-Shboul et al. 2012) or triangulated with role plays and oral peer feedback tasks (Nguyen 2013). The US and Belgian data lend further support to the claim that other factors than national culture and L1/L2 proficiency may determine the content and organisation of rejection letters in international business communication. The study also corroborates earlier work reporting close similarities in the performance of face-threatening speech acts between native speakers of English, non-native speakers of English, and native speakers of other languages (Thai). It is hoped that the findings will prove useful in re-defining the learning objectives of business writing courses and will stimulate further research into how to teach the pragmatics of rejecting across cultures. Additionally, it is hoped that it will contribute to the growing body of speech act realization research into a wide range of cultures, ethnicities and domains of professional and organizational communication that do not rely – like many of the case studies cited above –on DCTs or role-play situations.

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