

The Role of Gender on Saudi English Language Learners' Performance of Refusals

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Abstract

Refusal is one of the most complicated challenges for the hearer, as a face-threatening act, which is influenced by social factors such as gender. Thus, the main purpose of the study is to investigate the role of gender on the speech acts of refusal by comparing the performance of English foreign language (EFL) learners and English second language (ESL) learners, males and females. EFL and ESL students' data were collected using an online written Discourse Completion Task (DCT), which was modified and further classified based on Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) model. A total of 32 postgraduate students participated in this study: 16 Saudi EFL students in Saudi Arabia (eight males, eight females) and 16 Saudi ESL students in the United Kingdom (eight males, eight females). The study found that gender has no significant role in performing refusals except in using indirect strategies and adjuncts by EFL males and females with different interlocutors and the number of instances used with different objects.

Keywords: English foreign language (EFL) learners, English second language (ESL) learners, Pragmatics, the role of gender, the speech act of refusals.

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Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively is the primary purpose of language learning and the key to success for many foreign and second language learners. To achieve their communicative goals, language learners need to learn to use a range of speech acts effectively, such as requests, complaints, apologies and refusals (Kasper & Rose, 2001). Moreover, it has been found that some speech acts are more problematic to learn and understand than others.

Two main theories are crucial in studying pragmatics, in general, and politeness, in particular. Speech act theory has been defined by Austin (1962) as the utterances which are not merely informative units but functional acts in the communication process. Politeness theory which has been introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987) is a form of behavior that encourages communication between potential bold partners. Moreover, politeness theory includes face-threatening acts (FTAs) as one of its components, which are defined as those acts which threaten the speaker's or listener's positive or negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that refusals are face-threatening acts since they require more communication skills without misunderstanding or embarrassment. Thus, in this study, the speech act of refusals is employed to investigate the pragmatic differences among learners.

Furthermore, according to Brown and Levinson (1987) and Fraser (1990), gender is one crucial factor behind the complexity of performing refusals. Hence, this study will investigate this complexity among two groups of learners EFL and ESL learners. As EFL learners, especially those who study business, computer sciences and financial administration need to use the English language in their future workplaces either with people, males and females from the same country or with people from different countries who speak English for communication purposes. ESL learners are required to use English to interact with other learners, males and females, for education purposes, in learning classrooms or outside classrooms for more practice in the learning language, or even with the native-speaking community. Thus, to avoid misunderstanding or miscommunicating, this study will explore the pragmatic performances among males and females, focusing on refusal speech acts.

Moreover, the findings of this study will be fruitful. First, for English language learners to identify the differences and improve their refusal performances. Second, for English teachers to work on enhancing and raising their learners' pragmatic awareness in foreign or second language learning environments. These findings will be reached after answering the following research questions:

1. Are there differences in the performance of EFL males and females as regards their usage of refusal strategies and adjuncts?
2. Are there differences in the performance of ESL males and females as regards their use of refusal strategies and adjuncts?

Ultimately, this paper will be structured as follow: after this introduction, the literature review will be provided, accompanied by the previous studies that investigated the role of gender on refusal speech acts. This will be followed by discussing the methodology and presenting the main findings. Finally, the conclusion of this study and future research recommendations will be given.

Literature Review

Language and Gender

Generally speaking, many researchers believe that different genders mean different use of the language since some specific features are found to be more frequent in females' language, more than in males and vice versa (e.g., Lakoff, 1990; Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; Rubin & Greene, 1992; Tannen, 1990; Winn & Rubin, 2001). One of the earliest studies that traced gender differences by focusing on specific discourse features was conducted by Lakoff (1975), who then suggested that women's language is weaker than men's language due to women's use of many language features, including tag questions and hedges (e.g. I think, might, could), which can represent unassertiveness and reflect longstanding power inequalities between men and women in society.

Such findings have been supported by some previous studies, which found gender differences (Zimmerman & West, 1975; Fishman, 1980), as well as Herring's (1993, 1994) work in online spaces. She found that both genders use language consistent with traditional stereotypes about gendered interactional styles since men's style is described as critical and aggressive, which includes sarcasm, self-promotion, rhetorical questions and challenges to others, while women's style is described as person-oriented, which includes asking questions, agreement, thanking and appreciation. Another study has investigated the differences between genders' language by focusing on the discourse style. Tannen (1994) claimed that the discourse style of men is more reporting, completive and assertive, which aims to convey facts, whereas the discourse style of women is more communicative and supportive, which aims to create and maintain relationships. Gu (2013) has reviewed many studies and reached one conclusion which is that most of the researchers believe that there are differences between gender and language since females usually tend to be more polite than males, and that females' language is more implicit and indirect, while males' language is more direct.

On the contrary, some other researchers believe that the issue of gender and language is more complicated than merely generalizing that, for example, a specific discourse style is used by men more than women or vice versa. Cameron (2007) indicated that gender's use of language could differ across cultures since women in western culture are less direct and more cooperative than men, who are more assertive and competitive, but not in other cultures, where the opposite is true. Some other scholars indicated that gender makes no difference in specific contexts. McRae (2009) found that men and women were similar in favor of mitigating and cooperative styles of disagreeing during interaction in business meetings in workplace settings. Similarly, McDowell's (2015) study concluded that male nurses' linguistic styles were alike feminine styles in performing empathetic discourses during nurse-to-nurse interaction. Thus, in terms of language and gender in general, differences cannot always be predictable since this depends on many other variables.

More specifically, in terms of speech acts and gender, they are interrelated and interwoven with each other (Boxer, 1993; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990), especially the speech act of refusals which can be influenced by gender as well as other contextual factors such as social status, power and age (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006; Fraser, 1990; Smith, 1998).

Gender, Language Learning, and Refusals

Very few studies have investigated the role of gender in English language learners' refusal utterances. Two of these studies have focused only on one gender of language learners, either males or females, in two different learning environments and concluded different results regarding the directness and indirectness of their refusals. One of those studies was conducted in the late 1990s by Widjaja (1997), who compared the performance of refusals among female Taiwanese ESL learners and American female English native speakers by using role-plays and interviews. The study found that Taiwanese females tended to be more direct and concluded that the reason for this was over-generalisation. This could be due to learners applying one specific rule to other situations and negative transfer from the mother language. Another study was conducted at the beginning twentieth by Al-Eryani (2007), who used DCT to examine the refusals of invitations/offers, suggestions and requests when addressing people of different social statuses among three males groups: Yemeni Arabic native speakers, Yemeni Arabic EFL learners, and native speakers of English. He found that Arabic male EFL learners preferred indirect refusals and that their productions differed based on the social status of the interlocutors. However, both of these studies, Widjaja (1997) and Al-Eryani (2007) have investigated one gender rather than comparing both, which can be seen as a gap in the literature.

Furthermore, regardless of the significance of the relationship between gender and language, most of the studies which investigated English language learners and were conducted in the same context, Iran, reached a similar conclusion which is that gender does not affect English learners' refusal speech acts. For example, Hassani, Mardani, & Dastjerdi (2011) examined the role of gender among EFL learners, once in their native language and once in English, and found no differences between students' production in terms of their gender. Arani & Tehrani (2013) found that gender had no meaningful effect on the choices of refusal strategies, and Parvaresh, Bidaki, & Farahani (2014) found that the role of gender was restricted to the use of a regret strategy, with EFL females making more regret statements than males. Rahbar, Oroji, & Hedayatnejad (2015) and Hedayatnejad, Maleki, & Mehrizi (2016) have focused on the study of refusal of suggestion among formal and informal situations for the former and different social statuses for the latter. They reported that the application of refusal strategies in formal or informal situations was not statistically different between females and males (for the former), and that females and males were similar to each other in terms of the applied strategies to people with different social statuses. However, the only study in the Iranian context which reached a different conclusion was that conducted by Akram, Rohani, & Ravand (2015). They found that the EFL female and male learners were significantly different in using the refusal strategies since some strategies were more frequent in females' refusals than males, such as statements of empathy, regret, postponement, hedging and statements of principle. They also found that males used to criticize the requester more frequently than females.

Yet, among other non-Arabic contexts, two other studies in two other different contexts indicated that the English female and male learners were different in performing the refusals. Tuncer & Turhan (2019) examined the effect of gender and interlocutor status on the refusals of Turkish pre-service teachers of English and found that females and males were different since females preferred using indirect strategies, especially the use of negative willingness, and utilized

more refusals with equal and lower interlocutors, but males were more direct, particularly in using direct 'no', and used more refusals with higher interlocutors. Wang (2019) compared the EFL Chinese females and males using the refusal strategies. It was found that the female students tended to avoid threats of face, so they utilized more indirect strategies such as apology, pity, promise, suggestion, dissuasion and reason, the excuse of explanation and adjuncts, while males were more direct in performing refusals.

In the Arabic context, only two studies (to the best of the researcher's knowledge) have investigated the role of gender on English learners' speech act of refusals. Both studies indicated that females and males refuse in different ways. Qadoury Abed (2011) compared EFL males' and females' refusals and found slight differences between them since EFL males utilized more refusal strategies and fewer adjuncts than females. Jasim (2017) concluded that EFL female participants used more indirect strategies and adjuncts than EFL male participants, while males utilized more regret than females.

Therefore, this review shows a continuous debate among scholars on the role that gender can play in determining the number and choice of refusals among a group of learners. However, the effect of gender on learners' performance of refusals has very rarely been explored among Arabic EFL or ESL learners in general and has not previously been investigated among Saudi EFL and ESL learners in specific. Hence, the current study aims to fill this gap, focusing on exploring the gender differences among two groups: 1) EFL males and females, and 2) ESL males and females.

Methods

The data was collected using the Discourse Completion Task (DCT), which means providing participants with specific written scenarios, identifying the status of the interlocutor, and asking them to respond to each scenario by giving a refusal speech act. This method is preferred in pragmatic studies as it enables researchers to investigate the influence of some factors, e.g. gender (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985). A modified version of Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) DCT application was adopted to meet the population of this study, i.e. EFL and ESL students, and to achieve the purpose of this research to investigate the pragmatic differences between the students in academic settings. The DCTs were designed to address all social statuses: scenarios one, five, six, and 10 addressed higher status, scenarios three, four, eight, and nine addressed equal status, and two, seven, 11, and 12 addressed lower status and were distributed to include 12 objects: four invitations/offers (one, four, seven, and 10), four requests (two, five, eight, and 11) and four suggestions (three, six, nine, and 12) (see Appendix A).

Participants

The 32 participants, males and females, in this study were divided into two groups as follows: 16 Saudi ESL postgraduate students in the United Kingdom (eight male, eight female), and 16 Saudi Arabian EFL postgraduate students in Saudi Arabia (eight male, eight female). The participants were randomly selected, as an online invitation was sent via social media, urging students who were studying in business, computer sciences and financial administration to respond voluntarily to the survey (during July and August 2020). Hence, this would allow participants to respond at

the appropriate time and would be safer to avoid any face-to-face meetings during the global Coronavirus pandemic at the time of conducting this research.

Data Analysis

Responses included 824 refusals, which were analysed and identified as strategies and adjuncts, following Beebe *et al.*'s (1990) model, which was further developed based on the obtained data. For instance, in Beebe *et al.*'s (1990) study, even though the statements of negative ability/willingness were categorized under direct refusals, they were treated as indirect refusals since they did not include direct 'No' or the performative word 'refuse'. Some new categories were created based on the data produced by the participants, such as 'using honesty expressions' (e.g. "actually" and "to be honest"), and 'past negative experience' (e.g. "I still feel bad about it"). Furthermore, analysis of the speech act of refusal of each scenario was based on the types of strategies or adjuncts used. For example, the statement "Thank you a lot I appreciate your promotion but I cannot go as I'm interested being in this place" includes three semantic formulas of refusal: one adjunct, which is the use of gratitude and appreciation ("Thank you a lot"), two strategies, which are the use of negative ability and willingness ("but I cannot go"), and the use of excuses, reasons and explanations ("I'm interested being in this place"). Furthermore, a t-test was used to compare the significance of the differences in findings of males and females among each learners groups: EFL and ESL.

Results

The Use of Refusal Strategies among EFL Males and Females

In the EFL group, males and females were very similar in using direct strategies since both rarely directly refused objects, with four and five instances, respectively. They were also less performative, as opposed to using direct 'no', with one out of four instances for males and two out of five instances for females. The statistical procedure t-test also supports this result since no significant difference in the overall use of direct strategies was found between EFL males ($M=2$, $SD=2$) and females ($M=2.5$, $SD=.5$), $t(2)=.44$, $p=.34$, see table one.

However, males and females differed in their use of direct strategies across interlocutors' statuses and objects. EFL males used more direct strategies with lower interlocutors, with three out of four instances, while EFL females used slightly more direct strategies with higher and equal rather than lower status, with two instances out of five for each. EFL males also used more direct strategies with requests, with two out of four instances, while EFL females used more direct strategies with suggestions and invitations and offers rather than requests, with two instances for each. Moreover, t-tests found no significant differences in the use of direct strategies based on interlocutor status between males ($M=1.33$, $SD=2.33$) and EFL females ($M=1.66$, $SD=.33$), $t(4)=.35$, $p=.37$. There were also no significant differences regarding the use of direct strategies based on the type of object between EFL males ($M=1.33$, $SD=.33$) and females ($M=1.66$, $SD=.33$), $t(4)=.70$, $p=.25$, see table one.

Table 1. Comparison of the use of the direct strategies across EFL males and females

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of direct strategies	EFL Male	8	2	2	.34
	EFL Female	8	2.5	0.5	
	EFL Male	8	1.33	2.33	.37

The use of the direct strategies among different interlocutor statuses	EFL Female	8	1.66	.33	
The use of the direct strategies among different objects	EFL Male	8	1.33	.33	.25
	EFL Female	8	1.66	.33	

Furthermore, while both EFL males and females used more indirect strategies than direct ones, females tended to be more indirect than males, with 218 instances for the former and 152 instances for the latter. It can also be seen that the use of excuses, opinions and explanations was the most frequent strategy among both EFL males (61 instances) and females (73 instances). There were no great differences between males and females in specific use of indirect strategies except for the use of regret, where females used 45 instances while males used only nine instances. Statistically, a t-test showed no significant difference in the overall use of indirect strategies between EFL males ($M=7.6$, $SD=198.04$) and females ($M=10.9$, $SD=361.46$), $t(38)=.62$, $p=.26$, see table two.

In terms of the use of the indirect refusals by males and females across different interlocutor statuses and objects, it was found that males used more indirect refusals with higher status interlocutors (55 out of 152 instances), while females were more indirect when addressing lower statuses (81 out of 218 instances). Statistically, a t-test revealed that there was a significant difference in the use of indirect strategies based on interlocutor status between EFL males ($M=50.66$, $SD=20.33$) and females ($M=72.66$, $SD=58.33$), $t(4)=4.29$, $p=.006$. EFL males and females were similar in being more indirect when refusing requests rather than other objects, but to a different degree, with 61 instances for males and 81 instances for females. This was also statistically significant since a t-test showed a significant difference in the use of indirect strategies based on the type of object between EFL males ($M=50.66$, $SD=122.33$) and females ($M=72.66$, $SD=52.33$), $t(4)=2.88$, $p=.02$, see table two.

Table 2. Comparison of the use of the indirect strategies across EFL males and females

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of indirect strategies	EFL Male	8	7.6	198.04	0.26
	EFL Female	8	10.9	361.46	
The use of the indirect strategies among different interlocutor statuses	EFL Male	8	50.66	20.33	.006
	EFL Female	8	72.66	58.33	
The use of the indirect strategies among different objects	EFL Male	8	50.66	122.33	.02
	EFL Female	8	72.66	52.33	

The Use of Refusal Strategies among ESL Males and Females

In terms of ESL, males and females used the same number of instances regarding direct refusal strategies, with four for each. They were also similar in not using performative refusals at all. Statistically ESL females and males were also similar since a t-test showed that there was no

significant difference in the overall use of direct strategies between ESL males ($M=2$, $SD=8$) and females ($M=2$, $SD=8$), $t(2)=0$, $p=.5$, see table three.

However, there were slight differences in use of direct strategies with different statuses and objects. ESL females were more direct when refusing lower status interlocutors (two out of four instances) and when refusing suggestions (three out of four instances). ESL males did not use any direct strategy with higher status, but only with equal and lower status (two instances for each), and they also were not direct when refusing requests rather than suggestions and invitations (two instances for each). Moreover, a t-test revealed no meaningful difference in the use of direct strategies with different interlocutors' statuses between ESL males ($M=1.33$, $SD=1.33$) and females ($M=1.33$, $SD=.33$), $t(4)=0$, $p=.5$. Another t-test was conducted to compare the use of direct strategies with different objects by ESL females and males, which also showed no significant difference since ESL males ($M=1.33$, $SD=1.33$) and females ($M=1.33$, $SD=2.33$), $t(4)=0$, $p=.5$, see table three.

Table 3. Comparison of the use of the direct strategies across ESL males and females

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of direct strategies	ESL Male	8	2	8	.5
	ESL Female	8	2	8	
The use of the direct strategies among different interlocutor statuses	ESL Male	8	1.33	1.33	.5
	ESL Female	8	1.33	.33	
The use of the direct strategies among different objects	ESL Male	8	1.33	1.33	.5
	ESL Female	8	1.33	2.33	

Greater use of indirect strategies than direct was made by both genders, and females slightly exceeded males in using indirect refusals, with 173 and 168, respectively. The specific use of indirect strategies was not greatly different between ESL males and females, and statistically was not significant since a t-test showed no meaningful difference in the overall use of indirect strategies between ESL males ($M=8.4$, $SD=267.2$) and females ($M=8.65$, $SD=232.87$), $t(38)=.04$, $p=.48$. The use of excuses, opinions and explanations was the most frequent strategy for both males and females with 68 and 60 instances, respectively, see table four.

In terms of the ESL males and females' use of indirect strategies across different interlocutor statuses and objects, it can be seen that ESL males were more indirect when refusing higher and lower statuses (59 out of 168 instances) while females were more indirect when refusing an equal interlocutor (59 out of 173 instances). Yet, a t-test revealed no significant difference in the use of indirect strategies with different interlocutor status between ESL males ($M=56$, $SD=27$) and females ($M=57.66$, $SD=1.33$), $t(4)=.54$, $p=.30$. ESL males and females were similar in using indirect refusal strategies with requests rather than other objects, with 64 and 63 instances, respectively. Statistically, this is a tiny difference, and thus a t-test showed no significant difference in the use of indirect strategies with different objects between ESL males ($M=56$, $SD=112$) and females ($M=57.66$, $SD=46.33$), $t(4)=.226$, $p=.41$, see table four.

Table 4. Comparison of the use of the indirect strategies across ESL males and females

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of indirect strategies	ESL Male	8	8.4	267.2	0.48
	ESL Female	8	8.65	232.87	
The use of the indirect strategies among different interlocutor statuses	ESL Male	8	56	27	.30
	ESL Female	8	57.66	1.33	
The use of the indirect strategies among different objects	ESL Male	8	56	112	.41
	ESL Female	8	57.66	46.33	

The Use of Adjuncts by EFL Males and Females

In terms of the use of adjuncts among EFL learners, EFL females used more than double the number of adjuncts used by EFL males, with 36 and 14 instances, respectively. It was found that the use of positive feeling, opinion and agreement statements was the most frequent adjunct used by EFL females, followed by the use of gratitude and appreciation. EFL males used more gratitude and appreciation than positive feeling statements, but the difference was slight, with seven instances of the former and five of the latter. However, a t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in the overall use of adjuncts between EFL males ($M=3.5$, $SD=9.66$) and females ($M=9$, $SD=60$), $t(6)=1.31$, $p=.11$, see table five.

Moreover, the use of adjuncts among different interlocutor statuses and types of objects was also investigated and it was found that EFL females used adjuncts more commonly with higher status (17 out of 36 instances), but males used them with both higher and equal statuses to the same degree (six for each out of 14 instances). It was also found that males and females used more adjuncts with invitations and offers than other objects (seven out of 14 and 16 out of 36 instances, respectively). Even though both genders seem to agree with the use of adjuncts with higher interlocutors and invitations and offers, they differ in the number of instances used with that status and object. Thus, a t-test showed statistically significant differences regarding the use of adjuncts with interlocutor status between EFL males ($M=4.66$, $SD=5.33$) and females ($M=12$, $SD=19$), $t(4)=2.57$, $p=.03$, and a significant difference in the use of adjuncts with objects between EFL males ($M=4.66$, $SD=10.33$) and females ($M=15.33$, $SD=4.33$), $t(4)=4.82$, $p=.004$, see table five.

Table 5. Comparison of the use of adjuncts across EFL males and females

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of adjuncts	EFL Male	8	3.5	9.66	.11
	EFL Female	8	9	60	
The use of adjuncts among different interlocutor statuses	EFL Male	8	4.66	5.33	.03
	EFL Female	8	12	19	
The use of adjuncts among different objects	EFL Male	8	4.66	10.33	.004
	EFL Female	8	15.33	4.33	

The Use of Adjuncts by ESL Males and Females

In terms of the use of adjuncts among ESL students, ESL males used slightly more adjuncts than ESL females, with 25 and 20 instances, respectively. The most frequent strategy for ESL males it was the use of pause fillers, followed by positive feelings while for ESL females was the use of positive feelings, opinions and agreements. ESL males and females used statements of gratitude and appreciation to the same extent, with six instances for each. An obvious difference between ESL males and females was the use of pause fillers, which were used more commonly by males, while only one instance was used by females. A t-test showed no statistically significant difference regarding the overall use of adjuncts among ESL males ($M=6.25$, $SD=21.58$) and females ($M=5$, $SD=35.33$), $t(6)=-.33$, $p=.37$, see table six.

Furthermore, these adjuncts were used by ESL males and females across different statuses and objects similarly, since they used more adjuncts with higher status than with other statuses, with 12 out of 25 and eight out of 20 instances, respectively. They also were similar in using more adjuncts with invitations and offers rather than other objects, with 10 out of 25 instances for males and 8 out of 20 instances for females. They were also similar statistically since a t-test revealed no significant difference in respect to the use of adjuncts across different statuses between ESL males ($M=8.33$, $SD=10.33$) and females ($M=6.33$, $SD=4.33$), $t(4)=-.90$, $p=.20$. A t-test also showed no meaningful difference in terms of the use of adjuncts across different objects between ESL males ($M=8.33$, $SD=2.33$) and females ($M=6.66$, $SD=2.33$), $t(4)=-1.33$, $p=.12$, see table six.

Table 6. *Comparison of the use of adjuncts across ESL males and females*

	Group	No. of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	P value
The overall use of adjuncts	ESL Male	8	6.25	21.58	0.37
	ESL Female	8	5	35.33	
The use of adjuncts among different interlocutor statuses	ESL Male	8	8.33	10.33	.20
	ESL Female	8	6.33	4.33	
The use of adjuncts among different objects	ESL Male	8	8.33	2.33	.12
	ESL Female	8	6.66	2.33	

Discussion

In terms of the pragmatic difference between EFL and ESL males and females, the study found that EFL and ESL males and females avoided using direct refusal strategies. This finding is widely agreed upon by several studies investigating English language learners of English, such as Arani & Tehrani (2013), Hassani, Mardani, & Dastjerdi (2011) and Parvaresh *et al.*, (2014). Moreover, Arani & Tehrani (2013) also agree with this study that both genders tend to use more nonperformative than performative refusals. In contrast, Wang (2019) found that male learners of English tended to give direct refusals more commonly than females, who preferred indirect refusals. However, all the four studies earlier mentioned were conducted in Iran while Wang's (2019) study was conducted in China, and thus, different contexts and cultures might have led to contrasting results. As Mead (1935) indicated, culture can influence gender behavior, which might affect language and choice of words.

Moreover, the use of more indirect strategies by EFL and ESL females than by males corresponds with Arani & Tehrani (2013), but in both studies the difference was not statistically significant. However, while Wang's (2019) study found that the greater use of indirect refusals by females than males was significant and a sign of a female tendency to be more polite in refusing, this difference was not investigated statistically. Furthermore, EFL and ESL males and females were similar in giving excuses, reasons and explanations as the most frequent indirect refusal. This supports previous studies such as Arani & Tehrani (2013), Hassani *et al.*, (2011) and Wang (2019), which might make the use of this strategy a model for polite refusals. This might be due to a speaker's tendency sometimes to lie rather than to give their real view or feeling (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Another indirect strategy used by EFL females rather than males was regret, which corresponds with Parvaresh *et al.*, (2014) finding. Females' use of regret, such as "sorry", "unfortunately" and "I'm afraid", can be interpreted as apologies, and Tannen (1990) stated that women usually tend to apologize more than men. Regardless of all these differences, statistically, EFL and ESL males and females show no significant differences regarding the overall use of direct and indirect strategies. This is in line with the findings of Arani and Tehrani (2013), Hassani *et al.*, (2011) and Parvaresh *et al.*, (2014).

Furthermore, the study found no meaningful differences between ESL males and females regarding using of direct and indirect strategies across different interlocutor statuses and objects, which is consistent with Hassani *et al.*, (2011) finding. It also found no significant difference between EFL males and females in the use of indirect refusals across statuses and objects, but a meaningful difference was detected in the use of direct strategies, since females were more indirect with lower statuses, while men were more indirect with higher statuses. They were also significantly different in the number of instances used with requests. This finding corresponds with Tuncer & Turhan (2019), who found that females usually tend to be more indirect with lower and equal statuses, but males with higher interlocutors. No previous study has compared genders regarding the use of objects, which might suggest that this area merits further investigation.

In terms of adjuncts, EFL females used more adjuncts than males, but for ESL students, while males used more adjuncts than females, the difference was not great. The result regarding EFL learners corresponds with Hassani *et al.*, (2011), who also found that adjuncts were used more by females than by males. However, they found that positive feelings, opinions and agreements were the most frequent strategies used by both males and females, followed by gratitude and appreciation statements. While the present study agreed that positive feelings, opinions and agreements were the most frequent strategies, it found that this was followed by gratitude and appreciation only for females and not for males. Thoits's (1989) study seems to agree with this study's finding since it stated that women usually tend to express their feelings and emotions more than men, which might also be supported by Simon and Nath (2004), who indicated that females were more likely to express their feelings verbally than males, who preferred to express their feelings behaviourally. Moreover, ESL males used many more pauses than females, which is supported by Binnenpoorte, Bael, Os, & Boves (2005), who stated that men gave more pauses than women, yet they investigated oral speech (telephone dialogue and face-to-face conversation), and thus this might require further research. Furthermore, the present study found no significant difference between EFL and ESL males and females in the overall use of adjuncts. This result is consistent with the findings of research conducted by Parvaresh, Bidaki, & Farahani (2014), who

reported no difference between males and females in terms of the use of adjuncts. Although Hassani *et al.*, (2011) and Parvaresh *et al.*, (2014) investigated EFL learners from the same country, Iran, they reached different results. This difference might lie in that 20 students in the latter study did not define their gender, which might have created a difference in the outcome.

Another interesting finding was that EFL and ESL males and females were similar in using more adjuncts with higher statuses and with invitation and offer objects. This corresponds again with Hassani *et al.*, (2011), who found that females and males used more adjuncts when they addressed higher status interlocutors. Yet, in the present study, EFL and ESL males and females used different numbers of adjuncts with higher status interlocutors and with invitation and offer objects, revealing a significant difference between EFL males and females, but not among ESL learners. Other studies have not discussed this, especially in respect of the objects, which might present a research opportunity.

Nevertheless, two limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size means that the findings cannot be generalized to all Saudi EFL and ESL postgraduate learners. Second, participants were from three different disciplines, which might have affected the precision of the results. Hence, to obtain more valid and reliable results, this study could be replicated with larger sample size and learners who study in the same discipline.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the role of gender in the refusal performances of EFL and ESL learners. It has been found that gender has no meaningful influence on the overall use of direct, indirect strategies and adjuncts. However, there is a significant difference in the use of direct strategies and the number of adjuncts used by EFL males and females across different interlocutor statuses and objects, but not by ESL learners. Furthermore, this study can be expanded in future research by discussing other related topics such as the role of the study environment on males' or females' refusals and the relation between learners' refusals production and learning styles: visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinaesthetic.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The DCTs Scenarios

1. You are a lecturer at a university. The head of the school offers you raise and promotion, but it involves moving to another campus. You do not want to go. Today, the Head of School calls you into his office.

The Head: I would like to offer you an executive position on another campus which 100 kilometers from here. It is a great place and a nice raise comes with the position.

You refuse by saying:

The school head: Well, maybe you should give it some more thought before turning it down.

2. You are a teacher at a university. One of your best students asks to speak with you in private

Student: As you know, I have attended all my classes

since the beginning of the term, and I know you have been

pleased with my achievements so far. I really enjoy your classes,

but I really need to be absent from the final exam

You refuse by saying:

Student: Then I guess there is no solution than to attend the exam.

3. You are studying with your classmate at the library. He/she offers you a snack.

You: Thanks, but no thanks. I've been eating like a pig and I feel just terrible. My clothes do not even fit me.

Friend: Hey, why don't you try this new diet I've been telling you about?

You refuse by saying:

Friend: You should try it anyway.

4. A classmate invites you to study group, but you really cannot stand one of the students in this group.

Classmate: How about coming over for a group study Sunday evening? We are having training for next week presentation.

You refuse by saying:

Classmate: O.K. maybe another time.

5. You are a lecturer in a university, and you have a meeting with the Head of the Department that you work in. It is getting to the end of the day and you want to leave work.

The head of the school: If you do not mind, I would like to stay an extra hour or two today so that we can finish up with this work.

You refuse by saying:

The head of the school: That's too bad. I was hoping you could stay.

6. You are in class trying to find the assignment that your teacher just asked for. While you are looking through many papers in your bag your teacher notices you.

Teacher: You know, maybe you should try and organize your papers better. I always divide my papers into different files. Perhaps you should give it a try.

You refuse by saying:

Teacher: Well, it is an idea anyway.

7. You are the head of a school. Your students invite you to have a lunch together and to have a chat together in the breaktime.

The student: We have met during the opening day for us in the school and my classmates and I really would like to invite you to have lunch together and to listen to your advice on how we can do our best in our studies.

You refuse by saying:

The student: Perhaps another time.

8. You are a junior in college. You attend classes regularly and take good notes. Your classmate often misses a class and asks you for the lecture notes.

Classmate: Oh God! We have an exam tomorrow, but I don't have notes from last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?

You refuse by saying:

Classmate: O.K. then I guess I will have to ask somebody else.

9. You are having lunch with a classmate in the breaktime and after finishing your lunch, he/she suggests having a piece of cake

Classmate: How about another piece of cake?

You refuse by saying:

10. You are a very good student. One day one of your teachers asks you to come to his/her office

Teacher: Next Sunday, there will be a free trip to Oxford for good students as a prize for their achievements. I know it is short notice, but I am hoping that you can come on the trip. What do you say?

You refuse by saying:

Teacher: That's too bad. I was hoping you would be there.

11. You are the head of a university and one of the staff asked you for a vacation for two weeks to visit his/her family in another place

The staff member: Excuse me, Can I ask for a vacation for just two weeks? I need to visit my family in another country and I cannot wait until August

You refuse by saying:

12. You are a language teacher at a university. It is just about the middle of the term now, and one of your students asks to speak to you.

Student: Ah, excuse me, some of the students were talking after class recently, and we kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in conversation and less on grammar.

You refuse by saying:

Student: O.K., it was only a suggestion.

