A Gender-based Analysis of Refusals as a Face Threatening Act: A Case Study of Iranian EFL Learners

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Politeness is a phenomenon which is common to all cultures. Each culture has a different perception of what is polite and each language has various devices for expressing politeness. Besides, gender can be considered as an important variable in language use and research suggest that men and women use language differently. Speech acts is not an exception. Thus, this study investigates gender differences of EFL learners in making refusals. To analyze this, a DTC questionnaire consisting of fourteen situations was given to 100 students (50 male / 50 female) asking them to write how they would make refusals for each situation. The results of the analysis indicated that both male and female students use substantially more indirect strategies than direct strategies in most cases. Although indirect strategies are preferred by these two groups, there still exists difference between male and female subjects in terms of the probability of indirectness. Female students' refusals tend to be more gentle and indirect than those of male students. Female students like to explain reasons, and they prefer to use detailed and specific response instead of a direct "no". By contrast, male students' refusals tend to be direct, brief and even blunt. Besides, male and female students have different tendency in four different refusing situations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The refusal of speech acts is one of the important factors in the speech acts field. According to Thomas (1983, p. 94), "Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language efficiently in order to gain a special aim and to comprehend language in context". Cheng, Ye, & Zhang (1995) stated that refusal refers to a speech act of denial to employ in an action that suggested by the converser.

Refusal is the negative response to someone's invitation, offer, request, and suggestion. It is not easy to refuse native or non-native speakers, especially in a foreign language context in which the speakers have insufficient knowledge with regard to the refusals. Some influential factors affect the speaker's choice and production including inter-lingual transfer of pragmatic knowledge. So, in order to overcome these challenges, it is important to comprehend and identify the cross linguistics in production.

Speech acts of refusals are so important because they have an undeniable role in daily communication. EFL learners should know how to use the appropriate refusals in order to save the interlocutor's face and to be polite when they meet people in formal and informal situations.

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) believe that, in uttering a refusal, the speaker/writer is usually communicating a potentially unsatisfactory message while the listener/reader is concerned. Some methods are applied in alleviating refusals. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) assert that refusals are usually uttered in response to speech act of requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Like requests, refusals can also be direct or indirect. They also mention that "refusals can occur with some other elements such as statement of positive opinion, statement of empathy and so forth" (Eslami Rasekh & Mardani, 2010, p.212).

Due to the fact that acceptance or agreement is often preferred in response to these four speech acts, saying "no" can indicate disapproval of the interlocutor's intentions and also a threat to the interlocutor's face. Therefore, as Chen (1995, p.7) mentions, "refusals are regarded as face threatening act (FTA) since both

the speaker's or listener's positive or negative face is risked when a refusal is needed or used". Due to the nature of face-threatening acts, refusals are likely to be indirect, including mitigation, or delay. Chen (1995, p.121) believes that "As a matter of fact, they possess a long negotiated sequence with lots of face-saving maneuvers to accommodate its noncompliant nature, and that is why refusing appropriately requires a high level of pragmatic competence. "Altogether, refusals are complex since they are influenced by some social aspects, such as, age, gender, level of education, social distance, and power (Smith, 1999 as cited in Ghazanfari, 2013) and also because they need sequences of negotiation. Additionally, it is even hard to say no to requests, suggestions, and offers in a foreign language since misunderstandings may happen in case that one applies pragmatic knowledge inappropriately. "In fact, refusing others' suggestion, offer and request without offending them is of great importance since the "inability to say 'no' clearly has led many non-native speakers to offend their interlocutors" (Ramos, as cited in Ghazanfari, 2013, p.49).

The role of gender differences and their plausible effects on the speech acts of refusal have not been dealt with in an Iranian context with the specific conclusion about the gender so far. However, this research intended to include 'gender' as a variable in the study to account for the strategies used by both genders. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the type of strategies in the application of refusals among Iranian males and females in an intermediate level of language proficiency within the formal and informal situations.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Politeness has been broadly studied in sociolinguistics and more specifically language in the workplace (Holmes &Schnurr, 2005; Schnurr& Chan, 2009). One of the influential models of politeness is undoubtedly Brown and Levinson`s model (1987). The main concept of the model is face and that a rational human being is assumed to possess two aspects of face: negative and positive. Most speech acts are intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTAs); therefore, politeness strategies are employed to minimize face threat of FTAs. Moreover, the level of politeness depends on three independent social factors: solidarity or social distance between interlocutors, relative status or power difference between interlocutors, and culture ranking of the imposition.

Ishikawa (2013) says that gender differences have been analyzed from different perspectives for the last four decades, including, for instance, the use of different linguistic aspects (e.g. Labov, 2001), styles (e.g. Trudgill, 1978), directness (Ishikawa, 2013), interruptions (Zimmerman & West, 1975), or politeness aspects (e.g. Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003). These studies indicate that women are more likely to express positive politeness and to mitigate more often to minimize the effect of face-threatening acts and pat attention to their hearers' face. As a matter of fact, Holmes (1995) reported that women tend to use those resources for the fact that they are more attentive and they are more concerned and aim at building and ensuring their relationships, since there are speech acts where women show more sensitivity than men, who are more direct.

An extensive body of study on language and gender has been conducted with regard to identifying, and trying to explain, differences in the speech styles of men and women. The main differences have been found in the area of linguistic politeness (Zimmerman & West 1975; Fishman 1978; Tannen, 1990), on language and gender over the past three decades, which revealed that women are more likely than men to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies to avoid or minimize threatening their interlocutors' face. For instance, in contrast to men, women tend to interrupt less in a conversation and "to be more attentive listeners, concerned to ensure others get a chance to contribute (Holmes, 1995). Bayls (2009) examined the relationship between small talk and gender.

Helga Vanda Koczogh (2011) studied gender differences strategies of Hungarian speakers. He investigated the attitude of Hungarian speakers toward men and women speech as well as the probable effect of gender differences on the preferred disagreement strategies and linguistic markers used by Hungarian speakers. He investigated people's perception of men and women speech. The result showed that men (4.09) were judged as slightly more polite than women (3.94), though the difference was not statistically significant.

The speech act of refusal has been thoroughly studied in inter-language and multicultural pragmatic linguistics. It always takes the form of a negative response to acts such as invitations, offers, requests, and suggestions. These include the realization of speech acts of refusals in different dialects and languages, such as Azizi Abarghoui (2012) on investigating the Iranian EFL learners and native speakers of Australia with regard to the strategies of refusal of request; Sahragard and Javanmardi (2011) on studying refusals of request, order, suggestion, and invitation in an academic EFL context; Liao and

Bresnahan (1996) who examined refusal strategies of requests; Qadoury Abed (2011) who studied pragmatic transfer of Iraqi EFL learners' refusal strategies of invitations, offers, requests, and suggestions; Widjaja (1997) on examining refusal of dating, but there have been few gender-based studies of refusal of speech acts in an Iranian context, especially in an intermediate level; most studies have been done in academic levels. Applying speech acts refusal are not limited to the academic participants, hence, the researcher has chosen a sample from intermediate level of English language participants among population.

Al-Issa (2003) investigated the sociocultural transfer of the performance of refusal in Jordanian EFL learners. He found three areas which were affected by transfer: the choice of semantic formulas, content of semantic formulas, and length of responses. Interview data also revealed other factors that affected transfer including their L1, their perception of the L2, and religion.

Moaveni (2014) conducted a comparative study on the refusal strategies used by American undergraduate students and a group of international students. The results showed that the American group used more direct strategies accompanied by gratitude semantic formulas, in contrast, the international group tended to use regret and explanation. The international sample tended to provide reasons that were more specific. Moreover, he found that the Americans tended to use different semantic formulas and indirect strategies (expressing regret, providing reasons, and using adjuncts to refusals) if their interlocutor was a friend.

Eshreteh (2015) studied the differences and similarities in the performance of refusal between two groups of Palestinians and Americans. The results indicated that the Palestinians used a refusal strategy of "marginally touching the point," emphasizing on restoring and maintaining relationships people (p. 187). However, the Americans tended to resolve the matter in question, and the number of employed refusal strategies was economically chosen.

In investigating the similarities and differences in the performance of refusal between Jordanian and American male groups Al-Shboul and Huwari (2016) found that cultural norms and values are significant. Though American group was more direct in their refusals, overall results indicated that both groups preferred indirect strategies such as providing an explanation, adjuncts to refusals, and apologies.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

A hundred intermediate students (50 males and 50 females) participated in the present study aiming at investigating the differences on the use of refusals as FTA. The ages of the participants ranged between 12 and 18 years who recruited based on expected intermediate levels of linguistic and communicative competence.

In the present study, first the students were put into two groups of male and female, each consisting of 50 students. Then data of both male and female group were collected through two types of instrument: a written discourse completion test (DCT) and group discussion. The instruments were used to measure male and female students' ability to implement refusals fluently and properly in various situations. The DCT for refusals consists of 14 situations and was adopted from Alemi and Tajeddin (2013) and Ren (2012). The first six situations, were obtained from Alemi and Tajeddin (2013), focusing on different contexts (e.g., education- al, workplace, and daily life). The remainder addressed teacher- student situations and student- student situations that involved four types of refusals: a refusal of requests, refusal of suggestions, refusal of invitations, and refusal of offers. Every question of the questionnaire has three options, including direct strategy, indirect strategy and a neutral strategy, therefore, an overall tendency of the selection of refusal strategy, and the difference between male and female students' selection can be reflected in the data of the survey.

The DCT and a form for collecting demographic information (e.g., gender, age, year of study) were distributed to the participating students. The respondents were encouraged to respond according to each of the scripted situations and not to think about their responses excessively. After submitting their test, they were asked to form small groups of 5 students to discuss the appropriateness of their responses and potentially give additional responses. The students were then asked to role-play each situation. After the data collection, the relationship between the students' gender and the adopted strategies were revealed by statistical procedure including frequency.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research questions of this study inquired the strategies preferred by male and female students when refusing others as well as the differences between male and female students when using refusal strategies.

Table 1. Refusal Strategy Use between Male and Female"

The data in table1 was collected according to the number of choosing the option A (Refuse directly), option B (Refuse directly and give the reason), and option C ((Apologize), refuse indirectly and give the reasons).

Option	Male	Female
AB>C	46	20
AB≦C	4	30
Total	50	50

We can see more male and female students prefer to an indirect and polite way when refuse others. In their answers, the number of C is more than the total number of A and B. Less students choose the direct way. In their selections, the total number of A and B is more than the number of C. However, the differences between male and female can also be found. In the group "AB>C", males are more than females. By contrast, in the group "AB<C", females are more than males. On the basis of Figure 1, the total number and percentage of direct and indirect strategies used in overall situations can be worked out.

Table2. Total number and percentage of direct and indirect strategies used in overall situations

Strategy	Male		Female	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Direct	46	92%	20	40%
Indirect	4	8%	30	60%
Total	50	100%	50	100%

Table 2, revealed that, in the males group, the direct strategies take the 92% of the total strategies, indirect strategies 8%; in the female group, the direct strategies take the 40% of the total strategies, indirect strategies 60%.

The results reveal that the two groups of subjects have some characteristics in common. They all tend to employ substantially more indirect strategies than direct ones. Although direct refusal is clear and effective in accomplishing the refusal, it threats others' face. Therefore, it is less adopted, especially in Iranian's context, which emphasizes politeness and reciprocity. Besides, when the percentages of male and female are compared, it also can be found that there are more males than females prefer indirect strategies, which may reflect that male students are more indirect and polite than female students.

Table 3. The difference between male and female students' refusal strategies

Strategy	Request		Suggestion		Invitation		Offer	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Indirect	890.59%	1200.8%	850.56%	1010.67%	830.55%	1110.74%	930.62%	1150.76%
Direct	610.40%	300.2%	650.43%	490.32%	6241%	410.27%	570.38%	350.23%

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the analysis indicated that both male and female students use substantially more indirect strategies than direct strategies in most cases. Although indirect strategies are preferred by these two groups, there still exists difference between male and female subjects in terms of the probability of indirectness. Female students' refusals tend to be more gentle and indirect than those of male students. Female students like to explain reasons, and they prefer to use detailed and specific response instead of a direct "no". By contrast, male students' refusals tend to be direct, brief and even blunt. Besides, male and female students have different tendency in four different refusing situations.

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