
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Cross-Cultural and Linguistic Study of Refusals: A Comparative Investigation of the Jordanian and Egyptian Pragmatic Competence

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a conceptual comparative study of refusal strategies that are employed by Jordanian and Egyptian speakers, emphasizing how cultural and linguistic factors shape these strategies. Understanding the utilization of these strategies is vital for comprehending the responses of those receiving refusals. This study investigates the diverse refusal strategies applied by Jordanian and Egyptian student speakers to discover the cultural and linguistic influences on their choices. Data will be collected through interviews and memos employing Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The expected results are anticipated to elucidate the significant influence of linguistic and cultural factors on the articulated refusal strategies employed by the students. The study also aims to recognize the different types of refusal strategies commonly used by Jordanian and Egyptian student speakers. Eventually, this research will provide a basis for future investigations into the discursive markers utilized by Jordanian and Egyptian speakers in their interactions. Examining the implicit and explicit discursive markers of refusal will assist in getting an in-depth understanding of the linguistic and cultural impacts on Jordanian and Egyptian speeches.

KEYWORDS

Refusal strategies, Jordanian refusal, Egyptian refusal, Culture, Linguistics

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1. Introduction

Refusal strategies offer insights into the socio-cultural values of speech communities and reflect the social norms rooted in diverse cultures. These minimal, functional terms of discourse communication often require indirect strategies, making them noteworthy in intercultural communication for their various roles in discourse. As Brown & Levinson (1978) claimed, refusal strategies are formulated in most instances indirectly to save the hearer's face. Language and culture are interrelated to each other because the speeches of communities are constructed based on them. Refusals are a significant challenge for speakers of different cultures, characterized as complex and sensitive pragmatic tasks. According to Beebe et al. (1990), non-native speakers often use indirect strategies to avoid offending others. However, misunderstandings can arise if they rely on native language strategies.

The purpose of this study is to examine the refusal strategies used by Jordanian and Egyptian students studying English as a foreign language, with an emphasis on how these strategies are influenced by their cultures. It specifically aims to determine the meanings that various refusal strategies convey, as well as the effect of Jordanian and Egyptian cultures on students' speech when they use them. Refusal speech acts are face-threatening, either diminishing or maintaining the face wants of the hearers. Effective communication in such contexts necessitates careful use of refusal strategies to avoid offending the hearer. Interlocutors must understand the appropriate forms and functions in the target language to navigate these pragmatic strategies successfully.

Examining refusal strategies among EFL students in Jordan and Egypt is important for enhancing communication across diverse cultures. The relationship between language and culture is evident in their interactions, underscoring the importance of

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understanding their refusal strategies. Each language has exceptional rules for constructing these strategies. So, understanding the refusal strategies of Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students can facilitate the attainment of the exact meaning of these strategies in diverse contexts, thereby improving cross-cultural communication and reducing misunderstandings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Past Studies

Several studies investigated strategies of refusal among different societies. Few studies have compared refusal strategies between Jordanian and Egyptian societies. The purpose of communication is to deliver a clear message that can be understood by the hearer positively. So, if hearers want to save the speakers' face through successful communication, they should use polite refusals in most situations. Similarly, if two interactants from different cultures want to refuse an offer, they try to soften their speeches using polite strategies to avoid threatening the face of the speakers. Understanding these cultural discrepancies is indispensable for effective cross-cultural communication. By discovering the differences and similarities in refusal strategies, interactants enhance mutual deference and reinforce better interpersonal relationships. Nelson et al. (2002) compared Egyptian Arabic and American English refusals using the Discourse Completion Test tool. The findings showed that American and Egyptian cultures utilized similar refusal strategies. Darwish, A. (2018) investigated how young adult Egyptian students expressed refusals in both their native language (Egyptian Arabic) and English, highlighting socio-pragmatic aspects such as power and distance. The study revealed that the Egyptians utilized strategies such as explanations, alternatives, and regret. Adjuncts like gratitude are notable in refusals to those of equal or higher power. Contrastingly, negative pragmatic transfer was observed in English refusals.

Regarding request and refusal emails from international students in a Thai EFL context, highlighting positive politeness in requests and negative politeness in refusals, which are seen as face-threatening acts needing mitigation, was investigated by Liu et al. (2025). Jalis et al. (2019) highlighted cultural sensitivity, noting similarities and differences in refusal speech acts between German and Malay situations, advocating for socially appropriate communication strategies. Al-Natour et al. (2025) further indicated that social dynamics, such as power relationships, affected the refusal strategies used by the interactants.

Morkus, N. (2014) examined how native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and American English make refusals in equal and unequal status contexts, involving 10 participants from each group through role-play. Key findings revealed significant differences: Egyptians were more verbose and indirect, particularly in higher-status interactions, often mentioning family-oriented reasons, while Americans preferred personal reasons and were inclined to express regret and gratitude. Furthermore, Egyptians often utilized religious words and proverbs in refusals. Request and refusal emails written by international students in a Thai EFL context were examined by Liu, Y. et al. (2025). The study sought to note the occurrence of negative politeness strategies in refusals and positive politeness strategies in requests. This strengthened the idea that refusals are fundamentally face-threatening acts that often necessitate mitigation. Jalis, F. et al. (2019) further underscored the importance of cultural sensitivity, demonstrating resemblances and variances in Malay and German refusal speech acts. Their research underlined the need for speakers to implement socially suitable strategies to ensure effective cross-cultural communication.

Bakry, H. (2015) inspected Egyptian undergraduates' disagreements in EFL classrooms through a politeness theory perspective. It collected data from 18 hours of videotaped classes and interviews to analyze disagreements related to power dynamics and contextual variables. The findings showed that students use several politeness strategies when speaking to their teachers, frequently displaying more aggravated disagreements regarding the teachers' language effort. This variability in disagreement strategies is associated with social distance and types of interaction. As demonstrated by Al-Natour et al. (2025), social dynamics, such as power relationships, can pointedly influence how individuals prompt dissent. This study examined current studies on refusal strategies across several societies and settings, highlighting problems that motivate researchers in linguistics and sociolinguistics to conduct further research.

Tobbi (2024) examined sociocultural transfer in Algerian EFL learners' refusals to shed light on the impact of cultural principles on refusal strategies, with a preference for directness, detailed explanations, and expressions of gratitude. These results underlined the complex interplay between L1 cultural norms and L2 pragmatic development. Refusal strategies in a management environment that demonstrated the influence of social power dynamics on displays of dissent were examined by Al-Natour et al. (2025). The results showed that the various levels of relationship shape interaction, with those in positions of authority often endeavoring to control dissenting opinions. Remarkably, the study also revealed that women employees were more inclined to voice dissent upward, engaging strategies that reflected both their influence and boundaries within the organizational structure. These findings highlighted the relationship between gender and power in determining refusal performance. This enhanced indirectness and politeness exhibit the role of cultural sensitivity in refusal strategies.

Enab, N. (2020) investigated euphemistic expressions employed by Egyptian Arabic speakers during discussions on sensitive topics like impairment, cancer, occupations of low status, bodily functions, women's marital status, and death. A survey of 275 adult Egyptians revealed a high usage of euphemisms, particularly in face-threatening contexts. Key strategies identified included understatement, general-for-specific, hyperbole, borrowing, circumlocution, and technical jargon. The study advocates for increased awareness and understanding of these expressions and strategies in teaching Arabic as a foreign language to enhance communication between learners and native speakers. Another study by Al-Natour et al. (2024) examined food refusal strategies among Jordanians, revealing a preference for indirect strategies to preserve politeness. The results are consistent with wider research findings that indirectness is often employed in cultures where maintaining social harmony is highly valued. Likewise, Liu, Y. et al. (2025) explored request and refusal emails written by international students in a Thai EFL context, noting the frequency of positive politeness strategies in requests and negative politeness strategies in refusals. This supported the idea that refusals are fundamentally face-threatening acts that often require mitigation. This study highlighted the importance of considering cultural and linguistic backgrounds when examining refusal strategies.

The importance of cultural sensitivity, demonstrating similarities and differences in Malay and German refusal speech acts, was highlighted by Jalis, F. et al. (2019). Their study emphasized the necessity for interactants to implement socially suitable strategies to ensure effective cross-cultural interaction. Farashaiyanl and Muthusamy's (2017) study on Iranian EFL learners exposed a restricted range of semantic methods used across varied circumstances, representing a potential lack of pragmatic cognizance and contextual understanding. The study emphasized the challenges faced by L2 learners in evolving a dissimilar understanding of pragmatic norms.

Fang's (2024) study examined the use of indirect refusal strategies, such as explanations and apologies, by Chinese English speakers in ELF interactions, predominantly when rejecting requests from Indonesian participants. This approach eases the face-threatening feature of refusals, highlighting the effect of cultural background on refusal behavior. Yu and Li (2025) discovered cross-linguistic impacts on refusal strategies among Uyghur Mandarin English trilinguals, supporting the Scalpel Model and signifying that prior languages affect L3 refusal strategies in a strategy-specific manner. Mohammad's study of EFL nursing students indicates a preference for direct refusals, particularly in higher-status interactions, pointing to areas for pedagogical intervention. Overall, these studies reflect the difficulties of mastering pragmatic distinctions in refusal strategies across different cultural and linguistic contexts.

Research on refusal strategies emphasized the impact of cultural norms, pragmatic transfer, and context. An example of such a study was conducted by Demirkol (2016), who found that core politeness principles persist across languages, with regret and explanation being momentous. Several studies showed that culture, language proficiency, and teaching methods influence refusal strategies. For instance, Mohammad (2022) noted that EFL nursing students favored direct refusal features, particularly in requests, highlighting a focus on clarity and efficiency in the nursing context. Other research on pragmatic instruction revealed its predominant results in pedagogy. McIntire (2021) suggested tandem learning for refusal instruction, while Derakhshan and Shakki (2020) showed that both implicit and explicit strategies enhanced comprehension of refusals and apologies. The findings emphasized the inevitability of merging language forms, sociocultural aspects, and context for positive pragmatic awareness expansion.

Almansa-Villatoro & Motte (2026) sought to study (im)politeness, focusing on ancient Egyptian texts spanning all historical periods. The study aimed to create an accessible and valuable resource for researchers in ancient Egyptian history and pragmatists working on cross-cultural communication. Notwithstanding it's profound possible to unveil and dissect social dynamics in interaction. Regarding persuasive strategies by Jordanians, AlYousef et al. (2025) examined persuasive strategies employed by Jordanian interlocutors within an academic setting, adopting Aristotle's rhetorical triangle. It revealed that distinct preferences between students and professors, with professors favoring logos-driven strategies and students leaning towards pathos-driven approaches. This indicated how dissimilar roles and goals within an academic context can outline persuasive interaction styles. Arwa Mohammad Rabee et al. (2025) revealed in their study of the relationship between linguistic theories and their application in literary and translation research to examine the stimulus of linguistic theoretical models within translation studies. This study concluded that translation depends heavily on explicit linguistic principles.

Jalil's (2025) study compared Kurdish Sorani Dialect and American English, revealing that Sorani Kurds showed greater status sensitivity and religious orientations in their refusal strategies. The analyses of the data demonstrated the vital role of the Sorani Kurds' cultural values while articulating their refusals. Duresa's (2025) research stated that remedial students hesitated to master English courses because of a lack of awareness of their benefits and perceived limited career prospects, underscoring language attitudes' influence on educational choices. Furthermore, Li and Wongwaropakorn (2024) deliberated on the use of subtle refusal strategies in Chinese television dramas, representing the implicit interaction of refusals.

Wannaruk's (2008) study on American English and Thai refusals emphasized both commonalities and variances, indicating the influence of L1 on Thai EFL learners' refusal behavior. Al-Natour et al. (2024) inspected the use of silence in classroom settings by Jordanian EFL students and professors, whereas Al-Natour (2025) explored various congratulatory strategies in graduation notebooks. Collectively, these studies broadened the attention of pragmatic studies to encompass non-verbal interactions and various social communications.

To sum up the results of the above studies, future research on refusal strategies among Jordanian and Egyptian students' needs to highlight the complexity shaped by cultural norms and contextual features. The past studies mentioned in this section indicated disparities in directness and politeness strategies used by Jordanians and Egyptians, but there's a need for deeper examination into the balance of individual action and socio-cultural influences. Investigating non-verbal cues, power dynamics, and social distance in refusal behavior is vital. Moreover, studies could enhance understanding of refusal competence development. With the rise of digital communication, examining refusal strategies in online interactions is also essential for effective cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Analytical Framework

Recently, the refusal speech act was analyzed using a variety of models. Beebe et al.'s (1990:55–73) analytical framework was employed in this study to analyze the data and categorize refusals into two groups: direct refusal strategies and indirect refusal strategies. Two strategies under the category of direct refusal strategies. There are eleven strategies for indirect rejection. Table 2.1 below provides examples and explanations of these tactics.

No	Direct Refusal Strategies	No	Indirect Refusal Strategies
1	Using performative verbs (I refuse)	1	Statement of regret (I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...)
2	Non-performative statement o "No" o Negative willingness/ability (I can't. /I won't. /I don't think so)	2	Wish (I wish I could help you...)
		3	Excuse, reason, explanation (My children will be home that night. /I have a headache)
		4	Statement of alternative: o I can do X instead of Y (I'd rather.../I'd prefer...) o Why don't you do X instead of Y (Why don't you ask someone else?)
		5	Set condition for future or past acceptance (If you had asked me earlier, I would have...)
		6	Promise of future acceptance (I'll do it next time. /I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...)
		7	Statement of principle (I never do business with friends.)
		8	Statement of philosophy (One can't be too careful.)
		9	Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:

	- o Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (I won't be any fun tonight to refuse an invitation) - o Guilt trip (waitress to customers who want to sit a while: I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.) - o Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack (Who do you think you are? /That's a terrible idea!) - Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request - o Let interlocutor off the hook (Don't worry about it. /That's okay. /You don't have to.) - o Self-defense (I'm trying my best. /I'm doing all I can do.)
10	Acceptance that functions as a refusal: - o Unspecific or indefinite reply - o Lack of enthusiasm
11	Avoidance: - o Nonverbal ▪ Silence ▪ Hesitation ▪ Doing nothing ▪ Physical departure - o Verbal ▪ Topic switch ▪ Joke ▪ Repetition of part of request (Monday?) ▪ Postponement (I'll think about it.) ▪ Hedge (Gee, I don't know. /I'm not sure

Table 2.1 Beebe et al. (1990:55-73) refusal strategies

As in the Beebe et al. (1990) model, refusal strategies may be preceded by adjuncts such as positive opinion statements, expressions of empathy, pause fillers, and gratitude. Refusals typically involve three sequential strategies: pre-refusal strategies that prepare the recipient, the main refusal (Head Act) that states the refusal, and post-refusal strategies that emphasize, justify, or conclude the refusal response.

3. Methodology

This research employs qualitative methods to recognize the meanings behind refusals by Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students. It aims to elucidate the intentional significance of interactants' utterances and describes the research methodology, including data collection, study sample, instruments, and data collection procedures.

3.1 Data Collection

Linguistics qualitative research focuses on understanding the direct and indirect meanings of utterances, helping researchers explore the cultural factors influencing speech construction. A qualitative method is considered appropriate for yielding significant results and guiding future research. Data will be collected from 30 Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students, 15 from each group, specifically in the English and translation departments. It focuses on the refusal strategies used by them during communication, analyzed through interview questions and memos.

3.2 Sample of The Study

The participants in this study comprise 30 EFL students in the English and translation departments. As Sekaran (2003, p. 295) advises, a minimum sample size of 30 is generally acceptable for data analysis. The sample comprises both male and female EFL students to account for anticipated differences in the refusal strategies used during communication and in response to contrary thoughts. The researcher applied distinct codes for each participant to explain the examples that are related to each group of individuals in the analysis. Two distinct codes used for the examples in the analyses are JLS1 and ELS1. JLS1 code is related to Jordanian students, and the ELS1 code is related to Egyptian students.

3.3 Instruments

Data collection ceased once saturation was observed, and there was no new information to be collected (Imran, M., & Almusharraf, N., 2023). Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the heads of the English and translation departments, assuring them that the data would be used solely for this study. Two instruments were used in this qualitative research to systematically analyze data and understand participants' refusal strategies. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative data are derived from purposefully selected informants, and memos were utilized to identify the specific refusal strategies employed by the participants. Because a mixed-method approach was used in this research, the second instrument used is a semi-structured interview. Creswell & Creswell (2017) describe qualitative data as that which was obtained through information provided by purposefully selected informants.

A semi-structured interview helps the researcher in asking purposeful questions to understand the reasons that motivated them to use such refusal strategies rather than others. It helps to reach the central explanations that make some strategies suitable rather than others in their communications. As this study seeks to find out the major factors that affect EFL students when using some refusal strategies in their speeches, it is significant to account for the vital forms they construct in specific situations. Attaining all of these aspects helps to recognize the reasons for using the refusal strategies in their interactions.

3.4 Procedure for Data Collection

The data collection procedure comprised eight key processes: Firstly, obtaining permission from department heads via a formal letter. Secondly, securing respondents' consent through signature on consent forms. Thirdly, identifying a meeting place and informing participants about interview times. Fourthly, conducting individual interviews and documenting responses. Fifthly, continuing data collection until saturation is reached, indicating no new information emerges. Sixthly, observing and writing memos about the participants' reactions throughout the interviews. Seventhly, categorizing answers by asking questions for comparative analysis. Eighthly, decoding refusal strategies from participant answers. After that, the researcher employs a structured approach to analyze data on refusal strategies, which includes: adopting an analytical framework, evaluating extracted refusal strategies according to research objectives, identifying linguistic and cultural influences on their usage, elaborating reasons for these strategies among Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students based on responses and memos that are collected from them, and lastly explaining the revealed results after the analysis.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual study proposes a hypothesis related to the linguistic and cultural factors that influence Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students' use of specific refusal strategies. It seeks to accomplish two main objectives: first, to recognize the reasons behind the favored refusal strategies employed by these Jordanian and Egyptian EFL students. Second, to identify the linguistic and cultural factors that shape their performance. The results are expected to support future research by contributing to the understanding of word formation in refusal strategies and providing insights into the syntactic structures employed by these learners in interactions.

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