Speech Act of Refusal Among English Language Teaching Students

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Abstract

Speech acts as the elements of communicative competence refer to the actions such as apology, request, complaint, suggestion and refusal. Refusal as a face-threatening act for the hearers is one of the most complex issues which is sensitive to social variables including gender and education. Accordingly, the present study was set out to investigate the refusal strategies that are mostly used by English Language teaching (ELT) students. To this end, fifty ELT postgraduate students form Eastern Mediterranean University in Famagusta, Cyprus, participated in this study. The data was obtained from 12-items written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and analyzed based on the classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). The results suggested that the participated students in this study mostly demonstrated preference for indirect refusal. Additionally, Men mostly employed direct strategies to an interlocutor of lower status, while for women to an interlocutor of equal status. Furthermore, women tended to use more adjuncts than men in all three situations. Among four ethnic groups (Persian, Kurdish, Turkish & Arab), Adjuncts were mostly used by Persian students, while Turkish students preferred to use direct strategies more than other groups. Moreover, this study has some implications towards the theories underpinning it.

Keywords: ELT students, ethnicity, gender, pragmatics, refusal strategy.

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Introduction

In our daily life, we require to know not only a language, but also how to use this language in order to communicate. Pragmatics plays a crucial role in the process of communication. The role of pragmatics is vital in producing and decoding messages in a language. Yule (1996) was defined Pragmatics as the study of intended speaker meaning. Some other scholars also defined Pragmatics as the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Rintell, 1997).

According to Hymes (1972), when children acquire a language, they acquire both the grammatical structures and a set of social rules. The knowledge of appropriate usage patterns is called communicative competence. Fraser (1983) was defined Pragmatic competence as "the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes" (p.30). That is, the hearer of an utterance should have the ability to understand the intended meaning in order to make the conversation meaningful.

Austin (1962) and his student, Searle (1969), focused on the relationship between language and its act and put forward the Speech Act Theory. Speech acts are deemed to be the elements of communicative competence in a language and refer to the actions such as apologies, requests, complaints, suggestions and refusals (Abed, 2011). Among these actions, the concept of refusal is one of the most complex issues which have been the focus of numerous studies, since from a sociolinguistic perspective, as mentioned by Felix-Brasdefer (2006), they are sensitive to social variables such as gender, age, level of education, power and social distance. Moreover, it is considered as a face-threatening act for the hearers that may not match with the expectations of them (Sahragard & Javanmardi, 2011). According to Honglin (2007) speech act of refusal is defined as "the utterance, which is spoken out to perform the action of refuse" (p.67). Accordingly, in this study, it is of utmost interest to explore the common strategies used by ELT postgraduate students at University of Eastern Mediterranean University as advanced learners of English language who have also acquired the knowledge of pragmatics because of their courses.

Literature Review

The speech acts constitute an important part of pragmatics through which we deliver several messages to our interlocutors. Speech Act Theory was presented by Austin (1962) for the first time and then developed by Searle (1969). However; it is defined in several ways by different scholars. For instance, Cutting (2002) stated that "speech act theory describes what utterances are intended to do, such as promise, apologies and threaten" (p.2). Fitch and Sanders (2005) stated that speech act theory focuses on the functionality of utterances in terms of what differences they make to the social standing of speakers and/or hearers. According to Austin (1962) speech acts are functional units in communication. They are everyday activities such as informing, describing, ordering, threatening, complaining, and rejecting for which we use the language. It is noteworthy that in the production of language, people not only make propositional statements about objects, entities and states of affairs, but they also fulfill functions of language (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Thus, these functions are inevitable in communication for delivering accurate messages.

One of the important speech acts is Refusal which has been the focus of Numerous studies. There are three different categories of Refusal studies: *intra-lingual studies*

which focus on refusals of a single culture/language; *cross-cultural studies* that focus on refusals of more than one culture/language; and *learner-centered studies* that focus on discovering how language learners learn and/or use refusals in different cultures or languages (Morkus, 2014). Speech acts of refusals seem to have been mostly studied in cross-cultural research. Numerous researchers compared the speech acts of refusal between two or more cultures/languages and they concluded that behaviors of speech acts varying from one culture to another (Chang ,2009; Nelson, Carson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002; Liao & Bresnahan ,1996) For instance, Al-Kahtani (2005) explored the differences in realizing speech acts of refusals in different cultures and concluded that Americans, Arabs and Japanese performance of refusals differed in the ways they performed refusals, but not across all situations. The study of Chen (1996) also showed that Americans were more direct than Chinese people. Similarly, the study of Honglin (2007) also revealed that Chinese people considers the refusals as more face-threatening acts than Americans. According to Lyuh's (1992) study Koreans used more avoidance and less gratitude than did Americans. Hashemian (2012) also studied Cross-cultural differences in English and Persian refusals and suggested that Persians employed more indirect strategies than English speakers, while English speakers employed more Adjuncts to Refusals. Nelson et al. (2002) reported that both Egyptians and Americans in his study, preferred fewer indirect strategies in their refusals to equal status interlocutors than refusals to lower and higher status interlocutors. The Malay ESL students also, as suggested by Amirrudin and Salleh (2016), employed more indirect strategies, compared to the direct strategies.

The previous research also demonstrated that speakers use a wide range of refusal strategies. For example, Çiftçi (2016) indicated that Turkish and English speakers used explanations or reasons as the most frequent refusal strategies in his study. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) showed that approximately 85% of Japanese speakers of English used statement of regret to refuse the request of a person in higher status. Abed (2011) also indicated that Iraqi EFL learners express their refusals with care and use various strategies such as explanation, statements of regret, wish and refusal adjuncts in their refusals than Americans and are more sensitive to their interlocutor's lower status. He further explained that in his study, there was little difference between males and females in refusal frequency and refusal adjuncts. According to the study of Izadi and Zilaie (2015) Iranian Persian speakers employ indirect strategies, specially gratitude and reason, more than direct ones in refusals. Montero (2015) also indicated that ELT students in his study preferred indirect strategies such as excuses and reasons in all situations presented in DCT. The study of Hedayatnejad, Maleki and Mehrizi (2015) on the effect of social status and gender on realizing speech act of refusal of suggestion among Iranian EFL learners showed that the strategies used by subjects were depended on their social status and people with low social status used more direct strategies. Moreover, he found that there was not significant difference between speech act of refusal in males and females. Similarly, gender differences were not statistically significant in the study of Sa'd and Qadermazi (2014) on the comparison of refusal strategies of Iranian EFL learners. On the contrary, Moaveni (2014), in his study, concluded that American females preferred expressions of gratitude and stating positive opinions, whereas American male provided reasons and alternatives.

One significant issue in the studies which focus on speech act of refusals in second/foreign language is the role of language proficiency in negative pragmatic transfer by the students. That is, applying the rules of L1 by EFL/ESL students to L2 (Eslami, 2010). For example, the study of Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Allami and Naeimi (2011) revealed that L2 learners with higher proficiency levels transfer more than other levels of proficiency. So, this study aimed to investigate how ELT postgraduate students as advanced learners of English Language who are also familiar with pragmatics because of their courses followed different patterns to produce the speech act of refusal. Although numerous research conducted on speech act of refusal, most of them have been focused on English language speakers/learners and some other languages such as Japanese, Chinese, etc. However, few studies have been done to compare the speech act of refusal among ELT postgraduate students taking into account the influence of factors such as ethnicity and gender. To this end, this research was set out to compare the effects of gender and ethnicity (Turkish, Arabic, Persian and Kurdish) on refusal strategies employed by ELT postgraduate students. More specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1- What are the most common refusal strategies among ELT postgraduate Students?

2- Are there any differences among the refusal strategies employed by male and female ELT postgraduate students?

3- Are there any differences among the refusal strategies employed by Persian, Turkish, Arab and Kurdish ELT postgraduate students?

Methodology

Fifty postgraduate students studying ELT at Eastern Mediterranean University of Cyprus (28 females, 22 males) volunteered to participate in this study in fall semester of 2017. They ranged in age from 26-34 years old. Moreover, 14 participants were Turkish, 12 of them were Kurdish, 15 of them were Arabic and 9 participants were Persian (table 1).

Table 1: Participants of the study

	Persian	Turkish	Kurdish	Arabic
Male	3	8	4	7
Female	6	6	8	8

 The data collection instruments of this study included (a) a background questionnaire containing some demographic questions about gender, age, ethicity, native language and education of the participants (b) 12-items written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) developed by Beebe et al. (1990). Numerous researchers used this questionnaire in their studies on speech act of refusal as it can be administered to a large number of participants and is suitable for intercultural comparisons. The questionnaire contains 12 items created to elicit the speech act of refusal in 4 situations (requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions). Each situation is needed to use a refusal to a person of higher status, a person of equal status, and a person of lower status.

This study has a qualitative design and the data collected during 2 weeks of fall semester in 2017. The DCT questionnaires were sent to 58 ELT postgraduate students of Eastern Mediterranean University of Cyprus via email; However, 50 students answered to the questionnaires. Then, the qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed

using classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). Therefore, the obtained data explored three types of refusal:

Direct strategies: refusing directly without any hesitation, for example; No! I don't!

Indirect strategies: refusing in an indirect way, for example; I am sorry I will already…, or I wish I could be able to…

Adjunct strategies: these are additional statements to direct or indirect strategies, for example; well, actually, I can see your situation, I really appreciate that...

Results

This study was conducted to compare the speech act of refusal used by ELT postgraduate students of four different ethnic groups. Moreover, this study aimed to explore the gender effect on refusal strategy preferences of the students. To this end, the participants were asked to provide natural responses in English language to twelve situations presented to them through the questionnaire.

Generally speaking, the results of this study indicated that the participants mostly prefer indirect refusals to show their unwillingness, disapproval or opposite thinking in English language. Most of the participants used various strategies such as showing regret, explanation and excuses. For example, most of them showed their regret by saying "I am sorry, but…", or "thank you but ..." and then they continued with giving an explanation such as "…. I have to finish my work", or "…I do not have enough time". More specifically, the results can be categorized into four themes, namely refusal of request, refusal of invitation, refusal of suggestion and refusal of offer.

Refusal of Request

In general, the most indirect statements were employed to refuse the lower status interlocutor's request (58.6 %). Approximately, half of them tended to use indirect strategies in equal and higher statuses (44.64% & 49.02% respectively). It is notable that none of them used direct strategies to refuse a request of a person of higher status (their bosses). Moreover, the most adjuncts were employed to the interlocutor of higher status (table 2).

Table 2: percentages of refusal strategies of request based on gender

Request	Techniques	Female responses	Male responses	Total
Lower status	Direct	28.57	22.72	25.64
	Adjuncts	17.85	13.63	15.74
	Indirect	53.57	63.63	58.6
Equal status	Direct	42.85	36.36	39.60
	Adjuncts	17.85	13.63	15.74
	Indirect	39.28	50	44.64
Higher status	Direct	0	0	0
	Adjuncts	42.85	59.09	50.97
	Indirect	57.14	40.90	49.02

According to the table above, the difference between men and women is evident in the use of indirect strategies. While women tended to use the most indirect strategies to refuse their boss's request, men preferred to use the most indirect strategies to refuse the request of lower status. Table 3 shows the percentage of the refusal of the request based on the students' ethnic groups.

Table 3: percentages of refusal strategies of request based on ethnicity

Request	Technique	Persian	Turkish	Kurdish	Arab
Lower status	Direct	22.22	35.71	25	20
	Adjuncts	44.44	0	16.66	13.33
	Indirect	33.33	64.28	58.33	66.60
Equal status	Direct	33.33	57.14	33.33	33.33
	Adjuncts	33.33	7.14	16.66	13.33
	Indirect	33.33	35.71	50	53.33
Higher status	Direct	0	0	0	0
	Adjuncts	88.88	0	66.66	60
	Indirect	11.11	100	33.33	40

As it can be seen in Table 3, all of the ethnic groups mostly preferred to use direct strategies to refuse their friends' request. Moreover, Adjuncts are mostly employed by Persian students, while Turkish students preferred to use direct strategies more than other groups.

The invitation refusal

Most of the participants tended to use the most direct refusals to the invitation of a person of lower status (41.55%) in compare with other statuses. They mostly used short direct utterances such as "no, I can't", or "I can't come" in such situations. Whereas, most of them tended to indirectly refuse the invitations. The most common indirect strategies used by the participants were explanation, excuses and showing regret in both gender.

In the third situation (higher status), few males by saying "I can't" (13.63%) and none of women directly refused the invitation. More importantly, in such situations, most of women started their utterances with appreciation, for instance "thanks for the invitation, but…" or "I am so appreciated of your invitation however…". The percentages of refusals of invitation are presented in table below according to participants' gender.

Table 4: percentages of refusal strategies of invitation based on gender

Invitation	Technique	Female responses	Male responses	Total
Lower status	Direct	28.57	54.54	41.55
	Adjuncts	14.28	9.09	11.68
	Indirect	57.14	36.36	46.75
Equal status	Direct	32.14	27.27	29.70
	Adjuncts	14.28	9.09	11.68
	Indirect	53.57	63.63	58.6
Higher status	Direct	0%	13.63	6.81
	Adjuncts	42.85	45.45	44.15
	Indirect	57.14	40.90	49.02

The most direct refusal statements of females were related to the friend's invitation (equal status), for example, some of them briefly mentioned "I can't come", while men mostly used direct strategies to the interlocutor of lower status. On the other hand, women preferred to use indirect refusal to higher status, while for men to equal status. Table 5 shows the percentages of answers taking into the account the various ethnic groups.

Table 5: percentages of refusal strategies of invitation based on ethnicity

Invitation	Technique	Persian	Turkish	Kurdish	Arab
Lower status	Direct	22.22	57.14	41.66	33.33
	Adjuncts	44.44	0	8.33	6.66
	Indirect	33.33	42.85	50	60
Equal status	Direct	22.22	57.14	25	13.33
	Adjuncts	44.44	7.14	0	6.66
	Indirect	33.33	35.71	75	80
Higher status	Direct	0	14.28	8.33	0
	Adjuncts	44.44	28.57	66.66	40
	Indirect	55.55	57.14	25	60

According to Table 5, it can be seen that the same pattern of refusal of request repeated. Persian students preferred to use adjuncts more and direct strategies less than other groups. Whereas, Turkish students employed direct strategies more than others. Moreover, there is not any significant deference between Kurdish and Arab people.

The suggestion refusal

Three items (5, 6 and 8) were viewed as suggestion refusals in the same three setting as previous ones, with employee, friend and boss as an interlocutor. In general, more than half of students had indirect approach to refuse a suggestion of all interlocutors (74.67%, 81.16% & 86.78% respectively). Moreover, they employed various strategies such as explanation (e.g. I cannot arrange myself), wish (e.g. I wish I was able to go on diet), excuse (e.g. I want to try another diet as my doctor advised me), the promise of the future (e.g. If I decide, I will ask you to explain it for me) and lack of enthusiasm (e.g. Sorry, I do not think like you, everyone has special way to live). In the following table, the percentages of Participants' answers to a suggestion situation are provided according to participants' gender.

Table 6: percentages of refusal strategies of suggestion based on gender

Suggestion	Technique	Female responses	Male responses	Total
Lower status	Direct	0	27.27	13.63
	Adjuncts	14.28	9.09	11.68
	Indirect	85.71	63.63	74.67
Equal status	Direct	14.28	9.09	11.68
	Adjuncts	14.28	0	7.14
	Indirect	71.42	90.90	81.16
Higher status	Direct	17.85	0	8.92
	Adjuncts	3.57	0	1.78
	Indirect	73.57	100	86.78

According to Table 6, none of females gave direct answer to their interlocutors of lower status. On the other hand, none of males provided direct statement in the situation when their interlocutors were in higher status. Furthermore, women tended to use more adjuncts than men in all three situations. Table 7 provides the percentages of participants' answers based on their ethnic groups.

Table 7: percentages of refusal strategies of suggestion based on ethnicity

Suggestion	Technique	Persian	Turkish	Kurdish	Arab
Lower status	Direct	22.22	28.57	0	0
	Adjuncts	11.11	14.28	16.66	6.66
	Indirect	66.66	57.14	83.33	93.33
Equal status	Direct	11.11	21.42	8.33	6.66
	Adjuncts	33.33	0	0	6.66
	Indirect	55.55	78.57	91.66	86.66
Higher status	Direct	0	14.28	8.33	13.33
	Adjuncts	11.11	0	0	0
	Indirect	88.88	85.71	91.66	86.66

According to Table 7, while approximately 22 percent of Persians and 28.5 percent of Turkish students provided direct answers to the interlocutor of the lower status, none of Kurdish and Arab students provided direct answer in such situations. The highest percentages of direct statements were evident in Turkish students' answers in all three situations, in compare with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, Kurdish students used adjuncts more than other groups to refuse the suggestion of the lower status interlocutor, for example "wow, it sounds great...", while for two other situations, Persians used adjuncts more than other groups.

Offer refusal

In the first situation, participants were supposed to refuse a cleaning lady's offer to pay for a broken vase. In this situation, none of the participants directly refused this suggestion. Some examples of the frequent answers included "don't worry…", and "it is ok, I will pay for it".

Furthermore, female participants mostly had a direct approach to refuse a friend's offer of having a piece of cake, at first by saying just "no, thanks" or "no, I can't". Then they chose more indirect approach to refuse. While men had more indirect strategy from the first, for example "I am full thanks.", or "I ate too much".

To interlocutor of higher status, approximately half of the participants (48.69%) answered directly. For example, "No, I cannot accept this offer", or "no, I want to stay here". Moreover, some indirect strategies such as explanation and excuses frequently used by the participants. For example, "I am so sorry, but I cannot leave my family.", and "thank you so much for your offer, but I have to stay here". The following table shows the percentages of refusals based on gender.

Table 8: percentages of refusal strategies of offer based on gender

Offer	Technique	Female responses	Male responses	Total
Lower status	Direct	0	0	0
	Adjuncts	7.14	0	3.57
	Indirect	92.85	100	96.42
Equal status	Direct	64.28	22.72	43.5
	Adjuncts	0	0	0
	Indirect	35.71	77.27	56.49
Higher status	Direct	53.57	45.45	49.51
	Adjuncts	3.57	0	1.78
	Indirect	42.85	54.54	48.69

Regarding the ethnicity of the participants, it is notable that Persians used adjuncts more than others. Turkish and Kurdish students also used more direct strategies of refusal with their friends in compare with others (Table 9).

Table 9: percentages of refusal strategies of offer based on ethnicity

Offer	Technique	Persian	Turkish	Kurdish	Arab
Lower status	Direct	0	0	0	0
	Adjuncts	22.22	0	0	0
	Indirect	77.77	100	100	100
Equal status	Direct	22.22	57.14	66.66	33.33
	Adjuncts	0	0	0	0
	Indirect	77.77	42.85	33.33	66.66
Higher status	Direct	44.44	57.14	41.66	53.33
	Adjuncts	11.11	0	0	0
	Indirect	44.44	42.85	58.33	46.66

According to Table 9, none of the groups used direct refusal to lower status interlocutor. Furthermore, none of the groups except Persian with 11.11 percent employed adjuncts to refuse higher status interlocutor's offer.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate different pragmatic patterns used by ELT postgraduate students to produce the speech act of refusal. Therefore, three research questions put forwards. The first one was as what follows:

What are the most common refusal strategies among ELT postgraduate Students?

The results of this study indicated that the participants mostly preferred indirect strategies of refusal to show their unwillingness or disapproval in English language. The high frequency of using indirect strategies demonstrates that the participants of this study were aware that the indirect strategies can reduce the face-threatening effects of the speech act of refusal. Numerous studies in this line revealed that indirect strategies are more preferred (Nelson et al., 2002; Amirrudin & Salleh, 2016; Izadi & Zilaie, 2015). For example, Çiftçi's (2016) study revealed that the most preferable refusal strategies in the situations presented through DCT were indirect ones, since direct refusal is associated with impoliteness. Moreover, explanation and excuses were the most frequently used strategies in this study. Similarly, Montero (2015) stated that ELT students participated in his study preferred indirect strategies such as excuses and reasons in all situations presented in DCT.

The scond research question was "*Are there any differences among the refusal strategies employed by male and female ELT postgraduate students?*"

To answer this question, the results demonstrated that men mostly used direct strategies to refuse an invitation of lower status and an offer of higher status interlocutors. On the other hand, women mostly employed direct refusals to the interlocutor of equal or higher status. In terms of indirect strategies, women preferred to use indirect refusals with higher status, while for men with equal status. More importantly, women tended to use more adjuncts than men in approximately all situations and showed their appreciation, specially to the person of higher status. As a case in point, Moaveni (2014) also found that females preferred expressions of gratitude and stating positive opinions more than men. On the contrary, the studies of Hedayatnejad and et al. (2015) and Sa'd and Qadermazi (2014) showed that there was not significant difference between speech act of refusal in males and females.

The final research question was *"Are there any differences among the refusal strategies employed by Persian, Turkish Arab and Kurdish ELT postgraduate students?"*

The results of this study revealed that despite almost similar patterns of speech act of refusal in all ethnic groups, especially between Kurdish and Arab students, Turkish participants employed direct refusals more than other groups. whereas, Persians used adjuncts more than other groups in almost all of situations (11 out of 12 situations). Likewise, the literature suggested that speech act of refusal varies among the different ethnic groups (see Çiftçi, 2016; Beebe & et al., 1990; Abed, 2011).

All in all, the present study compared the effects of gender and ethnicity on the use of refusal strategies and can contribute to the study of speech act of refusal. Even though the sample size of this study did not constitute a large number, it is possible to make some general conclusions. The results of this study in the line with previous research, indicated that ELT postgraduate students of this study employed indirect refusals more than other strategies. The results of this study may not generalize to the students of other departments, since the ELT students are more familiar with pragmatics because of their courses. Moreover, ethnicity and gender of the speakers may affect the use of refusal strategies. However, due to a limited number of participants, further investigation on ethnic groups and gender difference is highly recommended. Future research can also compare other factors such as age groups, social status and educational background on the use of refusal strategies in larger number of participants. Moreover, the data collection was based on written responses, so it is also recommended that future researchers use role-play to elicit the more natural responses.

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