

Refusal Strategies of Saudi EFL Female Learners: Exploring the Interplay between Face-threatening acts and Social Variables

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Abstract:

This paper explores the refusal strategies employed by Saudi female learners and the relationships between face-threatening acts (FTAs) and three main social variables: social power, social distance, and the degree of imposition. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather quantitative data using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) administered to 40 participants, alongside semi-structured interviews with a subset of 12 participants to obtain qualitative insights. Findings indicated that participants relied most on indirect refusal strategies (75.5%), which were higher in social contexts (78.6%) than in academic settings (72.3%). The results appear to be a direct influence of social variables on participants' choices: Indirectness was higher when addressing interlocutors of higher status or in high-imposition situations, but refusals to peers allowed for somewhat greater directness. Qualitative analysis revealed how the realization of cultural and gender norms as manifested through the participants' strategic use of hedging, apologies, and explanations to soften refusals, particularly when interacting with authority figures or in hierarchical settings, brought forth participants' adherence to politeness and face-saving strategies deeply situated in the collectivist nature of Saudi culture. Moreover, gender expectations played a crucial role in modulating indirectness, with female participants exhibiting

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heightened levels of mitigation and deference, especially in mixed-gender interactions where social conventions dictated a greater need for linguistic politeness and self-restraint. This tendency toward indirectness was particularly evident in formal and male-dominated contexts. Participants signaled the practical difficulties in aligning their refusal strategies with the communicative norms of English that create ambiguity or pragmatic failure. The study underscores the need for explicit instruction in pragmatic competence, using cultural comparisons and contextually related practice. Such findings bring new developments into the area of interlanguage pragmatics, with some instructional suggestions aimed at bridging the gap between the native cultural norms of Saudi learners and the pragmatic expectations found in natural English-speaking contexts.

Keywords: refusal strategies, face-threatening acts, sociocultural dynamics in the Saudi context, pragmatic competence, politeness norms.

Introduction

Speech acts are basic units of communicative competence that form the very foundation of pragmatic interactions in languages (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1962). Among these acts, refusals are a particularly challenging speech act for L2 learners due to their intrinsically face-threatening nature. Based on politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), refusals involve rejecting offers, requests, or invitations. The refusal threatens either the positive face – interlocutor's need for appreciation and approval – or the negative face – the interlocutor's need for independence and freedom to act. Effective refusals are dependent on an exquisite balance between clarity and politeness, with regard for social status and relationships. This difficulty for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners becomes even more complex as they navigate the pragmatic norms of the target language (English) against the cultural expectations of their home environment (Al-Issa, 2003).

The complexity surrounding refusals occurs not only because of their ability to imperil face but also from the significant cultural and social influences that impact their realization. Refusals are particularly sensitive in cultures like Saudi Arabia, which maintains a strong orientation toward collectivism, politeness, and indirectness in communication (Hofstede, 2001). Specifically, women in the Saudi culture are socialized to maintain high levels of politeness and to avoid confrontational talk (Al-Ghamdi & Alqarni, 2019; Alhaidari, 2009).

Therefore, refusal can require elaborate linguistic strategies to mitigate potential face-threatening consequences. Furthermore, social factors like power relationship, degree of social distance, and degree of imposition strongly impact the realization of refusals (Beebe et al., 1990). For example, Saudi EFL learners use more indirectness in the case of refusals involving an interlocutor with a high social status or with whom they are not quite familiar. Their refusals align with the cultural connotation to maintain social harmony. Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to appropriately use language in context and in a specific culture (Kasper & Rose, 2002), a key to successful refusal realization in English. However, previous research has shown that Saudi EFL learners fail to easily achieve pragmatic appropriateness when making/performing refusals.

Research indicates that cultural conventions prioritizing deference, politeness, and the evasion of direct confrontation can result in refusals that may be unclear, inappropriate, or inconsistent with the conventions of the target language (Al-Khatib, 2006; Al-Issa, 2003). For example, learners from Saudi Arabia might extensively employ strategies such as hedging, providing excuses, or offering ambiguous refusals, which may not consistently align with pragmatic appropriateness within English-speaking

environments. It is this anomaly that underlines the necessity to investigate how Saudi learners' refusal strategies manifest the interaction of cultural norms and L2 pragmatic competence.

In fact, the complication in this phenomenon is that refusals are also gendered. Previous studies have argued that, regardless of the cultural context, women use more indirect and polite refusal strategies than men do, demonstrating the socialized expectations about women's talk and interaction. (Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003). The feature of gender expectations entails additional pressure on refusals by women to head towards the face-saving strategy for maintaining social decorum in a conservative cultural settings such as that in Saudi Arabia. Thus, Saudi EFL female learners feel added pressure to balance the cultural norms of politeness with pragmatic conventions of the English language that would determine specific features of their refusal performance.

Literature regarding refusals within a Saudi EFL context remains scant, particularly regarding female learners. Although there were contributions into refusal strategies which Arabic speakers use in general (Nelson et al., 1998; Al-Issa, 2003), few studies have specifically tackled the actual performance of refusals in academic and social contexts by Saudi female learners and the impact of social variables such as status, distance, and context on their choice of strategy. This nature of refusal, therefore, needs further study to get an overview of the refusal strategies enacted by Saudi EFL female learners in view of varied natures of cultural and gendered dynamics.

The present study attempts to address this research gap by investigating refusals employed by Saudi female EFL learners and probing the influence of FTAs and social factors upon their pragmatic choices. More specifically, This research explores how the Saudi EFL female learners would respond to request, offer, and invitation refusals within academic and social situations, besides trying to explore some of the strategies they would use while mitigating the FTAs. The research utilizes Brown and Levinson's politeness model (1987) and Beebe et al.'s refusal taxonomy (1990) to analyze the complicated interaction of cultural norms, gender expectations, and pragmatic competence. In so doing, it aims to highlight the challenges Saudi female learners face when responding to refusals in English.

Research Questions

The research examines the refusal strategies employed by Saudi female EFL learners in relation to FTAs and the role of specific social variables. Hence, the following questions are posed:

1. What are the main refusal strategies employed by Saudi EFL female learners within an academic and social context in refusing a request, an offer, and an invitation?

2. How do social variables such as power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition influence the refusal strategies selected by Saudi EFL female learners?
3. To what extent does the realization of refusal strategies by Saudi EFL females relate to cultural constraints of politeness and gendered expectations?
4. What is/are the biggest pragmatic issues/problems or pragmatic failure Saudi EFL female students face when performing refusals in English?
5. What pedagogical approaches can be recommended to enhance Saudi EFL female learners' pragmatic competence in refusal strategies?

Literature Review

Speech Acts and the Nature of Refusals

Speech act theory, first described by Austin (1962) and then elaborated by Searle (1969), forms part of pragmatic competence in that it categorizes utterances according to their intended communicative function. Refusals, belonging to both commissive and expressive acts, present big hurdles since they are intrinsically face-threatening in nature (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Refusals inherently risk damaging the hearer's positive face, the desire to be liked and accepted, or their negative face, which represents the wish to act autonomously. As refusals involve rejecting offers, invitations, or requests, they require strategic linguistic mitigation to minimize potential social tension and maintain harmony in interpersonal interactions (Rees-Miller, 2000).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory sets a key framework to understand the realization of refusals. Along the lines of this theory, speakers use positive politeness strategies that mitigate a face threat by appealing to the hearer's need for acceptance and appreciation and negative politeness strategies that show deference to the hearer's need for autonomy. Beebe et al. (1990) expanded this conceptualization in developing a coding scheme for refusal strategies, which was comprised of direct refusals (e.g., outright rejection), indirect refusals (e.g., excuses and explanations), and adjuncts to refusals (e.g., gratitude, apologies, and hedges). This taxonomy has been useful in analyzing refusals across languages and cultural contexts to obtain valuable information on how speakers mitigate FTAs.

Cultural Influence of Refusal Strategies

Cultural norms significantly influence the realization of refusals, as pragmatic appropriateness varies among diverse linguistic and cultural communities (Nelson et al., 1998). Cultures characterized by collectivism, such as Saudi Arabia, emphasize group harmony, deference, and indirectness in speech, which influence refusal strategies (Hofstede, 2001; Al-Issa, 2003). Consequently, face-saving

cultures would rely mainly on indirect strategy types such as excuses, softeners, and hedging to avoid direct confrontation and disturb social etiquette (Al-Khatib, 2006).

Arabic speaking cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, use indirect speech acts and formulaic expressions while refusing (Al-Issa 2003; Nelson et al. 2002). For instance, refusal is usually preceded by thanks or apologies to mitigate its face threatening effect. However, all these strategies might not fit within the pragmatic rules of English, and may sound vague or result in pragmatic failure if the indirectness is too much (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Such discrepancies indicate the need for EFL learners to develop intercultural pragmatic awareness in producing appropriate refusals in English.

Gender and refusal Strategies

Research on gender-specific communicative strategies has identified that females use more mitigated and polite strategies than males (Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003). This is recurrently attributed to the social expectation that females nurture the social solidarity of group life, avoid confrontative behavior, and use language for maintaining interpersonal relationships. According to Mills (2003), however, these gendered tendencies in communicative behavior do not transcend all speech situations. Rather, these are culturally prescribed and recurrently depend on the local norms and ideologies concerning feminine speech. In conservative contexts like Saudi Arabia, gender roles impose further constraints on the kind of linguistic choices available for females to make. Al-Ghamdi and Alqarni (2019) note a higher degree of sensitivity to politeness and indirectness among Saudi women, reflecting a broader social convention that closely ties female discourse with modesty. Such cultural assumptions in reality prescribe refusal performance, where Saudi EFL female learners would rather depend on indirect strategies in dealing with FTAs to maintain their assigned places in society. This further complicates pragmatic competence in English acquisition, with pragmatic norms presumably requiring a balanced play of directness and politeness.

Socio-cultural variables in refusal strategies

It has been well documented in pragmatic studies that the refusal strategy is influenced by social variables such as power dynamics, social proximity, and levels of imposition (Beebe et al., 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008). Power dynamics play a crucial role, as individuals typically use indirect strategies more frequently when interacting with interlocutors who hold higher social status or authority – such as educators or superiors – to mitigate FTAs (Rees-Miller, 2000). On the contrary, refusals are likely to be more direct when the degree of social distance is lower, such as in interactions with colleagues or close friends.

Félix-Brasdefer (2008) notes that refusals are sensitive to context and also differ depending on the degree of imposition inherent in either the request or offer. High-imposition situations have the refusal strategies more elaborate and indirect than in low – imposition situations. For the Saudi EFL female learners, these factors interactively along with the cultural and gendered expectations play to determine the pragmatic choices when performing refusals.

Pragmatic Competence and Interlanguage Pragmatics

Pragmatic competence has been considered one of the significant aspects of communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980), and it is a strategic way of negotiating FTAs such as refusals (Mey, 2001). Kasper and Rose (2002) have viewed pragmatic competence as an ability to appropriately produce language in a particular context, embedding linguistic structure into a social convention. In case of EFL learners, pragmatic competence refers to overcoming interlanguage pragmatics problems, which means transferring L2 learners' pragmatic conventions of their L1 into the target language. Interlanguage refusal research (e.g., Beebe et al., 1990; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) shows that pragmatic transfer usually means differential realization of norms between L1 and L2, pragmatic failure, or miscommunication. For instance, Saudi EFL learners might employ Arabic refusal strategies that are pragmatically appropriate, like over-apologizing or vague justification, but have been described as too vague or inappropriate in English (Al-Issa, 2003). Such challenges, however, only serve to underscore the very importance of explicit pragmatic instruction in raising learners' awareness of target language norms and improving pragmatic performance.

Gaps in the existing literature

Although refusal strategies of speakers of Arabic and EFL learners have been studied (Al-Issa, 2003; Nelson et al., 1998), only few studies have focused on Saudi EFL female learners. This particular group deserves more attention since it is identified by a certain kind of cultural and gender dynamics. Most previous studies have not considered the Saudi context and, the cultural norms and the patterns of gendered communication guiding the pragmatic competence of Saudi learners.

This paper fills these gaps by exploring the refusal strategies of Saudi female EFL learners in academic and social situations. Based on Brown and Levinson's politeness framework (1987) and Beebe et al.'s taxonomy (1990), the current study examines how social variables like power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition influence female learners' pragmatic choices. Thus, this paper contributes to the growing literature on interlanguage pragmatics by addressing the difficulty Saudi female learners face in performing refusals and the impact that the cultural norms have in shaping this

particular speech act, and by offering pedagogical suggestions concerning the development of pragmatic competence in EFL classes.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, blending quantitative and qualitative methods to explore refusal strategies by Saudi EFL female learners. A sequential explanatory design – first a quantitative approach, then a qualitative approach – was used to closely understand the pragmatic decisions taken by the participants. The DCT was administered to collect quantitative data to identify and classify refusal strategies. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were employed as a qualitative tool for a deep understanding of the underlying reasons behind the participants' refusal strategies and the influence of social variables. This methodological framework ensures triangulation, hence enhancing validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The sample consists of 40 female EFL undergraduates at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Participants in this research were purposely selected to make groups that are homogeneous in terms of gender, age brackets falling between 18 and 21 years, and educational background. All the participants attended advanced classes in English, which presupposes that they had already achieved at least the B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The selection of this group is consistent with the objective of the research to explore refusal strategies at the meeting point of cultural norms, gender dynamics, and social factors.

To address ethical considerations, participants were given comprehensive information regarding the aims and methodologies of the research, as well as their rights, thereby facilitating informed consent. Throughout the research, anonymity and confidentiality were upheld to promote candid and unreserved responses.

Tools

DCT

To collect data, an adapted version of the DCT, developed by Beebe et al. (1990) was used. In the DCT, there were 12 refusal situations categorized into two groups:

1. Academic Contexts: Situations that deal with professors and other classmates; for instance, refusing an assignment extension request, an offer, or invitation to a peer study group.
2. Social Contexts: Circumstances characterized by routine interpersonal involvements, like not getting invited to social gatherings anymore or rejection of support from family and friends.

Each group of situations was elaborately contrived to act out various levels of social power dynamics of high, equal, and low status, of social proximity of closeness against distancing interlocutors – and the degree of imposition, high versus low. According to Félix-Brasdefer (2008) and Brown and Levinson (1987), these were included in order to test their impact on the pragmatic choices the respondents would make.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with 12 volunteers participating in the second phase supplemented the DCT data by investigating the participants' perspectives on the following aspects:

1. Participants' reasoning for their refusal strategy choices.
2. The way cultural expectations and gender roles influence their refusals.
3. The perceived influence of authority, social distance, and imposition on their pragmatic decision-making processes.
4. Challenges faced while doing refusals in English and how these were a reflection of cultural transfer.

Interviews were conducted in English, but Arabic was used wherever necessary to clarify expressions for accuracy. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Methodology

The research was implemented in the following phases:

1. Piloting: The DCT instrument was piloted with 8 non-participating Saudi female learners to test the situations for clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Consequently, minor modifications were made to integrate the feedback given to ensure that the situations reflected both academic and social situations.
2. Quantitative data collection: The DCT was administered to participants in a controlled classroom setting. They were asked to respond as naturally as possible, focusing on a given situation and a refusal strategy in each context. No time limit was set for conducting this, which allowed participants to reflect on their pragmatic choices.
3. Qualitative Data Collection: Twelve selected participants were chosen for semi-structured interviews, which were conducted face-to-face in a designated meeting room on campus to ensure privacy and a distraction-free environment. The interviews were held individually rather than in groups, allowing participants to express their perspectives freely without peer influence. Both the researcher and the interviewee were seated at a comfortable distance in an informal yet professional

arrangement to encourage open discussion. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent, and all individuals were informed about the recording process beforehand to ensure transparency and alleviate any potential discomfort. Participants expressed no hesitation regarding the recording, recognizing its necessity for accurate transcription and analysis. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, yielding in-depth qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The DCT data were coded using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy of refusal strategies positing that:

1. Direct Refusals: Explicit rejections (e.g., "No, I can't").
2. Indirect Refusals: Implicit strategies, such as excuses, reasons, or avoidance (e.g., "I'm busy," "Maybe next time").
3. Adjuncts to Refusals: Mitigating elements that accompany refusals, such as expressions of gratitude, apologies, or agreement (e.g., "Thank you, but I'm busy").

Qualitative Data Analysis

The interviews data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework that involved:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Initial coding.
3. Identifying themes regarding cultural norms and social influences.
4. Testing themes against the research objectives to ensure conformity.
5. Defining and naming final themes.

This procedure enabled the researcher(s) to identify dominant themes related to participants' perceptions of culture and gender norms, social dynamics, and pragmatic challenges. Descriptive statistical analyses of frequency and percentage were carried out to describe the trend and pattern in the usage of strategies. Comparisons between the two contexts, academic and social, and across the social variables of power, distance, and imposition, were also conducted.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability was established in that the coding for the DCT data was independently done for 20% of the data by two coders; the Cohen's kappa coefficient turned out to be 0.87, which is very good. The validity has been ensured by combining the DCT responses with interview data through methodological triangulation. Besides, member checking was done during the interviews to verify the

accuracy of the responses and their meaning given by the participants. Specifically, after each interview, the researcher summarized key responses and interpretations and asked participants to confirm or clarify their intended meanings. This process ensured that any ambiguities were addressed and that the participants' perspectives were accurately represented, enhancing the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

To ensure reliability, inter-rater agreement was established for the DCT data coding. Two independent coders analyzed 20% of the data, yielding a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.87, indicating a high level of agreement. Validity was ensured through methodological triangulation, combining DCT responses and interview data to corroborate findings. Additionally, member checking was employed during the interviews to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses and interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted by following ethical research guidelines, especially in informing participants that they could withdraw anytime from the research without penalty. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study by anonymizing participant data.

Results

The DCT response analysis indicated meaningful trends in refusal strategies used by Saudi EFL female learners across academic and social situations. Results also underlined the complex role played by three major social variables – power relationship, social distance, and degree of imposition – on the pragmatic choices participants made.

Distribution of Refusal Strategies

Refusal strategies were subcategorized using the taxonomy proposed by Beebe et al. (1990): direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals.

Table 1

Overall distribution of refusal strategies

Refusal Strategy	Academic Contexts (%)	Social (%)	Contexts	Overall (%)
Direct Refusals	14.5%	8.3%		11.4%
Indirect Refusals	72.3%	78.6%		75.5%
Adjuncts to Refusals	13.2%	13.1%		13.1%
Total	100%	100%		100%

Quantitative analysis revealed a marked preference for indirect refusals, which accounted for 75.5% of total responses. The indirect strategies were more used in socially related situations (78.6%) than in academic situations (72.3%), showing an overall adherence to culturally driven norms of politeness and face-saving. The use of direct refusal was relatively low (11.4%) and slightly higher in academic contexts 14.5%, while adjuncts to refusal appeared to be constant across the contexts (13.1%).

Effect of social variables on refusal strategies

Findings were then further analyzed into the social variables – power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition – to identify how far these variables affected refusal strategies.

- **Power Relations:** A clear correlation emerged between interlocutor status and the degree of indirectness employed. When addressing interlocutors of higher social status (e.g., professors or supervisors), participants overwhelmingly relied on indirect strategies (83.7%), including reasons/excuses (e.g., “I have another commitment”) and hedging (e.g., “I’m not sure if I can”). Direct refusals were rare (6.1%) in these interactions. On the other hand, refusals to peers or people of equal status recorded a relatively higher directness, (18.5%), reflecting a lessened hierarchical pressure.
- **Social Distance:** Refusals made to people in low social distance – such as friends and family members – used adjuncts to refuse in the text more frequently (17.4%). Very often, participants used appreciation, such as “Thank you but I can’t”, or an apology to mitigate the refusal. In high-distance situations, however, – as in the case of a distant acquaintance – relations depended mostly on formulaic indirectness which can hold politeness and avoid face-threatening consequences.
- **Degree of Imposition:** The findings revealed that the degree of perceived imposition was positively correlated with the amount of mitigation. High imposition situations – like refusing a professor’s request for more work – used elaborate indirect strategies – primarily reasons/excuses, (49.2%), and future acceptance, for example, “Maybe next time”. Low imposition situations – such as refusing peers informally – were related to a higher disposition in using direct refusals (15.6%), although softened with adjuncts where necessary.

Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed and revealed rich, contextual insights into the cultural, gendered, and pragmatic dimensions of participants’ refusal strategies. These qualitative findings are grouped together under four major themes:

The Role of Cultural Norms of Politeness

Participants highlighted the necessity to perform refusals by adhering to face-saving mechanisms due to the deeply inculcated cultural notion of collectivism and social harmony (Hofstede, 2001). Indirect

strategies, such as excuses or hedging, were explained to avoid of conflict or giving a sign of respect, e.g.,

“I don’t like to say ‘no’ directly because it might sound rude. I always try to give a reason or say something soft to show respect.”

This preference for indirectness aligns with previous research on Arabic-speaking contexts (Al-Issa, 2003) and underscores the prioritization of positive politeness strategies.

Gender Expectations and Indirectness

Participants stressed that gender expectations also proved to be a significant factor in shaping their linguistic choices. Being female learners in a conservative cultural setting, they claimed to be especially biased toward avoidance of direct refusals, at least with male or high-status interactants, e.g.,

“As a woman, I had to make sure not to sound harsh or forwarding. It’s important to be always polite and respectful.”

These results resonate with Mills (2003) and Holmes (1995), who argue that women's relative preference for indirect strategies is often linked to socialization norms which valorize modesty and relational harmony.

Role of Social Factors

Most of the participants’ responses share the influence of power relations and social distance: high status interlocutors would receive heightened levels of linguistic mitigation to save the face of the speaker and interlocutor, e.g.,

“If my professor asked me to do something, I would never refuse bluntly; I would always apologize and say that I'd do my best, though it was impossible.”

In comparison, refusals to friends or close peers permitted an increased degree of directness because the social tension is lessened, e.g.,

"Among my friends, sometimes I could say directly 'no', because they would have understood, but I explain the reason.”

Problems of Pragmatic Adequacy in English

The participants reported challenges with pragmatic appropriateness in refusing in English: too much reliance on indirect strategies led to vagueness, which is totally opposite of what is usually expected from students in academic contexts.

"I use excuses a lot, but sometimes I think that my professor of English speaking doesn't understand me, so maybe I should be clear."

This challenge represents another aspect of the influence of cultural transfer, as noted by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), and highlights a critical need for explicit instruction in pragmatic competence.

Discussion and Implications

This research examined the refusal strategies employed by Saudi EFL female learners and explained the interrelationship between FTAs and social variables represented by the power relation, social distance, and degree of imposition. Findings showed a strong trend towards indirect refusals in both academic and social situations. However, social variables seemed to strongly influence strategy choice. These findings are in line with the previous research on interlanguage pragmatics and culturally situated politeness norms, nevertheless they added new information regarding Saudi female learners' experience of dual pragmatic expectations.

Overall, participants showed preference for indirect refusal strategies.

Quantitative data showed that the refusals produced by participants were dominated by indirect strategies (75.5%), slightly increasing to (78.6%) in social situations. This again underlines previous research into refusal strategies within collectivist cultures in that indirectness is drawn upon as a means of minimizing FTAs to maintain group harmony (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Hofstede, 2001). Al-Issa (2003) reports similar findings, in that Arab EFL learners relied on the use of excuses and hedges to avoid confrontation in refusal scenarios.

This dominance of indirect strategies could be attributed to the Saudi cultural norms that adhere to politeness and social harmony. Brown and Levinson (1987) indicate that in hierarchical and collectivist societies, refusals are softened or mitigated by speakers to maintain the interlocutor's positive face. The use of apologies, excuses, and hedges aligns with this theoretical perspective and underscores the impact of cultural expectations on speech act realization.

Although at a lower rate compared to the use of indirect refusals, interestingly, the (13.1%) use of adjuncts by participants in refusals underlines the attempt to soften the act even more when social distance is low. This finding corroborates Nelson et al.'s (1998) suggestion that Arabic speakers often use appreciation or apologizing expressions to accompany refusals as an additional face-saving mechanism.

Role of social Variables

The effect of the power relationship, social distance, and degree of imposition on refusal strategies was particularly pronounced. Participants were much more indirect with the high-status interlocutors, for example, professors, which confirms Beebe et al.'s (1990) claim that the more asymmetrical the power relation, the heavier the use of linguistic mitigation is. In situations where refusal was

unavoidable, for example, participants sometimes felt obliged to apologize or to promise future compliance due to a culturally instilled sense of deference to authority. In contrast, refusals to equals or peers were comparatively more direct yet still moderated with adjuncts to maintain relational solidarity. As such, it also supports Félix-Brasdefer's (2008) affirmation that a smaller power distance allows speakers to make less elaborate mitigation.

Degree of imposition was another essential factor influencing the participants' pragmatic choices. High-imposition requests elicited more elaborate refusals, with participants employing multiple layers of indirectness, such as excuses, hedging, and promises of future acceptance. These results align with Rees-Miller's (2000) study, which found that speakers increased mitigation in proportion to the perceived imposition of the request.

Gendered communication and politeness

Qualitative data reflected how refusal strategies were determined by gender roles. Participants showed great awareness of politeness maintenance and avoidance of direct confrontation, particularly in formal settings or interactions with male interlocutors. This aligns with Holmes' (1995) and Mills' (2003) claims that since women are socially expected to be more polite, their speech strategies are always indirectly presented. In the conservative Saudi context, gendered norms further amplify this tendency, favoring female learners to employ indirectness as a face-saving tool.

However, findings also highlight the possible pragmatic incompatibility of transferring culturally embedded strategies into English-speaking contexts. Participants described problematic efforts to attain clarity and appropriateness in their speech, which resonates with Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) observation on pragmatic transfer in the speech of L2 speakers. Thus, while in Arabic, indirectness is appropriate, in English, too much mitigation often leads to vagueness or pragmatic failure, specifically in academic speech, given that directness would serve clarity.

Pragmatic problems and cultural transfer

Reported challenges in balancing cultural politeness norms against English pragmatic conventions also reflect the dual pressures facing the Saudi EFL learner. As observed in the interview data, participants often defaulted to culturally appropriate Arabic strategies, such as strategies of excessive apology or vaguely worded refusals that ran counter to clear expression in English. This problem corroborates the findings of Al-Khatib (2006) on pragmatic transfer among Arab learners highlights the need for explicit pragmatic instruction to address these mismatches.

It is hoped that this research might contribute to the area of interlanguage pragmatics by providing an understanding of refusal strategies among Saudi EFL female learners. Although there are some

studies investigating refusals in general Arabic-speaking contexts – for example, Nelson et al. (1998) and Al-Issa (2003) – the current study traces the interplay between the cultural norm, gendered expectation, and social variable within a Saudi EFL context. The use of DCT for quantitative purposes and interviews for qualitative data gives an in-depth look not only at the strategies used but also at socio-cultural influences on the learner's choice. The research further outlines the peculiar challenges Saudi female learners surmount in their negotiation between culturally driven politeness norms and the pragmatic expectations of English; hence, it gives added meaning to the importance of context-sensitive pragmatic instruction tailored to learners' sociocultural backgrounds.

These findings bear important pedagogical implications for EFL instruction and for the elaboration of culturally sensitive curricula. Evidence has shown that there is an urgent need for effective pragmatic teaching emphasizing the seamless balance of directness and indirectness within employing refusal strategies in English. Instructors are encouraged to include more contextualized activities that give students opportunities to practice refusals based on social variables, such as relationship in terms of power and degree of interpersonal distance. Besides, discussion of politeness norms in different languages, such as Arabic and English, would raise intercultural awareness that could mitigate pragmatic transfer and enhance learners' appropriateness in communication. Another important aspect is discussing gendered communication to support female learners in navigating the complicated interplay of politeness, clarity, and confidence, especially in formal academic settings.

Although this research gave an in-depth look at refusal strategies, the limitations point toward possible avenues for further research: the sample population of Saudi female students in just one public university is proof that not all the results can be generalized on wider demography. Future research should, therefore, be carried out with male participants too, taking refusal strategies in other cultural and educational contexts so that more comparative findings on the influence of gender and culture can be reached. Additionally, longitudinal studies may provide a far greater insight into exactly how pragmatic competence develops over time, especially if supported by specific pedagogical interventions. Such studies would greatly enhance academic discourse in their support and promotion of better, more viable teaching practices.

In conclusion, this research highlights the interplay of complex relationships between cultural norms, social factors, and gender expectations regarding refusal strategies by Saudi female EFL learners. Results show dominant use of indirect strategies due to the culture of politeness, but they also reveal significant problems in achieving pragmatic appropriateness in English. Addressing such challenges through focused, culturally sensitive pedagogies may better prepare students to handle refusals effectively in different contexts. Indeed, through the development of intercultural and pragmatic competencies, instructors may be the key agents in developing adept and confident EFL communicators.

المستخلص

استراتيجيات الرفض لدى متعلمات اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في السعودية: تحليل تداولي
العلاقة للأفعال المهددة للوجه والمتغيرات الاجتماعية

مرام عبدالعزيز الهويريني

تستكشف هذه الدراسة استراتيجيات الرفض التي تستخدمها متعلمات اللغة الإنجليزية، والعلاقات بين الأفعال المهددة للوجه (FTAs) وثلاثة متغيرات اجتماعية رئيسية: السلطة الاجتماعية، والمسافة الاجتماعية، ودرجة الإلزام. تم اعتماد منهج بحثي يجمع بين الطريقتين الكمية والنوعية، حيث تم جمع البيانات الكمية باستخدام اختبار إتمام الخطاب (DCT) الذي طُبّق على 40 طالبة، بالإضافة إلى إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة مع عينة فرعية من 12 طالبة للحصول على رؤى نوعية. أشارت النتائج إلى أن الطالبات اعتمدن بشكل أساسي على استراتيجيات الرفض غير المباشر (بنسبة 75.5%)، وكانت هذه النسبة أعلى في السياقات الاجتماعية (78.6%) مقارنة بالسياقات الأكاديمية (72.3%). تؤثر المتغيرات الاجتماعية على اختيارات الطالبات، إذ يزداد استخدام الأسلوب غير المباشر عند مخاطبة أشخاص ذوي مكانة اجتماعية أعلى أو في مواقف ذات درجة إلزام مرتفعة، في حين أن الرفض تجاه الأقران يسمح بمزيد من المباشرة. كما كشفت التحليلات النوعية عن أن وعي الطالبات بالأعراف الثقافية ونوع الجنس عزز التزامهن باستراتيجيات الأدب والحفاظ على الوجه، المتجذرة في الطبيعة الجماعية للثقافة السعودية. علاوة على ذلك، زادت التوقعات المتعلقة بنوع الجنس من الميل نحو استخدام الأسلوب غير المباشر، لا سيما في السياقات الرسمية والبيئات التي يهيمن عليها الذكور. وأشارت الطالبات إلى الصعوبات العملية في مواءمة استراتيجيات الرفض مع المعايير التواصلية في اللغة الإنجليزية، مما يؤدي إلى الغموض أو الفشل التداولي. تؤكد الدراسة على الحاجة إلى تعليم صريح للكفاءة التداولية، من خلال المقارنات الثقافية والممارسة المستندة إلى السياق. تسهم هذه النتائج في تطوير مجال التداولية بين اللغات، وتقدم اقتراحات تعليمية لسد الفجوة بين المعايير الثقافية الأصلية للمتعلّمات السعوديات والتوقعات التداولية في البيئات الطبيعية للغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات الرفض، الأفعال المهددة للوجه، الديناميكيات الاجتماعية الثقافية في السياق السعودي، الكفاءة التداولية، أنماط التأدب.

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