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Refusal Strategies of Iranian EFL Learners: the role of sex, age, education levels and politeness [1]

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Abstract

Introduction: The current study aimed at finding if there is any significant difference between male and female participants in the type of refusal strategies they use across different age and education levels as well as politeness systems.

Materials and method: 110 Persian native speakers, 48 male and 42 female took a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which included 8 scenarios in each of which the respondents were presented with a situation in which they had to respond to a stimulus by rejecting it. The answers given to each item were analyzed and coded by an expert in pragmatics based on the taxonomy employed by Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990). To investigate the first research questions a series of Mann-Whitney U Test was used. Also, to investigate the effect of age (the second research question), educational background (the third research question), and the politeness system (the fourth research question) on the use of refusal strategies, three sets of Kruskal-Wallis H Tests were carried out using SPSS.

Results: Based on the results obtained, male and female participants were found to differ significantly only in their use of the 'regret' type of refusal strategies. A significant difference was observed among the age groups, different educational backgrounds and different politeness systems.

Conclusion: There are significant differences in refusal strategies based on gender, age, educational backgrounds and politeness systems.

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1. Introduction

Although Refusals as speech acts are present in all languages, not all languages/cultures refuse in the same way nor do they feel comfortable refusing the same invitation or suggestion. In some cultures refusing an invitation might be considered as taboo and as such very difficult to turn down if not impossible. In some other cultures, on the other hand, it is quite natural to refuse an invitation and the native speaker refuses to accept it quite comfortably. The speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says 'no' to a request or an invitation. Refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener/requester/inviter, because it contradicts his or her expectations, and the speaker is "acting as if s/he has more social power than the other person" (Yule, 1999; Keramati, 2014).

Refusals are often realized through indirect strategies; it, thus, requires a high degree of pragmatic competence. Since a failure to refuse appropriately can jeopardize the interpersonal relations of the speakers, refusals usually involve different strategies to avoid offending one's interlocutors. However, the choice of these strategies may differ across languages and cultures. One way, which is the focus of the present study, is to ask learners to get their hands on as much L2 material as they can. Communication is all about making constant choices among different modes of speech, and language learners should be instructed in such a way as to gain mastery over these choices. They can be asked to listen to genuine conversations in the target language and practice different dialogues. But words fade as soon as they are uttered. That seems to be tiresome task for the learners to rewind the recorded conversations times and again to get the gist (Widdowson, 2007). The fact that language learners are always afraid to communicate lies in the transient nature of spoken language. That is Why, the present researcher always advise language learners to get their hands on written equivalent of things they listened, and in most cases there has been noticeable advancement in their language proficiency. Having seen this made the researcher think of examining the language of texts to see if they are capable of being referred to as materials for learning to communicate. ". . . It is not just meaning that is negotiated in communication but human relations" (Ahghar, 2014).

Speakers who may be considered fluent in a foreign or a second language due to their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the language in question may still lack pragmatic competence. In other words, they may still be unable to produce that kind of language which is socially and culturally acceptable. In cross-cultural communication, refusals are known as 'sticking points' for many native speakers (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliz-Weltz, 1990). Therefore, the intention is to elicit the pragmatic performance of the Iranian Learners of English and compare them with ones elicited from those native speakers of Persian who can operationally be considered as not knowing English. By analyzing the used formulae with their orders and contents in constructing the refusal styles, this study will be an attempt to address the following research question. Is there any significant difference between male and female participants, different subjects' age ranges, different levels of education and the type of refusal strategies they use across different politeness systems?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

For the purpose of the study, 110 Persian native speakers, 48 male and 42 female (20 of the participants did not answer the question about their gender), took part in this study. They ranged in age from 13 to over 50. Since participants were not asked for their exact age, the exact range cannot be specified. Participants had to choose an option indicating the range in which their age occurs. The lowest range they could choose was'13 to 20', and the highest one was 'over 50.' However, the majority of participants were in the age range of 20 to 30.The participants were of different educational backgrounds. The study included participants holding diploma or lower degrees, BA/BS, MA/MS, and Ph.D. however, the majority of them were holding diploma or a lower degree.

2.2 Measurement

For the researcher to be able to analyze

participants' use of refusal strategies, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used. The DCT was originally designed by Blum-Kulka in 1982. It included 8 scenarios in each of which the respondents were presented with a situation in which they had to respond to a stimulus by rejecting it. For the participants who were Persian native speakers, the questionnaire was translated into Persian.

Participants' answers to this question were used to answer the second research question later.

They were also required to identify their educational background by choosing one of the options they were provided with. The options included the following ones: Option one: Diploma or below, Option two: Holding BA/BS or a BA/BS student. Option three: Holding MA/MS or a MA/MS student Option four: Holding PhD or a PhD student Participants' answers to this question were used to answer the third research question later.

The DCT included 8 scenarios each representing a situation in which the respondents were informed of the context first and then they had to reject a request made by a second person. Their answers were then analyzed for the type of refusal strategies used. This test was originally designed by (Blum-Kulka, 1982). The original DCT has 6 items. However, another 2 items were added to the original test for the purpose of the present study. They were divided into four groups: four requests, two invitations, one offer and one suggestion. Each type included a status differential: higher, equal, or lower.

The answers given to each item were analyzed and coded by an expert in pragmatics based on the taxonomy employed by Beebe et al. (1990). For example if a respondent refused an invitation by saying "I'm sorry, I already have plans. Maybe next time," this was coded as [expression of regret] [excuse] [offer of alternative]. The frequency of using each type of refusal strategies was then obtained and became the basis of data analysis.

Concerning the politeness system, respondents'' answers were investigated under four conditions. The first two questions in the DCT asked for the respondents' refusal a request in a situation in which there was a social distance between her and the requester(+ distance), and she enjoyed a higher status (+ power) as in the relationship between a boss and an employer. This constituted our top-down Hierarchical Politeness System (HPS top-down). In questions 3 and 4, there was no social distance and equal status as in the case of two friends. This constituted our Deferential Politeness System (DPS).

There was social distance and a lower power status in the third type of situations for questions number 5 and 6 in which the requester enjoyed a higher status. This was regarded as our bottom-up Hierarchical Politeness System (HPS bottom-up). Finally, the last two questions considered the situation in which there was social distance but the two interlocutors had an equal status as in the case of two strangers seeing each other in a queue. The type of refusal strategies participants used in each situation was used to answer the fourth research question.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test for use of different refusal strategies.

Based on the results obtained, male and female participants were found to differ significantly only in their use of the 'regret' type of refusal strategies (χ^2= 2.53, P=0.013) with males using it much less than females (169 vs. 194 mean rank). They did not differ from each other in their use of all other strategies. However, although the difference between their use of 'condition' refusal strategy was not found significant, a trend was observed in that case (χ^2= -1.79, P= 0.07), males using that strategy less than females (177 vs. 185). The same thing happened for the 'acceptance' refusal strategy (χ^2= -1.88, P=0.16). However, unlike the previous cases, males used this strategy more than females (mean rank of 183 vs. 176). Also the result shows that a significant difference was observed among the age groups in case of the of 'non-performative' refusal strategy (χ^2= 25.54, P= 0.001), 'alternative' refusal strategy (χ^2= 11.91, P= 0.02), and the 'avoidance' refusal strategy (χ^2= 10.05, P= 0.04). There was also a trend observed

in case of the 'excuse' (χ^2= 9.10, P= 0.0005), and the 'philosophy' strategies (χ^2= 9.17, P= 0.0005). In case of the 'non-performative' strategy, the highest mean rank belonged to the age range of 11-41; for the 'alternative' strategy, the highest mean rank belonged to the age range of 13-20; and for the 'avoidance' strategy, the age range of 51 and over' had the highest mean rank. For the two strategies for which a trend was observed, the highest mean ranks belonged to the age group of 31-40 for both the 'philosophy' and 'excuse' refusal strategies.

Table1. Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Use of Different Refusal Strategies

variables	Chi-square				Sig.			
	MF	***DAG***	**DEB**	**DPS**	***MF***	***DAG***	**DEB**	**DPS**
Performativity	4.67	1.54	1.12	1.12	0.01*	0.77	0.77	0.50
Non-performativity	8.54	25.54	11.55	1.54	0.001*	0.001*	0.001*	0.30
Regret	2.53	1.07	14.17	1.01	0.013	0.48	0.001*	0.40
Wish	7.24	1.22	20.80	1.81	0.01*	0.18	0.001*	0.24
Excuse	5.23	9.10	7.92	50.24	0.01*	0.001*	0.001*	0.001*
Alternative	8.54	11.91	1.91	11.34	0.01*	0.001*	0.23	0.001*
Condition	-1.79	1.62	1.22	11.13	0.23	0.54	0.28	0.33
Promise	10.14	1.14	1.00	18.62	0.01*	0.33	0.43	0.001*
Principle	2.13	1.16	1.35	15.14	0.01*	0.42	0.53	0.001*
Philosophy	11.60	9.17	1.97	1.60	0.01*	0.01*	0.22	0.12
Dissuasion	12.14	1.15	10.21	0.14	0.01*	0.42	0.001*	0.19
Acceptance	-1.88	2.14	1.12	0.18	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.70
Avoidance	24.54	10.05	1.30	12.60	0.01*	0.01*	0.65	0.001*
Adjunct	17.07	1.03	1.95	81.15	0.01*	0.23	0.72	0.001*

Note: MF, DAG, DEB and DPS stands for Male and Female, Different Age Groups, Different Educational Backgrounds and different politeness systems different refusal strategies respectively.

In addition, a significant difference was observed among the participants with different educational backgrounds in case of the 'non-performative' refusal strategy (χ^2= 11.55, P= 0.01), 'regret' refusal strategy (χ^2= 14.17, P= 0.0005), 'wish' refusal strategy (χ^2= 20.80, P= 0.0005), 'excuse' strategy (χ^2= 7.92, P= 0.05), and the 'dissuasion' strategy (χ^2= 10.21, P= 0.01).

In case of the 'non-performative' and 'dissuasion' strategies, the highest mean rank belonged to the group holding diploma or a degree below that; for the 'regret' strategy, the highest mean rank belonged to the group holding MA/MS; and for the 'wish' and 'excuse' strategy, it belonged to the group holding PhD. finally, a significant difference was also observed among different politeness systems in the case of the of 'non-performative' refusal strategy (χ^2= 18.55, P= 0.0005), 'regret' refusal strategy (χ^2= 56.07, P= 0.0005),'excuse' refusal strategy (χ^2= 50.23, P= 0.0005), 'alternative' strategy (χ^2= 11.34, P= 0.01), 'promise' strategy (χ^2= 18.62, P= 0.0005), 'principle' strategy (χ^2= 15.14, P= 0.0005), 'avoidance' strategy (χ^2= 12.60, P= 0.0005) and the 'adjunct' refusal strategy (χ^2= 81.15, P= 0.0005).

4. Discussion

In case of the 'non-performative' and 'promise' strategies, the highest mean rank belonged to HPS (top-down); for the 'excuse' strategy, the highest mean rank belonged to HPS (bottom-up); for the 'principle,' 'avoidance' and 'adjunct' strategies, it belonged to DPS; and for the 'regret,' and 'alternative,' strategies, the SPS had the highest mean In case of the firs research question, it was

observed that female participants significantly differed from their male counterparts in the type of strategies they use(Chomsky, 1968). They tend to use more of the 'regret' strategy, that is, in rejecting a request or invitation, etc., they tend to use more of expressions such as 'I am sorry' or 'I feel terrible.' Moreover, females were noticed setting more conditions as in saying 'if you had told me before,' while males were observed using an acceptance strategy which functioned more like refusals by being unspecific or avoiding giving a reply or showing enthusiasm(Abolmaali & Barkhordari, 2014). Women have always been noticed being different in using language from men. They are believed to have a different word choice from men as in the case of the adjectives they use to describe different things. They have been observed using more tag questions and using rising intonation which is more associated with a question rather than a statement. Lakoff (1973) believes that it is due to the fact that women are less sure about themselves and their opinions than are men. There is also some evidence that in cross-sex communications, women tend to ask more questions than men and encourage others to speak. However, men tend to interrupt more, challenge, and take control of the conversation.

Wardhaugh (1986) believes that it reflects the normal power relation which exists in societies with men being more dominant. He believes that since men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, they have learnt to do different things with language. Based on this view men and women have been brought up to behave differently concerning the language they use.

Lakoff (1973) believes that this is a reflection of a cultural problem rather than a linguistic one. It reflects that fact that men and women are expected to have different interests and roles, and use language differently in conversations.

Therefore, the use of regret strategy by women more than men, or the use of acceptance strategy by men more than women can be a reflection of such a culture in our society. Men have always been considered to be more powerful than women in Iranian society although the situation is changing little by little. Such a power has resulted in men considering themselves at a higher position showing no enthusiasm in the topic being discussed or showing no regret about the fact that they are rejecting request or an offer (Sadegi Fasaie & Irani, 2014).

In case of the second research question, it was found that different age groups used different types of refusal strategies. People between 13 and 20 used more and different types of strategies in comparison with people in other age ranges. They were observed to use more non-performativity statements such as saying 'NO,' 'I can't,' 'I won't,' or 'I don't think so.' They also tend to offer excuses, reasons or explanations for their action of refusal. For example, they may say that 'I have a headache.' They may also give statements of philosophy as in the case of 'one cannot be too careful.'

People in the age range of 31 to 40 tended to make more use of the alternative strategy by giving options such as 'why don't you do X?' or 'I prefer …. Rather than.' Finally, people at 51 or over tended to use avoidance strategy by using hedging (I am not sure) or postponement (I'll think about it).It seems that people in the age range of 13 to 20, who have happened to be at an age in which they less often happen to be in a position to reject others' requests due to their most of the time lower power status, tend to use a variety of strategies because they are not sure about how an action of refusal should be performed. They also tend to be more frank due to low age by using non-performativity statements. Moreover, people between 31 and 40, who most probably have had a lot of experience of being in situations in which they have rejected others' requests or their requests have been rejected do not differ from other groups but in giving alternatives which is a sign of being more considerate. Finally, people at the age of 51 or over tend to be more conservative by avoiding the whole problem itself.

Educational background has also been found to have an effect on the type of refusal strategies used by participants. Participants holding diploma or a lower degree used more direct refusal strategies by being more frank saying 'NO' or 'I can't.' They also used dissuasion strategy more than other

groups. They tended to warn, criticize, or remind the requester of the negative consequences (Khorami, Fathvalizadeh, Mohammadniya & Seadatee Shamir, 2013).

It seems that the use of such strategies results from the context in which such people usually work or live. These people, due to their lack of a higher educational degree, have to work at in a job with a lower social status. They also have a lower salary and as a result a lower economic status. In fact, they usually belong to the working class of the society. In such a context, most of the people they happen to have contact are usually of equal status to them with low level of education and no concern for saving each other's' face.

Moreover, the other type of people they may have contact with tend to be people with a higher social and power status who usually have the right to give orders to them. In such a situation, the people with a higher power usually use more direct refusal strategies in rejecting the lower status people. So these people get familiar mostly with such ways of performing the act of rejection, only. People holding higher degrees seem to be more concerned about other people's face and feelings. Those holding MA/MS were noticed making more use of regret strategy using phrases such as 'I am sorry', and those holding a PhD degree were observed making wishes (I wish I could help), or giving excuses, reasons, and explanations (I have an exam tomorrow). This could be explained by considering the social status such people have and the usual social roles these people possess and the resulting expectations such roles result in. Usually, such people are expected to differ in the type of language they use from those people who have been less educated. Finally, it was found that while in a top-down hierarchical politeness system, participants tend to use more of 'non-performative' and 'promise' refusal strategies, in a bottom-up hierarchical politeness system, the only strategy which showed a significance difference was that of 'excuse,.

A good example of such situations can be the conversation between a boss and an employee with the employee being the requester in the top-down HPS and with the boss being the requester in the bottom-up HPS. What distinguishes the two systems is not the distance but the power status of the interlocutors. In the top-down situation the one who refuses the other's request has a higher power status (Khorami et al., 2013). Therefore, she sees no need for giving explanations or excuses for her action. As a result, she might use non-performatives more often by saying 'NO', or 'I can't.' At best they might make use of the 'promise' strategy by saying 'Next time, I'll. .' or 'Maybe next time' to procrastinate the acceptance of the request. However, in case of a bottom-up HPS, since the requester enjoys a higher power status, the one who is going to refuse the request cannot be direct by saying 'No'. She is threatening her employer's face. So she has to do something to lower the threat by bringing an excuse or giving explanations such as 'I have headache.' In case of the other two politeness systems, it was observed that participants tended to make more use of the 'principle,' 'avoidance,' and 'adjunct' strategies in the differential politeness system (DPS). They also used the 'regret' and 'alternative' strategies more the others in the solidarity politeness system (SPS) (Beebe et al, 1990; Alamin, karimzadeh & Bakhtiyari, 2014; Keramati, 2014).

What distinguishes the DPS from SPS is not the power status because it is the same in both systems. What makes a difference is the social distance between the interlocutors. A good example of such situations is the conversation between two friends in the case of the DPS and between two strangers in the case of the SPS. Since in the DPS, there is no distance between the two interlocutors, and they both have an equal power status, the one to refuse an invitation or offer has to be considerate of the other's face by trying to keep the friendly relationship between them. As a result she might try to avoid the topic by saying 'I'll think about it' for example, or she might try to base her refusal on a principle she obeys as in 'I don't do business with friends.' She might also accompany her refusal with some statements such as 'I'd love to but' or 'that's a good idea, but' to reduce the threat to her friends face. However, when it comes to a SPS situation, since there is social distance between the two interlocutors, the one to refuse a request has to be

more careful because since she doesn't have a higher power status, she cannot reject the other's request directly. However, since she does not have a lower power status, she does not have to worry that much about the consequences of her refusal. As a result she might try to keep her solidarity at the same time as she is trying to be polite by expressing her regret or offering an alternative.

Implications

To shed light on the significance and objectives of this study, the applications and implications this study can have in language teaching and other language related areas are discussed in this section. The first and most important implication this study can have applies to teachers and material developers working on teaching Persian as a foreign language. In developing a conversation, for example, between a male and female, material developers should be careful in their choice of refusal strategies each participant may use. As the findings of this study showed, males and females differ in the type of refusal strategies they use. Female participants are more likely to use expressions such as 'I am sorry,' or 'I feel terrible' showing regret (Al-Eryani, 2008). Moreover, in developing any task by material developers or in using any piece of task by language teachers, it must be noticed that the educational background of the participants as well as their age and the social distance other power status may affect the type of strategies they use and as a result the type of language they use.

The second implication this study may have applies to language learners learning Persian as a foreign language. Learning a language is not separate from learning its culture and the type of strategies people use in rejecting others' requests are part of their culture and as a result part of their language. Therefore, it seems imperative that a language learner be aware of such strategies and the differences between males and females, or people with different educational background or at different age in their use of such strategies.

Another implication or application the findings of this study may have applies to the area of translation studies. People differ in the type of refusal strategies they use in different cultures. One strategy which is appropriate in one culture may be inappropriate or even insulting in another. As such, when rendering a book from one language to another, which implies rendering the rules of one culture to another, translators must be careful not to render sentences word by word. They should consider whether the same strategies are followed in the target language or they need to be adapted to fit well in the target culture.

Finally, the results of this study, more specifically the findings of the first research question about the difference between men and women's use of refusal strategies, can contribute to the sociolinguistic theories of language, in which it is believed that the language used by men and women differ from each other due to the power status each holds in the society, or because of the way in which each was brought up, or the roles each take in the society.

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