

Refusal Strategies of Saudi EFL Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the refusal strategies used by Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate students as well as to examine the relationship of these strategies to social status in the situations of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. It provided an answer to the research question, what are the strategies used by EFL undergraduate students when performing the speech act of refusal and whether these strategies vary according to status in the situations of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion? The participants were 150 Saudi EFL students. Data were derived using a discourse completion task. It was composed of three request situations, three invitation situations, three offer situations, and three suggestion situations. Each of those situations consisted of a refusal to a person of a higher status, another one for a person of equal status, and finally one for a person of a lower status. Beebe et al. (1990) taxonomy was selected as the most comprehensive one for the analysis of refusal strategies. The results indicated that the most popular refusal strategies the participants used were the indirect ones, followed by the direct ones and then by adjuncts. The results also revealed that the participants refused differently in each of the four types of situations. On the other hand, the results showed that social status has no significant influence on their use of refusal strategies. Based on these findings, some recommendations for the integration of pragmatic teaching were suggested to foster pragmatic competence among undergraduate students.

Keywords: Invitation, offer, refusal strategies, request, Saudi EFL students, social status, speech acts, suggestion

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Introduction

The utterances that people produce which require responses from the hearer and performing some actions are called speech acts. Refusal is a speech act that is receiving increasing concerns nowadays. Refusal can be used in response to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Refusals occur in all cultures but not in the same way; what may be appropriate in one culture may not be so in another.

The lack of knowledge of these differences may create communication breakdown. Wannaruk (2008) states “Communication breakdowns can occur during cross-cultural communication due to different perceptions and interpretation of appropriateness and politeness” (p.318). Successful communication and performance of speech acts depend largely on pragmatic competence. Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as “the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand the language in context” (p. 92). Performing speech acts in cross-cultural communication needs mastering the pragmatic competence of the target language speakers.

Furthermore, refusal speech acts are categorized as face-threatening acts. They are response speech acts which are initiated by the speaker. Yamagashira (2001, p. 260) views the refusal speech act as “a sensitive pragmatic task” as speakers handle refusal situations with sensitivity, and use different strategies to make sure that others are not offended. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that face can be lost maintained, or enhanced, and must continuously be attended to in interactions. Using politeness strategies can save the face of speakers and addressees. Saving speakers face requires using strategies that take into consideration status and context.

Statement of Problem

The speech act of refusal occurs in all languages and is mostly used by speakers in different ways. Culture plays a significant role in the choice of refusal strategies. Any failure to refuse appropriately may threaten the face of the speakers. Learners’ ability to use appropriate speech acts has received increasing concern in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. Undergraduate students show differences in expressing rejections and in showing politeness when they do so.

Students need to be aware of these differences to communicate effectively. They have to attain a pragmatic knowledge of speech acts of the target language in order to avoid being considered impolite. Reinelt (1994) suggests that non-native speakers should recognize refusals and learn some strategies to save their listener’s face and reduce the negative effect that refusals might cause.

Objectives

This study aims to explore refusal strategies employed by Saudi EFL undergraduate students and examine whether these refusal strategies vary in the contexts of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion situations, or vary according to higher, equal or lower social statuses. The findings will be beneficial to undergraduate professors and others who are involved in the teaching of EFL undergraduate students.

The following major research questions are specifically addressed.

1. What are the strategies used by Saudi EFL undergraduate students when performing the speech act of refusal?
2. Do Saudi EFL students utilize different refusal strategies in the situations of request, invitation, offer and suggestion?
3. Do Saudi EFL students utilize different refusal strategies based on social status?
- 4.

Significance of the Study

Kiok (1995) believes that pragmatic errors are more serious than phonological or syntactic ones. The speech act of refusal requires a high degree of pragmatic competence as it may threaten the interlocutor's face. The way people say the negative answer "no" differs in different cultures and has a great impact on communication success or breakdown. Barron (2003) states that refusal speech act takes more time to be developed than the other speech acts. The lack of mastery of pragmatic competence leads to violating conversational and politeness norms which in turn lead to communication breakdowns. Meier (1995) as cited in Morkus (2014), states, "Teaching pragmatic aspects of language can minimize intercultural communication breakdowns and reduce cultural stereotyping" (p. 1).

Therefore, students need to learn strategies to avoid such situations. They have to learn the appropriate forms used in the target language, their functions, and the context for using them.

The present study aims to examine the students' refusal speech act performance in the contexts of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion situations, and based on the social status of the interlocutors. The results may raise the pragmatic awareness of both Saudi professors and students. Lecturers can integrate speech acts in the language classroom to help students acquire the pragmatic competence to succeed in social interactions in the target language and to perform refusal successfully.

Theoretical Framework

The Speech Act of Refusal

Speech acts can be understood as utterances that have communicative functions such as requesting, refusing, greeting, thanking, apologizing, inviting, and giving orders. Kempson (1977) states, that in uttering a sentence, a speaker is involved in three different speech acts, where the speaker utters sentences with a particular meaning (locutionary act), and with a particular force (illocutionary act), in order to achieve a particular effect on the hearer (perlocutionary act).

Refusal is an important speech act in our daily life, and it requires a high level of pragmatic competence. Sadler and Eroz (2001) define the speech act of refusal to reject the speech acts of requests, invitations, suggestions, and offers. According to Beebe et al. taxonomy (1990), refusal strategies are of two types, direct and indirect. The direct strategies are divided into three types, and state clearly what the speaker means. The indirect strategies are classified into eleven types, and state the intended meaning, but not as clear as the direct one.

- I. Direct strategies: It refers to the refusals that are told directly. It includes two subtypes:
 - a. Performative verb, ("I refuse.").

- b. Non-performative statements (“No.”, “I cannot.”, “I don’t think so.”).
 - c.
- II. Indirect strategies. It refers to the refusals that are delivered by using mitigating patterns to maintain politeness. It involves the following subtypes:
- a. Statement of regret (“I am sorry...”, “I feel terrible...”).
 - b. Wish (“I wish I could help you...”).
 - c. Excuse/Reason/Explanation (“My children will be home that night...”, “I have a headache...”).
 - d. Statement of alternative “I can do X instead of Y...”, “I’d rather ...”, “I’d prefer...”, “Why don't you do X instead of Y?”, “Why don't you ask someone else?”).
 - e. Set condition for future or past acceptance (“If you had asked me earlier, I would have ...”).
 - f. Promise of future acceptance (“I’ll do it next time.”, “I promise I’ll... or “Next time I’ll...”).
 - g. Statement of principle (“I never do business with friends.”).
 - h. Statement of philosophy (“One cannot be too careful.”).
 - i. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor by:
 1. Threat (“I won’t be any fun tonight.”).
 2. Criticize the request or requester (“Who do you think you are?” - “That is a terrible idea!”).
 3. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.
 4. Let interlocutor off the hook (“Do not worry about it...”, “That is okay”, “You don’t have to.”).
 5. Self defense (“I am trying my best...”, “I am doing all I can do...”).
 - j. Acceptance that functions as a refusal, by using unspecific or indefinite reply, and lack of enthusiasm.
 - k. Avoidance by the topic switch, joke, repetition of part of the request (“Monday?”), or postponement (“I’ll think about it...”).
 - l.
- III. Adjuncts to refusals. It refers to the expressions used to protect the interlocutors’ face. It includes the following subtypes:
- a. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement. (“That is a good idea...”, “I’d love to ...”).
 - b. Statement of empathy (“I realize you are in a difficult situation...”).
 - c. Pause fillers (“uhh”, “well”, “oh”, “uhm”).
 - d. Gratitude/appreciation.
 - e.

Politeness Systems

Politeness is one of the important factors that may influence refusals. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that the essential concept of politeness theory is “face” which means “the public self-image”. They proposed that individuals whether speakers or hearers like to save each other’s faces when facing threatening acts by using politeness strategies.

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) divided politeness systems into three types, deference, solidarity and hierarchical. Two factors help in the distinction of these systems. They are power

relationships and social distance. The first politeness system is deference. The participants of communication see themselves according to this system as being equals or near equals with a distant relationship. They employ independence strategies in interaction. This type of politeness system can be seen when two professionals who have the same status but a distant relationship address each other with deferential terms such as "Ms. or Mr. and surname.

The second politeness system is solidarity. In this system, the participants of communication see themselves as being equals with a close relationship. They use politeness strategies of involvement that save each other's face, e.g. colleagues.

The third type is hierarchical. In this system, the participants of communication see themselves as being different in social status. They use different strategies to talk to each other. The higher status individuals use involvement strategies whereas the lower status individuals use independence strategies, e.g. a professor with a student.

In general, both of the two types of deference and solidarity are symmetrical, which means using the same types of politeness strategies mutually by the two parties in a conversation. The third system "hierarchical" is asymmetrical which means one party is in a superior position and the other is in a subordinate position.

Teaching Refusal Strategies in the EFL Classroom

Mastering the speech act of refusal requires a particular level of pragmatic competence that helps in successful communication. Developing the students' pragmatic competence in the target language is necessary. Martinez-Flor and Beltran-Palanques (2013) suggested a deductive/inductive approach to teach refusal strategies to EFL students. It consists of four phases to integrate pragmatic competence in an EFL context.

The phases are pragmalinguistic awareness, sociopragmatic awareness, pragmatic production, and feedback on pragmatic production. According to this pedagogical model of pragmatic competence students have to be exposed to appropriate contextualized refusal input, first to develop pragmalinguistic awareness; next, they have to be aware of the sociopragmatic issues, such as the influence of some aspects such as social distance, power, age and gender on language use; then, they have to be provided with communicative activities for practicing the knowledge acquired. Finally, students receive feedback on their refusal performance.

Empirical Studies

Much investigation on pragmatic competence and refusal speech acts has been done. However, among the several studies carried out was a study of Beebe et al. (1990) that investigated the use of refusal strategies by Japanese speaking Japanese, Japanese speaking English, and Americans speaking English. A written discourse completion task was used to collect the data. It consisted of second language (L2) refusal situations that involve refusal of requests, invitations, suggestions, and offers based on social distance. The data were analyzed using three category classifications of the semantic formula, direct, indirect and adjuncts. This coding scheme was used by most studies of refusal strategies. The findings showed that there were significant differences

in the use of refusals between Americans and Japanese in relation to the order, frequency and content of semantic formulas.

Similarly, Al-Shalawi (1997) examined the speech act of refusal among Saudis and Americans. The aim of his study was to identify the influence of their culture on the speech of their community and their communication style. Data were collected by using a discourse completion task. The participants were 50 Americans and 50 Saudis. Results revealed that both groups used almost similar semantic formulas in performing refusals. The only difference was in the use of the direct strategy "No".

Al-Issa (1998) examined the refusal strategies used by Jordanians compared with those of Americans. Data were gathered using a discourse completion task. Results indicated that both nationals used the indirect strategy of refusal by giving reasons or explanation. Besides, the Jordanian explanations were lengthy when compared with the American ones. Jordanians used more indirect refusal strategies using regret statements more than Americans.

Al-Eryani (2007) compared the refusal strategies used by Yemeni EFL learners and Americans native speakers of English. A discourse completion task was used as the major data completion instrument. The findings indicated that Yemenis used indirect strategies of refusal by giving reason or explanation. On the other hand, Americans used regret as an indirect refusal strategy most frequently.

Abed (2011) conducted a study to examine the differences in useful strategies between Iraqi EFL learners and American native speakers of English. The tool used in the collection of data were a 12-items written discourse completion task. The findings indicated that Iraqi EFL learners used the statement of reason/explanations, regret, wish, and refusal adjuncts more frequently than American native speakers of English. Besides Iraqi EFL learners are more sensitive when they speak to people of lower status than when they speak to people of higher or equal status.

Al-Ateeq (2016) investigated the use of refusal strategies of 30 Saudi male and female students. Data were analyzed and classified as proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). Results showed that students apply more indirect refusal strategies than direct ones. They also use adjuncts in their refusal statements.

Al-Mahroqi and Al-Aghbar (2016) examined the refusal speech act performed by Omani EFL college students. The participants were forty-one English as foreign language learners. The tool used in the collection of data was a discourse completion test. Students were asked to refuse in four different situations i.e. requests, suggestions, invitations, and offers. Results revealed that Omani EFL students used indirect refusal strategies most frequently than direct ones. The direct refusals were performed mostly when refusing requests and suggestions. Moreover, Omani EFL learners used regret more when refusing requests and they showed consideration for the interlocutor's feelings when refusing offers. Besides, Omani learners were not sensitive to the social status of the interlocutors when using the speech act of refusal.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive quantitative research was conducted in the present study to examine the performance of Saudi EFL students of the speech act of refusal.

Participants

A total of 150 Saudi female undergraduates from King Khalid University were selected randomly to represent Saudi EFL undergraduates. The study was administered in semester one of the academic year 2018-2019. Four intact classrooms participated in the study. Each classroom consisted of 30 to 40 students. They were all in their third year at the English Department. Their ages ranged between 18-25 years.

Instruments

Spencer-Oatey (2008) states that the main instruments used in the collection of data of pragmatics are discourse completion tasks, multiple-choice and rating scale questionnaires. However, despite discourse completion tasks having a limitation of allowing respondents to take enough time to complete a task, and unlike the situation in a natural setting, data collected using a discourse collection task has authentic conversations (Beebe & Cummings, 1996).

A discourse completion task was used as the tool to collect the data. It was designed by the researcher (See Appendix A). The aim of the task was to identify the students' performance in the speech act of refusal. The task consisted of three requests, three offers, three suggestions, and three invitations. Each situation included a refusal to a person of higher status, another one to a person of equal status, and finally one more to a person of lower status. Students had to provide written data to express their refusals in situations that revolved around university, home, friends, and bosses.

The data collected from participants were codified based on a classification of refusal strategies designed by Beebe et al.'s (1990) which is one of the most widely used taxonomies for refusal studies. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages to provide concrete findings regarding Saudi EFL undergraduates' implementation of refusal strategies.

Results

This section provides a holistic description of refusal strategies used by the Saudi EFL undergraduate students. Data were coded and analyzed quantitatively by the researcher using Beebe et al. (1990) taxonomy of refusal. The semantic formula was classified into three categories, direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjunct refusals. Next, descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages were computed and noted.

The results of the study will provide answers to the research questions:

What Are The Strategies Used By Saudi EFL Undergraduate Students When Performing The Speech Acts Of Refusal?

Analysis of the data obtained using the discourse completion task from 150 Saudi EFL students, indicated that they used a total of 2696 refusal strategies. These strategies were divided

into three categories, direct, indirect and adjuncts. Table 1 lists the refusal strategy categories used by Saudi EFL undergraduate students, the frequency of each category, and their percentages.

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of refusal strategy categories

Refusal strategy type	Frequency	Percentage
Indirect strategies	1556	57.72
Direct strategies	876	32.49
Adjuncts strategies	264	9.79
Total	2696	100.0

At the category level, Table 1 above shows that Saudi EFL undergraduate students used indirect strategies most frequently 1556 (57.72%), followed by direct ones 876 (32.49%), and the least used was adjuncts strategies 264 (9.79%). Saudi EFL students knew well how to soften the negative effect of their refusals by using many indirect strategies such as using excuses, reasons, explanations and statements of regrets. Even when they used direct strategies, they preceded them with indirect ones or adjuncts.

At the individual level, descriptive statistical analysis of the data obtained based on the types of refusal strategies of Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, indicated that Saudi EFL students used a variety of refusal strategies summarized in Table 2. It illustrates the variation in the use of several strategies.

Table 2

Variation in the use of individual refusal strategy by Saudi EFL students

Strategy type	Refusal strategy	Frequency	Percentage	
Direct refusal strategies	Performative verb	6	0.22	
	Nonperformative statements	870	32.27	
	Statement of regret	578	21.44	
	Wish	44	1.63	
	Excuse/Reason/Explanation	716	26.56	
	Statement of alternative	61	2.26	
	Set condition for future or past acceptance	10	0.37	
Indirect refusal strategies	Promise of future acceptance	39	1.45	
	Statement of principle	22	0.82	
	Statement of philosophy	3	0.11	
	Attempt to dissuade interlocutor by:			
	Threat or statement of negative consequences	6	0.22	
	Criticize the request or requester	21	0.78	
	Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request	5	0.19	

	Let interlocutor off the hook	47	1.74
	Self defense	0	0.00
	Acceptance that functions as a refusal	0	0.00
	Avoidance by postponement	4	0.15
Adjuncts to refusal strategies	Statement of positive opinion, feeling or agreement.	93	3.45
	Statement of empathy	10	0.37
	Pause fillers	18	0.67
	Gratitude/appreciation	143	5.30
	Total	2696	100.0

Table 2 shows that the most frequent individual refusal strategies used were “non-performative statements” 850 (32.27%), followed by “excuse/reason/explanation” 716 (26.56%), then by “statement of regret” 578 (21.44%), next by “gratitude/appreciation” 143 (5.30%), and finally by “statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement” 93 (3.45%).

The least refusal strategies used at the individual level were “statement of philosophy” 3 (0.11%), followed by “avoidance by postponement” 4 (0.15%), then, by “request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request” 5 (0.19%), and finally by both “threat and statement of negative consequences” and “performative verb”, both scored 6 (0.22%).

Two refusal strategies were not used at all “self defense” and “acceptance that functions as a refusal” 0 (0.00%). Saudi EFL students used the direct strategy “non-performative statements” in which “No” or “negative willingness or ability” is used such as “I can’t”, “I won’t”, and “I don’t think so”. This strategy is usually combined with indirect strategies or adjuncts.

The second most frequent strategy used was the indirect one that includes providing excuses, reasons, and explanations. It is used to avoid direct refusal and maintain the relationship.

The third most frequent strategy used was the indirect one which includes expressing regret such as “I’m sorry”, “My apology”, “I feel terrible”, “Unfortunately”. They used this strategy to avoid hurting the feelings of others.

The fourth most frequent strategy used was an adjunct to refusal. When using this strategy, learners express gratitude such as “Thank you”, “Thanks”. Adjunct strategy is usually followed or preceded by direct or indirect strategies.

Finally, the most frequent strategy used was also an adjunct to refusal, where Saudi EFL students tended to express statements of positive opinion, feeling or agreement such as “That is a good idea”, “I’d love to”, “That is great”, “and That is so sweet”.

On the other hand, Saudi EFL students never tried to defend themselves when they refuse by saying “I’m trying my best”, or “I’m doing all I can do”. They also never used acceptance that functions as a refusal. They liked to be clear in their refusals but at the same time, they wanted to be polite.

Do Saudi EFL Students Utilize Different Refusal Strategies In The Situations Of Request, Invitation, Offer, And Suggestion?

The data showed that there is some variation in the use of refusal strategies with regard to situations of “request, invitation, offer and suggestion”. Table 3 summarises the differences in the use of refusal strategies in different situations.

Table 3

Frequency and percentage of refusal strategies in the situations of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion

Descriptive statistics					
Frequencies					
Situations	Direct	Indirect	Adjuncts	Total	Percentage
Request	215	472	22	709	26.30
Invitation	200	448	63	711	26.37
Offer	225	331	115	671	24.89
Suggestion	236	305	64	605	22.44

Table 3 shows that there were variations in the use of strategies according to situations. At the category level, students reported the use of refusal strategies most frequently when refusing an invitation, 711 (26.37%), followed by refusing a request 709 (26.30%), then by refusing an offer 671 (24.89%), and refusing a suggestion 605 (22.44%) was the least frequent.

Furthermore, the data analysed showed that all students used indirect refusal strategies most frequently in all the situations. This result indicated the students’ special concern to keep a good relationship with the interlocutors.

On the other hand, students used mainly, more direct and adjuncts refusal strategies with suggestion and offer than with invitation and request. Besides, the indirect refusal strategies were used more with request and invitation than with offer and suggestion.

With regard to the individual level of strategies used in each situation, three strategies were used most frequently, but they differ in order (See Appendix B). The most frequent strategies used by Saudi EFL students in the situation of request was “The non-performative statement” 211 (29.76%) such as “No”, “I can’t”, and “I won’t” followed by “statements of regret” 209 (29.47%), then by using “excuses, reasons, and explanation” 188 (26.52%).

On the other hand, the most frequent strategies used in the situation of invitation were refusal by using “excuses, reasons, and explanations” 206 (28.97%), followed by the direct refusal strategy “non-performative statements” 200 (28.13%), then using “statement of regret” 192 (27.00%).

In the situation of offer, students used the direct strategy “non-performative statements” most often 224 (33.38%), followed by “excuses, reasons, and explanations” 164 (24.44%), and finally, by “statement of regret” 90 (13.41%).

Similar to the situation of request, Saudi EFL students used “non-performative statements” most frequently in the situation of suggestion 235 (38.84%) followed by using “excuse, reasons, and explanations” 158 (26.12%) followed by “statements of regret” 87(14.38%).

Do Saudi EFL Students Utilize Different Refusal Strategies Based On Social Status?

Another analysis of the refusal strategies used in each of the situations of “request, invitation, offer and suggestion” will be done in the following lines. This analysis will determine the influence of social status on the use of refusal strategies. Table 4 summarizes the use of refusal strategies in different situations of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion with regard to social status.

Table 4

Frequency and percentage of refusal strategies used in the four situations based on social status

Frequencies						
Social status	Request	Invitation	Offer	Suggestion	Total	Percentage
Equal	241	235	222	200	898	33.31
Higher	239	224	231	198	892	33.09
Lower	229	252	218	207	906	33.61
Total	709	711	671	605	2696	100.00

Table 4 shows that social status has no influence on the frequency of refusal strategies used by Saudi EFL undergraduate students. In other words, Saudi EFL students refused similarly when dealing with the three types of interlocutors, higher, lower, or equal status persons. They do not change their refusals according to the distance and power of the interlocutors.

With regard to individual refusal strategies, the data analysed revealed that Saudi EFL students used different strategies when both the speaker and the interlocutor, have the same social status, and one has to refuse a request, an invitation, an offer or a suggestion.

The most frequent one used was “non-performative statements” 292(32.52%), followed by “excuse/reason/explanation” 265(29.51%), then by “statement of regret” 194(21.60%), next by “gratitude/appreciation” 59(6.57%), and finally, by “statement of positive opinion” 25(2.78%). All the rest of refusal strategies were used least frequently.

On the other hand, when the speaker has to refuse a request, invitation, offer or suggestion, from someone of a higher social status, several different strategies were used. The most frequent refusal strategies used were “non-performative statements” 280(31.39%), followed by “excuse/reason/explanation” 256(28.70%), then, by “statement of regret” 208(23.32%) next, by “gratitude/appreciation” 49(5.49%), and finally, “statement of positive opinion” 38(4.26%). All the rest of strategies were used least frequently.

Finally, when the speaker had to refuse a request, invitation, offer or suggestion from someone of a lower social status, the most frequent strategy used was “non-performative

statements” 298(32.89), followed by “excuse/reason/explanation” 195(21.52%), then, by “statement of alternative” 176(19.43%), next, by “gratitude/appreciation” 35(3.86%), and finally, by “statement of positive opinion” 30(3.31%). All the rest of the strategies were used least frequently.

In general, the refusal strategies of “non-performative statements”, “excuse/reason/explanation”, “statement of regret”, and “gratitude/appreciation” were all the most frequently, used strategies with some differences in the frequency sequence.

Discussion

In answering the research questions of the study, the findings revealed that Saudi EFL undergraduate students could handle refusal situations with sensitivity. They positively, used the indirect strategies most frequently, followed by direct ones and then by adjuncts.

In other words, Saudi EFL students preferred to express their refusals indirectly by finding appropriate expressions to soften the negative effects of a direct refusal. They used excuses, reasons, explanations, and statements of regret to mitigate the refusal and convince others that their refusals were due to circumstances out of their control.

The results were in line with the results of previous studies which reported that EFL learners used more indirect refusal strategies (Al-Issa, 1998; Abed, 2011; Al-Ateeq, 2016). More investigation is needed here to see if students are following their sociocultural norms and if there is a pragmatic transfer from first language.

Besides, when Saudi EFL students refuse directly, they use non-performative statements such as “No”, “I cannot”, “I do not think so” to avoid offending the speaker. In addition, they used the adjuncts strategies least often. This type of strategy is not very common to them. They are not used to giving many positive opinions and statements of empathy while refusing.

Another analysis of their speech acts of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion revealed that students refused to accept an invitation or a request by using many indirect strategies more than when refusing an offer or a suggestion. They do not like to appear inappropriate in English; they combined their refusals with expressions to mitigate the negative effects of refusal. They give the impression that they care for whatever the speaker offers or requests.

On the other hand, students used more direct and adjuncts strategies to refuse a suggestion and an offer. They stated directly their refusals using “non-performative statements” or they supported the interlocutors by using “statement of positive opinion” and expressions of “gratitude and appreciation”.

In general, results indicated that the situation of invitation gets the highest score as well as the situation of request. This means that the subjects feel hard to make the greatest efforts to refuse people when being invited or requested. On the other hand, the situation of the offer gets the lowest score followed by suggestion. This indicated that the subjects exert the least efforts to refuse but they showed their concern by using more adjuncts refusal strategies.

In response to question 3, the findings indicated that there was no influence of social status on the use of refusal strategies in the situations of request, invitation, offer and suggestion. Saudi EFL students reacted similarly to social statuses of equal, higher and lower. In terms of individual refusal strategies, the findings displayed that “non-performative statements”, “expressions of excuse”, “reasons”, “explanation” and “statement of regret”, “gratitude/appreciation” were the most frequently used strategies by Saudi EFL students with some differences in the order of occurrence. The insensitiveness of Saudi EFL students to their interlocutor’s higher, lower and equal statuses needs more attention. It requires more emphasis to be given to teaching EFL students the types of politeness systems. Teachers could focus on the factors that influence the choice of refusal strategies, such as power relationship and social distance, as suggested by Martinez-Flor and Beltran-Palanques (2013).

Recommendations for EFL Teachers and Educational Professionals

Nowadays, it is becoming essential for language learners to have knowledge of speech acts to develop communication competence; failure to do so may result in miscommunication. However, the present study showed some deficiencies in Saudi EFL students’ implementation of refusal strategies in relation to social status. Therefore, it is recommended for educational professionals to integrate the teaching of refusal strategies with practical methodology at the university. Consciousness-raising training could be given as well to learners on politeness systems.

Further studies can investigate the use of refusal strategies of the Arabs. This could be a useful area for future research to decide which refusal strategies transfer most readily and which ones do not. Another area can be investigated the similarities and differences in the use of refusal strategies of both rich and poor people.

Conclusion

As refusal strategies vary from culture to culture, it is crucial for the students to know the cross-cultural techniques of face-threatening acts. By doing this, they could achieve successful communication and avoid violating any social-cultural norms. The study examined the speech act of refusal in the context of English as a foreign language. The findings revealed that Saudi EFL students acted differently about the frequency of strategies used for refusal in different situations. Saudi EFL students favored the indirect refusal strategies to save the interlocuter’s face and protect the relationship and harmony.

With regard to the relationship of refusal strategies and the situations of request, invitation, offer and suggestion, students used indirect strategies in invitation and requests, more than with offer and suggestion. Besides, students used more direct and adjunct strategies to refuse suggestions and offers.

Finally, the findings indicated that social status does not affect the choice of refusal strategies of Saudi EFL students. Thus, English teachers could give considerable attention to improve their students’ pragmatic competence, and help them avoid communication breakdown within an EFL context.

Teachers can expose their students to the pragmatic features that native speakers adopt to communicate in certain situations. Pragmatic competence should be added to students' curriculum theoretically and practically. More emphasis should be given to raise students' consciousness of the types of politeness systems, and the strategies used with each system.

About the Author

Wafa Ismail Saud holds a PhD in English from the faculty of Language and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia. Her Master degree was in English as a second language from the International Islamic University, Malaysia. Her Bachelor degree was in English language with honor, from the College of Education, Makkah, Saudi Arabia. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5010-7891>

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Appendix A - Discourse Completion Task

Discourse Completion Task

Instructions: Please consider the following situations you may find yourself in with other people. Respond by **refusing** and respond as naturally as possible as if you were in the actual situations.

Please write what you say to them.

1. Request (A person of equal status makes a request.)

You are a university student. Your friend needs to do a presentation using her laptop. She accidentally drops it and needs to borrow one. She comes to you asking to borrow yours.

You **refuse** her request by **saying**:

2. Request (A person of higher status makes a request.)

You are a university lecturer and the head of your department requests you to stay late at the office and finish your work before leaving.

You **refuse** her request by **saying**:

3. Request (A person of lower status makes a request.)

You are a lecturer at the university. You have some useful books that can help your students finish their projects. One of them requests borrowing one of the books.

You **refuse** her request by **saying**:

4. Invitation (A person of equal status makes an invitation.)

Your friend invites you and her other old friends to her house for dinner.

You **refuse** her invitation by **saying**:

5. Invitation (A person of higher status makes an invitation.)

You are a lecturer at a college. Your dean invites all of the faculty members for lunch.

You **refuse** her invitation by **saying**:

6. Invitation (A person of lower status makes an invitation.)

You are the manager of a bank. One of your employees invites you to her wedding party.

You **refuse** her invitation by **saying**:

7. Offer (A person of equal status makes an offer.)

You are at a friend's house for dinner. Your friend offers you a pie.

You **refuse** her offer by **saying**:

8. Offer (A person of higher status makes an offer.)

You work at a company and your manager offers you to work overtime for good pay.

You **refuse** her offer by **saying**:

9. Offer (A person of lower status makes an offer.)

Your servant burns one of your expensive dresses while ironing it. She insists on paying for it.

You **refuse** her offer by **saying**:

10. Suggestion (A person of equal status makes a suggestion.)

You are a college student. You live far away from your college and every day you miss the first lecture. Your friend suggests to you to move near to the college.

You **refuse** her suggestion by **saying**:

11. Suggestion (A person of higher status makes a suggestion.)

You are a good at writing poems. Your teacher suggests to you to specialize in English literature.

You **refuse** her suggestion by **saying**:

12. Suggestion (A person of lower status makes a suggestion.)

You are a university lecturer. You call the secretary to make an appointment to meet the dean tomorrow. She suggests coming and meeting the dean now because of her busy schedule tomorrow.

You **refuse** her suggestion by **saying**:

The End

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix B - Table 5. Research Data for Direct Refusal Strategies

Table 5. Research Data for Direct Refusal Strategies																
Refusal Strategy	Request Status				Invitation Status				Offer Status				Suggestion Status			
	Equal	Higher	Lower	Total	Equal	Higher	Lower	Total	Equal	Higher	Lower	Total	Equal	Higher	Lower	Total
A. Performative verb	2	2	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
B. Non performative statements	61	69	81	211	65	66	69	200	74	77	73	224	92	68	75	235

Appendix B - Table 6. Research Data for Indirect Refusal Strategies

Table 6. Research Data for Indirect Refusal Strategies																
Refusal Strategy	Request Status				Invitation Status				Offer Status				Suggestion Status			
	Equal	High	Lower	Total	Equal	High	Lower	Total	Equal	High	Lower	Total	Equal	High	Lower	Total
A. Statement of regret	85	66	58	209	66	67	59	192	27	37	26	90	16	38	33	87
B. Wish	0	0	2	2	4	0	28	32	0	2	0	2	5	1	2	8
C. Excuse/Reason/Explanation	71	73	44	188	78	67	61	206	65	70	29	164	51	46	61	158
D. Statement of alternative	6	2	19	27	1	0	2	3	1	2	2	5	4	7	15	26
E. Set condition for future or past acceptance	2	1	0	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	0
F. Promise of future acceptance	2	14	3	19	7	4	0	11	1	4	1	6	2	0	1	3
G. Statement of principle	1	4	12	17	3	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1
H. Statement of philosophy	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0
I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor by:																
1. Threat or statement of negative consequences	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	0
2. Criticize the request or requester	2	2	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	2	5	6	13
3. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	2	2
4. Let interlocutor off the hook	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	44	44	3	0	0	3
5. Self defense	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
K. Avoidance by postponement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	4

Appendix B – Table 7. Research Data for Adjuncts to Refusals

Table 7. Research Data for Adjuncts to Refusals																
Refusal Strategy	Request Status				Invitation Status				Offer Status				Suggestion Status			
	Equal	High	Low	Total	Equal	High	Low	Total	Equal	High	Low	Total	Equal	High	Low	Total
A. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement.	6	4	6	16	9	11	13	33	2	9	4	15	8	14	7	29
B. Statement of empathy	2	0	1	3	0	0	2	2	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	0
C. Pause fillers	0	1	1	2	0	2	3	5	4	0	1	5	4	1	1	6
D. Gratitude / appreciation	1	0	0	1	2	7	14	23	46	26	18	90	10	16	3	29