A Study of Iran's High School Prep Textbooks for Levinson's Dispreferred Seconds

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Abstract
This study was intended to investigate the application and presentation of dispreferred seconds in English textbooks taught at Iran's high school prep centers referred to as an EFL setting. Since dispreferred seconds normally occur in conversations, dialogs and the respective exercises were the target of this investigation. The texts were examined carefully to see if dispreferred seconds were effectively introduced in them. In other words, the goal was to find out if dispreferred seconds have been presented in the texts in the same way as they are used by native speakers. The data were analyzed by determining the total number of dispreferred seconds, the number of the unmarked as well as the marked ones plus their percentage. The findings revealed that the presentation of dispreferred seconds in the texts was adequate, ensuring that students can understand how to use them in real-life conversations.

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different types of dispreferred seconds were proved inefficient based on the principles and compared to the way they are used by native speakers. This work was hoped to detect the inappropriate materials based on this research and help improve syllabus design by taking the pragmatic principles into consideration and incorporating sociocultural aspects of competence as a part of communicative competence into the teaching materials.

**Key Words**: Preference Organization, Dispreferred Seconds (responses), Preferred Seconds, Dispreferred Markers.

**Introduction**

A glance at the history of language teaching reveals that the trend has gradually moved on through the prevalent structural-based theories of 1916 toward generativism in 1960 (the time of Chomsky) and finally to the current functional-based theories since 70s. This has paved the way for researchers to study different aspects of language teaching in the light of pragmatics. Given the burgeoning development of pragmatics and its importance to a functional approach to language teaching, a question to be raised is how much attention textbook writers are paying to what pragmatics can offer. There is a general level of awareness among textbook writers that the language taught should be both grammatically correct and appropriate to the context in which it is presented.

Although pragmatics principles may be universal at some abstract level of consideration, they often differ from culture to culture both in the situation to which they apply, and in the manner they are implemented. Therefore, we cannot assume that our students will bring with them the cultural competence they need to function effectively in a target cultural setting. What they do not bring with them, they must learn, and helping them learn it is an important function of the EFL classroom to prepare them to properly communicate with native speakers. Peng (2007) believes involving the
students in conversation analysis of authentic materials incorporated into the language class help them be exposed and benefit from an environment similar to the real world where the target language is used. Through engaging in conversation analysis, students especially those learning English as a foreign language may hopefully gain a fresh view of English as a linguistic tool rather than just a school subject. In pursuit of this goal, some studies were performed by researchers in ESL settings concerning the use of pragmatic principles in teaching materials as those performed by Ping (2007) and Bouton (1986) in the area of dispreferred seconds. But very little has been done in the same area on EFL texts.

According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), the elements in a conversation often come in pairs. It means that the utterances of one speaker elicit particular kinds of responses by the other conversation partner. A greeting, for example, is likely to be answered by another greeting or, a question by a response. These are called adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The following are two examples:

(1)    A : Is that a new hair style?
       B : Yeah. It was time for a new look.
(2)    A : Would you like one more cup of coffee?
       B : Sure thing.

Speech acts such as requests, invitations, accusations, and even statements, seem to call for a particular response to follow. Levinson (1983) set out to discover if there was a relationships between the parts of a particular type of pair that could be responsible for whether the response (the second turn) would be labeled preferred or dispreferred. What he found was a number of recurrent and reliable patterns on the basis of which he was able to construct a table as Table 1.
He noted for example, refusals of requests or invitations are nearly always in dispreferred format, and the acceptance in preferred format (Levinson, 1983, p.336).

On the basis of such information, a speaker has only to know that his response was a refusal to an invitation, a disagreement with an assessment, acceptance of blame, etc., in order to realize that it should be marked as dispreferred. According to Levinson, we need a rule for speech production which can be stated roughly as follows: try to avoid the dispreferred action- the action that is generally in dispreferred or marked format. Thus, the two essential characteristics of dispreferred actions are: (a) they tend to occur in marked format (b) they tend to be avoided. Further, he describes a dispreferred second as one that in the eyes of the community, threatens the personhood of the conversation partner or endangers the bond that can be supposed to exist between the partner and the speaker. He says society finds such messages offensive and has decreed that they must be identified as such and their force diluted by the presence of various dispreferred markers. But what is there about dispreferred responses that makes it necessary to dilute their impact in a neutral tactful conversation? Levinson refers to Gaffman's (1983) discussion of the nature of the conventions governing a social encounter. These conventions he says ritually enforce the standards of modesty regarding self and those of others generally enjoined by the community. Maintaining face, one's own and that of the conversation partner is a primary motivation for everything one says and does in conversation. Similarly, McCharthy
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(1990) points out that we probably react against the bold 'no' answer and that politeness codes demand a more elaborate structure for dispreferred responses. According to Levinson, “Preferred seconds are unmarked; they occur as structurally simpler turns while dispreferred seconds are marked by various kinds of structural complexity” (Levinson, 1983, p.307).

Examples: (3) A: Would you shut the door on your way out, please?  
B: Sure thing. (preferred second)  
(4) A: Want to go to a movie tonight?  
B: I can't. Sorry. I've got to study. (dispreferred second)

Ping (2007) on the other hand, indicates that whether a second turn is preferred or dispreferred can not be identified merely by its linguistic structure. It is the speaker’s meaning and communication context that play an important role in the preferential organization of adjacency pairs. In the following example the disagreement may count as a preferred second turn.

(5) Jimmy: I haven't done well, have I? (assessment)  
Mary: Nonsense, of course you did well! (disagreement but is a “preferred second turn”)

He argues that in spite of the view held by some conversation analysts that preferred, and particularly dispreferred responses often have certain linguistic structures, i.e., preferred responses tend to be short and straightforward while dispreferred responses are normally marked in long and complex forms, we may say, however, it is misleading to insist that preference organization has certain linguistic forms or structures.

Example (6) A: Can you play guitar?  
B1: Yes.  

Bouton (1986) proposed the following principles to be considered in relation to dispreferred seconds:
Dispreferred responses are normally marked as such in neutral, consultative English normally spoken in day-to-day interactions. What constitutes a dispreferred response and how it can be marked in different contexts must be identified, modeled and explained to the learner, and appropriate exercises provided. Unmarked dispreferred responses should not appear in the text unless contained within a justifying context which is explained in some way.

Levinson suggests four main categories of dispreferred markers:

1. A significant delay before the second is uttered in the form of a pause, a space taker such as 'well…' or 'uh…er' or the displacement of the second over a number of repair initiators of other sorts of embedding.
2. Prefaces such as the following: 'uh…er', 'well…' or 'hmmm'; token agreements before disagreements; apologies if relevant; and qualifiers as: I (don’t) think that …‘, hesitation, etc.
3. Some account of why the preferred second cannot be performed.
4. The actual declination component.

Yule (2000), presents the patterns associated with a dispreferred second in English as a series of optional elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to do a dispreferred</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. delay/hesitate</td>
<td>pause; er; em; ah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. preface</td>
<td>well; oh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. express doubt</td>
<td>I am not sure; I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. token yes</td>
<td>That’s great; I’d love to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. apology</td>
<td>I’m sorry; what a pity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. mention obligation</td>
<td>I must do X; I’m expected in Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. appeal for understanding</td>
<td>you see; you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. make it non-personal</td>
<td>everybody else, out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. give an account</td>
<td>too much work; no time left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. use mitigators</td>
<td>really; mostly; sort of; kinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. hedge the negative</td>
<td>I guess not; not possible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dialogs have long been used in EFL textbooks because of their value as teaching devices. They serve as models for the kind of communicative behavior that we want students to emulate. Until recently, however, writers have had to depend largely on their own intuition and creative skills to make their dialogues models of genuine interaction. Little was known concerning the pragmatic principles that guided participants in any interaction. In the absence of explicit, detailed knowledge of this sort, students and teachers alike were left to interpret a dialog and to infer the principles, underlying the interaction it presented, largely on the basis of their own past experience. Much of what was learned, was based on their cross-cultural sensitivity to such matters.

This is now changing. Research is beginning to make explicit the conventions by which we communicate. As our theoretical knowledge grows, so does the challenge before applied linguistics to make the new insights more directly accessible to teachers and learners.

This study is intended to investigate the concept of dispreferred seconds in high school prep texts (in dialogs and the respective exercises) to see if they have effectively been presented in such teaching materials.

Taking into account the above-mentioned, and considering the fact that our EFL texts, for the most part, help students develop a grammatical competence rather than a pragmatic competence, the research question would be:

**Do our EFL texts present dispreferred seconds as effectively as they are used by native speakers?**

2. Methodology

Dialogs and the respective exercises of the high school prep textbooks were investigated based on Bouton's three principles mentioned in 1.2. Then the presentation of dispreferred seconds was discussed and the
implications for foreign language teaching classroom, material preparation and syllabus design were explored.

As mentioned earlier, the materials involved in this study included English textbooks taught at high school prep centers of Iran. Conversations and dialogs were the target of the investigation since dispreferred seconds normally occur in such interactions which are usually associated with such speech acts as requests, questions, invitations, apologies, complements, etc.

Our examination of the texts went through the four common situations referred to by Levinson (1983) in which dispreferred seconds come into play:

- Negative responses to questions
- Contradiction to another participant in the conversation
- Refusal to a request
- Rejection of invitations and accusations

Based on the three aforementioned principles mentioned in 1.2 which should be present in any functional approach to dispreferred seconds, our criterion in the assessment of the texts was to answer the following four questions put forward by Levinson (1983).

1. Are the various types of dispreferred seconds presented in the texts? If so, do they occur in normal conversations and meaningful contexts like dialogs and exercises?
2. Are dispreferred seconds appropriately marked?
3. Is the students' attention directed to the elements acted as dispreferred markers, their function and the reason for their presence in a given particular context?
4. Are unmarked (inappropriate) dispreferred seconds that may appear rude in a normal conversation presented in the textbooks as models without justifying context and appropriate explanations?

Total number of dispreferred seconds, the number of the marked and unmarked ones as well as the number of each type of dispreferred
seconds occurring in the texts were determined and the percentage of the marked dispreferred seconds was calculated so that we could find out the range of the occurrence of each type of dispreferred seconds in general and the occurrence of appropriately marked ones as well as the unmarked in particular.

3. Results
The results of this study are presented in Table 2. and Table 3. The first shows the total number of dispreferred seconds occurring in each text as well as the number of the unmarked and marked ones with their percentages, and the latter indicates the number of each type of dispreferred seconds occurring in the texts.

The appropriateness of the data collected through the investigation, was examined based on the four questions mentioned in Methodology as our tools for the evaluation of the texts.

Table 2: Dispreferred seconds occurrence in high school prep textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbooks</th>
<th>Total number of dispreferred seconds</th>
<th>Number of unmarked dispreferred seconds</th>
<th>Number of Marked dispreferred seconds</th>
<th>Percentage of the marked ones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 1</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 3</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>77 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In surveying our EFL textbooks, discrepancies were found between the way in which dispreferred responses were presented and the way
they should be presented as discussed in previous sections. As indicated in Table 2 all texts have presented a number of dispreferred seconds most of which in an unmarked format with no justifying context or explanation. Even for the appropriately marked responses, there is no implication on the part of the author to direct students' attention to dispreferred markers, their function and the need for their presence in that particular context.

Table 3: Different types of dispreferred seconds presented in high school prep textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbooks</th>
<th>Negative response to question</th>
<th>Refusal to request/offer</th>
<th>Rejection of invitation</th>
<th>Contradiction to another participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 1</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Path to English Book 3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, as indicated in Table 3, the occurrence of various kinds of dispreferred seconds was mainly limited to negative responses to questions, only one of the four possible situations mentioned by Levinson (1983) in which dispreferred seconds come into play. On the whole, the presentation of dispreferred seconds in the texts neither fully conformed to Bouton's principles mentioned in Introduction nor provided the expected replies to all the four questions (our criteria in the assessment of the texts) put forward by Levinson in Methodology. Thus, the null hypothesis claiming that dispreferred seconds were appropriately presented in high school prep textbooks is rejected in this way.
4. Discussion
As Widdowson (1991) puts it when acquiring a language one does not only learn to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence, but also learns how to use them appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose. So, producing grammatically correct sentences is one aspect of language learning ability, and understanding which sentences or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context is another aspect. Widdowson calls the first 'usage' which involves the manifestation of our knowledge of language system, and the other 'use' which involves applying language usage for communicative purpose. Therefore, knowing a language goes beyond knowing how to understand, speak, read and write sentences; it also requires knowledge of how sentences are used for communicative purpose.

In normal circumstances linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage, and its realization as use (Widdowson, 1991). Although there is a natural coincidence of usage and use in normal language behavior, in our survey of high school prep English textbooks, we found that the focus was generally on usage rather than use. Consider for example the following dialogs.

(1) Teacher : Is this a desk?
Mina : No, it isn't
Teacher : What is it?
Mina : It is a table
(Birjandi,2007, Book 1, p.33)

(2) A: Is this a door?
B : No, it isn't. It's a wall
(Birjandi,2007,Book 1, p.34)

(3) A: Does he walk to school?
B: No he doesn't, he goes to school by bus.
(Birjandi,2007, Book 2, p. 60)

(4) A: May I leave the classroom?
B: Yes, of course.

(5) A: May I leave the classroom?
B: No, you may not.
(Birjandi,2007, Book 3, p. 54)
Presenting such pictorial dialogs can help students get the answer with the aid of the pictures. They can also be useful in teaching and providing students with practice of particular structures or various vocabulary items; but they are seldom used in actual communication. In dialog (1), the questions and answers which goes between the teacher and Mina are not normal instances of language use but rather a device for presenting certain structures or words which help students establish them in their mind by repetition. So, the first problem with this conversation is the non-authenticity of the whole dialog and the second, is the modeling of the unmarked dispreferred response without any account or justifying context on why the answer has appeared unmarked.

In (2) and (3), the questions are contextualized to the extent that they refer to something outside language and we are not just dealing with manipulation of the language itself, and the dispreferred responses are marked (accompanied by some explanation). Yet, the fact that the questioner sees and knows the answer to his/her question still makes the dialog unnatural. Only if students are certain that the questioner is in a situation really unaware of his requested information, the question would take on the characteristic of normal language use.

In (4) and (5), both preferred and unmarked dispreferred seconds have been presented as possible answers to the requests which were simply handled as yes/no questions. They are intended to introduce the modal ‘may’. Questions of this type are special types of requests for getting permission to do something. Negative short answers to such questions seem appropriate only when the person uttering such a response is in a position of authority. So, it is essential for students to be informed of the limitation of using such a structure in order not to generalize it to other situations. Students should be made aware that these responses are allowed where there is a mismatch of power as teacher/student, parent/child, police/suspect,
etc. Students should be pointed out that in everyday conversation, people don't usually respond that way if they are not in a position of authority. Rather, in a similar natural context the request and response sequence may be something like these:

(6) A: Can I use your pen?  A: Can I borrow a pen?
    B: Sure. Here you are.  B: I am sorry. I don't have one.

An answer like "no, you can't" is perhaps interpreted as rude, authoritarian, and confrontational. Moreover, in normal conversations people don't lend themselves to such syntax-based short answers. Therefore, the negative responses to such exercises as in (1) and (5) would be considered dispreferred from a pragmatic point of view unless one of these three things happens. First, students are told that these are mere exercises and have no communicative validity, in which case pragmatic considerations would be irrelevant. Present pedagogical theories, of course, frown on such an approach and our authors clearly do not intend to follow that track since they have presented their exercises in the form of short conversational exchanges. Second, the authors can search for questions in a context that would normally require only a simple yes/no reply without any further embellishments. Such questions and contexts are rather hard to find. Third, the authors provide their negative responses with appropriate dispreferred markers. This latter course is the best to follow and certainly has the greatest value as a device for teaching the application of preference principle to yes/no questions and their answers.

Since none of these three possible options have been chosen, the negative responses in such exercises should be treated as dispreferred, unmarked, and a pragmatically inappropriate model for students to follow. In fact, such exercises are not really intended to present and teach dispreferred responses; they present preferred and dispreferred forms simultaneously in the same exercise just as alternative models to reply a question. There is nothing at all implying the preference system and its related issues. The focus is rather on presenting and
practicing a particular structure. No concern indeed is shown for effective presentation of dispreferred seconds. Now consider the following examples:

(7) Amin: Have you English today?  
Ali: Yes, we have. What about you?  
Amin: No, we haven't.

(8) A: Are you a teacher?  
B: No, I'm not. I'm a doctor.

(Birjandi, 2007, Book 1, p. 54)  

(9) Hamid: Are there many cars in the street?  
Parvin: Yes, there are many cars in the street  
Hamid: Are there many buses in the street?  
Parvin: No, there aren't. There is one bus in the street.

(Birjandi, 2007, Book 2, p. 14)

(10) Parvin: Excuse me. Have you a red pencil?  
Mehri: No, I haven't.  
Parvin: Have you a pen?  
Mehri: Yes, I have.  
Parvin: What color is it?  
Mehri: It's red. Here you are.  
Parvin: Thank you.

(Birjandi, 2007, Book 2, p. 5)

These exercises and many others which almost represent similar patterns are potentially confusing. Nothing is said by the author at any time to distinguish among preferred and dispreferred, marked and unmarked patterns in any way. No account is given on why A's response appear in an unmarked form in (7); it indeed keeps Ali waiting for more information concerning Amin's schedule – what lessons Amin had that day, or, when he had English. Amin's answer could have maintained faces of both participants and looked more natural, polite and more in line with standards of modesty if accompanied by enough information as "we have English tomorrow" or "we have science and dictation today".
By the same token, no attention is directed to the appropriately marked dispreferred responses in (8) and (9). As for (10) the problem is doubled; not only is there a mixed presentation of preferred responses and unmarked dispreferred ones with no justifying explanation on the unmarked one, but the whole dialog looks inauthentic compared to a normal conversation. All the unusual and redundant exchanges in this dialog could have been modified and it could have taken on the form of a normal and communicative request and response sequence if shortened this way:

Parvin: Excuse me. Have you a red pencil?
Mehri: No, I haven't. But I have a red pen. Do you want that?
Parvin: Yes please. Thank you.

The widespread use of such models and exercises suggest that the authors, for the most part, have ignored the need for introducing dispreferred seconds and marking such responses. In focusing on the grammatical point involved in dispreferred responses in dialogs and exercises, they simply forget the pragmatic implications of the format they are using.

5. Conclusion
Through the survey of Iran's high school prep English textbooks, it was found out that the way in which dispreferred seconds presented in the texts was frequently different from the way native speakers actually use them. The evaluation of the texts was organized by answering the four questions put forward in 2.3. Upon the review of the texts, what we found was that out of the four situations, put forward by Levinson, in which dispreferred seconds come into play, only one (the negative response to questions) was of the highest occurrence and the three others (contradiction with another participant, refusal to requests, and rejection of invitations) were almost ignored. Thus, the presentation of dispreferred seconds proved
to be less than adequate. While there were dialogs and exercises that conformed to the principles of making dispreferred responses, there were many cases that didn’t. In other words, marked and unmarked dispreferred responses were intermingled in the same exercise or dialog without any justifying context or explanation on the unmarked ones. This puts the students in danger of taking the unmarked responses too, as appropriate models to be used in normal conversation and thus putting them at the risk of diminishing their own image and relationship with their conversation partner while encouraging them to think that they are behaving appropriately.

The most important thing was that whether dispreferred seconds had been appropriately marked or appeared unmarked, all texts lacked one thing in common. There was very little explanation on what types of responses were preferred and what types dispreferred. Nor was there any account on the part of the author to call the students' attention to elements functioning as dispreferred markers, their effect, and the reason for their presence in a particular context. The result is that for students using such texts, the responsibility rests upon them and their teacher for realizing that a preference system does exist when a person replies to questions, invitations, requests, of another participant in the conversation. But this is not the way it should be. Unfortunately even if the teacher wishes to explain this to her class, she is on her own; neither the book nor the teacher's manual tells her what she needs to know if she is to describe such turns accurately. Robinson (1985) says, if we want people from other cultural backgrounds to get the intended message from our lessons, we must draw their attention to that. This suggests a deductive rather than inductive approach to these pragmatic matters.

Thus, in this case, the dispreferred seconds should be pointed out to students first and then types of dispreferred markers as well as their function, the reason for their presence and the effect of their absence on the conversation partners as well as the dialog itself must
be explained to the learners. Students must be taught to mark such utterances so that they could properly be understood by their native speaker partner and to be able to interpret them effectively when they come from others. As Bouton (1986) puts it, when dispreferred seconds occur unmarked in conversation, native speakers can recognize them and will interpret them as inappropriate or as justified in terms of that particular context. For example, they recognize that the speaker is justifiably angry at the person whom he is addressing. With learners, on the other hand, such ability does not exist. As such, the reason for using an unmarked dispreferred response in a particular instance should be pointed out to them. Otherwise, they will not be able to distinguish between the ones which have been used appropriately and those which have not. If we do not help our students understand these things, their communication with native speakers may turn to be inefficient and frustrating unless they are provided with what they need to know.

Therefore, this is clearly the task of syllabus designers and material developers to take the result of such studies into consideration and provide students and teachers with bright insights concerning the effective and correct use of the language through genuine teaching material. When dialogs follow pragmatic considerations appropriately, they can be excellent tools for teaching students how to handle such dispreferred actions as giving negative responses, opinions contrary to that of others, refusing requests, rejecting invitations, etc.

References


