Contrasting Pragmatic Elements of L2 Japanese and L2 English Learning: A Closer Look at Refusals and Indirect Opinions

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Abstract
This paper examines the acquisition of pragmatically correct refusal and indirect opinion strategies by first language (L1) English learners of Japanese, and mirror image pragmatic acquisition of L1 Japanese learners of English. The scholarly evidence seemingly indicates that both L2 learners of English and Japanese can acquire and adopt pragmatically correct refusal and indirect opinion utterances and strategies, either through explicit instruction, or incidentally through target language (TL) immersion environments. Nevertheless, advanced levels of general TL language proficiency do not always appear to correlate to corresponding levels of pragmatic competence or fluency in the specific areas examined. In fact, pragmatically appropriate speech patterns may often be inconsistently adopted due to a variety of factors, which may point to a greater need for explicit pragmatics instruction in TL classroom environments.

Keywords: Indirect Opinions, Pragmatic Competence, Refusals, L2 Japanese, Target Language

Introduction

This paper examines the thorny pragmatic challenges that second language (L2) Japanese and L2 English learners experience when developing pragmatic aspects of speech in each respective target language (TL). Particularly, the acquisition of TL refusals and indirect opinions is surveyed. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004) emphasize the importance of pragmatic awareness as follows: "Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative, ill mannered, rude, or a combination of all three. Such misinterpretation of communicative intent is heightened in cross-cultural situations" (p. 244). This highlights the importance of foreign language learners being able to acquire subtle pragmatic aspects of respective target languages, to include refusals and indirect opinions. This investigation may further illuminate pragmatic challenges encountered by both groups of learners.

An examination of relevant literature on this topic shows differing linguistic pragmatic learning nuances between Japanese L2 learners of English, and L1 English speaking learners of Japanese. For example, LoCastro (2010) states that "cross-cultural mismatches between Japanese interlocutors and American English speakers may arise regarding the location and frequency of the listener responses" (p. 97). By contrast, Houck and Fujimori (2010) address the apparent inability of Japanese learners of English to offer an indirect opinion in English, e.g., "the tendency of learners from cultures such as Japan to use offensively direct strategies when speaking English" (p. 90). Subsequently, pragmatic challenges faced by both groups may reflect a variety of cultural differences between English speaking Western and Japanese cultures.

Knowledge of the most apparent cultural differences, including latent preconceived notions and stereotypes, may result in speech acts or utterances which exaggerate perceptions of the TL culture. This is perhaps one reason why Japanese L2 English learners might use extremely direct English utterances with L1 English-speaking interlocutors, based on perceptions of L1 English speaker frankness. As a result, Japanese L2 English learners may even overdo 'directness' when speaking in English or may make a variety of other pragmatic mistakes. This paper reviews applicable research on such issues, and then contrasts similarities and difference between each group of learners.

Refusals and Indirect Opinions in L2 Japanese Learning

Increasingly, technology is becoming an integral part of foreign language teaching in multiple dimensions. Pragmatics is an area in which potential gains may be made through technological means designed to enhance pragmatic awareness. In this arena, Ishihara (2007) examines the impact of a web-based pragmatics awareness program, which utilizes naturalistic audio samples, for its ability to increase pragmatic competence in L2 learners of Japanese. Ishihara evaluates various speech acts and states that learners analyze the "language of acceptance and refusal in order to self-discover the lexical and prosodic features of refusals" (p.28). Moreover, Ishihara claims that "reflective journaling" (p. 34) yields evidence of L2 Japanese learners' capacity to increase pragmatic competence. Intriguingly, one of a handful of

pragmatically appropriate refusal strategies adopted by L2 Japanese learners is the "white lie" which is used in Japanese culture as a refusal and as a means of saving face, while continuing to be truthful with close friends when uttering refusals (Ishihara, 2007). In Western countries white lies are also likely used, but there may be greater social penalties if the truth is revealed, as those who utter them run the risk of being branded 'a liar,' if the truth is later exposed. This does not mean that the white lie is not used in English speaking Western cultures, but it may not be as much of an automatic mechanism as it is in Japanese society which places greater value on social harmony and saving face than on stating the truth objectively. In any case, it appears that L2 learners of Japanese were able to acquire a range of pragmatically appropriate refusal strategies by overcoming whatever social norms and stigmas they might have acquired in home countries.

While research by Ishihara (2007) indicates that L2 Japanese learners can acquire pragmatically appropriate refusal strategies, by contrast, Kawate-Mierzejewska (2009) demonstrates that even advanced L2 speakers of Japanese tend to employ quite different refusal strategies than L1 speakers of Japanese. Kawate-Mierzejewska (2009, p. 199) examines differences in refusal strategies between 20 L1 Japanese speakers and 20 American L2 Japanese speakers by examining short telephone conversations. All L2 Japanese speakers had lived in Japan for over ten years, and nearly all of them passed the most advanced level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) (Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2009). The results indicate that the L2 Japanese speakers employed different refusal strategies than the L1 Japanese speakers, and only two of the same strategies, i.e., excuse and delay (p. 214). Kawate-Mierzejewska (2009) opines that L1 Japanese refusal patterns are most likely governed by "shared sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge" (p. 214). The larger number of face-saving linguistic devices in Japanese might be indicative of a greater value put on saving face in the Japanese sociocultural context than in a North American sociocultural context. Subsequently, L1 North American English learners of Japanese, perhaps out of a greater sense of individualism, may simply not be interested in saving face, even if they possess the advanced language skills to properly do so. Therefore, when making refusal type statements it appears that Japanese usually opt for a standard 'plug and play,' i.e., formulaic response to most refusal situations. By contrast, L2 speakers of Japanese seem to generate their own individualized or authentic response for each situation even if armed with an advanced level of proficiency in Japanese.

L2 Japanese learners might acquire pragmatic awareness in a variety of ways. While some of those ways might involve formal classroom instruction, others are more naturalistic. For instance, Yokoyama (as cited in Itomitsu, 2009) asserts that L1 Japanese speakers tend to engage in 'foreigner talk', and expands on this notion by describing how L1 Japanese speakers converse with L2 learners: "Japanese natives tend to modify their speech by avoiding the use of linguistic mitigating devices when they speak to non-natives, and monolingual Japanese simplified their speech to non-natives more than bilingual Japanese did" (p.158). Therefore, it appears that monolingual Japanese speakers tend to be more direct and even less polite to L2 Japanese speakers when uttering refusals in Japanese. Such a direct style of 'foreigner talk' communication could partially explain why L2 learners may have a relatively easy time understanding refusals. Additionally, Japanese L2 learners, even at

advanced levels, may struggle to acquire native-like refusal patterns, i.e., less native-like input is likely to result in less native-like output.

An additional pragmatic component which this section examines is how L2 Japanese learners interpret indirect opinions, and how well they acquire proper indirect opinions for expressing and comprehending linguistic strategies. Since it is usually granted that Japanese society places a great deal of value on social harmony, opinions may be frequently stated in indirect ways, or mitigated to show deference to others. In terms of offering opinions, Iwasaki (2009) elaborates on pragmatic differences between L1 and L2 speakers of Japanese in terms of offering opinions:

> L1 speakers very often used the quintessential modal adverb *yahari/ yappari*. They also used the verb *omou* 'think' with various combinations of negatives; the sentence-final particles *kana, yo*, and *ne*; and modality markers (*daroo, zya nai ka*, and *kamosirenai*, which all roughly mean 'maybe'). Such intricate usage of hedges, sentence particles, and modality markers contribute to establishing common ground and achieving nonconfrontational, harmonious ways of stating and supporting opinions. // L2 learners rarely used *yappari* or modified *omou*… L2 learners sounded more direct than L1 Japanese speakers (p. 552).

These differences are likely the result of sociocultural differences. Japanese society tends to favor collectivism and social harmony, while North American or Western society tends to value self-confidence, individualism, and freedom of expression. It is likely that L2 learners of Japanese from a North American background may avoid the use of modals, softeners, and hedges since the excessive use of passive voice in a North American cultural setting may convey an image of weakness, inactiveness, deceptiveness, or a lack of confidence. For example, when interviewing for a job with a North American firm, if the hiring manager solicits an interviewee for his or her opinion and the job applicant utters a highly passive or hedged response the applicant is likely to be perceived in an unfavorable way, e.g., weak, passive, indecisive. Such societal expectations and norms can be deeply ingrained at a subconscious level.

I would argue that it is more a result of the later, i.e., not feeling the need to use such strategies, but even going further that L2 speakers may either consciously or unconsciously reject such devices rooted in deeply ingrained North American sociocultural values. Even so, it is possible that advanced learners of Japanese may not fully understand or appreciate the value of modifying their speech patterns when conversing in Japanese, especially if their curricula haven't specifically addressed pragmatic dimensions of target language learning. Therefore, it would probably be useful to improve pragmatic instruction for L2 Japanese learners through explicit pragmatic instruction and by emphasizing the social benefits of modifying patterns of speech when conversing in Japanese.

It may be assumed that in-country target language immersion is a panacea for developing pragmatic competence. However, there might be more systematic approaches which serve to isolate and remedy specific deficiency areas of pragmatic awareness. A good starting point is learning to identify more or less difficult aspects of pragmatic acquisition. In this domain, Taguchi (2008a) examines the pragmatic comprehension ability of 63 beginning and intermediate L2 Japanese learners at a

university in the United States and claims that for both groups of elementary and intermediate learners of Japanese "indirect refusal was the easiest to comprehend, and conventional indirect opinions were the most difficult" (p. 565-566). Taguchi (2008a) concludes that "nonconventional opinions were more difficult for the learners to comprehend than refusals, probably due to their idiosyncratic nature" (p. 571).

In this regard, L2 Japanese learners at various levels may lack the ability to construct meanings when there are simply so many things that remain unuttered in Japanese. In music it is said that 'rests are silent music.' Similarly, perhaps in Japanese, unsaid utterances are a silent form of communication. The problem may be for L2 learners that too many silent utterances may produce insufficient context required for comprehension. According to Yamashita (2008) "Misunderstanding occurs when Japanese do not say enough" (p. 207). Relatedly, the following is an example of an American businessman's inability to understand an indirect refusal of Japanese businessmen, who mean 'no' when they say they will 'consider it' (Yamashita, 2008). This is one concrete example of how lack of pragmatic awareness can mislead L2 speakers who tend to rely on the literal meanings of words and phrases.

Yamashita (2008) also points out that "Whether or not we actually say something, nonverbal actions such as gestures including hand waves, head nods, facial expressions or eye movements can mean as much as verbal utterances alone or even more" (p. 208). Relatedly, Jungheim (2006) examines differences between the pragmatics of body language and facial gestures as a means of communication, and how L2 Japanese learners may misinterpret refusals which come in the form of body language. In this vein, pragmatic instruction for L2 Japanese learners, including the study of facial gestures and physical movements, may be as important as learning linguistic or verbal concepts and strategies.

Greater illumination of specific pragmatic acquisition processes and challenges was garnered through Taguchi's (2009) computer-based listening evaluation of 84 American English-speaking learners of Japanese comprehension of "three types of indirect meaning: indirect refusals, conventional indirect opinions, and non-conventional indirect opinions" (p. 249). These learners were at various levels of learning, i.e., elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The results demonstrate "that refusal items were the easiest to comprehend, followed by conventional and non-conventional indirect opinions" (ibid). This seems to reinforce the notion that there is a range of difficulty regarding various components of pragmatic knowledge.

Refusals in Japanese may appear in a spectrum from the most direct to the most indirect. In my own interactions with Japanese interlocutors, I have encountered an array of refusals from the explicit *iie* 'no,' or *muri desu* 'it's unreasonable,' or 'impossible' to the more indirect *tottemo kibishii desu ne* 'it's quite severe,' or *chotto muzukashisoo desu* 'it looks a little difficult.'However, it is less common for Japanese speakers to utter explicit refusals out of consideration for the other person's feelings and maintaining an outward appearance of politeness and social harmony; even though native-speakers of Japanese may opt for more direct strategies with L2speakers as previously noted.

One factor which may contribute to easier comprehension of Japanese refusals in general may be due to the frequent use of formulaic phrases, i.e., commonly uttered / prepackaged phrases with little to no modification. In this regard, Mizutani (1985) describes the use of formulaic language for refusals or disagreements: "For example, in response to a request, one can say *Kangaete okimasu* 'I'll give it consideration'. These kinds of expressions do not mean either yes or no but imply that there is little hope for the request" (as cited in Taguchi 2008, p. 561). Various common formulaic refusal utterances like *Kangaete okimasu* could probably be easily taught and acquired in L2 Japanese classrooms. For instance, L2 Japanese instructors could straightforwardly tell students what particular phrases literally means in English, e.g., *Kangaete okimasu* essentially means 'very unlikely' or 'no'. This sort of straightforward instruction could be implemented with beginners and intermediate learners. However, much more lengthy and nuanced opinion utterances should likely be tackled in intermediate and advanced L2 Japanese classes.

While target study-abroad immersion is not a cure-all, it is helpful in the acquisition of target language and culture. Taguchi (2009) asserts that L2 Japanese learners may have limited opportunities for authentic interaction, so it is vital for L2 Japanese teachers to "ensure that pragmatic learning comprises part of language learning" (p. 270). For L2 Japanese teachers, this has two significant implications. First, pragmatics should probably be incorporated at all levels of L2 Japanese learning rather than in a single course. Second, pragmatic topics should be appropriately matched to the specific proficiency levels of students.

Refusals And Indirect Opinions In L2 English Learning

This section explores challenges that L1 Japanese L2 learners of English encounter regarding being able to comprehend and utter pragmatically appropriate refusals and indirect opinions in English. Kondo (2008) examines pragmatic development of Japanese L2 English learners, focusing on refusals and the development of pragmatic awareness. Kondo explores two main areas: the ability to use correct refusals after overt instruction; and changes in refusal strategies following overt unambiguous instruction. Kondo (2008) analyzes frequency and overall use of the following ten types of refusal strategies and concludes that L1 and L2 pragmatics can be taught through explicit instruction to the point where learners can comprehend, contrast, and compare pragmatic differences and nuances between their L1 and L2. The following example indicates gains in pragmatic ability resulting from overt instruction.

Subject 1
Japanese learner before instruction: I'm sorry. I have to go grandfather's house with my family.

Japanese learner after instruction: Next weekend? Oh, I'm sorry, Jennifer. But my family already made plan. I'm sorry, I can't come. Maybe some other time. Thank you for the invitation (Kondo, 2008, p. 165).

Such results appear to show movement in the observation group from unnatural English refusal strategies toward more culturally appropriate refusal strategies. One challenge that many foreign language teachers may encounter is prompting students

simply to produce output, which may come in the form of a refusal or opinion. However, what are teachers to do when students lack the motivation or skill to speak? Ellis (2012) addresses the "silent period" (p. 191) which he describes as one phase in second language acquisition. As harmless and natural as a silent period may be in second language learning, Shimizu (2006) addresses what appears to be a general unwillingness for Japanese students to express opinions in L2 English classroom settings. For example, "although the students like to talk idly in Japanese, which disrupts the smooth progress of the class, they are unwilling to express their opinions in English concerning the topic being studied" (Shimizu, 2006, p. 33).

Certainly, the willingness to offer opinions in classrooms seems to greatly differ between Japanese and North American culture. For example, in North American classrooms, refraining from offering opinions in class may indication "laziness or a lack of intelligence" (Shimizu,2006, p. 33). Shimizu (2006) opines that one reason behind Japanese students' reticence to offer an opinion is in class results from a variety of social condition which values waiting for one's turn and deference toward social hierarchy. Therefore, this research indicates that a lack of linguistic output in a TL may not always be caused by a lack of comprehension or ability, but also may stem from deeply ingrained sociocultural norms.

As a result of examining how L2 English learners behave in immersion environment classrooms, it is also worthy to compare at-home learning versus study abroad learning through immersion. How do learners interact with a target language differently when at-home versus in a TL immersion environment? In this vein, Taguchi (2008b) investigates the role that learning environment plays in the development of pragmatic acumen by examining 60 Japanese L2 English learners at a university in Japan, against a comparable group of 57 Japanese L2 English learners at a university in Hawaii. Taguchi (2008b) examines two areas of pragmatic awareness: indirect refusal and indirect opinions.

Based on the evidence from pretests and posttests for both groups, Taguchi (2008b) finds that for both immersed and at-home learners, indirect refusals were easier to comprehend than indirect opinions; and concludes that at-home learners who are not immersed in a TL environment are not disadvantaged in developing pragmatic proficiency compared with their TL immersed counterparts. These findings have encouraging ramifications for pragmatic education in one's home country.

Continuing to examine classroom learning, it is useful to turn to Yphantides (2009) who demonstrates the ability of L1 Japanese speakers to offer implied meanings when uttering refusals or indirect opinions in L2 English classrooms. One example from a dialogue between two interlocutors referred to as X and Y transpires as follows:

X: "Let's go to the movies tonight,"
Y: "I have to study for an exam"   (Yphantides, 2009, p. 34).

Such an example illustrates the ability to utter more nuanced and sophisticated refusal than an explicit 'no, I can't'. In fact, Yphantides (2009) opines that X's utterance contains "both the literal and surface meanings," while "Y's assertion that he/she must study for the exam, but primary or indirect meaning hidden under the surface is

Y's rejection to X's proposal" (p. 34). There could be various ways of looking at such linguistic abilities. They could reflect similarities in pragmatic features between Japanese and English, thus showing transfer from the L1 to English. Even though L1 English speakers tend to be more direct than L1 Japanese speakers, nonetheless, L1 English speakers, among themselves, may utter a variety of more ambiguous and nuanced implied meanings and indirect refusals based on the real-world context. Yphantides (2009) asserts that Japanese L2 English learners can successfully acquire pragmatically appropriate English conversational techniques such as "'you look beautiful when you are dressed in bright colors' (indirect opinion suggesting that dark colored dress does not suit the person well)" (p. 50). Such examples illustrate that L1 Japanese learners of English appear not to struggle to produce indirect opinions or make subtle implications with their utterances. It may be more challenging, however, to instruct such learners to fine-tune such abilities to quickly switch back and forth between using indirect or implied meanings being able to recognize when to use various strategies in their appropriate sociolinguistic contexts.

Discussion and Contrasting both Groups

The examination of pragmatic differences and similarities between L2 Japanese learning (for L1 English speakers) and L2 English learning (for L1 Japanese speakers) reveals an array of dynamic and interesting phenomena. Further examination uncovers various speech patterns and strategies which are rooted in cultural differences, while other factors may be rooted in gender. Taguchi (2015) contends that "in order to learn pragmatics, learners must attend to multipart mappings of form, meaning, function, force, and context. These form-function-context mappings are not only intricate but also variable and do not obey systematic, one-to-one correspondences" (p. 1). Needless to say, when examining pragmatic language learning challenges, determining precise fundamental causes for specific challenges and developing corresponding remedies may be quite a complex endeavor.

Examining the acquisition of pragmatic awareness in L2 Japanese learning, it is essential to look at gains which result from not only classroom instruction but also from web-based instruction and in-country immersion. Ishihara (2007) asserts that web-based pragmatics instruction "can potentially be effective as a curriculum independent of class-based instruction" (p. 36), yet claims that more optimal outcomes may be achieved if web-based pragmatics instruction is used in tandem with class-based instruction. In terms of gaining pragmatic aptitude through TL immersion, Iwasaki (2010) quantitatively and qualitatively examines the pragmatic development of five L1 English learners of Japanese through comparing formal and informal speech patterns before and after one academic year of study abroad in Japan. Ironically, Iwasaki (2010) observes that the study group seems to use informal speech more frequently after returning from Japan, indicating a decrease of pragmatic competence, based on post-immersion interview data. According to Iwasaki, this might not have been an actual decrease in pragmatic proficiency per se, but rather during study-abroad immersions in Japan students might have been "pressured to use the plain style by their Japanese peers and/or host families" (2010, p. 69). Thus, social factors which might complicate pragmatic strategies. In any case, it seems plausible that the way L1 Japanese speakers converse amongst themselves can often be quite different from the way Japanese converse with L2 learners of Japanese since it is

commonly perceived that *gaijin* (i.e., foreigners) are met with a different set of expectations. In fact, as usually discussed by those who have experienced Japanese society, L2 Japanese learners have anecdotally encountered L1 Japanese-speakers who describe a sort of '*gaijin* waiver,' or "*gaijin dakara shou ga nai* (i.e., 'foreigner, therefore, nothing can be done')", which essentially means that it is expected that foreigners will not conform to various social norms while residing in Japan. Hence, foreigners in Japan are unsurprisingly treated differently in both linguistics and social contexts.

In this light it is interesting to examine which pragmatically appropriate structures are adopted by L2 learners and which ones are disregarded, as well as the reasons behind the selection strategies. According to LoCastro (2012), native Japanese speakers tend to "follow the generally socially-agreed-upon rules rather than to use language creatively, dependent on situated features. In other words, the default for Japanese speakers' enactment of politeness is to follow societal norms" (p. 145). By contrast, Iwasaki (2010) implies that there are in fact shades of grey in terms of politeness and that "there is considerable variability among individuals as to whether and to what extent their choices resemble those of native speakers" (p. 69). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assess that rather than cultivating proficiency gains, immersion in Japan might muddy the waters of pragmatic comprehension, including being able to distinctly recognize refusals and indirect opinions. If this possibility is true, then formal pragmatic instruction (especially prior to study-abroad) could greatly assist learners to better identify actual meanings in naturalistic communication. Otherwise, learners may be relegated to ad hoc approaches of trial, error, and guesswork.

It is also thought-provoking to note that the most significant differences in pragmatic language may not always occur between L1 and L2 speakers. Sometimes greater differences may be observed between men and women regardless of what their L1 or L2 might be. Kawate- Mierzejewska (2009) observes "some gender differences in refusal realization strategies in both" L1 to L1 Japanese conversations and L1 to L2 Japanese conversations (p. 199). Cross-cultural examination with respect to gender revealed that both the L1 Japanese male and L2 Japanese female participants "used the five different patterns of refusal sequences, but only one type, Delay-Excuse, was common" (Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2009, p. 213). Additionally, the L2 Japanese female participants "produced the greatest variety of refusal patterns" (Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2009, p. 215). In terms of gender, Yamanaka and Fordyce (2010) identify specific differences in L2 Japanese and L2 English pragmatic learning and discover that "female speakers decline more politely in both Japanese and English" (p. 200). On average it seems that L1 Japanese speakers tend to be politer than L1 English speakers, yet women generally tend to be politer than men in both languages, whether conversing in the L1 or L2. The level of politeness is likely to affect refusals and opinion strategies, as politeness may often manifest in the form of various softeners and other mitigation strategies. It seems that gender plays a role, and men generally appear less likely than women to expend the effort required to learn and utilize politeness strategies in their L1 and L2.

Hidden or imbedded meanings may prove to be an obstacle for L2 Japanese learners. Akai (2007) contrasts differences in refusals between English and Japanese speakers by providing one speech act context to illustrate the difference, e.g., when a salesperson is trying to sell a product (p. 11). In this example the Japanese Speaking

Person (JSP) states: "*chotto kangaesasete kudasai*" (Let me think about it); whereas the English-Speaking Person (ESP) states "I don't want it" (p. 11). Akai (2007) asserts that such indirect Japanese speech patterns result from the desire to maintain social harmony, whereas L1 English speakers are more inclined to utter and interpret utterances in a more direct way. In this respect, it appears that hidden meanings or dual meanings may be a stumbling block for L1 English learners of Japanese. While they may understand the literal meanings of utterances such as 'let me think about it;' nevertheless teaching the pragmatic dimensions of such utterances and their de facto meanings can be an important aspect of L2 Japanese instruction. By comparison, it seems that L1 Japanese learners of English seem to be more adept at learning and applying indirect refusals in English without as much explicit instruction, even though they may tend to overdo straightforwardness when conversing in English.

Conclusion

Following an examination of relevant literature written on pragmatic aspects of L2 English and L2 Japanese learning, focusing on refusals and indirect opinions, it seems clear that transfer from L1 influences comprehension and output in the L2 in both cases. In this realm, Taguchi (2015) states that "adult L2 learners experience a unique challenge in their pragmatic development, stemming from the co-existence of first language (L1) and L2-based pragmatic systems" (p. 1). Therefore, language teaching and learning do not appear to be a simple matter of memorizing vocabulary or grammar constructs in an attempt to understand utterances in target languages through direct translations. Particularly when crossing over from an English L1 to a Japanese L2 or vice versa, pragmatic education must take a more pronounced role in TL instruction.

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