

REFUSAL AS SOCIAL SPEECH ACT: AN EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL VS NATURAL SCIENCE STUDENTS'

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Abstract: Given the significance of specific speech acts, let alone refusal, which requires extra attention from the audience as well as being quite difficult to execute, this study examined the refusal speech act as performed by social and natural science learners. Participants were two groups of 5 esp intermediate-level social learners and 5 natural science learners of umm. Through a discourse completion test (dtcs), they were asked to respond to scenarios individually. To better understand the factors influencing the participants' choice-refusal strategies, a follow up semi-interview was conducted. Dct data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and the interview was analyzed and coded using the du bois model. The findings found that natural and social science students generally refused to use the indirect strategy, with excuses, reasoning, explanations, and regret being the most frequently used tactics. The second most popular option was the adjunct technique, followed by positive feelings, pause fillers, and empathy comments. The direct strategy was the least preferred. Participants considered age, power relationships, proximity, and other criteria when developing their techniques.

Keywords: Speech Acts, Refusal, Social Science, Natural Science

INTRODUCTION

People communicate with language in order to fulfil their needs to others. Here, pragmatic competence is used since language forms are used depending on the environments where it is involved social and cultural factors in certain contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Since differences can be seen around cultural factors and people tend to be in various environments, it is also complicated to match someone's backgrounds and it is possible for them to have miscommunication. Further, the incompetent multilingual and multicultural students are not influenced by their pragma-linguistic competence, but also their socio-pragmatic competence (Qadi, 2021). It is an unavoidable thing because each individual needs to be aware of their non-verbal communication, the sentences that they want to say, how they deliver it, and whether their words are appropriate in the particular situation (Brown, 2007). However, although people need to pay attention to what they say, be it in the performative or constatives forms, they are still communicating with others. Therefore, those utterances are considered as a speech act because it receives a response from the listener and performs an action to them (Wang, 2019).

When constructing an utterance, they impulsively deliver a communicative act with lexical items in daily life, bringing speech act theory as a functional component of communication for the first time. In existing communication, there are several speech acts to reply responses, such as request, thank, complain, apologize, or refuse which become part of

daily life in any setting (Austin, 1962). However, although all languages have their way to process the speech act, it doesn't mean it is appropriate with linguistic terms and contextual situations since each culture has differences and possibly odd or unacceptable to each other (Mohammad, 2022). Furthermore, among all speech acts that are introduced, refusal becomes one of the most complicated acts to be performed since it needs an extra attention to the listener and if it is not, it is possible for the speaker failed to gain the intention that happened (Rahayu, 2019). Refusal applies when someone does something that disapproves and contrary to what is desired. Therefore, refusal strategies are needed since it includes a strategy of how people refuse or accept something (Beebe, 1990: p. 46). In this case, these strategies are in the form of polite or impolite. It depends on the socio-culture that occurs around the subject.

In the EFL context, student's communication to others becomes crucial since it includes vital communication to keep up their own identities. In this interaction, things possibly happen such as performing speech acts that are appropriate to their context and culture. Consequently, misunderstanding for various reasons resulting in failure to catch the information conveyed by both subjects are a vital problem especially in refusing a response (Muis, 2022). A lot of factors that influence EFL students in refusing something include their background as an L1 user. Therefore, this current study investigates the kinds of refusal strategies and the factors that influence the production of students with different backgrounds, who are from social studies and science studies. Several stereotypes become paramount reasons to have this kind of study. There is a problem in Indonesian education where students majoring in social studies are regarded as inferior to those majoring in science (Rahman Hz & Ramadhan, 2022). That put a specific reason to select the participants from different background studies. They are non-English department students who use English as Foreign Language. Therefore, the research questions are formulated as follow:

1. What kinds of refusal strategies are employed by social studies and science studies?
2. What are the factors that influence the production of their refusal strategies?

Literature Review

Communication becomes a part that occurs since people need each other for certain purposes, including maintaining relationships or fulfilling needs. Those purposes can be delivered by linguistic expression which explains the following rules that apply when performing the speech act such requesting, refusing, greeting, thanking, apologizing, inviting, or giving orders (Saud, 2019). Since it is necessary for speakers to have sufficient pragmatic competence to avoid miscommunication or offensive interactions, it indicates that refusal becomes one of the most complex speech acts to perform (Morkus, 2009; Umale, 2011). Moreover, to refuse someone, it is not always in the form of rejection, but can be in postponement or have an alternative proposal as well (Utomo et al., 2022). Therefore, these refusal strategies consist of two forms which are direct and indirect strategies (Beebe et al, 1990). These address the semantic formula which focused on the expression that may be used to implement refusal itself. However, adjuncts strategies also needed to protect the speaker face which this strategy tends to be empathy and more appreciate to the listener.

Regarding refusal strategies which often make both subjects' expressions seem treacherous, it is caused by the social-cultural factors like gender, age difference, social status, academic level, topic of the conversation, and surroundings (Umale, 2011). For instance, education background also includes the social factor that is contributed in refusal strategies (Smith, 1998; Fraser, 1990). Although refusal strategies can be implemented in many aspects, most of the previous studies are conducted in the similar way where it only focuses on the comparative cultures to identify the cultural diversity (Qadi, 2021; Wang, 2019). Further, in academic areas, it has been distributed a lot especially in EFL/ESL context where refusal strategies occur around students and teachers in which it emphasizes different aspects such

culture, gender, and academic level. Further, refusal strategies around Indonesia EFL context are also implemented (Dwiana et al, 2021).

Several studies have been conducted on the refusal speech act from various perspectives. Here, an interlanguage study by Rahayu (2019) compared the three groups with different ways of refusing. These groups consist of Indonesian EFL Learners (IELs), Indonesian Native Speakers (INSSs), and American Native Speakers (NSs). The most visible strategy that was used by NSs were direct strategy where the participants were directly said no to refuse something. However, IELs and INSSs were emphasized to put the blame on the third party. It indicates that IELs are still affected by their native language and culture. However, from 409, 325 Saudi EFL students agreed to use indirect strategies. It is followed by adjuncts strategies with the total 50 frequencies and direct strategy becoming the least frequency of 34. This result of this study was also influenced by culture where direct refusal is shown as a show of impoliteness towards others (Qadi, 2021). On the other hand, 120 Iranian EFL students differ based on the gender where females are indirectly said as to refuse someone while males indicate to be more direct than females. It means gender also affected their way about how to refuse (Shahi, 2022).

Since previous studies regarding refusal strategy indicates their focus revolved around EFL students with culture and gender as their factors, this current study will focus on the comparison of students' different study backgrounds who come from non-department students but still use English as FL context. This research is motivated by exploring different areas, it will add insight and the number of research on speech acts. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate further into different foreign language contexts and further explore the refusal strategies on speech acts.

METHOD

This study is conducted with a group of intermediate level UMM ESP learners (n=10) whose proficiency was determined according to the results of the TAEP test given right after the enrollment session. Participants come from two different majors; Social Science and Natural Science. Law students will represent Social Science background, while Civil Engineering students will represent Natural Science background. As the focus of the study is to know the refusal strategies, participants are asked to complete the given scenarios individually in the form of Discourse Completion Test (DCTs) during the class time. Then the collected DCT data are analyzed and coded based on the taxonomy of refusals developed by Takahashi and Beebe et al (1990). A follow-up interview will also be conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of factors which influence the participants' choice of refusal strategies they employed. Then, the collected interview data will be analyzed and coded according to Du Bois models.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigates the kinds of refusal strategies and the possible factors that influence it as seen from students with different study backgrounds; social studies and science studies. There are 9 kinds of situations that the researchers provide through the DTC questionnaire under three themes including request, invitations and offer. This first situation led the students to refuse some requests, which were later followed by invitations and offers. Students were also being interviewed to further understand their personal choices and preferences in applying certain refusal strategies they had employed to the DCT questionnaire.

Science Students' Refusal Strategies and Background

For the first theme of the DCT (i.e request), science studies students were found to avoid direct refusal such as "no" that indicates an impolite way. The participants' responses analysis from the DCT sheet are presented in the following.

Table 1. Science Students' Refusal Strategies in dealing with request

Refusal strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	Negative willingness	1	6.6%
Indirect	Lack of enthusiasm	2	13.3%
	With criticize the request/requester	1	6.6%
	Excuse – reason – explanation	4	26.6%
	Set condition for future	1	6.6%
	Statement of alternative	4	26.6%
	Statement of regret	1	6.6%
	Attempt to dissuade – guilt trip	1	6.6%
Adjuncts	-	-	-
Total		15	100%

When refusing some requests, most participants tend to provide an *excuse-reason-explanation* and *alternative statement*, an example of an indirect strategy due to a *lack of enthusiasm* regarding the circumstances. However, the direct strategies were only employed once. They were to *censure the request/requester*, *establish future conditions*, *express regret*, and *try to dissuade* (guilt trip). It was demonstrated that students of scientific studies still use a polite approach when responding to a request. It was related to the previous study by Fitri et al. (2020) stated that that the students' culture significantly influences how they speak of their refusal strategy; instead of answering "no" directly, students give indirect answers using the polite strategies.

For the second situation which involves invitations, the students utilized both direct and adjunct strategies. There were *excuses*, *explanations*, and *reasonable options* for declining the invitation. One participant stated, "It seems I can't because I have a presentation tomorrow, and I have to prepare the material that I will present," indicating that she provided a clear and civil explanation. Hence, here the findings showed that the students use indirect strategies to refuse with an excuse, as Abbas and Berowra (2022), who researched Meranaw's student's responses toward invitations, primarily use indirect methods, giving the reason, explanation, or an excuse. The detail analysis is provided as follow:

Table 2. Science Students' Refusal Strategies in dealing with invitations

Refusal strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	-	-	-
Indirect	Excuse, reason, explanations	5	100%
Adjuncts	-	-	-
Total		5	100%

In the third scenario, participants declined various offer situations. In this instance, various strategies were determined. A direct approach was identified. As demonstrated in the preceding section, it is known that two participants refused to use *performative* (no) as part of the direct strategy. In contrast, one participant used a *non-performative* (negative

willingness/ability) strategy. However, participants utilized indirect strategies significantly more often than direct ones. Most respondents expressed *an attempt to dissuade* (self-defense), followed by *a lack of enthusiasm* and *a statement of regret* when refusing. They also used *excuse-reason-explanation*, *alternative statement*, *avoidance* (verbal-repetition asking), *avoidance* (topic switch and joke) as the refusal is slightly less common than *the promise of future acceptance*, *attempt to dissuade* (let interlocutor), and *avoidance* (verbal-postpone). In addition, the students used adjuncts as they spoke pause fillers. The founding can be strengthened by Qadi's (2021) study that investigated refusal strategies among Saudi EFL students, that primarily people gave the indirect refusal method toward invitations from someone, the politeness way more preferred rather than the impolite one.

Table 3. Science Students' Refusal Strategies in dealing with offers

Refusal strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	Performative	2	8.3%
	Negative willingness	1	4.1%
Indirect	Lack of enthusiasm	3	12.5%
	Excuse – reason – explanation	1	4.1%
	Promise of future acceptance	2	8.3%
	Statement of regret	3	12.5%
	Statement of dissuade – self defences	4	16.6%
		2	8.3%
	Statement of dissuade – let interlocutor	1	4.1%
		2	8.3%
	Avoidance – verbal – repetition asking	1	4.1%
		1	4.1%
	Avoidance – verbal – postpone		
Avoidance – topic switch			
Avoidance – verbal- joke			
Adjuncts	Pause fillers	1	4.1%
Total		24	100%

The DCT responses then further clarified by students' responses to the interview toward their preferences and choices in employing such a refusal approach. With the emphasis of being polite and providing such logical reasoning, students claimed those two considerations as the basic way in deciding their act of refusal. By doing so they intended to make things clear that they won't surely do as the request as elaborated from the following statement:

“The decision of using a polite approach is actually depending on to whom I am speaking to. But, I will try to be as polite as possible in whatever circumstances as in my family I am always asked to behave politely. Also, from my experiences, people will accept me refusing as long as I provide them with a logical reason.”

“I try to be polite by being as logical as I can in providing the reason why I refuse certain circumstances because being reasonable always helps me to avoid misunderstanding and other future unexpected situations.”

Additionally, students also asserted that the following situations which are invitations and offers are somehow having the same consideration as the request. Things that make it

slightly different is that in deciding responses to offers and invitations, they need to look further into the benefits as well as consequences they might get from such situations.

“Of course, I will refuse some offers or invitations that bring me no benefits,”

“I tend to avoid things that can put me in trouble, such as the offers given by a senior that I haven’t known”

In regards to the directness, they noted that even if it’s necessary to be clear and direct to avoid any chance of misinterpretation, some cases do rely on the degree of politeness, especially within Indonesian cultural context which goes further beyond what is conveyed through the utterances.

“It’s impossible for me to be very direct in refusing something for my lecturer or someone who is superior to me, isn’t it?”

“My lecturer will definitely judge me as impolite if I for instance directly refuse the request or offer, right?”

Therefore, students claimed such need in being neutral and safe through the use of indirect or excuse-reason-explanation. They also noticed that within everyday life communication, refusing something is quite tricky as it required them to put into account several considerations as per whether or not to be direct, polite, as well as not to be burdened. It re-emphasized the finding of Rahayu’s (2019) study which revealed that socio-cultural factors such as social status, power and age have been reported to influence the choice of refusal strategies.

Social Students’ Refusal Strategies

The findings from the social science students are somehow replicating the natural science one. For the first section of request, social studies students mentioned two kinds of refusal, which are direct and indirect which were distinguished based on certain context as classified and elaborated as follow:

Table 4. Social Students’ Refusal Strategies in dealing with request

Refusal Strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Strategies	Negative willingness	1	6.7%
Indirect	Excuse, reason, explanation	6	39.0%
	Statement of regret	1	6.7%
	Criticize the requester	1	6.7%
	Promise of future acceptance	3	19.8%
	Unspecific for indefinite reply	3	19.8%
Adjunct	-	-	-
Total		15	100%

In this act, the students mostly conducted indirect strategies in various formulations where it is implemented in different contexts. In direct strategies, there is only one student that did this act in the first situation. Similar findings are found due to direct strategies since it happens between nonnative speakers. It considers that they learned to refuse more directly and explicitly (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Barron, 2005; Ren, 2013). Within the indirect strategy, there are various kinds of formulas that have different specifications. One of them is

to *criticize the requester*, who accuses indirectly of the request. This seems quite offensive even though it was said indirectly. In contrast, most of the students used excuse-reason-explanation regarding not to hurt or offend the requester. Looking for a particular reason which is promising is a strategy used by social studies students in refusing these essential requests. This result is in contrast with some previous studies that claimed Indonesian EFL students tended to give some alternative refusal to equal status and give positive perspective to feel not offended (Wijayanti, 2016; Dwiana et al, 2021).

Table 5. Social Students' Refusal Strategies in dealing with invitation

Refusal Strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Strategies	-	-	-
Indirect	Excuse, reason, explanation	5	100%
Adjunct	-	-	-
Total		5	100%

In this situation, students are required to refuse an invitation. The five social students answered this situation indirectly, divided into three terms with similar meaning, which is excuse-reason-explanation. From all of the explanations, the students' refusals are accompanied by certain reasons that could make the refusal strong enough to be accepted by the requester. Further, two respondents gave more than one reason to give the refusal. Therefore, the requester could be sure of their explanation and not give some negative impression. Similar findings have been found due to indirect strategy used in invitation settings. Iranian EFL students tend to regret and make an excuse to refuse invitations, gratitude, and offers (Sahragard & Javanmardi, 2011). Followed by this, initiating acts also have significant influence to indirect strategies to refusal realized by EFL students (Chen & Yang, 2007).

Lastly, the students are faced with several offers with various contexts where they do not only refuse offers from others, but also reject it from someone who is older and has a different background education level. Here, two types of strategies are carried out by two different students which are negative willingness and non-performative strategies. In negative willingness strategy firmly rejects the offers the student receives from strangers. It seems straight without further explanation. On the other hand, non-performative also occurs in the same context. Without explanation, the student firmly rejected the offer he received and did not give a reason why he declined the offer. Since from all forms of speech act, the students mostly employ direct strategy in refusing offers (Dwiana et al, 2021).

Table 6. Social Students' Refusal Strategies in dealing with invitation

Refusal Strategies	Semantic Formula Code	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Strategies	Negative willingness	1	3.5%
	Non-performative	1	3.5%

Indirect	Excuse, reason, explanation	8	28%
	Unspecific or indefinite reply	6	21%
	Guilt trip	1	3.5%
	Let interlocutor off the book	2	7%
	Lack of enthusiasm	6	21%
	Criticize the requester	1	3.5%
	Statement of principle	2	7%
Adjunct	-	-	-
Total		28	100%

However, indirect strategies are also carried out in various formulas. Further, the most formula that is used in this situation provides excuses in rejecting the offer. On the other hand, unspecific or indefinite replies and lack of enthusiasm have the same frequency. It can be said that students are able to refuse but are not able to give a true justification of their rejection. Then, in this offer, students have the opportunity to *criticize the requester*. This was also followed by a *statement of principles* from several students. Unfortunately, this situation particularly has things different. In this case, these two refusal contexts happen with interlocutors who are older and have higher education level from the students. This result is in contrast with some previous studies that claimed institutionalized power influenced the refusal strategies. Here, participants who have lower education levels tend to be more likely to be indirect but aggressive when disagreeing with something to powerful participants. It indicates that the students have less care for someone higher (Rees-Miller, 2000; Bella, 2014; Eviliana, 2015; Fitri et al, 2020). Therefore, in respect to social and cultural norms and values, the connection between politeness and directness/indirectness are explored. What enhances social relationships in one culture might cause misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication in another (Khammari, 2021).

These findings are then re-emphasized through the interview section. It is notably revealed that there are a number of factors influencing students' choices in implementing refusal strategies such as power relation, close bound, places and circumstances as well as self-interest and belief toward the situations. Students agreed that they can't freely act without considering the interlocutors' side. It is in line with the finding of Bastomi (2014) which revealed that students did not want to directly perform actions of refusal unless absolutely necessary because within Indonesian context refusing can produce discomfort between interlocutors.

"Someone with higher authority must have significant influence toward the response I gave. As when I need to go around the bush before coming to my refusal point when I need to ask my lecturer to stop the class as she/he had it overtime,"

"I can't, of course, directly say no to my lecturer or someone older than me as I will offended them by doing so,"

"I can directly say no only to someone close to me, but not for some not-so-closed-enough friends or seniors,"

Furthermore, it offered statements made by Chojimah (2015), who stated that students used an indirect method to make their refusal as courteous as possible. It is also relevant to the Indonesian politeness culture from Prinsip Saling Tenggeng Rasa (Chojimah, 2015; Sartika et al., 2020).

“Sometimes, I need to make a fake promise in the future as to avoid the obligation of fulfilling something that I don’t really like to do,”

As a result, it can be argued that while adopting such refusal techniques, students have difficulties because they must weigh numerous socio-cultural factors before finally converting particular utterances into an act of refusal.

CONCLUSIONS

In brief, it is found that both natural and social science students were generally refused using the indirect strategy. This approach was employed at almost every level of the interlocutor. Excuses, reasoning, and explanations are the most frequently used tactics by all of the participants, with regret coming in second. Both strategies were characterized as indirect refusal methods. The second most popular option among participants was the adjunct technique. The participants used it in a variety of circumstances. Participants most commonly used the alternative statement, followed by positive feelings, pause fillers, and empathy comments. The direct strategy was the least preferred. It was used to reject interlocutors politely without openly rejecting them.

The participants also noted that they considered numerous criteria when developing such techniques, including their age, power relationship, proximity, and so on. It is further suggesting that participants in this study were already aware of the pragmatic background information because they carefully refuse someone, particularly the higher status individual, by employing indirect refusals. It is critical that the speaker declines in a pertinent and appropriate manner so that the refusal does not jeopardize the communication intention. They have chosen politeness as an excuse to reject their interlocutors.

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