

THE REALIZATION OF THE SPEECH ACT OF REFUSALS AMONG CHINESE EFL SPEAKERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Refusal, as one of the most frequently performed speech acts in our daily lives, has recently gained increasing attention in pragmatics. In academic settings in Malaysia, it is of great importance to study refusals in that there are many occasions where people with different cultures are expected to make refusals spontaneously in various contexts. Considering the large number of Chinese students from Mainland of China, the purpose of this study is thus to investigate how Chinese EFL speakers realize refusals in a Malaysian academic context. Two research questions are identified: 1) What are the preferred refusal strategies employed by Chinese EFL speakers in a Malaysian academic context? 2) What are the factors that influence their choices of refusal strategies? In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative method is applied. The participants of this research consist of 15 male postgraduate students from China (mainland) who are studying in University of Malaya. The role-play scenarios adapted from Discourse Completion Test (Beebe et al. 1990) are used to collect data which consists of eight different initiating speech acts such as: suggestions, requests, invitations, and offers. Each situation involves two social variables: social power and social distance. After the role-play session, a follow interview is conducted to investigate the factors that influence respondents' choices of refusal strategies. The data were analyzed based on the classification of refusal strategies by Beebe et al (1990). The findings reveal that indirect refusal strategy is the most preferred refusal strategy among Chinese EFL speakers. The dominant use of this strategy can mitigate the refusal responses and help maintain the social relationship among interlocutors. The findings also show that there are four factors that might influence the refusal responses produced by Chinese EFL speakers, that is, social power, social distance, culture and religion, and nationality.

Key words: speech act of refusal, Chinese EFL speaker

Introduction

Speech act study is not a new field. There are many studies that have been done about different speech acts due to its central role in communication. According to Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985), the empirical investigation of speech acts can provide a better understanding of how human communication is achieved through the use of linguistic behaviors. In addition, it shows the similarities and differences of interactions among people of different languages and cultures under similar circumstances. In fact, the realizations of speech acts of different communities are influenced by the social and cultural norms and beliefs of these communities (Meier, 1995, 1997; Richards & Schmidt, 1983).

Refusal, as one of the types of speech acts, has also gained great attention from many researchers (Honglin, 2007; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Henstock, 2003; Kwon, 2004). Refusal has been recognized as a face-threatening act which causes damage to the face of both the speaker and the hearer. It is different from other speech acts in our daily life communication in that it is not initiated by the speaker but it is a negative response to the interlocutor (Gass and Houck, 1999). It is a complex speech act to perform because of the risk of offending the interlocutor, for inability to refuse properly might pose a threat to the interpersonal relations of the speakers. In fact, it is more complex when people are expecting to make refusals in a foreign language. In the current globalized world, people of different nationalities who have different native languages started to interact more frequently than before. Due to the globalization, English language has become an international language which has been widely used by different people to communicate with each other (Sasaki, et. al., 2006). According to Crystal (1997:141) "there are probably already more L2 speakers than L1 speakers" which therefore propounds the need to pay special attention to the non-native speakers' performance on English. Due to the fact that most of the international students studying in Malaysia use English to communicate with each other, it is of great importance to study how foreigners realize speech act of refusal in a Malaysian context.

The introduction part provides a brief background about the study. It is followed by the problem statement as well as the research questions. Then a discussion of the relevant concepts is provided such as: speech act theory, speech act of refusal, and face-threatening act. Previous studies on speech act of refusals in the past 20 years are discussed in details. After that, it specifically describes the research design, methodological framework, the instruments used for data collection, the procedures of data analysis. Finally, the research findings are presented towards the end of this paper.

Statement of Problem

Based on recent statistics, there are many international students studying in Malaysia, and among them, the number of Chinese students is quite considerable. English is considered as a lingua franca in Malaysia, especially in the academic setting. Therefore, Chinese students need to use English as a means of communication to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds. There may be issues of misunderstanding or misinterpretation if they are not able to apply appropriate refusal strategies in English in certain academic context. Therefore, it is very important to look at how Chinese EFL speakers realize refusals in a Malaysian academic context.

In many cultures, how to say 'no' sometimes is much more important than the answer itself since the inability to refuse properly may result in misunderstanding, unconscious offense or breakdown in communication (Ramos, 1991). Therefore, a great number of studies about refusals have been done (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Kwon, 2004) but there is a methodological limitation, in that the data were often collected by means of Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which is a written task. Few studies pay attention to oral data. Therefore, this study will specially explore the oral data produced by Chinese EFL speakers as well as investigate the factors that influence their choices of refusal.

Research Questions

1. What are the preferred refusal strategies employed by Chinese EFL speakers in a Malaysian academic context?
2. What are the factors that influence the choices of refusal strategies?

Literature Review

The speech act theory was firstly introduced in 1962 by the British philosopher John Austin who states that language is not only used to describe things but also used to do things, that is, to perform acts. The term "speech act" usually refers to illocutionary acts in its narrow sense. Since illocutionary acts (intended meaning of an utterance) is an important part of speech acts. Austin's students Searle (1975a) further classified the illocutionary acts into five types such as: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. The speech act of refusals is under the category of commissives.

The speech act of refusal is "the negative counterparts to acceptances and consentings are rejections and refusals. Just as one can accept offers, applications and invitations, so each of these can be refused or rejected." (Searle and Vandervken, 1985, p.195) Similarly, Al-Eryani (2007) argued that a refusal is a negative response to an offer, request, invitation, and suggestion. Since refusal is a speech act which, to some extent, include a kind of rudeness, performing inappropriate refusal strategies might harm the relationship between interlocutors. (Hassani, Mardani, & Hossein, 2011). To avoid appearing offensive or impolite, non-native speakers often overuse indirect strategies that could be misinterpreted by interlocutors (Al-Eryani, 2007) and thus misunderstanding occurs among interlocutors even when the same linguistic code (i.e. English) is applied. Therefore, the speech act of refusal is important to be studied.

A face-threatening act can lead to a certain challenge to the interlocutor by damaging his/her self-image. In compliance with Brown and Levinson's theory (1987), face-threatening act may threaten either the speaker's face or the hearer's face. Furthermore, it can threaten either positive face or negative face. No matter in an informal or a formal conversation, being conscious or unconscious, people may impose a threat to the persons' self-image or to the interlocutor's face which result in a "face-threatening act". Face-threatening act can either damage the negative face by suppressing the interlocutor's freedom of action, or threaten the interlocutor's positive face by neglecting their public image, their egocentric feelings or ignoring their sense of achievement. Negative face threatening act includes directives with a manner ranging from straightforwardness to insolence, such as commands, requests, advice, invitations, or even interruptions, etc. On the other hand, positive face threatening act includes criticisms, offensive behaviors, disagreement, dispute, and corrections.

Many studies have been conducted on the realization of speech acts mainly from three different perspectives such as: intra-lingual studies, cross-cultural studies, and learner-centered studies. Intra-lingual studies focus on the investigation of speech acts within a single speech community or culture; the cross-cultural studies examine the realization of speech acts in two or more languages or cultures; learner-centered studies which concentrated on reception and production of speech act by language learners. The present study falls under the category of learner-centered studies.

A number of studies focused on the realization of speech act of refusal among Chinese. Chen, Ye and Zhang (1995) carried out a study about how native speakers of Mandarin Chinese realize refusals. This study is different from other Chinese studies as it focuses more on the context. The findings revealed that refusals influence the way Chinese interact with each other. It also shows making direct refusals usually affects the relationship between interlocutors, therefore most of Chinese prefer to use indirect strategies, especially, implicit semantic formulas to make refusals in order to avoid offending interlocutor or threatening the interlocutor's face.

Another study was conducted by Wang Aihua (2001) on the speech act of refusal between Chinese and Americans in interpersonal communications. She analyzed data regarding words, phrases and sentence pattern based on sociopragmatic analysis. The results revealed that social factors such as, social power, social distance have influence on speech act of refusals. Meanwhile, when people are making refusals, being indirect means being polite, but actually not all indirect utterances are polite.

Similarly, Honglin (2007) conducted a comparative study on refusals between Chinese and Americans. In the study, he found out that Chinese and Americans use different types of refusal strategies to make refusals and even the way they refuse also showed a significant difference, which are affected by the cultures and situations. Surprisingly, the findings revealed that Chinese are more direct compared to American participants. He stated that “the Chinese tend to emphasize restoring relationship between people, while Americans emphasize solving the problems in question” (p. 67).

The first cross-cultural study on speech act of refusal was conducted by Beebe et al (1990), which compared the refusals produced by native speakers of Japanese and native speakers of English. In fact, this study is considered as a landmark since all the following studies on speech act of refusal used Beebe’s et al. (1990) framework. The findings reveal that there are some differences between Japanese speakers of English and native speakers of English in terms of the frequency of semantic formula, the order of the semantic formula, and the content of semantic formulas. Félix-Brasdefer (2008) studied the realization of refusal among learners of Spanish when they refuse invitations from different social status interlocutors (i.e., equal and higher). The findings showed that pragmatic transfer existed among the participants and also provided some information about participants’ cognition process during which they consider politeness, discourse, grammar and vocabulary. In another study, Hiba et al (2011) investigated the speech act of refusal among Malaysian students at a local university in Malaysia. The purpose of this study was to find out the preferred strategies used by students in making refusal in an academic context. He found out that participants make refusals in different ways and they preferred to use refusal strategies like “statement of regret”, “reason/explanation” in making refusals to requests. Besides, the study also showed that Malay culture have some influence on their realization of refusals.

Research Methodology

This is an empirical study on the realization of speech act of refusals by Chinese EFL speakers in a Malaysian public university. This study applied a qualitative approach.

The classification of refusal strategies adapted from Beebe et al. (1990) is used to analyze the data, which has also been applied by many researchers to investigate refusal strategies (e.g. Morkus, 2014, Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006). The classification of refusal strategies and examples are illustrated as follows:

Table 1: The Classification of Refusal Strategies (Beebe et al., 1990)

Refusal Strategies	Semantic formulas	Examples
Direct strategies	Performative	<i>I refuse..</i>
	Direct ‘No’	<i>No....</i>
	Negative willingness ability	<i>I cannot make it</i>
Indirect Strategies	Statement of regret	<i>I am so sorry...</i>
	Wish	<i>I wish I could help you.</i>
	Reason/explanation	<i>I have an exam.</i>
	Statement of alternative	<i>You can ask others to join you.</i>
	Set condition for future/past acceptance	<i>If I knew it earlier, I would...”</i>
	Promise of future acceptance	<i>I’ll do it next time</i>
	Statement of principle	<i>I never do business with friends</i>
	Criticize the interlocutor	<i>It’s a silly suggestion</i>
	Let the interlocutor off the hook	<i>Don’t worry, I can handle it</i>
	Unspecific/indefinite reply	<i>I don’t know when I can give them to you</i>
	Lack of enthusiasm	<i>I’m not interested in...</i>
	Repetition	<i>A party ?</i>
	Postponement	<i>I will think about it</i>
Adjuncts to refusals	Statement of positive opinion	<i>I would like to ...</i>
	Pause filler	<i>well, uhm, er</i>
	Gratitude/appreciation	<i>Thank you</i>

Participants

The sample of this present study consists of 15 male postgraduate students, who are currently studying in University of Malaya in different faculties for at least one year. The reason why the researcher targeted postgraduates is that they are able to respond to

the role-play in English due to the English requirements (IELTS 6.5) for postgraduate candidates in University of Malaya. The subjects' age range from 24 to 30 years old.

Instruments

Two instruments have been used for data collection in this study, that is, a closed oral role-play, and a retrospective interview.

I. Role-Play

The role-play scenarios are used in this present study to collect data, which have been adapted from Discourse completion tasks/tests (Beebe et al., 1990) and some changes have been made for DCT to suit the Malaysian context. This role-play scenario involved eight different situations designed to elicit refusals as a response to four different initiating speech acts: requests, suggestions, offers and invitations. Each situation is related to two social variables: social power (high < /equal =) and social distance (high +/low -), as it is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The eight situations related to the social power and social distance.

Situations	Manner of asking	Social Power	Social Distance
1	Suggestion	<	+
2	Suggestion	=	-
3	Request	<	-
4	Request	=	+
5	Invitation	<	+
6	Invitation	=	-
7	Offer	<	-
8	Offer	=	+

II. Retrospective Interview

A retrospective interview is used to get the feedback from participants based on the role-play session. Four interview questions are identified and illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The interview questions

Interview questions	
1.	Did you consider the status of your interlocutor when you respond to the role-play in each situation?
2.	Did you consider the social distance (close/ not close) when you respond to the role-play situations?
3.	Did you consider your own culture and religion when you need to refuse your interlocutor in a Malaysian context?
4.	Would you refuse differently when your interlocutor has the same nationality as you?

Data Collection

Prior to the recording of the role-play, all the participants are given a letter of consent for their participation in the study and their role-play scenarios are recorded. Before the role-play begins, the participants are required to provide some basic information. After that, the detailed instructions on how the scenario works are provided to the participant. Consequently, the participant are asked to read each situation, then the researcher initiates a conversation regarding each situation and the participant as a responder responds to the researcher orally and his response is recorded. The average time taken to conduct the role-play is around 15 minutes per participant. After the role-play session, each participant is asked to respond to the follow-up interview questions.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively by investigating the refusal strategies used by Chinese EFL speakers based on the framework of refusal strategies adapted from Beebe et al. (1990). There are three stages of analyzing data. The first phase focuses on calculating and coding of refusal strategies used by participants. In this phase, the total number of refusal responses produced by participants is calculated, then all the refusal responses were coded as "direct refusals", "indirect refusals" and "adjuncts to refusals". The second phase of the analysis investigates the preferred refusal strategies used by participants based on the frequency and percentage of each strategy used. The third phase analyze the interview responses and examine the factors that influence the refusals produced by participants.

Findings

120 refusals are produced by 15 Chinese EFL speakers in eight situations. These refusals are classified into three categories “direct”, “indirect” and “adjuncts to refusals” based on the framework of Beebe et al (1990). The refusals are varied in terms of length and the number of semantic formulas. The findings show that 465 semantic formulas were employed by Chinese EFL speakers. Moreover, the findings show that all of the refusals contain more than one semantic formula. Among 465 strategies, 64 semantic formulas are identified as “direct”, 257 as “indirect” and 144 as “adjuncts to refusals”. As the following Table 4 shows, the most preferred strategies utilized by Chinese speakers is indirect refusal strategies with 257 occurrences (55.3%).

Table 4 Number of refusals produced by Chinese EFL speakers

Strategies	S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S5	S6	S 7	S 8	Total	Percentage
Direct	6	7	11	7	9	7	7	10	64	13.8%
Indirect	36	28	42	25	38	25	41	22	257	55.3%
Adjuncts	17	8	24	10	24	15	29	17	144	31.0%
Total	59	43	77	42	71	47	77	49	465	100%

Direct Strategies

The data show that in the first category “direct”, it consists of 64 semantic formulas (13.8%), as shown in the above table 4. In this section, “negative willingness ability” are prominent as compared to the “performative” and direct ‘no’ strategies. The following table illustrates the frequency of occurrences of direct strategy used by Chinese EFL speakers.

Table 5: Frequency of direct strategies by Chinese EFL speakers

Direct strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Performative	1	1.6%
Direct “no”	14	21.9%
Negative willingness ability	49	76.6%
Total	64	100%

Table 5 shows that Chinese EFL speakers prefer to use “negative willingness ability” to make direct refusals rather than using direct ‘no’ and “performative” strategies. For instance:

An excerpt from C15 in S4

My friend invites me to go for a movie [reason/explanation] so I cannot go with you. [negative willingness ability] Sorry.[statement of regret]

An excerpt from C1 in S6

Umm, [pause filler] my dear friend I guess I cannot join you in this coming new year [negative willingness ability] because I'm already invited by other Chinese friends to attend the new year party so the time is conflicting. [reason/explanation] So thank you so much for the invitation. [appreciation] I hope you guys have a very good time.

Indirect Strategies

Indirect strategies are the dominant refusal strategies used by Chinese EFL speakers. The findings reveal that “reason/explanation” has the highest frequency (44.4%), followed by “statement of regret” (18.3%). Table 6 shows the frequency of indirect refusal strategies used by Chinese EFL speakers.

Table 6: The Frequency of Indirect Strategies Among Chinese EFL speakers

Indirect Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Statement of regret	47	18.3%
Wish	6	2.3%
Reason/explanation	114	44.4%
Statement of alternative	14	5.4%
Set condition for future/past acceptance	16	6.2%
Promise of future acceptance	4	1.6%
Statement of principle	3	1.2%

Criticize the interlocutor	1	0.4%
Let the interlocutor off the hook	5	1.9%
Unspecific/indefinite reply	28	10.9%
Lack of enthusiasm	3	1.2%
Silence	1	0.4%
Repetition of the request	7	2.7%
Postponement	6	2.3%
Total	257	100%

The most preferred semantic formula used by Chinese speakers is giving “reason/ explanation” This means when Chinese EFL speakers make refusals, they tend to give reasons and explanations to explain why they have to refuse in the given situations. For instance:

An excerpt from C3 in S3

Thank you professor for your information. [appreciation] I wish I could attend it [wish] but unfortunately, I'm sorry [statement of regret] I cannot attend this meeting [negative willingness ability] because I'm busy with my assignments. [reason/explanation] Maybe you can inform other classmates. [statement of alternative]

An excerpt from C4 in S6

It sounds nice, [statement of positive opinion] but I think my final exam is just after new year so I need to take time because I'm afraid of my marks. [reason/explanation]

The second frequently used semantic formula among indirect strategies is “statement of regret” (18.3%) and the third preferred semantic formula is “unspecific/indefinite reply” (10.9%), which might indicate that Chinese EFL speakers tend to give implicit responses when they make refusals in order to not offend the interlocutors and also to soften their refusals. However, this also might cause some misunderstanding to the interlocutor since the response is unspecific, indefinite and unclear. For example:

An excerpt from C4 in S5

Er, [pause filler] thanks for you invitation prof, [appreciation] but I'm sorry [statement of regret] because I need to go back home to celebrate Chinese new year with my family and my flight is on Sunday. [reason/explanation]

An excerpt from C8 in S6

You know we are good friends, but you know I don't like to go out with people I don't know well because I will behave very very strange. So your friends I don't know them. [reason/explanation] so sorry. [statement of regret]

Adjuncts to refusals

The occurrence of adjuncts to the refusals is the second preferred set of strategies, with 144 occurrences (31.0%), used by Chinese EFL speakers (see table 4.2.1). The findings of the study show that pause filler is used more frequently as compared to the other two semantic formulas of the adjuncts to refusals. “Pause filler” has 57 occurrences, which is equivalent to (39.6%), followed by “statement of the positive opinion” with 46 occurrences (31.9%), and lastly “appreciation” which has 41 occurrences (28.5%). The following table illustrates the frequency of adjuncts to refusals used by the Chinese EFL speakers.

Table 7: Frequency of adjuncts to refusals of Chinese EFL speakers

Adjuncts to refusals	Frequency	Percentage
Statement of positive opinion	46	31.9%
Appreciation	41	28.5%
Pause filler	57	39.6%
Total	144	100%

In this section, the data reveal that the semantic formula “pause filler” is highly preferred by Chinese speaker compared to the other two semantic formulas. The findings also reveal that Chinese EFL speakers like to use “pause filler” before they start their main responses. The prominent use of “pause filler” might indicate that Chinese EFL speakers need longer time to consider and organize their answers or responses in order to not offend the interlocutor. For instance:

An excerpt from C2 in S5

Umm, [pause filler] thanks for your inviting professor, [appreciation] but this Sunday I cannot join you [negative willingness ability] because I have something else to do, which is important to me. [reason/explanation] If you told me earlier, I might attend. [set condition for past acceptance] I'm so sorry. [statement of regret]

Factors that influence the choices of refusal strategies

The findings also show that there are four factors that influence their refusal responses of Chinese EFL speakers, that is, social power, social distance, culture and religion, and nationality.

The data clearly show that participants' refusal responses are influenced by social power, this is observed in the different refusal strategies used when they need to interact with interlocutor of different social status. Moreover, the results also show that they tend to be more polite to a higher status interlocutor and somehow are more direct to an interlocutor of equal status. For example:

Interview question 1: Did you consider the status of your interlocutor when you respond to the role-play in each situation?

A response from Chinese 1

Yes, I tend to be more causal with friends or peers but more polite to people who are senior than me.

Another response from Chinese 3

Yes, I considered their social status when I thought they are in higher rank, I answered in a very polite manner.

Another response from Chinese 5

Yes, I have to consider the social status because behave differently with different social status.

The findings reveal that the participants are fully aware of the social distance. They are inclined to be more cautious when they refuse an interlocutor with high social distance. For example:

Interview question 2: Did you consider the social distance (close/ not close) when you respond to the role-play situations?

A response from Chinese 1

Yes, it's a habit for me to behave more polite to people not close to me and behave straightforward to familiar ones.

Another response from Chinese 2

Yes, the social distance is very important, because I will use different words to refuse with different social distance.

Another response from Chinese 5

Yes, I guess that is always part of my concern when I am responding. E.g., if someone is very close to me, then my way of refusing may be more direct.

The findings show the refusal responses from Chinese EFL speakers are deeply influenced by their culture. They usually consider their culture before they respond to their interlocutors. This can be observed in the following examples:

Interview question 3: Did you consider your own culture and religion when you need to refuse your interlocutor in a Malaysian context?

A response from Chinese 1

Yes, everyone should show their respect to refuse the interlocutor. So I have to consider my own culture and religion. Is it acceptable by interlocutor?

Another response from Chinese 2

Yes, before I respond to the interlocutor, I may take into account the culture and religion factors in order to come up with a more appropriate way to answer.

Another response from Chinese 5

Yes, different cultures use different ways to refuse.

Nationality is another factor that affects the refusal responses of the Chinese EFL speakers, in that they find it easier to refuse an interlocutor of the same nationality. In addition, the participants are also aware of the cultural differences. For example:

Interview question 4: Would you refuse differently when your interlocutor has the same nationality as you?

A response from Chinese 1

Yes, people from different countries have different cultural backgrounds. So I need to consider their preferences.

Another response from Chinese 2

Yes, if the interlocutor has the same nationality with me, it is easier for me to respond since we share the same culture or probably the same religion. Thus I tend to be more direct.

Another response from Chinese 5

Yes, Chinese culture has its features, at the same time, other cultures have other characteristics.

Conclusion

As evident in the study, indirect refusal strategies are the most preferred strategies employed among Chinese EFL speakers. Such prominent use of indirect refusal strategies might minimize the face threat and soften the refusal answers. More specifically, it is evident that “reason/explanation” and “statement of regret” are the most two dominant used semantic formulas among the indirect refusal strategies. However, the findings of the study also show that among direct refusal strategies, “negative willingness ability” is the highly preferred one. In addition, there is no obvious preferences among “adjuncts to refusal” found among Chinese EFL speakers. Factors such as, social power, social distance, culture and religion, and nationality also have some influence on the refusal responses produced by Chinese EFL speakers.

This study highly rely on the refusals responses collected from postgraduate students in only one university, that is, University of Malaya. Therefore, further studies can explore the realization of refusals among international students studying in other Malaysian universities. Since there are many factors that influence the choice of refusals, there is also a need to consider other variables such as, gender and authority (Paltridge, 2000) that also affects the realization of this type of speech act.

The present study focuses only on the realization of speech act of refusal among Chinese EFL speakers in Malaysia. More specifically, it is limited to the preferred refusal strategies and factors that influence the refusal strategies, which is inadequate to provide insights into every aspect of the choice of refusal strategies employed by Chinese EFL speakers.

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