



## Iranian EFL learners' sociolinguistic competence: Refusal strategies in focus

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### Abstract

The current study investigated the extent to which Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners are sociolinguistically competent in performing the speech act of refusal. The data were elicited from a sample of 30 Iranian EFL learners, 15 males and 15 females, who responded to situations in a discourse completion task (DCT). The results indicated that the three most frequent refusal strategies are 'excuse, reason, explanation', 'non-performative statement' and 'statement of regret'. The findings revealed the participants' tendency toward positive and negative politeness in refusing. Regarding gender, Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences between males and females in the use of both politeness strategies and refusal strategies. The refusal utterances were also rated by two native English speakers on a three-point politeness Likert scale (1: Polite, 2: Partially polite and 3: Impolite). The rating was that out of the 148 utterances (i.e., 82% of the entire sample of refusal utterances being 180 utterances), only 43 refusals, accounting for 29%, had been rated as 'Polite', with the remaining 105 utterances rated as either 'Partially polite' or 'Impolite'. The analysis of the content of the refusal semantic formulas included elements of both politeness and impoliteness. Elements that contributed to appropriacy included indirectness, certain syntactic and lexical structures, intensification, among others while the elements of impoliteness were length of the semantic formulas (both shortness and verbosity), lack of total redress, mitigation and politeness markers, among other things. In general, the participants were found to be in need of improvement in the appropriate realization of refusal.

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## 1. Introduction

As a highly complex act which requires a high level of pragmatic competence on the part of the refuser to avoid causing offence to the addressee, a refusal functions as a dispreferred response initiated by an offer, invitation, request or suggestion and can put the interlocutor's positive face at risk if performed inappropriately (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2011). Therefore, a face-threatening act (FTA) such as refusal needs to be accompanied by redress, mitigation and politeness markers. The problem arises when individuals speak a language that is not their native language but a language they have learned. Kasper (1981, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 2001, p. 6), for instance, argued that "Learners frequently underuse politeness marking in L2 even though they regularly mark their utterances for politeness in L1". In a similar vein, Doughty (2005) stated that lack of politeness markers is also among the typical problems observed in the second language behavior of the Canadian English-French

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bilinguals in immersion programs. Most probably, Doughty's findings can be true of many EFL learners. This issue has recently motivated a large number of research studies on politeness (e.g., Abdul Sattar, Lah, & Suleiman, 2011; Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Farnia & Wu, 2012; Nelson, Al Batal, & El Bakary, 2002; Tahakashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Umale, 2011; Wannaruk, 2008, to name but a few). The concept of politeness and polite behavior, as an indicator of pragmatic development and sociolinguistic ability, has been on the agenda for a number of decades and has recently commanded wide assent. The acquisition of pragmatic competence to be an effective communicator in the target language is a long task to carry out and a long-term, though desirable, goal to achieve.

The ability to appropriately realize and encode a speech act in one's native language or in a second or foreign language (L2) relates to what has been labeled the 'sociolinguistic ability' or, more broadly, the 'pragmatic ability'. More specifically, Canale and Swain (1980, as cited in Littlewood, 2011, p. 546) defined sociolinguistic competence as the "knowledge of how to use language appropriately in social situations, e. g. conveying suitable degrees of formality, directness and so on".

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed five politeness strategies for doing an FTA: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record politeness and do not do FTA.

1. Bald on record politeness strategies constitute those strategies the most significant feature of which is the lack of any mitigation and indirectness. Verschueren (2003) stated that these are "completely open and direct, without any attempt to let the addressee preserve some freedom of action or some sense of equality" (p. 45). The following request is an example of bald on record politeness strategy: *Open the door!*

2. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Chodorowska-Pilch, 2008, p. 1361), a positive politeness strategy is "approach-based; it 'anoints' the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S [speaker] wants H [hearer]'s wants [...]". '*Please open the door, darling*' exemplifies positive politeness.

3. According to Chodorowska-Pilch, (2008), a negative politeness strategy is 'avoidance-based' and the speaker realizes this strategy by utilizing strategies that recognize and preserve the hearer's negative-face wants; '*Can you please open the door?*' is an instance of negative politeness strategy.

4. Off-record strategies can be achieved by minimizing the imposition on the hearer through the use of hints, metaphors and making one's intention vague (Morkus, 2009). According to Ogiermann (2009), they pose the speaker or the hearer to the highest amount of redress. Austin (1987) enumerated hints, allusions, irony, double-edged compliments, oblique requests, euphemisms and puns to be the strategies employed in off record politeness. '*It's cold in here*' as a hint to prompt the addressee to open the door is an example of off record politeness.

5. The fifth strategy to be polite is to choose not perform or do the FTA which is deemed to be the most face-saving act (Ogiermann, 2009). That is to say, speakers may prefer not to put their own or the addressee's face at risk by refraining from doing a certain speech act.

The present study investigates extent to which Iranian EFL learners have become sociolinguistically competent in encoding the speech act of refusal. The study is motivated by the dearth of research studies particularly by the fact that refusals have not been welcomed very extensively in the Iranian context. The study is of significance in that it touches upon an area of communicative competence which is of a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication.

### 1.1. Literature review

As a significant FTA, a refusal leads to disruption in harmony in relationships. Therefore, to save a relationship from disruption, the interlocutors are required to employ a variety of strategies to mitigate

the disruptive effect of the act of refusing (Umale, 2011). The taxonomy of refusal strategies, consisting of Direct Refusals, Indirect Refusals and Adjuncts to Refusal, as classified by Beebe, Tahakashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990, as cited in Farnia & Wu, 2012, p.174) is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Classification of refusal strategies

Type	Strategies	Semantic Formulas
I) Direct	A) Performative	I refuse
	B) Non-performative statement	
II) Indirect	1) "No"	
	2) Negative willingness/ability	I can't; I won't; I don't think so.
	A) Statement of regret	I'm sorry; I feel terrible.
	B) Wish	I wish I could help you.
	C) Excuse, reason, explanation	I have a headache.
	D) Statement of alternative	
	1) I can do X instead of Y	I'd rather do...; I'd prefer
	2) Why don't you do X instead of Y	Why don't you ask someone else
	E) Set condition for future or past acceptance	If you had asked me earlier, I would have...
	F) Promise of future acceptance	I'll do it next time; I promise I'll...; - Using "will" of promise or "promise"
	G. Statement of principle	I never do business with friends.
	H. Statement of philosophy	One can't be too careful.
	I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	
1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	"I won't be any fun tonight" to refuse an invitation	
2. Guilt trip	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	Who do you think you are?; That's a terrible idea!	
4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.		
5. Let interlocutor off the hook	Don't worry about it; That's okay; You don't have to.	
6. Self-defense	I'm trying my best; I'm doing all I can.	
J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal		
1. Unspecific or indefinite reply		
2. Lack of enthusiasm		
K. Avoidance		
1. Nonverbal		
a. Silence		

	b. Hesitation	
	c. Do nothing	
	d. Physical departure	
	2. Verbal	
	a. Topic switch	
	b. Joke	
	c. Repetition of part of request, etc.	Monday?
	d. Postponement	I'll think about it.
	e. Hedging	Gee, I don't know; I'm not sure.
Adjuncts to refusals	1. Statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement	That's a good idea...; I'd love to...
	2. Statement of empathy	I realize you are in a difficult situation.
	3. Pause filler	uhh; well; uhm.
	4. Gratitude/appreciation	

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Special attention has been directed to refusal behavior of EFL learners as refusals are highly face-threatening and performing them in an inappropriate way can easily lead to face loss and disruption of social harmony and consequently serious breakdowns in communication. The line of research has shifted attention to various issues surrounding this speech act such as the comparison of native and non-native speakers' refusal strategies (Umale, 2011), the effect of instruction on the language learners' refusals (Lingli & Wannaruk, 2010), and so forth. Umale (2011) carried out a study to investigate the similarities and differences between ten British speakers and ten Omanis who responded to situations in a DCT which consisted of various interlocutor statuses (low, high and equal). Umale's findings suggested that both the Omanis and the British speakers tended to use indirect refusals strategies, mainly statement of regret, care for the interlocutor's feeling, giving reasons and promise for future acceptance, to refuse requests from their superiors. Umale concluded that while Omanis tried to sound polite when refusing, their too long answers often led to pragmalinguistic failure.

The role of implicit and explicit instruction in English refusals of 62 Chinese learners of English was examined by Lingli and Wannaruk (2010). They found that while no significant difference was observed with regard to refusals to offers and suggestions, the explicit instruction was better than implicit instruction in refusals to invitations and requests. In general, they concluded, explicit teaching in English of refusals was found to be better than implicit instruction. The effect of explicit instruction on the development of polite refusal strategies was also the subject of investigation in another study (Silva, 2003). The study incorporated task-based principles into the teaching of the sociopragmatic as well as the pragmalinguistic aspects of refusals. The findings revealed that the subjects in the experimental group, a sample of 14 low-intermediate learners of English, made considerable pragmatic development compared to those in the control group. For instance, some refusal strategies which were absent in the pre-test appeared in the post-test phase which resulted in more polite refusals. Yang (2008) conducted a study of refusal strategies and the motivating acts that prompted the refusals to be made. The data gathered from clips taken from five Chinese TV series indicated that refusals were most often prompted by requests, offers, invitations and suggestions.

Researchers have also focused on the instrumentation phase of interlanguage research. Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2011) examined the appropriate data collection tools for gathering data on refusals to requests, comparing oral-role plays, written discourse completion tasks and awareness tests and their

effect on the production and comprehension of refusals among university students. They concluded their study with the statement that these tasks can be utilized not only to collect data on pragmatics-related aspects of language learning but also to teach these aspects to L2 or FL learners. Al-Kahtani (2005) took into account the way refusal strategies are realized in three different cultures, namely American, Arab and Japanese, but in the same language, English. Al-Kahtani's study of these three cultural groups showed that although refusals were realized differently in different cultures, there were similarities in the way that requests were refused by the groups. He found out that regret, excuse, reason and explanation were the most frequent refusal strategies used. He recommended that teachers teach the appropriate use of refusal strategies so that EFL learners avoid breakdowns in cross-cultural communication. In a study of Chinese and Malaysian university students' refusal behavior, Farnia and Wu (2012) investigated the refusals to invitation by use of a written discourse completion test and an immediate structured interview aimed to see examine their perception concerning their cognition and language of thought in the process of refusing. The findings showed that both groups used similar types of refusal strategies but they differed in the frequency of the refusals. In addition, the most frequent refusal strategies were found to be statement of regret, excuses, reasons and explanation and expression of negative ability and willingness. As regards the adjuncts to refusals, the results also revealed that the participants used positive opinions, feelings, or agreement, expressions of gratitude and appreciation and alerters most frequently of all.

Research on refusal has been rigorous in the Iranian context as well. For instance, Hassani, Mardani and Dastjerdi (2011) focused on the role of gender and social status in their cross-linguistic study of the refusal strategies of a group of 60 EFL learners who responded to a DCT with a time interval in between. The results showed no significant difference as regards the role of gender and the higher social status was found to result in the learners' use of indirect refusal strategies in Persian while more direct strategies were used in English. In another study, Allami and Naeimi (2011) focused on the pragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners in their cross-linguistic study in which they examined the frequency, shift and content of semantic formulae of the refusals of three groups of Persian speakers, Persian learners of English and native speakers of English, taking into account the learners' language proficiency, status of interlocutors and types of eliciting acts. The findings indicated that differences in the shift, frequency and semantic formulae of the native and nonnative speakers and that the most frequently used refusal strategies were direct refusals, statement of regret and excuse, reason and explanation. Allami and Naeimi (2011) noted that Iranian EFL learners demonstrated evidence of pragmatic transfer of the sociocultural norms from their L1 (Persian) to L2 (English).

The current study will examine the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners to refuse in an attempt to fathom out the extent to which these strategies have been employed appropriately, hence a measurement of the sociolinguistic competence/development and language appropriacy.

## *1.2. Research questions*

The following research questions were formulated to guide the current study:

1. What are the most frequent refusal strategies and adjuncts to refusals used by Iranian EFL learners across gender?
2. Is there any significant difference between males and females in their use of refusal strategies?
3. What are the politeness strategies used in refusal by Iranian EFL learners across interlocutor power?

4. Is there any significant difference between males and females in their use of politeness strategies in refusal?

5. How do native English speakers evaluate Iranian EFL learners' refusal utterances on the politeness Likert scale?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 30 (15 males and 15 females) Iranian MA EFL learners/holders. Their age ranged from 23 to 31 and they were contacted via mail to fill out the DCT. They were asked to respond immediately although no time limit was set for their response. Nearly all the participants were teachers in English at either private language institutes or public schools.

### 2.2. Instrument(s)

The data were collected by means of a DCT. The DCT employed in Allami and Naeimi's (2011) study was utilized in the current study to collect data on the realization of refusal by Iranian EFL learners. It is important to note that the DCT used by Allami and Naeimi comprised 12 situations, 6 situations of which were selected for the purposes of the current study. In doing so, the researchers considered the familiarity and suitability of the situations for the intended purpose as well as the fact that an equal number in each power level be selected (i.e., two situations for each power status). Information on the situations of the DCT is presented in Table 2. In this table, power (P) is shown by means -P (the speaker is lower than the hearer), +P (the speaker is higher than the hearer) and =P (the speaker and hearer are equal).

**Table 2.** The description of the construction of refusal situations

No.	Situations	Power
1	Spending an extra hour	(-P) Low-High
2	Eating another piece of cake	(=P) Equals
3	Borrowing lecture notes	(=P) Equals
4	Organizing oneself better	(+P) High-Low
5	Asking for change in schedule	(-P) Low-High
6	Asking for salary raise	(+P) High-Low

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were analyzed in four phases. First, the frequencies of the refusal strategies and adjuncts to refusals were determined by analyzing the refusal semantic formulas according to the taxonomy of refusal strategies as proposed by Tahakashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) (see section 1.1 above). In the next step, the politeness strategies employed in the data were determined based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The third phase included an evaluation of the refusal semantic formulas in terms of politeness by two native English speakers on a three-point politeness Likert scale as such: 1:

Polite, 2: Partially polite and 3: Impolite. Finally, the semantic formulas were examined qualitatively in light of the previous research on politeness and the elements of politeness and impoliteness were determined in this phase.

### 3. Results

The present study touched upon Iranian EFL learners' refusal behavior from a sociolinguistic viewpoint and the results are presented below.

#### 3.1. Refusal strategy use

The participants employed all the refusal strategies but two strategies, namely performative and statement of philosophy. Table 3 summarizes the results of refusal strategy use among Iranian EFL learners.

**Table 3.** Raw frequency and percentage of refusal strategies across gender

Type	Refusal strategy	Group					
		Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
I) Direct	A. Performative	0	0	0	0	0	0
	B. Non-performative statement	27	9.6	36	12.8	63	22.3
II) Indirect	A. Statement of regret	19	6.7	20	7.1	39	13.8
	B. Wish	5	1.8	4	1.4	9	3.2
	C. Excuse, reason, explanation	62	22	55	19.5	117	41.5
	D. Statement of alternative	2	0.7	3	1.1	5	1.8
	E. Set condition for future or past acceptance	3	1.1	2	0.7	5	1.8
	F. Promise of future acceptance	4	1.4	5	1.8	9	3.2
	G. Statement of principle	0	0	1	0.3	1	0.3
	H. Statement of philosophy	0	0	0	0	0	0
	I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	13	4.6	12	4.2	25	8.8
	J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal	2	0.7	2	0.7	4	1.4
	K. Avoidance	4	2.4	1	0.3	5	2.76
Total		141	50	141	50	282	100

These findings are consistent with those of Nelson, et al. (2002), Wannaruk (2008), Allami and Naeimi (2011), Abdul Sattar, et al. (2011), Umale (2011) and Farnia and Wu (2012).

Table 3 shows that Iranian EFL learners' three most frequent strategies of refusing are excuse, reason, explanation, non-performative statement and statement of regret. The results demonstrated reasons and excuses, however, were not specific, a finding which is again in keeping with Allami and Naeimi's (2011) findings. For example, such general excuses as 'I have so many problems with the expenses of this bookstore', 'we're not in a good situation economically right now', and 'I have a lot of work to do sir' abounded in the participants' refusals. Allami and Naeimi noted that the high frequency of excuse, reason and explanation in the refusals of Iranian learners can be attributed to their attempt to sound polite and to their cultural specificities. They also reported that Americans' excuses, unlike those of Iranians, were more specific.

Another finding is that the participants rarely avoided providing the addressee with a response, whether verbally or non-verbally, which can be interpreted as their attempt to be polite. Males, however, tended to use avoidance more frequently than females. This might be related to the fact that, as Holmes (1989) pointed out, women often tend to be more polite than men and therefore have employed this strategy less frequently.

Figure 1 shows the directness level of the refusal strategies across gender.

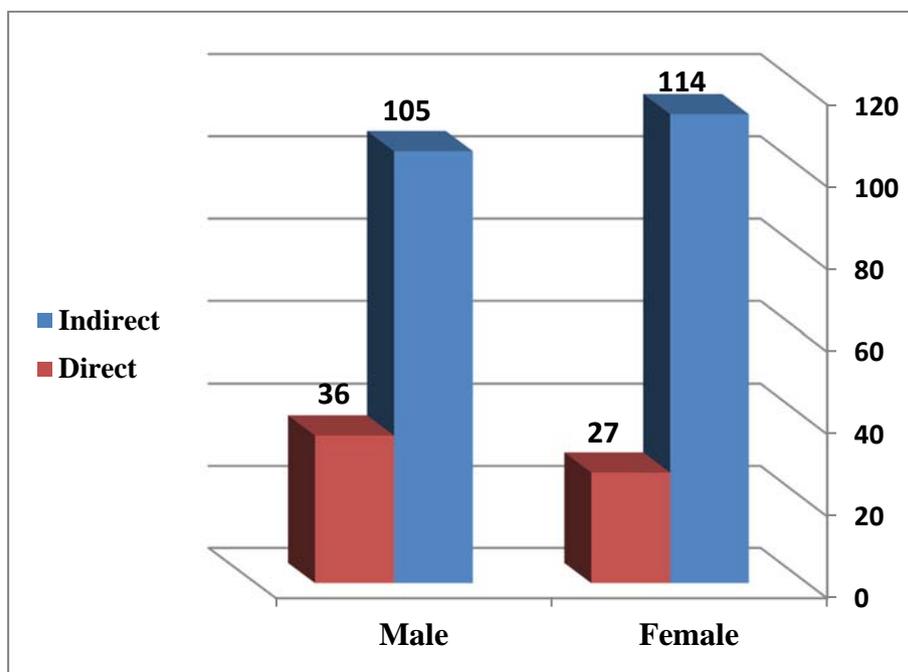


Figure 1. Frequency of type of refusal strategies across gender

Figure 1 shows that, overall, females' refusal behavior is more direct than the males'. This difference in the level of directness is not very considerable, though.

In addition to refusal strategies, the study also examined the participants' use of adjuncts to refusals. The results in this regard are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of adjuncts to refusal strategies across gender

Adjunct	Group		
	Male	Female	Total

	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1. Statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement	17	17.5	15	15.5	32	33
2. Statement of empathy	1	1	0	0	1	1
3. Pause filler	22	22.7	12	12.4	34	35
4. Gratitude/appreciation	16	16.5	14	14.4	30	30.9
Total	56	57.7	41	42.3	97	100

As shown in Table 4 above, the participants used all types of adjuncts but statement of empathy with almost the same frequency. These findings are in line with Farnia and Wu (2012) except for the adjunct of 'pause fillers'. Also, Table 4 shows that male EFL learners use more adjuncts compared to females. The high frequency of gratitude and statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement is in line with Allami and Naeimi's (2011) findings.

As shown in Table 4 above, statement of empathy was the least frequent adjunct used. Since by using this adjunct, the refuser seeks the requester's solidarity (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2011), the very limited use of statement of empathy is indicative of the learners' inability to employ this mitigator in refusals. Morkus (2009) posited that adjuncts are "preliminary remarks that cannot stand alone and function as refusals" (p. 82).

### 3.2. *The role of gender in refusal strategy*

The role of gender in the use of refusal strategies was addressed in the second research question. The Chi-square analysis showed no significant difference regarding the role of gender in the use of refusal strategies ( $X^2= 5.192$ ,  $p= .878 > .05$ ). Table 5 sums up the results in this connection. Based on this analysis, the third null hypothesis is confirmed.

**Table 5.** Chi-square analysis of refusal strategy use

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	5.192	10	.87

N=282 p< .05 Critical Value: 18.307

### 3.3. *Politeness strategy use in refusal across gender and power*

Refusing a request, suggestion or an offer requires that S direct special attention to H's face so as to avoid unintended breakdowns in communication since refusals are notoriously face-threatening. To sound polite, EFL learners should equip their refusals, like any other speech act, with certain mitigators or politeness markers. The participants used politeness strategies in their refusals the frequency of which is summarized in Table 6 below. This was addressed in the fourth research question.

**Table 6.** Politeness super-strategy use across power and gender in refusal

Power	BOR		PSP		NGP		OFR		Do not do FTA	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
+P (S>H; Sit # 5 & 6)	8	3	20	20	12	23	2	4	0	0
=P (S=H; Sit # 2 & 3)	1	2	25	20	11	12	2	2	0	0
-P (S<H; Sit # 1 & 4)	1	1	26	26	26	17	1	0	0	0
Total	10	6	71	66	49	52	5	6	0	0

*Note.* Sit= Situation; M= Male; F= Female; BOR: bald on record; PSP: positive politeness; NGP: negative politeness; OFR: off record.

Table 6 shows that the major politeness strategies employed in refusals were positive and negative politeness. Although it has been stated in the literature that negative politeness strategies are used mainly by a low status person addressing a higher person status, the participants of this study used both positive and negative politeness simultaneously. The markers of negative and positive politeness are exemplified in the following refusal utterances provided in the data.

The role that gender plays in the use of politeness strategies was investigated using Chi-square in Table 7. The results showed no significant difference between males and females ( $X^2= 1.269$ ,  $p= .737 > .05$ ).

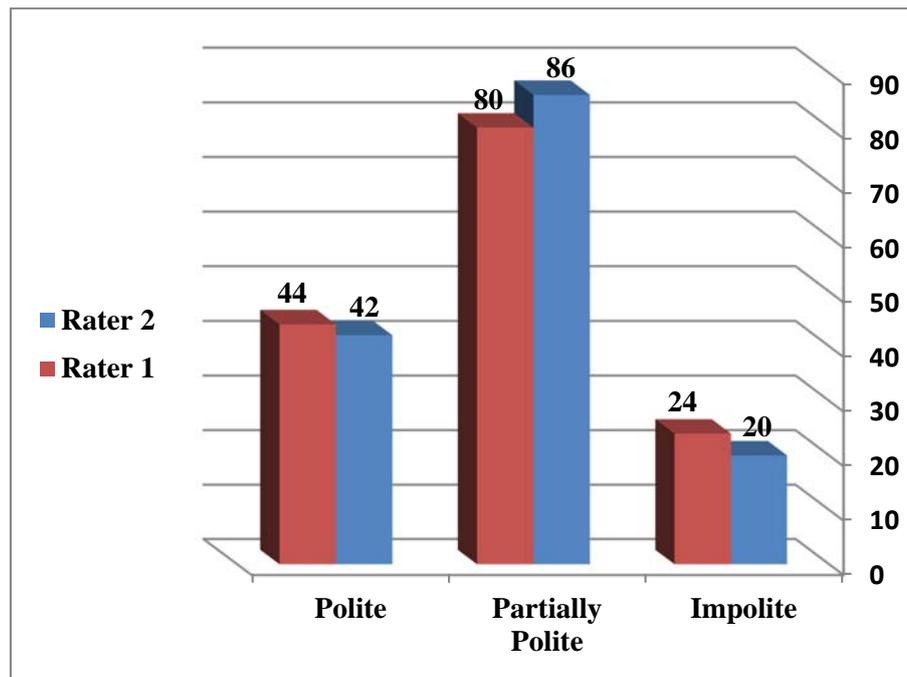
**Table 7.** Chi-square analysis of politeness strategy use in refusal

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	1.269	3	.737

N= 265 p< .05 Critical Value: 7.815

### 3.4. Native speakers' assessment

The total number of the refusal utterances was 148 utterances. Figure 2 summarizes the NS's assessment which was dealt with in the last research question.



**Figure 2.** NS' Assessment of the degree of politeness of the refusal utterances

As can be seen in Figure 2, the native speakers' rating of politeness indicated that on average, only 43 refusals, accounting for 29%, were rated as polite while 22 (14.9%) refusals were said to be impolite with the majority of the refusals (56.1%) rated as partially polite. It can be seen that in the majority of the cases of refusals, Iranian EFL learners were found to be partially polite. This finding shows that they have not been able to use appropriate politeness strategies in 56.1% of the cases. Polite and impolite refusals, on the other hand, constituted 29% and 14.9% of the number of refusals.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Qualitative analysis of refusal strategies

In this part, polite and impolite refusal utterances for each social status level (high, equal, low) and the participants' responses with their degree of politeness are presented and the reasons for their politeness or impoliteness are outlined. It is noteworthy that the labels 'polite' and 'impolite' used here are based on the native speakers' assessment.

#### *S# 1 (+P; Speaker < Hearer)*

You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave the office.

Boss: If it's okay with you, I'd like you to spend an extra hour or two so that we can finish up with this work. Can you stay little longer at the office?

#### Polite refusals

1. Female speaker: *I wish I could, I'll work harder next days and I'm sure we can finish it soon.*
2. Female speaker: *Please excuse me, I have to go.*

3. Female speaker: *Oh, unfortunately, 'I've got to go right now. I'm so sorry, but I promise to stay longer tomorrow.*

4. Female speaker: *Oh, I'm afraid I can't. I'm so sorry Boss. I'm invited to a family party. Everyone is waiting for me. I really can't stay more. I'm so sorry.*

5. Male speaker: *Well, I wish I would, but I can't. Sorry.*

6. Male speaker: *Unfortunately, I'm afraid I've to leave however I promise to make up for it soon.*

7. Male speaker: *Oh, actually I would be more than glad to stay, but I have an appointment with my dentist to fix one of my decayed teeth which is giving me a hard time!*

8. Male speaker: *I'm really sorry. I have already other plans.*

Hearing a refusal results in disappointment initially, so the refuser should do his/her best to lessen the disappointment by using phrases like *'I'm (so) sorry, but...'* or *'I'd love to, but...'*. These mitigators prepare the refused person for disappointment before hearing the answer. Therefore, the above refusals were deemed polite since most of them included apologizing or sympathy as negative politeness strategies employed to soften the threat of the refusal. A refusal is required to be expressed using different maneuvers particularly strategies that show the indirectness of the refusal so that learners are not labeled rude or impolite (Martinez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2011). All of the above refusals are indirect and contain *pre-refusals* such as pause fillers (*well, oh*), apologizing and expressing regret (*I'm really sorry*) and requests for forgiveness (*Please excuse me*) which have added to the politeness degree of the refusals. These refusals also contain *post-refusals* like promises for future acceptance (*I promise to stay longer tomorrow*) which lessen the threat of the refusal (Levinson, 1997). Promising is a positive politeness strategy that has been employed in refusals 1, 3 and 6. This strategy removes a large extent of the threat of the refusal posed to H's negative face. For example, *I promise to make up for it soon* will in all probability result in H's confidence that his/her request is of significance to S and his/her freedom of action has not been limited.

#### Impolite refusals

1. Female speaker: *I wish I could help you.*

2. Male speaker: *Not really, I am actually running out of the time and have to be somewhere at (...).*

Reasonably, H expects an apology for the refusal or, as Schiffrin (2005) explicated, at least an explanation or a justification that can serve as a mitigator to soften the refusal. However, the above refusals lack this strategy and in fact they emphasize the refusal itself. The first refusal does not contain any mitigator to soften the threat of the refusal while the reason provided in Example 2 is not plausible enough.

#### S# 5 (+P; Speaker > Hearer)

You teach English at a university. It is just about the middle of the semester now. One of your students asks to speak to you.

Student: Ah, excuse me; some of the students were talking after class yesterday. We kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in conversation and less on grammar.

#### Polite refusals

1. Female speaker: *Thanks a lot for your consideration, but more practice in conversation doesn't match the syllabus!*

2. Female speaker: *Thanks for your suggestion but I think this method is more helpful.*

3. Female speaker: *Well, conversation is not an intended goal for your course. It's general academic English rather than some conversational class in an institution.*

4. Male speaker: *Unfortunately I cannot do that because I have to go by the curriculum.*
5. Male speaker: *Sorry, we should follow the syllabus.*
6. Male speaker: *Maybe you're right but regarding the syllabus grammar is the focus of this course.*

The adjuncts to refusals utilized in Examples 1 and 2 in the form of appreciation foster the solidarity between S and H and lessens the degree of power. This strategy is a compliment that serves to preserve H's positive face (Morkus, 2009). According to Holmes (1989), compliments are positive politeness strategies. Examples 2, 4 and 6 have been hedged which results in H's feeling that his/her freedom of action (here, making a request or suggestion) is not impeded. In addition, in most of these utterances, S has removed him/herself from the focal point by mentioning the fact that the reason for failing to comply with the student's request is the regulations over which he/she has no control: *I have to go by the curriculum*. Therefore, both positive and negative politeness strategies have been employed here by a superior to a subordinate.

#### Impolite refusals

1. Female speaker: *I'm eager to know how you can make your sentences within a conversation without knowing grammar.*
2. Female speaker: *I'm your professor and I decide what to teach and what not to teach. According what the course requires I think it's better for your class to work more on grammar rather than conversation.*
3. Female speaker: *I think it's something I should decide about. Isn't it?*
4. Female speaker: *I have more than 10 years of teaching experience and I think you'd better have more focus on grammar than conversation now. When I feel you have got sufficient proficiency in grammar, then I will get down to conversation. Ok?*
5. Male speaker: *Well, I don't agree with you. You have to follow what I already required.*
6. Male speaker: *Sure! Any other suggestion? How about I give you guys ice cream after the class?!?*
7. Male speaker: *I know what I'm doing.*
8. Male speaker: *You [had] better focus on your job and let me focus on mine!*

One common feature of some of the above refusals is that they are too long, thus flouting Grice's maxim of quantity. Their length can be the reason of their impoliteness as was the case with Omanis' refusals in Umale's (2011) study which were found to be impolite on the grounds of being too long and thus verbose. Criticizing the requester in Examples 2, 3, 7 and 8 and the refuser's sarcastic tone in 6 as well as the refuser's emphasis on his / her authority as the professor and thus asserting his / her power, instead of solidarity, have led these refusals to be interpreted as impolite and rude.

#### S# 3 (-P; Speaker = Hearer)

You are a junior in college. You attend classes regularly and take good notes. Your classmate often misses class and asks you for the lecture notes.

Classmate: Oh God. We have an exam tomorrow but I don't have notes from last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?

#### Polite refusals

1. Female speaker: *I really want to help you but I need it myself.*
2. Female speaker: *I'm so sorry. Unfortunately I didn't bring my notes with me. I left them in home, Babolsar (a city in Iran). If you had told me sooner I would have brought them for you.*

3. Female speaker:
4. Male speaker: *I wish I could but unfortunately I haven't reviewed my notes yet.*
5. Male speaker: *If you want to copy them that's ok, otherwise I'm so sorry; ask another friend.*
6. Male speaker: *I wish I could, but I need my notes, sorry.*

The positive point about the above refusals is the use of the adjunct 'Statement of positive opinion/agreement' in 1, the conditional in Example 2 and wish in Examples 4 and 6. An adjunct does not form part of a refusal. Nevertheless, the positive opinion that the female speaker has voiced shows her concern for the hearer's face. By doing so, she has redressed the refusal to a large degree. Kwon's (2004) study revealed that use of adjuncts is a characteristic of the refusals of American English. The wish expressed in Examples 4 and 6 has significantly minimized the threat to H's positive face (Morkus, 2009). Schiffrin (2005) explicated that to soften a refusal, it should be accompanied by an explanation or justification. Some of the above refusals have been mitigated by use of this procedure.

#### Impolite refusals

1. Female speaker: *I do not think it is possible. You'd better learn to depend on yourself. You know, I really care more about your life.*
2. Female speaker: *No! That is your problem not my problem! Right?!!!*
3. Female speaker: *But what about tomorrow's exam?*
4. Male speaker: *Nope! I haven't forgotten the last time you borrowed them!*
5. Male speaker: *Sorry, and it's non-negotiable!*
6. Male speaker: *Well you know I'm gonna have a look at them today. Why don't you ask me earlier? Now you ask?! Sorry pal.*

Almost all of the above refusals contain criticisms leveled at the interlocutor which are extremely severe and thus threaten H's face to a great degree. Overall, 8.8% of the refusals were expressed by use of this strategy which is a sub-strategy of 'Let the interlocutor off the hook'. These criticisms can be interpreted as ways of showing one's power and disapproval of H's request/suggestion, hence the threat to H's positive face. Aksoyalp (2009), investigating the refusal strategies in a case study, assumed that the roots of the use of such a strategy went back to negative pragmatic transfer of pragmalinguistic conventions from the participants' L1.

## 5. Conclusions

The current study was carried out with the aim of demonstrating how sociolinguistically competent Iranian EFL learners are in refusing. The results revealed that the participants' use of refusal strategies was flawed and that it is in need of improvement. This improvement can be provided for the participants by means of raising their awareness of the cross-cultural differences in realizing various speech acts. The study also indicated that what might be needed is that the elements of politeness that were found in this study should be brought to the attention of language learners. That is, the learners should be made aware of both the elements of politeness and those of impoliteness while conforming to the former and avoiding the latter.

It is also suggested that teachers, as one of the main sources of input for learners, stress the importance of such highly face-threatening acts as refusal in everyday life encounters and how this can easily lead to serious breakdowns in communication, particularly when communication involves interlocutors from various cultures. The study identified the elements of both politeness and

impoliteness of the sample of refusal utterances. This simply implies that language learners are to bear in mind what makes a refusal utterance sound polite or impolite. The learners are also recommended to pay special attention to the role of the interlocutors' relative power and social status in interaction which, according to Brown and Gilman (1960), originate in "physical strength, wealth, age, sex, institutionalized role in the church, the state, the army or within the family" (p. 257). Power has been construed as one of the factors that determine which politeness strategy is to be chosen by the interactants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, power relationships are established almost in all interactions, especially when this entails individuals from asymmetrical power relations. Finally, textbook developers and material designers are to include more pragmatics-oriented, more use-oriented, as opposed to usage-oriented, exercises, contents and items. This is hoped to result in increased EFL learners' pragmatic awareness of the sociocultural norms that must be borne in mind while using the target language.

In conclusion, it can be said that EFL learners will not be able to behave politely and appropriately unless they fully understand the power dynamics at play among interactants. Investigating this aspect of language learning can reveal the extent of their sociolinguistic development, or to be more precise, the extent to which they have become 'polite' in the target language, here English.

Undoubtedly, no study is comprehensive from every aspect. The door is, for certain, left open to new areas of research. Future research can explore other speech acts than refusal including suggestion, request, complaint, among others. The data for the current study were gathered by means of a DCT. New studies can benefit from other data collection tools such as role-plays and interviews. Lastly, it is recommended that studies with larger sample sizes be conducted.

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### Appendix A. Discourse Completion Task for Refusal

Instruction: Please read the following refusal situations. After each situation you will be asked to write a response in the blank after 'you'. Imagine that you do NOT want to comply (=agree) with their request, invitation, etc. Please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation. The data will be used for research purposes only.

1) You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave the office.

Boss: If it's okay with you, I'd like you to spend an extra hour or two so that we can finish up with this work. Can you stay little longer at the office?

You: .....

Boss: Well, that's too bad...I was hoping you could stay.

2) You are at a friend's house for lunch.

Friend: How about another piece of cake?

You: .....

Friend: Come on, just a little piece?

3) You are a junior in college. You attend classes regularly and take good notes. Your classmate often misses class and asks you for the lecture notes.

Classmate: Oh God. We have an exam tomorrow but I don't have notes from last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?

You: .....

Classmate: Well...then I guess I'll have to ask someone else.

4) Your boss just asked you to bring a report to him. You can't find the report on your desk because your desk is much disorganized. Your boss walks over.

Boss: You know, maybe you should try to organize yourself better. I always write things down on a piece of paper so I don't forget them. Why don't you try it?

You: .....

Boss: Well...it was only an idea anyway.

5) You teach English at a university. It is just about the middle of the semester now. One of your students asks to speak to you.

Student: Ah, excuse me; some of the students were talking after class yesterday. We kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in conversation and less on grammar.

You: .....

Student: Well...it was only a suggestion.

6) You are the owner of a book store. One of your best workers asks to speak to you in private.

Worker: As you know, I've been here just a little over a year, and I know you've been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be honest I really need an increase in pay.

You: .....

Worker: Well...then I guess I'll have to look for another job.

## Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin toplumsal dil yetisi: Çok iyi bilinen reddetme stratejileri

### Öz

Bu çalışma, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen İranlı dil öğrencilerinin reddetme söz eylemini gerçekleştirmede toplumsal dil bilimde ne dereceye kadar yeterli oldukları araştırıldı. Bilgi durumlara söylev tamamlama görevleriyle yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen 15i erkek 15i kadın 30 İranlı öğrenci örnek grubundan temin edildi. Sonuçlar, en sık kullanılan 3 öğrenme stratejisinin mazeret, neden ve açıklama, yerine getirmeme durumu ve pişmanlık durumu olduğunu gösterdi. Bulgular, katılımcıların reddederken yakınsak ve uzaksak inceliğe eğilimlerinin olduğunu ortaya çıkardı. Cinsiyet hususunda ki kare analizi, nezaket ve reddetme stratejilerinin kullanımında kadınlar ve erkekler arasında kayda değer bir fark olmadığını gösterdi. Reddetme ifadeleri ayrıca anadili İngilizce olan iki kişi tarafından 3'lü nezaket Likert ölçeğinde sınıflandırıldı. (1.Nazik, 2. Kısmen nazik, 3. Kaba). Oran, 148 ifadeden oluşuyordu. (örneğin reddetme ifadelerinin tüm örneğinin % 82si 180 ifadeye tekabül ediyor.), % 29'u hesaba katarak sadece 43 reddediş nazik olarak değerlendirildi ve kalan 105 ifade ya kısmen nazik ya da kaba olarak değerlendirildi. Anlamsal reddetme deyimlerinin içeriği hem nezaket hem kabalık unsurlarını içerdi. Uygunluk düzeyine katkıda bulunan unsurlar, dolaylılık, belirli söz dilimsel ve sözlüksel yapıları, yoğunlaştırmayı içerirken, diğerleri arasında kabalık, anlamsal deyimler uzunluğu (kısalık ve fazlasıyla uzunluk) toplu düzeltme eksikliği, azaltma ve nezaket işaretleri diğer şeyler arasında. Genel olarak katılımcıların gerekli reddetme farkındalığında gelişime ihtiyacı olduğu kararına varıldı.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Uygunluk düzeyi; yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenenler; nezaket; reddetme; toplumsal dil yetisi

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