Article

Gender and Power Relation in English Refusal Strategies of ESL Undergraduates

Nurul 'Aqiilah Mohd Kamal & Adlina Ariffin[*]

AHAS Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia

[*]Corresponding Author: adlina@iium.edu.my

Abstract: Refusal refers to a face-threatening act (FTA) which may put one's self esteem at risk in communication. It encompasses turning down someone's request, offer or suggestion. The speech act of refusal has been one of the most prominent areas of interest for many scholars. However, there is a dearth of such study particularly within the Malay community. Thus, this study examined the refusal strategies used by Malay undergraduates in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), observed the differences and similarities in the refusal strategies of male and female undergraduates, and analysed the influence of relative power on the choice of their refusal strategies. This study employed the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was distributed among sixty Malay ESL undergraduates, consisting of 30 males and 30 females where they were required to refuse requests from three addressees (lecturer, friend, junior) in five different situations. The collected data were then analysed quantitatively. The findings showed that 32 out of 41 types of refusal strategies were used by the participants such as statements of regret, excuse and reason. Both male and female students employed indirect refusal strategies regardless of the person's relative power. However, in using direct refusal strategies, females tended to be more direct in stating their refusals than males. The findings of this study will provide new insights on the pragmatic competence of Malay ESL undergraduates in employing refusal strategies in English, specifically when different gender and relative power are deployed in communication.

Keywords: ESL learners; refusal strategies; speech act; Malay undergraduates

Introduction

Research has shown that speech acts are difficult for second language learners since speakers prefer to make direct translation from their native language to the second language, resulting in disparities in the hearer's interpretation of the message (Sadighi et al., 2018). Due to the hearer's inability to comprehend the message as intended by the speakers, misunderstandings and miscommunications can arise between the interlocutors. This is because every language has expressions which might be semantically different from other languages. On this note, Al-Kahtani (2005) pointed out that second language learners usually would have difficulties in performing the speech act due to cultural differences. He further mentioned that "different cultures realize speech acts in different ways" (Al-Kahtani, 2005, p. 70). Thus, in order to reduce the breakdowns in intercultural communication, it is crucial for speakers to have a high degree of pragmatic competence in certain speech acts like complaints, requests, and refusals.

Similar to other speech acts, refusals also happen in many different languages and modes of communication, regardless of a person's background and nationality. Refusal might be turning down someone's request, offer, or suggestion. Searle and Vandervken (1985) described refusal acts as "the negative

counterparts to acceptances and consenting rejections and refusals. Just as one can accept offers, applications, and invitations, so each of these can be refused or rejected" (p. 165). Moreover, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), face-threatening acts (FTA) are speech acts that have the potential to ruin or threaten one's positive or negative face such as complaining, ordering or requesting. Refusals are also referred as a face-threatening act (FTA) due to its nature of threatening the interlocutor's face when producing refusals. In the face-threatening act, the word 'face' refers to the individual's self-esteem where everyone wants to preserve their positive and negative faces (Brown and Levinson,1987). Wolfson (1989) described the positive face as the desire to be liked and accepted by others, whereas the negative face is defined as "the desire to be free and autonomous and not being imposed" (Umale, 2011, p. 79). As refusals can risk a person's face in the interaction between the interlocutors, it is vital for the speaker to possess pragmatic knowledge in order to avoid offending the other person.

In Malaysia, one of the traditional Malaysian cultural assumptions is face-saving (Hei, Ling & David, 2015). In all circumstances, Malaysians always strive to maintain their faces and avoid shame in their daily lives. Therefore, as much as possible, they try to avoid face-threatening situations. Sumaco et.al (2014) said that Malaysians are nurtured by their parents at an early age to have values of respect, loyalty, and face-saving. These values are very synonymous with the Malay culture which refers that Malays are nurtured to have a high level of mannerism in every aspect of their lives including oral communication. According to Musa et.al (2012) "Malay society were regarded as the gentiles and has acquired three noble traits, namely, (1) good-natured, well-mannered, and urbane, (2) polite, sensible and insightful in speech, and (3) wise and knowledgeable" (p. 175). However, no matter how hard we try to avoid face-threatening situations, refusals may still occur in all sorts of situations as they are a part of our daily communication and therefore, refusals cannot be avoided.

From the sociolinguistics perspective, refusals are significant because they are easily influenced by social variables like gender and power (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and failure to refuse in an appropriate manner may jeopardise interpersonal relationships. One of the variables that affects how people refuse requests is gender. This is based on the rhetoric that men and women speak in distinct ways. Women are seen to have a higher tendency to be more polite in their speeches rather than men (Mahmud, 2013). On a similar note, a study by Wang (2019) on English major students showed that men tend to be more direct than women in stating their refusals.

Other than gender, power also has a great impact on refusing requests. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the term power refers to the relative power relationships between the speaker and hearer. Due to the similarity of both terms, 'power' and 'relative power' will be used interchangeably in this paper. The term 'relative power' is further defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.77) as "the degree to which [a] Hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation at the expense of [the] Speaker". In other words, one who has power over another could control the behaviour of the other, for instance, the relationship between a boss and the subordinate, between a professor and the student, or between a mother and her daughter. Thus, based on the social variables mentioned above, this study aimed to investigate the refusal strategies used by male and female Malaysian Malay ESL undergraduates in English, to identify their differences and similarities, as well as to analyse whether relative power has an influence on the choice of the refusal strategies used.

According to Eslami (2010), "refusals can be a difficult speech act to perform" (p. 217). This is because refusals are complicated in nature that force speakers to refuse their listeners' requests directly or indirectly. Numerous studies had been conducted on the speech act of refusals, however, it is never adequate since people's understanding and perceptions of speech acts may vary across cultures and times (Al-Shboui et.al, 2020; Varisoglu, 2023).

Beebe et al. (1990) were among the researchers who looked at how the first speakers' (L1) sociocultural norms impacted the second-language speakers' (L2) refusal performances. In Beebe et al.'s study, they discovered that the refusals of Japanese learners of English (JEs) resembled the native Japanese speakers (JJs), but differed from native English Speakers (AEs). The findings revealed that Japanese speakers' refusals were impacted by the status of the interlocutors, whereas Americans responded based on their familiarity with the

interlocutors. In terms of semantic formula/expression content, the researchers discovered that the usage of specific excuses employed by the AE group was more than the JE and JJ groups.

Al Issa (2003) investigated the Jordanian EFL learner's realisation patterns of speech act refusals in the context of sociocultural transmission and its driving variables. To elicit the data, Al-Issa utilised 15 Discourse Completion Test (DCT) situations based on an observational field note and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that learners' socio-cultural transmission happened in three areas which were semantic formula selection, length of the responses, and semantic formula content. The cultural values that were transferred from Arabic to English were evident in every area. Furthermore, the interview data revealed that the learners' pride in L1, their perspective of L2, and their religion were all plausible motivators for sociocultural transfer.

Studies focusing on the refusal strategies within the Malaysian context are still scarce. However, one relevant study was by Maryam Farina and Wu (2012) which investigated refusal strategies based on nationality. The objectives of their study were to find out how Chinese international and Chinese Malaysian university students refuse invitations and to know the respondents' perceptions of the refusing process. The data was collected using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and a structured interview. The information gathered was analysed using Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The findings revealed that both Chinese international and Chinese students employed similar rejection techniques, but the number of strategies utilised by the students in the particular situation differed.

In 2016, a comparative study on refusal strategies was done by Saad et al. This study aimed to investigate the similarities and differences of the speech act of refusals in English performed by the Malay ESL speakers (MSE) and English native speakers (NSE). In this study, the researchers focused on the types and content of refusal strategies made by 12 Malay ESL speakers and 12 English native speakers when refusing a higher status interlocutor. The results showed that in terms of types and contents of refusal strategies, the Malay ESL speakers and the English native speakers shared many similarities. The NSE, however, used more direct strategies, and the content of their indirect strategies and adjuncts to refusal strategies reflected their western individualistic ideas, whereas the MSE exemplified eastern values that prioritize the importance of the group.

Another study by Abdul Sattar et al. (2011) investigated the refusal strategies of Malay students from University of Science Malaysia (USM). The data for this study were gathered using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), and the results were analysed using Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The findings revealed that the participants' preferred expressions in refusal strategies were regret or saying "sorry", as well as making excuses or explanations. Also, the study highlighted that the English refusal strategies employed by the Malay students were influenced by the students' culture.

Due to the dearth of research of this nature in Malaysia, this study aspired to investigate the use of refusal strategies among Malay undergraduate students. Specifically, the research aimed to find answers to the following questions:

- What are the refusal strategies used in English by Malay ESL undergraduates?
- Are there differences and similarities in the refusal strategies of male and female Malay ESL undergraduates?
- How does relative power affect the choice of refusal strategies made by Malay ESL undergraduates?

Conceptual Framework
The speech act of refusals is the main component in conducting the current study. One common framework for speech acts of refusals was the one proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). However, there were also past studies, especially those conducted in the Middle East which utilised Al-Issa's (2003) framework. It should be highlighted that Al-Issa's framework was inspired by Beebe et. al.'s conceptual framework.

Table 1 below illustrates that Beebe et al.'s framework (1990) contained more refusal strategies compared to Al-Issa's (2003). A total of 33 refusal strategies were mentioned in Beebe et al.'s framework. Meanwhile, only 26 refusal strategies were stated in Al-Issa's framework where he omitted 8 refusal strategies

from Beebe's and added 7 other strategies. The current study employed a combination of both frameworks with a total of 41 strategies for a richer data collection.

In this conceptual framework, refusal strategies are classified under two categories: direct and indirect strategies. To classify and identify the participants' types of refusal strategies in this study, the semantic formulas/expression in the conceptual framework below (see Table 1) are used as an indicator and reference for this current study. All of the responses will be classified according to these semantic formulas/ expressions by Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (2003). The semantic formula according to Moaveni (2014) is "a set of expression, which could be a word(s), a phrase(s), or a sentence(s), and can function as a refusal" (p. 13).

Table 1. Conceptual Framework

	Beebe et al. (1990)		Al-Issa (2003)	Current Study	Semantic Formulas/ Expression from Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (2003)
Direct Strategies	Performative			Performative	"I refuse"
			Explicit rejection	Explicit rejection	"Hell no", "No way"
	Non-performative:	"No"		"No"	"No"
		2.Negative willingness/ ability	2.Negative ability/ willingness	Negative willingness/ ability	"I can't", "I don't think so"
Indirect Strategies	Statement of regret		Regret	Statement of regret	"I'm sorry...", "I feel terrible...", "Excuse me...", "Forgive me..."
	Wish			Wish	"I wish I could help you..."
	Excuse, reason, explanation		Explanation/ Excuse	Excuse, reason, explanation	"My children will be home that night", "I have a headache", "I have to study", "I'm very busy"
	Statement of alternative:	1.I can do X instead of Y	Alternative	I can do X instead of Y	"I'd rather...", "I'd prefer..."
		2.Why don't you do X instead of Y		Why don't you do X instead of Y	"Why don't you ask someone else?"
	Set conditions for future or past acceptance		1.Future or past acceptance	Future or past acceptance	"Can we do it next week?" "If you had asked me earlier, I would have..."
			2.Conditional acceptance	Conditional acceptance	"If I finish early, I'll help you"
	Promise of future acceptance			Promise of future acceptance	"I'll do it next time", "I promise I'll...", "Next time I'll...", --using "will" or "promise"
	Statement of principle			Statement of principle	"I never do business with friends", "I don't borrow money from friends", "I don't ride with strangers"
	Statement of philosophy			Statement of philosophy	"One can't be too careful"
	1.Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester		Negative consequences	Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	"I won't be any fun tonight" to refuse an invitation. "I'm afraid you can't read my notes", "If you don't get out of here, I'll call the police."

Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:	2.Gulit trip		Guilt trip	For instance: waitress to customers who want to sit a while: "I can't make a living off people who just order coffee"
	3.Criticize the request/ requester etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack	1.Criticize 2.Insult/ Attack/ Threat	Criticize the request/ requester etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack	"That's a terrible idea!" "Who do you think you are?" "You are lazy!" "Who asked about your opinion?"
	4.Request for help, empathy and assistance by dropping or holding the request	Request for understanding	Request for help, empathy and assistance by dropping or holding the request	"Please understand my situation..."
	5.Let interlocutor off the hook		Let interlocutor off the hook	"Don't worry about it", "That's okay", "You don't have to"
	6.Self-defence		Self-defence	"I'm trying my best", "I'm doing all I can do"
		Reprimand	Reprimand	"You should attend classes too", "You shouldn't wait till the last minute"
		Sarcasm	Sarcasm	"I forgot I'm your servant"
Acceptance that functions as a refusal: Avoidance: 1.Non-verbal	1.Unspecific or indefinite reply		Unspecific or indefinite reply	
	2.Lack of enthusiasm		Lack of enthusiasm	
	a. Silence		Silence	
	b. Hesitation		Hesitation	
	c. Do nothing		Do nothing	
	d. Physical departure		Physical departure	
Avoidance: 2.Verbal	a. Topic switch		Topic switch	
	b. Joke		Joke	
	c. Repetition of part of requests, etc.		Repetition of part of requests, etc.	"Monday?"
	d. Postponement		Postponement	"I'll think about it"
	e. Hedging		Hedging	"Gee, I don't know", "I'm not sure"
		Request for information	Request for information	"Why do you think I should take it?"
		Return favour	Return favour	"I'll pay for you and me"
Adjuncts to refusals:	1.Statement of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement	Positive opinion/ feeling/ agreement	Statement of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement	"That's a good idea...", "I'd love to..."
	2.Statement of empathy		Statement of empathy	"I realise you are in a difficult situation"
	3.Pause fillers		Pause fillers	"uhh", "well", "oh", "uhm"
	4.Gratitude/ appreciation	Gratitude	Gratitude/ appreciation	"Thank you very much", "I appreciate it"
		Removal of negativity	Removal of negativity	"You are a nice person but.."
		Define relation	Define relation	"Okay my dear professor but..."

Methodology

The data for this mixed-method study was collected via an open-ended questionnaire that was disseminated to various local universities in Malaysia, however, the feedback received were mainly from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM), and MARA University of Technology (UiTM). The criteria in determining the sample for the study were (1) Malays (2) ESL learners, and (3) undergraduate students. This study utilised stratified sampling method to ensure the representativeness of male and female students to identify their differences and similarities in their use of refusal strategies. Consequently, 60 Malay ESL undergraduate students, consisting of 30 males and 30 females were selected as participants. Their age ranged between 19 to 25 years old. Despite the limited sample size, it was deemed adequate for this small study since the aim was not to generalise the findings but rather to elicit the crucial patterns and differences in their pragmatic competence is using refusal strategies.

1. The Study Design

The study employed Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as its main data collection method. The instrument was converted into an open-ended questionnaire which was disseminated via Google Form. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which was made up of five prompts or situations derived from Al-Issa's (2003) study (refer to Table 2). Each situation had differing relative power. Participants were required to provide their responses for each scenario based on the interlocutors involved. They were also provided with some guidelines which were: (1) the participants were asked to read each situation carefully and give the most appropriate responses to the situations as shown in Table 2; (2) the answers must be typed in English in the provided spaces; (3) the responses must be genuine and authentic i.e. indicating normal replies they would state in those situations; (4) the participants were asked to write the actual words they would say in daily conversation rather than saying "I would..."

For example, in Situation 5 where a participant needs to refuse a request for an interview class project from a friend, the response should be like "Sorry friend, I would love to participate, but I have work to do". This response would then be analysed and coded as four units of strategies (based on Table 1) as shown in the brackets below:

- Sorry: [*statement of regret*]
- Friend: [*define relation*]
- I would love to participate: [*statement of positive opinion/ feeling*]
- but I have work to do: [*excuse/ reason/ explanation*]

Table 2. Description of discourse completion test (Al Issa, 2003)

Situation	Request
Situation 1: Look after books Lecturer [Higher] Friend [Equal] Junior [Lower]	A speaker has to refuse a request from a lecturer, a friend, and a junior to look after books in a cafe.
Situation 2: Carry books and papers Lecturer [Higher] Friend [Equal] Junior [Lower]	A speaker has to refuse a request from a lecturer, a friend, and a junior to carry their books and papers.
Situation 3: Ride Lecturer [Higher] Friend [Equal] Junior [Lower]	A speaker has to refuse a request for a ride from a lecturer, a friend, and a junior to the nearest transportation hub.
Situation 4: Borrow books Lecturer [Higher] Friend [Equal] Junior [Lower]	A speaker has to refuse a request from a lecturer, a friend, and a junior to borrow a book for research or exam.
Situation 5: Interview Lecturer [Higher] Friend [Equal] Junior [Lower]	A speaker has to refuse a request for an interview from a lecturer, a friend, and a junior for a research/ class project.

Results of the Study

1. Refusal Strategies Used by Malay ESL Undergraduates

This section highlights the types of refusal strategies used by Malay ESL undergraduates in five request situations with differing relative power of the addressees. Overall, the sixty undergraduate students utilised 32 out of 41 strategies. Table 3 presents the number of the types of refusal strategies used and their frequencies in the five situations.

Table 3. Number of the types of refusal strategies used and their frequencies in five situations

Situations	Number of the types of refusal strategies	Frequency
Situation 1: Refuse to look after books	17/41	424
Situation 2: Refuse to carry books and papers	19/41	467
Situation 3: Refuse a ride	21/41	476
Situation 4: Refuse to borrow books	24/41	415
Situation 5: Refuse an interview	20/41	440
Total strategies used in all five situations:	32/41	

As illustrated in Table 3, the highest total frequency of the refusal strategies used was in Situation 3 (Refuse a ride) which occurred 476 times, even though only 21 strategies were used by the sixty participants. This contrasts with the total frequency of the refusal strategies in Situation 4 (Refuse to borrow books) which had the highest number of refusal strategies which were 24 but with only 415 occurrences, resulting in the lowest occurrences of refusal strategies used. Meanwhile, Situation 2 (Refuse to carry books and papers) was placed as the second highest total frequency of the refusal strategies used with 467 occurrences with 19 types of refusal strategies, while for Situation 5 (Refuse an interview), there were 440 occurrences of strategies with 20 types of refusal strategies, followed by Situation 1 (Refuse to look after books) which had 424 occurrences with a total number of 17 strategies employed by the participants.

Besides that, this study also highlights the top five refusal strategies made by the Malay learners in five types of situations as illustrated in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Top five refusal strategies in 5 types of situations

Strategy	Frequency	Example
Statement of regret (Indirect)	738	*"I'm sorry, but I don't have much time now." (Participant 1 refusing to a junior)*
Excuse, reason, explanation (Indirect)	680	*"... I need to go to my class right now" (Participant 35 refusing to a lecturer)*
Define relation (Indirect)	273	*"Sorry, my friend!..." (Participant 28 refusing to a friend)*
Negative willingness/ability (Direct)	157	*"Sorry, I can't" (Participant 26 refusing to a junior)*
Why don't you do X instead of Y (Indirect)	59	*"... Why don't you take Grab?" (Participant 34 refusing to junior)*

The top five strategies employed by the participants in the five situations were *Statement of regret* (f = 738), *Excuse, reason, explanation* (f = 672), *Define relation* (f = 273), *Negative willingness/ ability* (f = 157), and *Why don't you do X instead of Y* (f = 59). It is also noted that out of the five strategies, only one strategy, which is *Negative willingness/ ability* that belongs to the Direct category while the other four strategies belong to the Indirect category. It could be deduced from this empirical evidence that Malay learners are less direct when stating their refusals.

2. Differences and Similarities in The Refusal Strategies of Male and Female Learners
Table 5 below demonstrates the direct and indirect strategies used by both male and female Malay ESL undergraduates. It displays all types of direct strategies and the four most frequent types of indirect strategies.

Table 5. Direct and indirect strategies of male and female Malay ESL undergraduates

Refusal Strategies	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Direct				
Performative	0	0.0%	4	3.4%
Explicit rejection	1	1.2%	0	0.0%
"No"	21	25.6%	15	13%
Negative willingness/ability	60	73.2%	97	83.6%
Total	**82**	**100%**	**116**	**100%**
Male – Female Direct Difference (%)		**17.1%**		
Indirect				
Statement of regret	353	41.3%	385	42.9%
Excuse, reason, explanation	335	39.2%	345	38.5%
Define relation	133	15.5%	140	15.6%
Why don't you do X instead of Y	33	4%	26	3%
Total	**854**	**100%**	**896**	**100%**
Male – Female Indirect Difference (%)		**2.4%**		

It could be seen that a total of 116 direct strategies were used by the female respondents as opposed to the male respondents at 82 times when refusing a lecturer, a friend, and a junior with a difference of 17.1% between gender groups. Moreover, among the four direct strategies, the most frequent strategy employed by both genders is *Negative willingness/ ability* with 97 times for females and 60 times for males. This evidence clearly shows that females tended to be more direct in stating their refusals as compared to men.

In terms of their utilisation of indirect refusal strategies, specifically on the top four most frequent types, the female respondents recorded a total frequency of 896 as compared to 854 for the males giving a percentage difference of 2.4% between both genders. This marginal difference in percentage indicates that there is no significant difference between both male and female learners when using the indirect refusal strategies.

However, when a comparison is made between the direct and indirect strategies used by both genders, both male and female respondents chose to be indirect in manifesting their refusals. As shown in Table 5, male respondents used more indirect strategy (854 times) than the direct strategy (82 times), meanwhile female respondents also employed more indirect strategy with 894 occurrences as compared to the direct strategy with only 116 occurrences.

3. The Employment of Refusal Strategies Based on The Relative Power of The Three Different Addressees
Table 6 below summarises the number of refusal strategies and the total frequency of refusal strategies employed by sixty Malay ESL undergraduates across three different addressees (lecturer, friend, junior) in all five situations.

Table 6. Number of refusal strategies and total frequency employed to three different addressees in all five situations

Addressees	Number of refusal strategies used in all five situations	Total frequency in all five situations
Lecturer [Higher]	22	882
Friend [Equal]	24	712
Junior [Lower]	28	628

Based on Table 6 above, there were a total of 22 refusal strategies employed by the participants to refuse a lecturer, 24 refusal strategies for refusing a friend, and 28 refusal strategies for refusing a junior. Despite having the fewest refusal strategies, refusals to a lecturer recorded the highest occurrences of strategies (882 occurrences), followed by refusals to a friend (712 occurrences), and refusals to a junior (628 occurrences). Based on these findings, it could be deduced that in this present research, the number of types of refusal strategies opted by sixty participants had no effect on the total frequency of their usage in refusals.

The number of refusal strategies used by the participants in refusing their friend and junior was found to be higher than the lecturer. This was because in refusing a junior and a friend, the participants were able to use more diverse strategies such as 'Explicit rejection', '*Statement of principle*', '*Guilt trip*', '*Criticize the request/ requester; etc.; insult/ attack*', '*Sarcasm*', '*Joke*', and '*Hedging*'. These types of refusal strategies are thought to be acceptable when it comes to refusing people who have the same or lower relative power. However, these strategies may appear offensive in refusing someone who has greater power such as lecturers. From these findings, it could be inferred that relative power does influence Malay ESL undergraduates' refusal strategy choices.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data from the DCT procedure, a few key findings were derived. The study was able to identify the utilisation of 32 out of 41 refusal strategies by both male and female undergraduates in all five situations with differing relative power. Furthermore, it was also noted that the frequencies for the strategies are generally similar throughout all five situations. Indirectly, this shows that these Malay undergraduates do possess the pragmatic competence in engaging in face-threatening situations such as conveying refusals.

Besides that, a scrutiny on the five most frequent strategies used depicts the fact that four out of five strategies belong to the Indirect category which led to the conclusion that Malay learners are less direct when stating their refusals. This finding concurs with that of Abdul Sattar et al. (2011) where her study revealed that the participants' (ESL Malay undergraduates) preference in refusal strategies were *Statement of regret*, as well as *Making excuses or explanations,* which also belong to the Indirect category. Thus, it could be inferred that Malay learners have a high tendency in being apologetic when indicating refusal.

Nevertheless, a comparison between male and female learners' employment of the direct refusal strategies indicates that females tended to be more direct than their male counterparts. Despite the limited sample size, this result undoubtedly presents a contrasting idea from the stereotypical view where males are perceived to be more direct in communication (George, 2022). One plausible explanation to this scenario is that perhaps females nowadays are bold and more confident to make a stand and to convey such stand. In this study, the female respondents were noted to utilise a lot of '*Negative willingness/ ability*' direct strategy (97 times) by using the phrase 'I can't'. This finding concurs with that of Saad et al. (2016), who in her study found that the word 'I can't' is a direct strategy to demonstrate one's stand clearly. However, it contradicts the findings of Wang (2019) which highlighted that men tend to be more direct than women in stating their refusals.

No significant difference was seen in terms of the respondents' utilisation of indirect refusal strategies. Furthermore, when comparison is made between their use of direct and indirect refusal strategies, the results indicate that both male and female respondents chose to be indirect in manifesting their refusals. These findings are similar to an earlier study in which Saad et al. (2016) discovered that Malay ESL speakers employed more indirect strategy in their refusals. According to Musa et al. (2012), Malays tend to be indirect

in manifesting their refusals because the Malay culture itself teaches Malays to be "polite, sensible and insightful in speech" (p. 175). Hence, these findings show that culture does play a significant role in shaping people's behaviour and perception.

In terms of the relationship between the use of refusal strategies and the relative power of the interlocutors, this study found that relative power does influence Malay ESL undergraduates' refusal strategy choices whereby the respondents tended to utilise more diverse types of strategies when refusing someone with less authority such as a junior and a friend but less so with someone of authority such as a lecturer. Situating this finding within the context of face-threatening act, it could be concluded that both male and female respondents may felt less conscious of the need to save face when refusing a junior and a friend, hence, they were more at ease to utilise strategies such as '*Guilt trip*', '*Criticize the request/ requester; etc.; insult/ attack*', '*Sarcasm*', '*Joke*', and '*Hedging*'. However, they would be more cautious when addressing a person of higher authority, leading to them using less types of refusal strategies. This corresponds with Wolfson's (1989) concept of 'positive face' and 'negative face'. In order to maintain a 'positive face' i.e the desire to be liked by a person of a higher authority, the respondents were rather restricted in using the refusal strategies. However, they were less constrained, more relaxed and comfortable when addressing someone of similar or lower authority. In this respect, it could safely be said that the respondents had acquired the pragmatic knowledge of conveying refusals without deliberately offending those of different relative power.

Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to discover the refusal strategies used by Malay ESL undergraduates in English, to observe the differences and similarities in their employment of refusal strategies based on gender, and to analyse whether relative power has an influence on the choice of their refusal strategies. The key findings of the study showed that all sixty participants employed 32 out of 41 types of refusal strategies to state their refusals to three different addressees (lecturer, friend, junior). The top five refusal strategies utilised were '*Statement of regret', 'Excuse, reason, explanation', 'Define relation', 'Negative willingness/ ability'*, and *'Why don't you do X instead of Y'*. Moreover, it was found that generally male and female Malay ESL undergraduates employed more indirect strategies than direct strategies of refusal which could be related to the cultural elements of the Malay society. Nevertheless, a comparison between both genders shows that female learners prefer to use direct strategies than indirect strategies in stating their refusals which contradicts the stereotypical view of men-women communication styles. It was also discovered that the power relation between the participants and the addressees had a significant impact on the participants' choices of refusal strategies.

However, this study is without limitations. Firstly, it is noted that in this study, not all participants were being spontaneous in writing their responses. On this note, Yuan (2001) highlighted that the responses of DCT were shorter, simpler, less emotional, and less face attentive. Hence, in order to obtain a more in-depth and authentic responses, it is suggested that future research should collect data that combines both elicited and natural discourse such as role play. This is because role-play is more natural in settings while written DCT situations are also possible to gain natural responses based on the participants' spontaneity in responding to the questions.

Next, the number of participants - 60 Malay undergraduates - is considered small which limits the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, since this investigation was a pilot study of a bigger research, the findings are still significant especially in understanding the nuances in using refusal strategies between male and female Malay ESL undergraduates. Secondly, the study was limited in terms of the target group which focused mainly on Malay learners. Hence, it should be highlighted that the strategies employed by the participants may not be relevant to other races in Malaysia because each race has its own culture, communication style and uniqueness. Future research could expand the current study by obtaining data from a bigger sample size and include other races such as Chinese and Indians. It is undoubtedly crucial for us to understand and learn the communication styles of other cultures as it would be very helpful in improving racial tolerance and harmony between the different races in Malaysia.

Informed Consent Statement: All respondents in the study had given their consent.

References

Abdul Sattar, H. Q., Che Lah, S. & Raja Suleiman, R. R. (2011). Refusal strategies in English by Malay university students. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, 11*(3), 69-81.

Al-Issa, A. (2003). Sociocultural transfer in L2 speech behaviours: Evidence and motivating factors. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 27*, 581-601.

Al-Kahtani, S.W. (2005). Refusals realizations in three different cultures: A speech act theoretically based cross-cultural study. *Journal of King Saud University, 18*, 35-57.

Al-Shboul,Y. & Maros, M. (2023). The high and low-context communication styles in refusal strategies by Jordanian Arabic and American English speakers. *Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. 28(3),* 2063-2080.

Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. Scarcella, E. Andersen, S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *On the Development of Communicative Competence in a Second Language*. Newbury House (pp. 55-73).

Brown, P., & Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Eslami, Z. R. (2010). How to develop appropriate refusal strategies. In A. M. Flor, E. U. Juan, *On the Speech act performance: Theoretical, empirical and methodological issues* (pp. 217-236). John Benjamin Publishing Company.

George, K. (2022, August 29). How men and women communicate differently. *Activebeat.* https://activebeat.com/your-health/how-men-and-women-communicate-differently/

Hei, K. C., Ling, W. N., & David, M. K. (2015). The perceived value of silence and spoken words in Malaysian interactions. *SEARCH: The Journal of the Southeast Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities, 7*(1), 53-70.Lakens, D. (2021, January 4). Sample size justification. *Collabra: Psychology, 8(1)*. https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.33267

Mahmud, M. (2013). The roles of social status, age, gender, familiarity, and situations in being polite for Bugis society. *Asian Social Science, 9*(5), 58-72. https://doi: 10.5539/ass.v9n5p58

Maryam Farina & Wu, X. (2012). An intercultural communication study of Chinese and Malaysian university students' refusal to invitation. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 2*(1), 162-176.

Moaveni, H. T. (2014). *A study of refusal strategies by American and International students at an American University*. [Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato].

Musa, H., Sheikh Said, N., Che Rodi, R. & Abd Karim, S. Ab. (2012). Hati budi Melayu: Kajian keperibadian sosial Melayu ke arah penjanaan Melayu gemilang. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, 12*(1), 163-182.Saad, N., Bidin, S. J. & Shabdin, A .A. (2016). Refusal strategies used by Malay ESL students and English native speakers to refuse a request. *Proceeding of ICECRS, 1*(1), pp.253-266. http://dx.doi.org/10.21070/picecrs.v1i1.609

Sadighi, F., Chahardahcherik, S., Delfariyan, M., & Feyzbar, F. (2018). The influence of L2 English acquisition of the request speech act on Persian preschool children. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 6*(4), 25-34.

Searle, J. R., & Vanderveken, D. (1985). *Foundations of illocutionary logic*. Cambridge University Press.

Sumaco, F. T., Imrie, B. C., & Hussain, K. (2014). The consequence of Malaysian national culture values on hotel branding. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 144*, 91-101. https://doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.277

Umale, J. (2011). Pragmatic failure in refusal strategies: British versus Omani interlocutors. *Arab World English Journal, 2*(1), 18-46.

Varisoglu, M.C., Basutku,S. & Kafali,S. (2023). Refusal strategies of foreign students learning Turkish at B1 level. *International Journal of Eurasian Education and Culture.* *8*(20), 301-332. http://dx.doi.org/10.35826/ijoecc.650

Wang, Q. (2019). A comparative study of gender differences in refusal strategies from English majors. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 9*(8), 1040-1048. https://doi: 10.17507/tpls.0908.24

Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL.* Newbury House.

Yuan, Y. (2001). An inquiry into empirical pragmatics data-gathering methods: Written DCTs, oral DCTs, field notes, and natural conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics, 33(2),* 271-292.