# REFUSAL STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AMONG MALAY ESL STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT**

Good communication requires not only linguistic knowledge, but also an understanding of social and cultural factors in a situation. Studies on refusal strategies are not new. Many studies relating to refusals in English were focusing on western languages. The present study was an attempt to explore the use of refusal strategies as a speech act by Malay university students in Malaysia. Specifically, the study was looking at gender differences in refusal strategies and the most revealing social strategies in response to refusals used for power distance. The study employed a quantitative approach with survey as its research design. The participants consisted of 43 Malaysian students, (20 males and 23 females), studying in their bachelor degree programmes. Data was collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). All data collected were analysed by Mann-Whitney U Test and the Kruskal-Wallis H test. The findings showed that the Malay English as a Second Language (ESL) students employed more indirect strategies compared to the direct strategies. The high frequency in use of indirect strategies demonstrates that the subjects were aware of the fact that the use of the indirect strategies lessens the face-threatening effect of the speech act of refusal.

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings communicate with each other to get information, share ideas and thoughts through small chat with families, friends and people around them. Therefore, proper ways of speaking to others play an important role in communication. Good communication requires not only linguistic knowledge, but also an understanding of social and cultural factors in a situation.

Chomsky's (1965) language competence and language performance is thought to be instrumental in discussing the students' pragmatic competence. The idea of pragmatic competence was first being introduced by Canale and Swain (1982) where they defined pragmatic competence as referring to the ability to use language appropriately in different circumstances. Whereas circumstances are defined as purposes for communicating which often referred to as functions like apologizing, complimenting, requesting and refusing.

Under the umbrella of pragmatic competence there is a term introduced by Canale (1983) called pragmatic impairment. Pragmatic impairment is when a language learner does not have a balanced between fluency and accuracy. Fluency in a language means the ability to speak easily, reasonably quickly and without having to stop and pause a lot. Some students can be very fluent in English language, but they may have some grammatical mistakes that they commit to while communicating with others or they may not be good in using the language. On the other hand, precision in communication encompasses how well communicators engender verbal and

nonverbal messages that are understood by others and how well those messages are perceived, comprehended, recalled, and interpreted.

Furthermore, in communication, refusals take place in all languages. It could be refusing a request, an offer, a suggestion or others. Brown and Levinson (1978) stated that a refusal might offend the listener; hence getting messages across clearly without offending the listener becomes difficult. That is why the speaker has to make the conversation longer in order not to offend the other person.

*Statement of the Problem*

According to Hiba Qusay et al. (2011) study on a group of Malay students in a university in Malaysia, majority of the Malay students studied appear to be too direct and even rude while they are involved in communication. This is due to their inability to figure out the norms of appropriateness for various speech acts and interlocutors in the target culture. In other words they do not use pragmatically appropriate language when communicating (Graddol, 1997).

Refusals are intricate verbalization acts that require not only long sequences of negotiation and cooperative achievements, but also "face preserving manoeuvres" to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act (Gass & Houck, 1999, Fe'lix-Brasdefer, 2006). Refusals were not as much studied as other conditions under the Verbalization Act Theory but were being paid incrementing attention to as well (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990 Bardovi-Hartford, 1990 Liao & Breshnahan, 1996 Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984 Gass 1999 Takahashi & Beebe 1987 Nelson & Cason 2002). Most cross-cultural studies of the verbalization act of reluctant have investigated between varieties of English or English and other languages like Japanese, Arabic, Spanish Germany and so forth. Fewer studies on refusals by Malaysian ESL learners have appeared in the literature according to H.Q.A Sattar et al, (2011).

Moreover, although Malays are Malaysia's largest ethnic group, accounting for over half the population, so far no study has visually examined their performance of refusal verbalization acts in utilizing the English language. Various studies relating to refusals in English were focusing on western languages which was carried by Beebe et al, (1990) Chen, (1996) and Fe'lix-Brasdefer, (2006) which has shown refusing a person of higher power is even more difficult than refusing a person of equal or lower power status. This could be due to the statuses and their position.

Moreover, there are also studies on examining the influence of interlocutors' social status and gender on the provided refusal strategies. While there are a lot of studies in the literature of refusals that have investigated the effects of interlocutors' social rank on their responses, very few have paid proper attention to the power distance and social status in refusal strategies.

According to Athieh and Yassin (2011), there have been studies on the speech act of requests, compliments, apologies, and complaints in the sociocultural pragmatics field, but the speech act of refusal has not been widely studied in the sociocultural pragmatic particularly on specific context.

Riding on this scenario, examining the refusal strategies adopted by some Malay university students should be a good topic for research. Refusals as being discussed by many scholars in the

field showed to be very tricky and are considered difficult conditions to face. It involves the sensitivity from both parties; the senders and the receivers.

Jessica Raman (2016) in her thesis "*Refusal Strategies in English by Malaysian Indian Undergraduates*" said that Malaysians, as a whole are a face conscious society. Therefore, they are prone to avoid face-threatening situations as much as possible. Nevertheless, refusals are parts of our daily conversations and cannot be avoided. Refusal expressions differ from one person to the other depending on variables like situations, surroundings, power and the age gap between interlocutors.

### Research Questions

The present study was an attempt to explore the use of refusal strategies as a speech act by Malay university students in Malaysia. Hence, researchers mainly focused on the refusal strategies that were used by Malay students who were studying in higher education. Specifically, the study was investigating the differences in refusal strategies used by male and female students, looking into the types of refusal strategies frequently used by them and determining the most revealing refusals according to power distance (social status situation ).

These concerns were addressed by searching for answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the types of refusal strategies used by a group of Malay students in IUKL?

2. Are there any differences in the use of refusal strategies between male and female Malay students in IUKL when communicating?

3. Do Malay students in IUKL realise the speech act of refusals when refusing a person of lower, equal, or higher social status situation?

## RELATED LITERATURE

### *Theoretical Framework*

The central tenet of Speech Act Theories is that the uttering of a sentence is part of an action within the framework of social institution and conventions. Another important aspect of the Speech Act Theory is the concept of felicity conditions, introduced by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969).

The theoretical framework of this study explains the connections of each theory in discussing the phenomenon of refusal strategies. The model of Communicative Competence by Hymes (1962) is used as the biggest cause to see how refusal strategies could be explained. The Communicative Competence Model emphasized the importance of language as a system of communication in which knowledge of language use is important. Canale (1983) redefined Communicative Competence as sociolinguistic competence and refers it to how utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts and how this depend on the contextual facts such as status of the participants, purpose of interaction and conversations governing interactions. In this study, the speech act of refusal falls under the category of expressive referring to Searle's Taxonomy.

The study of refusal strategies also takes into account the aspect of politeness which is the central aspect in the field of cross-culture speech act research. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness with the concept of face (self-image) was adopted. Past research that adopted Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory has shown that the speech of refusal threatens the listener's face-value. It is said that "the speaker does not care about the listener's desires and that the speaker's desires are not the same as the listener's".

### *Past Studies*

Based on Ramos (1991), a refusal is to respond negatively to an offer, request, invitation, and so on. How one says *No* is more important in many societies than the answer itself. Therefore, the interlocutor must know when to use the appropriate form and its function. Refusals are considered to be a Face-threatening Act (FTA) according to Brown and Levinson (1987). The positive or negative face-value of the speaker or the listener is risked when a refusal is called for or carried out. Consequently, refusals, as sensitive and high-risk, can provide much insight into one's pragmatics. Therefore, Ramos (1991) said that, to perform refusals, it is highly indicative of one's non-native pragmatic competence.

Refusals, in cross-cultural communications and for non-native speakers, are known as 'striking points' (Beebe et al. 1990). Generally speaking, various strategies are being used to avoid offending people's interlocutors while communicating to lessen the risk of ruining interpersonal relations.

In a study of Chinese and Malaysian university students' refusal behaviour, Farnia and Wu (2012) investigated the refusals to invitation by using a written discourse completion test and an immediate structured interview aimed to examine the students' perception concerning their

cognition and language of thought in the process of refusing. The findings showed that both groups used similar types of refusal strategies but they are differed in the frequency of the refusals. In addition, the most frequent refusal strategies were found to be *statement of regret*, *excuses*, *reasons and explanation* and *expression of negative ability and willingness*.

Umale (2011) carried out a study to investigate the similarities and differences between ten British speakers and ten Omanis who responded to situations in a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consisted of various interlocutor statuses (low, high and equal). Umale's findings suggested that both the Omanis and the British speakers tended to use indirect refusals strategies, mainly *statement of regret*, *care for the interlocutor's feeling*, *giving reasons and promise for future acceptance*, to refuse requests from their superiors.

**METHODOLOGY**

*Sample*

For this present study, the participants consisted of 43 Malaysian students, (20 males and 23 females), studying in bachelor degree programmes. They are all Malays by ethnicity. The age range of the students was 18 to 30 years. Their mother tongue was Malay language and English was studied as a second language. The sample used English language for studying purposes only.

*Data Collection and Procedure*

This study employed a quantitative approach with survey as its research design. Data for this study was collected through the DCT that was adopted from Umale's (2012). The DCT consisted of 12 situations, two of which deal with academic settings and the others with everyday life.

Once the answers were collected, the responses given by the English as a Second Language (ESL) students were classified into strategies and then coded according to a modified classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990) as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Classification of Refusal Strategies

| Type | No. | Strategy | Expressions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct Refusal** | 1 | Direct | I refuse. No, I can't |
| **Indirect Refusal** | 2 | Reason | I'm busy |
| | 3 | Regret | I'm so sorry |
| | 4 | Consideration of Interlocutor's feelings | I appreciate the offer ….. 'Thank you' |
| | 5 | Let Interlocutor off the hook | Don't worry about it<br>That's Ok<br>You don't have to |
| | 6 | Wish | I wish I had money |
| | 7 | Set conditions for future or past acceptance | If the work is complete you may go tomorrow |
| | 8 | Hedging | Oh, I'm not sure |
| | 9 | Statement of philosophy/principle | I never lend money |
| | 10 | Repetition of the part of the request | Malaysia? |

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*Research Question 1: What are the types of refusal strategies used by a group of Malay students in IUKL?*

To answer the research question, data was gathered from the 12 situations asked in the questionnaires. These 12 situations displayed the types of refusal strategies. Since researcher used Beebe's benchmark, 22 refusal strategies has been highlighted. The data collected were analysed by using descriptive statistic frequency and percentage.

In order to obtain the frequency of refusal strategies used by the participants, the number of each strategy type used was counted. It was found that the types of refusal strategies that most used by the Malay IUKL students were indirect strategies (excuses (100%) and regret (100%)). This was followed by getting off the hook (97.7%), direct (90.7%) and set condition for past and future acceptance (76.7%). As for the lowest refusal strategies used by the Malay IUKL students, indirect strategies (ask reason (4.7%), ask questions (9.3%) and prefer (9.3%)) were used.

### Research Question 2: Are there any differences in the use of refusal strategies between male and female Malay students in IUKL when communicating?

Referring to the research question above, the data were gathered from the same DCT. Again, the data was obtained from the 12 situations about refusal strategies. To see the results, the data were keyed-in in the SPSS Version 23. The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to test the data. The Mann-Whitney U Test is known to be used to compare differences between two independent groups when the dependent variable is either ordinal or continuous, but not normally distributed. The Mann-Whitney U statistical test is non-parametric alternatives to the Related T-test and the Unrelated T-test. It examines two sample data sets and enables us to decide whether they are statistically different from each other.

Based on the results obtained, male and female participants were found to differ significantly only in their use of the refusal strategies number one which is 'direct' type of refusal strategies ($Z = -2.226$, $p = 0.026$) with females used it more than males (24 vs. 19.7 mean rank). They did not differ from each other in their use of all other strategies. Among the relevant responses given by the male and female participants in terms of direct refusal are;

> Male participants : *No! I insist!*
>                    : *I can't lend you some money this month…*
> Female participants    : *…. unfortunately, I can't join you.*
>                    : *I have to decline that offer…*

There are also irrelevant responses given by the male and female participants which are;

> Male participants : *hell no…*
> Female participants    : *I quit!*
>                    : *You're fired!*

### Research Question 3: Do Malay students in IUKL realise the speech act of refusals when refusing a person of lower, equal, or higher social status situation?

The same DCT, with the same 12 situations were used. Only that, the data gathered was divided into three social statuses. There are equal, higher and lower social status. The data was also keyed-in in SPSS Version 23 but the data was analysed by using Kruskal-Wallis H Test. The Kruskal-Wallis H test (sometimes also called the "one-way ANOVA on ranks") is a rank-based nonparametric test that can be used to determine if there are statistically significant differences between two or more groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable. It is considered the nonparametric alternative to the one-way ANOVA, and an extension of the Mann-Whitney U test to allow the comparison of more than two independent groups. The Kruskal-Wallis test statistic is approximately a chi-square distribution, with k-1 degrees of freedom should be greater than 5.

The findings showed found that there was no significant number for refusal strategies used by the participants for the equal social status. However, for the higher social status, the most significant refusal strategies used by the participants was refusal strategy 1 (direct) which was

$X^2 = 3.703, p = 0.054$. An example taken from situation 11: Participants had to refuse an offer from someone with a higher status; the manager of the company and one student gave an answer like this *"I can't sell this car…"*

For the lower social status, the most significant refusal strategies used by the participants were refusal strategy 1 (direct) which was $X^2 = 8.337, p = 0.004$ and refusal strategy 5 (get off the hook) which was $X^2 = 3.746, p = 0.053$. Two examples for this;

In situation 3: Participants needed to refuse to his/her employee's request and one student answered, *"I can't allow you to leave early today…."*

In situation 12: Participants had to refuse an offer from the domestic helper and one student answered, *"It's okay. No big deal."*

## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Conclusion*

All in all, some findings of the research questions were similar to the past studies and some were different. Farnia and Wu (2012) had similar findings when they also found that both genders used similar types of refusal strategies but only differed in the frequency of the refusals. In addition, the most frequently used refusal strategies were found to be "*statement of regret, excuses, reasons and explanation and expression of negative ability and willingness*". With regards to the adjuncts to refusals, the results also revealed that the participants used *positive opinions, feelings, or agreement, expressions of gratitude and appreciation*.

Another similar study was also found in Al-Shboul et al. (2012) when they investigated the similarities and differences of the speech act of refusals in English between Jordanian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Malay English as Second Language (ESL) among the postgraduate students. His results revealed that both groups used almost similar strategies with similar frequency in performing refusals.

The Malay students of IUKL chose not to risk their interpersonal relationship or also known as face-threatening acts according to Brown and Levinson (1987). Takahashi and Beebe (1987) said that the 'speech act of refusal as a face-threatening-act, has been identified as a "major cross-cultural stinking point for ESL students" which can lead to unintended offense and a breakdown in communication.

In terms of differences in the use of refusal strategies between male and female Malay students in IUKL when communicating, the findings apparently did not show much significant values. This current study is paralleled with the study of Hassani et al. (2011). Unlike Miri et al. (2015), the t-test indicated significant difference between male and female performance on seven refusal strategies including: criticize the requester, hedging, postponement, statement of regret, statement of empathy, statement of principle, and unspecific reply.

All past studies seemed to agree with the same findings. The differences however manifested more in the number of the strategies employed rather than in the types of the refusal strategies. As for the current study, the conclusion might be tenable on the grounds that the number of the students involved was small for the researcher to be able to find more significant values for more Refusal Strategies. As for what have been found, the findings can turn to be generalizable to refusal behaviour as well.

The findings for the third RQ were in line with Hiba Qusay et al. (2011) in their study on the Refusal Strategies in English by Malay University Students. The same findings were found that social status power was closely related to the students' realisation patterns of the refusal strategies. Participants in their study displayed variation in the frequency and the refusal strategies used in relation to the social status variables.

### Implications

The current study has a few implications towards the theories underpinning it. Firstly the findings of the study contributed to the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Researchers in this study felt there was a need for L2 pragmatics to be taught to develop lexical and grammatical knowledge. The findings strongly suggest that without a pragmatic focus, foreign language teaching could not promote students' metalinguistic awareness. Finally, despite those few limitations, the current study supported the view that pragmatic ability can indeed be systematically developed through proper planning of the classroom activities.

### Recommendations

This study considered the type of refusal strategies used by Malay students in IUKL. Nothing was done to compare such strategies with other languages. A cross cultural study of the use of such strategies can be done through the comparison of languages. Finally, the present study compared the use of refusal strategies in general. However, it is possible to compare the effects of gender, age groups, and educational background on the use of refusal strategies in different politeness systems.

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