

Refusal Speech Act in EFL Context: The Relation between Social Status, Distance, and Strategies Used

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Abstract—*The speech act of refusal potentially contains a level of bluntness and discourtesy, which can make it difficult for non-native speakers to say no in a foreign language. In this study, production of refusals is explored by examining the impact of social factors, such as power (high, equal, low) and social distance (familiar, unfamiliar), on the differential use of refusal strategies. To this end, seventy Iranian EFL learners produced several examples of refusals in a role-play task. The task included six situation types based on two social variables: interlocutors' power difference and their social distance. The results revealed strategy shift in power high and familiar situations, which are particularly discussed in this study.*

Keywords— *EFL, Refusal Strategies, Power, Distance, Non-native Speakers*

I. INTRODUCTION

English is an international language, functioning as a superior means of communication among all nations. Non-native speakers of English are far more than the native speakers in the world we live in nowadays [10], [24], [30], [31]. English as an International Language (EIL) focuses on the relationship between language and the local culture of its users. Native speakers of English are no longer the exclusive authorities to lead everyone how to use the English language. This means it is necessary to study how English is used by non-native speakers and how their socio-cultural values and norms are reflected in their performance in the English language.

It is clear that pragmatics plays an important role in the production and perception of speech. Crystal [11, p. 240] defines pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of its users, specifically of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication”. Pragmatics is also described

by [28, p. 36] as “the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the context and situations in which they are used”. In his definition pragmatic studies include the study of how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of the real world, how speakers use and understand speech acts, and how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

Speech act studies are considered to be a very important part of pragmatic research. All languages have their exclusive ways of performing speech acts. Although speech acts are universals, the method used in performing them is diverse in different cultures. The speech act of refusal, which is the main concern of this study, is a type of speech act that is used as a response to another individual's request, invitation, offer, or suggestion, which means it is not speaker initiative [14]. As we know, refusal is a speech act that potentially includes a level of rudeness and discourtesy; therefore, using inappropriate refusal strategies may harm the relationship between interlocutors. As a result, proper perception and production of refusals certainly requires a certain degree of cultural awareness.

We could find two kinds of refusals in the literature: genuine (also termed substantive) and ritual. A genuine refusal is declared “to convey the non-compliance of the speaker with the action proposed in the initiating move” [17]. In contrast, ritual refusal is “a polite act to indicate the speaker's consideration of the hearer” [8, p. 152]. Due to the different functions of genuine and ritual refusals, they should be studied separately. In this study, genuine refusals are our concern because in contrast to ritual refusals, which are face enhancing politeness strategies [8], genuine refusals are considered face-threatening acts. They are threats to the face of the hearer, because in performing a refusal, the speaker refuses to give the response his/her interlocutor is hoping to receive [6].

Additionally, social variables like power differentials, age, gender, and social distance between the interlocutors affect how people perform their refusals

in different social situations. In order to weaken the face-threatening nature of refusals, interlocutors usually make use of face-saving rules [13]. It means they usually use different strategies to avoid offending the hearer. Different cultures and different languages can also be effective in the variation of these mitigating strategies. [22]. Therefore, refusers need to be familiar with culture-specific face concerns to a certain degree to be able to comprehend and produce effective refusals [13].

The means by which a particular speech act is performed, in terms of the main content of an utterance are referred to as 'semantic formulas' in the literature. Semantic formulas are defined as "a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question" [9, p. 265]. For instance, when one refuses an invitation: 'Sorry, I can't; because we have some guests that night. Maybe another time! Thanks for the invitation', the semantic formulas used in this example include expression of regret (Sorry), statement of negative ability (I can't), providing the reason (we have some guests that night), postponement (Maybe another time), and expression of gratitude (Thanks for the invitation).

Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz [3] provided a list of these semantic formulas used when refusing different initiating acts. For investigating and categorizing the refusal data, most researchers have used this classification as the basis for analysis. According to their article, refusals are divided into two main groups: Direct refusals and indirect refusals. The direct refusals have very limited subdivisions in comparison to indirect ones.

Accordingly, the social factors of power and distance are thought to make speech acts more demanding to perform in different situations. Beebe et al. [3, p. 68] explain that the speech act of refusal reflects "fundamental cultural values" and involves "delicate interpersonal negotiation" that requires the speaker to "build rapport and help the listener avoid embarrassment". This speech act, therefore, requires investigation because there is a high potential for offending the hearer as well as the possibility of communication breakdown.

Wolfson [35] defines pragmatic transfer as the transfer of the rules of speaking or the conventions of language behavior. Positive transfer refers to the transfer of norms that L1 and L2 share. Negative pragmatic transfer, on the other hand, can be defined as the transfer of norms that are inconsistent across L1 and L2 [19]. Thomas [34] made an important distinction between two types of pragmatic transfer: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer. Pragmalinguistic transfer, as he mentioned, refers to the transfer from L1 of utterances that are syntactically and semantically equivalent, but are

interpreted differently in the two cultures. This, for example, includes the use of L1 speech act realization strategies or formulas when interacting in the target language. Sociopragmatic transfer, on the other hand, refers to transfer of knowledge about the social and cultural norms that govern language use in a given speech community. This kind of knowledge includes, for example, how status or social distance is perceived in a given speech community and how this might affect the way speech acts are realized. This kind of pragmatic transfer was basically the interest of the present study.

Moreover, many studies have made use of the same Discourse Completion Test (DCT) produced by [3]. While these studies have contributed to our understanding of the strategies, or semantic formulas, commonly used in the realization of the speech act of refusal, the majority of these studies come down to a methodological limitation: they used a writing-based data elicitation instrument (DCT), which elicits a single-turn response. While this facilitates comparison between the studies, it means that many studies have only investigated the same 12 situations, so there is a need for investigation of other refusal situations to see whether learners could vary their linguistic forms and content according to situations.

A. Objectives of the Study

Due to the problems explained in the previous section, this study aimed to explore the most common refusal strategies used by Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners in refusing requests in English when interacting with different interlocutors to see whether learners could vary their linguistic forms and content according to situations and under various social conditions (power, social distance).

B. Research Questions and Hypothesis

This study addresses the following two research questions.

- 1) What are the most common refusal strategies used by Iranian Upper Intermediate EFL learners in refusing requests in English when interacting with interlocutors from higher, equal, and lower status?
- 2) What are the most common refusal strategies used by Iranian Upper Intermediate EFL learners in refusing requests in English with regard to the contextual variable of social distance of the interlocutors (familiar, unfamiliar)?

II. METHOD

A. Participants

Participants consisted of 70 Iranian learners of English, studying English at three different language institutes (Kish Institute of Science and Technology; Safir Language Academy; Kanoon Zaban Iran Language Academy). All of these students were at the upper intermediate level of English proficiency in their institutes, but to make sure that the whole group was almost at the same level, they were asked to take a proficiency test called FCE provided by Cambridge University. They were found to be at the upper intermediate level of proficiency (B2 and C1) according the CEFR scale. An informed consent was provided to all the participants; and they were asked to fill out a background questionnaire before beginning. The participants included 35 males and 35 females, and ranged in age from 20 to 29. Most of these participants were undergraduate or graduate students of different majors. They studied English formally for at least one year (average: 1.7 years). None of them had spent more than 3 months in an English speaking country. All the students were native speakers of Persian.

B. Instruments

Billmyer & Varghese [5] explained that the use of DCT prompts that are rich in contextual information (content-enriched DCT prompts) elicit more elaborate

and rich data, that resemble natural data. Felix-Brasdefer [12] was able to successfully apply this concept to his role play scenarios. He provided his participants with content-enriched role play scenarios that included detailed information about the interlocutor in each scenario such as his or her gender, age, educational background, social status etc. Following [12], [33], and [23] this study used the pragmatic speaking tasks, which measured the learners' ability to understand situational information and to perform the speech act of refusal in six role plays. Role play is a task in which the actor responds to the description of a situation to an interlocutor's standardized initiation [18]. Two contextual factors served to categorize six social situations: interlocutors' power difference and their social distance [6].

The situations were presented in written form on six role cards in English, following [15]. The role plays were designed to incorporate different combinations of sociolinguistic variables of power and distance as explained by [6] politeness theory. The refusal situations in the present study were all refusals of requests. These situations were classified as shown in table I. In power high situations, the listener had a higher social status, whereas in power low situations, the listener had a lower social status. In power equal situations, the power relationship was equal. In familiar situations, the refuser had known the listener for a long time, while in unfamiliar situations, the refuser had just met the listener a few days ago or they had not known each other.

TABLE I. ROLE PLAY SITUATIONS

Role Play	Setting	Stimulus	Object of Refusal	Situation type
Role Play 1	Workplace	Request	Working extra hours	Power high/ unfamiliar
Role Play 2	Street	Request	Cell phone	Power equal/ unfamiliar
Role Play 3	College/Institute	Request	Book	Power low/ unfamiliar
Role Play 4	College	Request	Help research project	Power high/ familiar
Role Play 5	College/Institute	Request	Lecture notes	Power-equal/ familiar
Role Play 6	Home	Request	Give a day off	Power low/ familiar

C. Procedure

The students from the upper intermediate and advanced classes were asked to fill an informed consent, take part in the proficiency test and fill out the background questionnaire. After the scoring, the students from levels of B2 and C1 were selected, and they were chosen specifically due to the study's requirements: age between 20 to 29, undergraduate or graduate students of different majors in different universities, the ones who did not spend more than 3 months in an English speaking country, and those

who had been studying English in the institute for at least 1 year. 35 male and 35 female participants were selected and contacted at the end. They also had to be Persian native speakers. Each of these criteria has a reason and they all had to be controlled because they could affect the results of the study.

A first a group of 6 students, matching the same criteria took part in the pilot study. They were asked to act out each role play individually with the researcher. A digital voice recorder was used for audiotaping the role play interactions. The researcher gave task

directions. The role play descriptions were given to them via individual situation cards in written form in L2 and the participants were given 2 minutes to prepare mentally for the task. The recording began from the second when the role card was handed to the students until the end of the discussion. The recordings were transcribed and analyzed based on our data analysis scales.

D. Data Analysis

The participants' productions were analyzed for refusal strategies. Two raters scored the data, the researcher and a qualified English teacher. An inter rater reliability of 0.94 showed a good percent of agreement between raters. After the scoring was complete and the raters discussed their disagreements, two chi-square tests were taken to ensure the significance of the difference between the variables of power (high, equal, low), distance (familiar, unfamiliar) and the frequency of the 17 mentioned strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in each situation.

This study aimed to reveal if Iranian EFL learners were able to use different semantic formulas according to different situations. The classification of refusal strategies provided by [3] was used as a framework.

An example of the interaction from the pilot study is shown below from Role Play 1 in which a boss asks his employee to work for a few more hours. **A** is the interviewer and **B** is the student.

A: hey Ali, good job today

B: thank you Sir

A: So how are things going with the project?

B: I worked on it for the whole day, but it's not finished.

A: Oh well, we really need to deliver this project next week.

B: um, I'm so sorry but uh I've done my best today you know, but this is actually too loaded.

A: I know, but can you please stay a few more hours to finish this project?

B: this evening you mean?

A: yeah

B: actually, um.., I'm sorry but you know um.. I have an appointment with my friend and I have to be there, you know it's already arranged, and also I'm so tired as well and I don't think that uh, I can be ready for this or I do the project properly you know, but um I can probably come earlier tomorrow and finish that by the end of the day.

A: Ok that would be great!

B: Ok thank you!

As we can see in part 10 of the conversation, the refusal strategies used here are:

1: Statement of regret (*I'm sorry*)

2: Excuse, reason, explanation (*I have an appointment with my friend and I have to be there, you know it's already arranged; also I'm so tired as well and I don't think that uh (1) I can be ready for this or I do the project properly you know*)

3: Statement of alternative (*but um:: I can probably come earlier tomorrow and finish that by the end of the day*)

III. RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the study are provided in detail and are organized based on the research questions of this study.

A. Distribution of Refusal Strategies in Different Power Situations

To find out if power differentials affect the kind semantic formulas used by Iranian EFL learners' in their refusals, we examined linguistic strategies used by the participants. The refusal strategies were classified for their directness levels, using the coding framework adapted from [3]. A chi-square test was taken to ensure the significance of the differences found in different power situations. Table II. presents the total number of refusal strategies used in the power high situations (when the requester has a higher power status to the refuser) by Iranian EFL learners.

TABLE II. REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN POWER HIGH SITUATIONS

	Refusal Strategies	Role Play 1	Role Play 4	Total
Direct	Performatives	2	6	8
	Non-Performatives	61	65	126
Indirect	Regret	43	58	101
	Wish	20	32	52
	Excuse/Reason	63	66	129
	Alternative	24	11	35
	Condition for Future Acceptance	0	29	29
	Promise of Future Acceptance	39	10	49
	Principle	0	0	0
	Philosophy	0	0	0
	Dissuade	0	1	1
	Acceptance as Refusal	8	15	23
	Avoidance	4	3	7
	Positive Opinion	17	19	36
	Empathy	11	2	13
	Pause Fillers	68	70	138
Gratitude	1	45	46	

As it is clear in this table, pause fillers (138), excuse/reason (129), non-performatives (126), statements of regret (101), wish (52), promise of future acceptance (49) and gratitude (46) are used more than the others in this situation. It is noteworthy to mention that 4 participants were not able to refuse the requests in these situations at all, (3 for the second role play and 1 for the first). Although they had many reasons provided in the role card to refuse these requests, they still did not.

Some examples of the refusals in this situation are presented below:

Role play 4: *um:: (1) that's very nice of you to: (1) consider me as one of the good students and uh: (.) consider me (1) to work with you on this project but (1) you know: (.) I'm having two exams this week and uh I haven't studied yet and they are actually vital and uh:: (.) I'm uh: (2) I'd really wish I could actually work with you and you know cooperate on some research but uh researches but uh:: (1) I'm so sorry for this time, you know:.*

As you can see in this refusal, the student used a number of strategies. He began with pause filler and then he used gratitude, he brought an excuse, used a lot of pause fillers and then a statement of wish was

used. Finally he finished his refusal with a statement of regret.

Role play 2: *actually::, (2) uh:, I'm sorry but you know um:: (1) I have an appointment with my friend and I have to be there, you know it's already arranged, and uh:: (1) also I'm so tired as well and I don't think that uh: I mean:(1) I can't be ready for this or I do the project properly you know.*

In this refusal the student began with pause filler and then a statement of regret was used. After that she used a reason and a non-performative verb.

Role play 4: *I'm not free but:: I really really like to participate in your project, and (2) give something back, um: (2) ok no problem I will help you, I'll try to figure out a way to study and help you together.*

This refusal ended in an acceptance. He started with an excuse and a wish and pause filler, and then he was too shy to finish his refusal and he just accepted it!

Table III. presents the total number of refusal strategies used in the power equal situations (when the requester has an equal power status to the refuser) by Iranian EFL learners.

TABLE III. REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN POWER EQUAL SITUATIONS

	Refusal Strategies	Role Play 2	Role Play 5	Total
Direct	Performatives	0	0	0
	Non-Performatives	50	68	118
Indirect	Regret	67	30	97
	Wish	15	26	31
	Excuse/Reason	21	48	69
	Alternative	54	39	93
	Condition for Future Acceptance	19	12	31
	Promise of Future Acceptance	0	43	43
	Principle	6	0	6
	Philosophy	0	0	0
	Dissuade	28	36	64
	Acceptance as Refusal	0	20	20
	Avoidance	12	24	36
	Positive Opinion	0	0	0
	Empathy	27	12	39
	Pause Fillers	15	6	21
Gratitude	0	0	0	

As this table shows, non-performatives (118), regret (97), alternative (93), excuse/reason (69), dissuade (64), promise of future acceptance (43), empathy (39), avoidance (36), and wish (31) are used most in these situations. The total number of strategies used in these situations decreased to 659. And what captures our attention is that the use of pause fillers decreased to 21, while in power high situations, it was the top one mostly used strategy.

Some examples of the refusals in power equal situation are presented below:

Role play 2: *um:: (1) Sorry, No you can't, because I'm in a hurry (.) you know. (2) I'm late for my class. (2). Why do you ask me? There is a phone booth right there.*

In this example, the participant used a shorter refusal, in contrast to the power high situations. He began with a pause filler and statement of regret, then he used two direct refusals, and to be polite probably, he brought an excuse. And right where you think the refusal ended, the participant surprised us with the use of dissuade and an alternative.

Role play 5: *No I won't. I wish I could give them to you AGAIN, I know you need them, um: but:: (1) tomorrow I have exam too. It's better that you don't miss the classes (1) and you always do that (1) these days.*

This participant started her refusal with a direct No, and another non performative, then she used a wish, with a little bit of sarcasm which can be considered as the dissuasion category, a statement of empathy, pause fillers, reason, and finally a statement of principle and dissuasion again.

Table IV. presents the number of refusal strategies used in the power low situations (when the requester has a lower power status to the refuser) by Iranian EFL learners.

It is clear in this table that non-performatives (140), excuse/reason (137), regret (132), empathy (122), wish (118), alternative (84), promise of future acceptance (59), condition for future acceptance (35), and pause fillers (26) are used most in these situations. The total number of strategies used in these situations increased to 864.

Some examples of the refusals in power low situations are presented below.

Role play 3: *um:: (2) sorry, I can't give it to you, I really wish I could, but: you know that the next session is, we have the exam and um: I haven't already (.) studied any part of this(1) , so: (1) I need this book uh to(.) just get ready for the exam, sorry.*

This participant started her refusal with pause filler, a statement of regret, and a non-performative verb, and

then she used a wish, and a reason, another pause filler, another reason, and another regret.

Role play 6: *But um: (2) it isn't possible because tomorrow is my birthday its(3) ...I can't, sorry but I can't let you and also the day after tomorrow is the day that all my guests go(1) and there are a lot of work to do. I really wanted to help you but...it isn't ok.*

Um:: (2) But you can have a day off next week, is that ok?

This participant used pause filler in the beginning, then a reason was given and a non-performative verb was used; he used regret, and then he brought more excuses. A statement of wish was given and an alternative was used at the end.

TABLE IV. REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN POWER LOW SITUATIONS

	Refusal Strategies	Role Play 3	Role Play 6	Total
Direct	Performatives	0	0	0
	Non-Performatives	70	70	140
Indirect	Regret	63	69	132
	Wish	60	58	118
	Excuse/Reason	67	70	137
	Alternative	38	46	84
	Condition for Future Acceptance	22	13	35
	Promise of Future Acceptance	26	33	59
	Principle	0	0	0
	Philosophy	0	0	0
	Dissuade	7	1	8
	Acceptance as Refusal	0	0	0
	Avoidance	0	0	0
	Positive Opinion	0	0	0
	Empathy	65	57	122
	Pause Fillers	10	16	26
Gratitude	3	0	3	

Table V. presents the results of the chi-square test for the three power situations (high, low, equal)

As we can see in this table the significant is 0.000, which means the difference between the learners'

strategy use in power high, power equal, and power low situations is 99.9 percent meaningful and consistent.

TABLE V. CHI-SQUARE TEST FOR REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN POWER HIGH, EQUAL, AND LOW SITUATIONS

Test	Value	df	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	710.505 ^a	30	.000
Likelihood Ratio	732.653	30	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	45.931	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	2325		

B. Distribution of Refusal Strategies in Different Distance Situations

To find out if distance differentials affect the kind semantic formulas used by Iranian EFL learners' in their refusals, we examined linguistic strategies used by the participants in their refusals. The refusal strategies were classified for their directness levels, using the coding framework adapted from [3]. A chi-square test was taken to ensure the significance of the differences found in different distance situations. Table VI. presents the total number of refusal strategies used in the unfamiliar situations by Iranian EFL learners.

As it is shown in this table, non-performatives (181), regret (173), excuse/reason (151), alternative (116), empathy (103), wish (95), pause fillers (93), promise of future acceptance (65), condition for future acceptance (41), and dissuade (35) are the strategies which are used the most in these situations. The total number of strategies used in these situations is 1106.

Some examples of the refusals in unfamiliar situations are presented below:

Role play 1: *I (1) don't think so really, I'll think about it, um:: but, can I finish it tomorrow maybe? (2) I don't think I can work more today, um:: Is it even possible for me to do it (1) uh I promise (2) I will come tomorrow a little early and finish it as soon as possible.*

In this situation the participant used non-performative, then avoidance, then an alternative was given and another non-performative was used, after that he used pause filler and promises for future acceptance.

Role play 2: *um: (2) I'm so very sorry I have to say this but unfortunately I have left my (1) phone at home but if it's necessary maybe you can use, (2) you know, that shops phone, I think that they should help you if it's very necessary, unfortunately today I didn't have my phone on me and (1) I think it's your bad luck, I'm so sorry, (2) is there anything else I can do for you?*

This participant used pause fillers, statements of regret, reasons and alternative. Plus she sympathized with the interlocutor, but the point is, she lied, there were a lot of reasons mentioned in the role card for her to refuse the request, and none of them was not have a phone on her, when she was asked why she did that, she said that's what she thought to be a better way to refuse and not hurt the feelings of the interlocutor.

Role Play 3: *well::, um: No, I can't accept it, but you can come (1) in our house and we can study together but I can't give that book to you.*

This participant began with pause fillers and non-performative. Then she used an alternative.

TABLE VI. REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN UNFAMILIAR SITUATIONS

	Refusal Strategies	Role Play 1	Role Play 2	Role Play 3	Total
Direct	Performatives	2	0	0	2
	Non-Performatives	61	50	70	181
Indirect	Regret	43	67	63	173
	Wish	20	15	60	95
	Excuse/Reason	63	21	67	151
	Alternative	24	54	38	116
	Condition for Future Acceptance	0	19	22	41
	Promise of Future Acceptance	39	0	26	65
	Principle	0	6	0	6
	Philosophy	0	0	0	0
	Dissuade	0	28	7	35
	Acceptance as Refusal	8	0	0	8
	Avoidance	4	12	0	16
	Positive Opinion	17	0	0	17
	Empathy	11	27	65	103
	Pause Fillers	68	15	10	93
Gratitude	1	0	3	4	

TABLE VII. REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN FAMILIAR SITUATIONS

	Refusal Strategies	Role Play 4	Role Play 5	Role Play 6	Total
Direct	Performatives	6	0	0	6
	Non-Performatives	65	68	70	203
Indirect	Regret	58	30	69	157
	Wish	32	26	58	116
	Excuse/Reason	66	48	70	184
	Alternative	11	39	46	96
	Condition for Future Acceptance	29	12	13	54
	Promise of Future Acceptance	10	43	33	86
	Principle	0	0	0	0
	Philosophy	0	0	0	0
	Dissuade	1	36	1	38
	Acceptance as Refusal	15	20	0	35
	Avoidance	3	24	0	27
	Positive Opinion	19	0	0	19
	Empathy	2	12	57	71
	Pause Fillers	70	6	16	92
	Gratitude	45	0	0	45

Table VII. presents the total number of refusal strategies used in the familiar situations by Iranian EFL learners. As it is clear in this table, non-performatives (203), excuse/reason (184), regret (157), wish (116), alternative (96), pause fillers (92), promise of future acceptance (86), and empathy (71) are the most frequently used strategies in these situations in the participants' refusals. The total number of the strategies used increased to 1229.

Table VIII. presents the results of the chi-square test for the two distance situations (familiar, unfamiliar). As we can see in this table the significant is 0.000, which means the difference between the learners' strategy use in familiar and unfamiliar situations is 99.9 percent meaningful and consistent.

TABLE VIII. CHI-SQUARE TEST FOR REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED IN FAMILIAR AND UNFAMILIAR SITUATIONS

Test	Value	df	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	75.893 ^a	15	.000
Likelihood Ratio	85.436	15	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.768	1	.381
N of Valid Cases	2335		

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study we aimed to explore the most common refusal strategies used by Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners in refusing requests in English when interacting with different interlocutors to see whether learners could vary their linguistic forms and content according to situations and under various social conditions (power, social distance).

Seventy Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners produced refusals in six role play tasks. The pragmatic speaking task measured the learners' ability to understand situational information and to perform the speech act of refusal in six role plays. Role play is a task in which the actor responds to the description of a situation to an interlocutor's standardized initiation [18]. Two contextual factors served to categorize six social situations: interlocutors' power difference and their social distance [6]. The situations were presented in written form on six role cards in English, following [15]. Data were transcribed using conversation analysis conventions [27]. They were then assigned to refusal strategy categories which were adapted from earlier refusal studies [3]. There were two coders working with the data. The results of this study revealed significant differences in Iranian EFL learners' refusals in different social situations.

A. Discussion

1) Strategy Use in Different Power Situations (Research Question 1)

Refusals are considered to be an important point in cross-cultural communication. Because of the existence of the possibility of offending the hearer, they are a complex and tricky speech act to perform. If the refuser fails to refuse appropriately, it can endanger the speakers' interpersonal relations. Refusals usually include various strategies to avoid offending one's interlocutors, but the choice of them may vary across languages and cultures. In this section the strategies used by the participants in different social and distance situations are described and the top five mostly used strategies are introduced. The reason for each strategy use is defined and the use of strategies in different power and distance situations are compared together. Some exceptions in the participants' refusals are also defined in each category.

In power high situations the top five strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in their refusals were pause fillers, excuse/reason, non-performatives, regret and wish. Pause fillers being in the first position of the mostly used strategies can give us some points about the situation. It looks like it can be related to the power status, as compared to other power situations. In role cards number one and four, the requester had more power to the refuser.

Therefore, it appears that the reason for using more pause fillers than anything else is having doubts about what they were going to say, and trying to think about every word they say. Using excuses and giving reasons is also important because they have been used as a politeness strategy. Using non-performatives, which stand in the third place, means either most of the participants used a direct NO, or they said something like "I can't or I *won't*". In addition, we have the expressions of regret and wish. These are where the participants said they were sorry, or how they wish they could accept it. These two can also be considered as politeness strategies and the reason for using a lot of them can be the requesters' status.

As was mentioned in the result section, 4 participants were not able to refuse the requests in power high situations. They began with a bunch of refusal strategies and finally they ended up accepting the request. This can mean that the shame they felt in saying no to a higher status person was so high that although they had a bunch of good reasons in the role card to say no, they accepted it any way. This could be related to the Persian culture. Persian cultural schemas of *tā'ārof* (ritual politeness) and *rou-dar-baayesti* (state/feeling of distance-out-of-respect) can be very effective in their use of different refusal strategies. These cultural schemas cause speakers to be very reluctant to make a refusal. The cultural schema of *rou-dar-baayesti* can be described as a state or feeling of distance between individuals. This usually arises from differences in social power/distance and/or the high degree of respect/esteem one has for another individual. When it comes to performing a face-threatening act such as refusing a request, this feeling of distance usually leads to a feeling of hesitation.

In power equal situations (role card 2 and 5) the top five strategies used by Iranian EFL learners were non-performative, regret, alternative, excuse/reason, and dissuade. It is somehow interesting that non-performatives are on top of the list. It appears that students feel more confident in saying a clear cut NO to the requesters from equal status. Then the use of regret, which is considered as a politeness strategy, and then giving alternatives, which is somewhat humanistic, yet it can be considered as a good way of saying no to people and still not being rude to them. Giving reasons and excuses is in a lower position than the power high situations, but it still is in the top 5. Moreover, the fifth is the most interesting. The use of dissuade as a refusal strategy to people from equal status. Dissuades are for example when the participant criticizes the requester by saying something like "*It's a silly suggestion*" or "*Why did you think I could do this for you?*" or "*how dare you ask me this?*". Dissuading the requester was not expected to be in the top five. It cannot be considered as a politeness strategy and it is face threatening to the requester. It is clear that refusing a request from

people of higher status is much different from those of the equal status.

When the requester has a lower status to the refuser, we call it the power low situations. Role cards three and six represent this status. The top five mostly used refusal strategies in these situations are non-performatives, excuse/reason, regret, empathy, and wish. The use of non-performatives can mean that it is easy to say direct no to requesters from lower status. Using politeness strategies like excuse/reason, regret, empathy and wish are interesting in these situations because although the requester is of a lower status, the refuser does not dissuade or use face-threatening strategies. This can be due to Iranians kind nature.

The same results were gained in the study conducted by [20] when they examined the range of difference in the semantic formulas used with different status interlocutors by Persian speakers, and came to this conclusion that Iranians were noticeably sensitive to higher and lower status types. For instance, in refusing requests, Iranians had a much greater frequency shift of semantic formulas when addressing higher, equal and lower status interlocutors. Similarly, [25] concluded that American culture shows a preference for direct, accurate, clear and explicit communication whereas Arab culture exhibits an indirect, symbolic, ambiguous, and implicit style. The fact that Iranians, Arabs or Japanese gave more indirect reasons might be explained by the different features of high and low context cultures. In a high-context (i.e., less direct) culture such as Iran, people tend to put more emphasis on the implicit rather than on the explicit. In our study, specifically in power high and familiar situations, more indirect strategies were used and learners were more reluctant to refuse the requests directly.

The results of this study are consistent with other studies [3]; [7]; [14]; [26] in that it is easier to say no to the requesters from lower status than the interlocutors of higher status; and as also [2] conclude in their study, in lower status situations Iranian learners tend to use more direct strategies than the higher status situations.

2) Strategy Use in Different Distance Situations (Research Question 2)

Role cards one, two and three described unfamiliar situations where the interlocutors were either completely unfamiliar or barely knew each other. For example in role card one, there was a new boss; in role card two, the requester was a stranger in the street; and in role card three the requester was described as a new student in class. The top five strategies used in these three situations are non-performatives, regret, excuse/reason, alternative, empathy. Non-performatives being in the first position can show that it is easy for Iranian learners to say no, and use direct strategies to an unfamiliar requester.

The other four (regret, excuse/reason, alternative, empathy) are all politeness strategies, and mean that Iranian learners tried not to threaten the negative face of the unfamiliar requester and tried to be polite in their refusals. This can be due to the nature of Iranians. They are too kind to insult an unfamiliar requester. Yet the cultural scheme of *rou-dar-baayesti* cannot be spotted so much in these situations because as we can see, the direct strategy use is on top of the list. Nevertheless, the other indirect strategies are mostly used to protect the negative face of the requester and ease the refusal.

Role cards number four, five, and six described situations where the requester and the refuser already knew each other and they were somehow familiar. For example in role card 4, the situation described the request of a professor whom the requester already knew and was indebted to. In role card 5, the request was from a classmate who had borrowed the refusers' notes many times before, and in role card 6, the request came from the housekeeper of the refusers' house. The top five mostly used strategies in these situations were non-performatives, excuse/reason, regret, wish, and alternative. As we can see non-performatives are used most in both familiar and unfamiliar situations. The use of politeness strategies such as excuse/reason, regret, wish, and alternative are also quite the same as the unfamiliar situations with minor changes. However, the total number of strategies used in these situations is different from unfamiliar situations. In familiar situations the learners used more strategies than in the unfamiliar situations, which means in familiar situations Iranian learners feel the need to speak more and somehow convince the requester that they should really refuse the request, probably because of the *rou-dar-baayesti* they feel towards the requester; but in unfamiliar situations the students mostly just used two or three strategies at a time which can mean it was not so important for them to give enough reasons, or express how sorry they were, or how they wished they could accept the requests and all the other indirect strategies.

B. Conclusion

The first aim of this study was to explore the most common semantic formulas used by Iranian EFL learners with regard to the contextual variables including the status of interlocutors (higher, equal, or lower) and the distance (familiar, unfamiliar), to see whether learners could vary their linguistic forms and content according to situations and under various social conditions. The main reason for studying Iranian communication style lies in the fact that so little has been known about the Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic difficulties and needs, and their pragmatic knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of speaking has remained underdeveloped. As [29] mentioned, different languages and cultures have different criteria of appropriateness of speech act strategies.

Regarding the research questions, the most common semantic formulas were elaborated on in the previous parts. Refusals were proved sensitive to contextual variables; they differed in different power and distance situations. As in many other studies [32]; [21]; [1]; [25]; [22], among others, the most frequent strategy used by learners was providing excuse/reason for the refusal; this refusal strategy functions to convince the interlocutor that he/she is still approved of but that there are some necessary reasons for refusing his/her request. [16], for example, suggests that in Japanese culture, refusal means not only a 'no' to a request but also to personal relationships and other strategies are employed as a strategy to soften their refusals. Further, Iranian participants displayed a considerable level of indirectness, though direct refusal strategies were also frequent. The differences in the level of directness are based on power and distance situations. As we have seen, Iranian EFL learners displayed a nearly high level of frequency shift in their use of several semantic formulas in the need for face saving in refusals. This can be because of the notion of *rou-dar-baayesti* (state/feeling of distance-out-of-respect) which has a great role in Persian culture. This cultural schema encourages speakers to be very reluctant to make a refusal. The cultural schema of *rou-dar-baayesti* covers a state or feeling of distance between individuals, which usually arise from differences in power/ distance and/or the high degree of respect/esteem one has for another. Among other things, this feeling of distance usually leads to a feeling of hesitation experienced by the speaker when it comes to enacting a face-threatening act such as refusing a request.

V. REFERENCES

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