I'm Sorry, I've got Something to Do: A Study of EFL Learners' Refusal Strategies

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the English refusal strategies chosen by EFL learners in one public university in Banten regarding social status. A Discourse Completion Task consisting of two situations was employed to gather the data. The data taken were classified and analyzed based on Beebe, et.al (1990). The research result showed that most EFL learners chose indirect strategies to refuse by giving reasons and explanation followed by statements of regret. In relation with social status, in giving indirect refusals as the addition of giving reasons and regret, the EFL learners tended to provide alternatives to the request given by their friends or equal status. However, they tended to provide positive opinions to refuse a request given by someone with higher status.

Keywords: *refusals, request, social status*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Research

Communicating is the way we shape our lives. Without communication, it is not exaggerating to say that life won't be lively. The way people communicate is influenced by local cultures, norms, etc. That is why, sometimes communication among people across culture will break down. Thus, it is necessary to grow our awareness to pay attention to those norms in order to establish good communication.

In every day communication, we often get a request from others. Request is something which is not initiated by us, but others. Searle (1979) categorizes a request in commissive speech act as an attempt to get the hearer to do something. That is why, sometimes we can accept it, or even refuse it. In relation with requests, refusals, based on Azis (2000) is the act that shows an inability to perform the request for some reasons whether it is expected honestly or not. As the consequence, according to Ellis (2008), refusal is sometimes considered to cause communication breakdown, especially for those who come from different

cultures as doing refusal really needs high level of pragmatic competence (Asmali, 2013).

There have been numerous studies on refusal. Some studies try to compare the refusals made by English speakers and non-English speakers (Abarghoui, 2012; Amarien, 2012; Guo, 2012; Abed, 2011; and Poon, 2010). The other studies compare refusals among non-English speakers (Asmali, 2013; Farnia and Wu, 2012). Those studies consider other aspects, like gender, age, and status which give different results of the refusal strategies. However, as the researcher's concern, there have been a small number of studies on refusal in Indonesia, especially in academic contexts. As refusal is one of the speech act that has a potential to break communication between people with different cultures, it is necessary to conduct an investigation on the way EFL learners make refusals in English.

1.2. Statements of the Problems

The present study aims at answering the following questions:

1. How do EFL learners in Banten perform English refusals to a request?
2. Is there a difference on how EFL learners in Banten refuse the request done by the interlocutor with equal and higher status?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Sequences of Refusals

Based on Brown and Levinson, refusal may threaten someone's face. As a consequence, doing refusal requires some strategies, so that it will not hurt the one who makes request. Furthermore, Hassani, et.al. (2011) assert three usual phases in refusal strategies:

1. Pre-refusal strategies: preparing the addressee for an upcoming refusal;
2. Main refusal (Head Act): bearing the main refusal;
3. Post-refusal strategies: functioning as emphasizer, mitigator or concluder of the main refusal

    (p. 38-39)

However, the stages will vary depending on the kind of request, whether it is direct or indirect.

2.2. The Classifications of Refusals

Beebe, et.al. (1990) classify refusals into two categories, direct and indirect refusals:

I. Direct

1. Using performative verbs
2. Non performative statement

II. Indirect

1. Statement of regret
2. Wish
3. Excuse, reason, explanation
4. Statement of alternative
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance
6. Promise of future acceptance
7. Statement of principle
8. Statement of philosophy
9. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
10. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
11. Avoidance
12. Statement of positive opinion
13. Statement of empathy
14. Pause fillers
15. Gratitude/appreciation

In Indonesian context, Aziz (2000) studied Indonesian refusal and its politeness implication. He further proposed the strategies, namely direct NO, hesitation and lack of enthusiasm, offering an alternative, postponement, general acceptance with excuse, giving reason and explanation, conditional YES, complaining and criticizing, putting the blame on a third party, questioning the justification of a request, and threatening.

In regards with social status, the work of Hassani, et.al (2011) showed that social status determined the indirectness level of the refusal. In addition, Abed (2011) also studied how Iraqi EFL learners performed refusals to the interlocutors

with different social status. Those studies suggest that the different ways to perform the refusals in regards with social status are culture based.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Participants

One class of students in the English Department in a public university in Banten was chosen. There were 27 students who were at the fifth semester as the research participants. The choice of the participants was the consideration that they already had sufficient English pragmatic competence.

3.2. Research Instruments

A DCT (Discourse Completion Task) was employed to collect the data. The DCT was adapted from the work of Hashemian (2012). There were two different situations created in this DCT (see appendix 1). One was the situation in which the one who made request had an equal position (the participant's classmate). The second situation was the situation in which the one who made the request had a higher position (the participant's lecturer).

3.3. Research Design

The present study is a qualitative study employing a case study design. It is a case study, as suggested by Punch (2009), as this design is "… to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context…" (p. 119).

3.4. Framework of Analysis

To get the data, the DCT was distributed to the students to be filled in. The data gathered were then coded based on the classification of refusals proposed by Beebe, et. Al (1990) (see Appendix 2). Furthermore, the classified data were analyzed to find out the patterns of the participants' refusal. Descriptive statistics was used to find out the dominant refusal strategies chosen by the students. Moreover, the descriptive statistics was also used to compare the pattern of

refusals in two different situations. The results were then confirmed by the other studies.

4. Discussion

The first question is "How do EFL learners in Banten perform English refusal to a request?" This question is answered by finding out the dominant choice of the refusal strategies chosen by the research participants. Table 1 shows the choice of the refusals:

Table 1. The Distribution of the Refusal Strategies

Refusal strategies		Frequency				Total	P (%)
		Situation 1	P (%)	Situation 2	P (%)		
Direct	Using performative verbs	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Non performative statement	22	22.45	19	21.35	41	21.93
Indirect	Statement of regret	30	30.61	26	29.21	56	29.95
	Wish	2	2.04	3	3.37	5	2.67
	Reasons, explanation	30	30.61	30	33.70	60	32.09
	Statement of alternative	6	6.12	3	3.37	9	4.81
	Past acceptance	0	0	1	1.12	1	0.53
	Statement of principle	1	1.02	1	1.12	2	1.07
	Statement of philosophy	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Acceptance that functions as refusal	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Avoidance	0	0	1	1.12	1	0.53
	Statement of positive opinion	4	4.08	4	4.49	8	4.28
	Statement of empathy	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Pause, fillers	3	3.06	1	1.12	4	2.14
	Gratitude	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		98	100	89	100	187	100

The table shows that most students chose indirect refusals by giving reasons, excuses or explanations (32.09%). The statements of regret are at the second rank of the students' refusal strategies (29.95%). Further, the negative willingness or statements is at the third rank of students' refusal strategies (21.93%).

The second question is "Is there a difference on how EFL learners in Banten refuse the request done by the interlocutor with equal and higher status?" This question can be answered by observing Table 2 below:

Table 2. The Distribution of Indirect Refusal Strategies in Two Different Situations

Refusal strategies		Frequency			
		Situation 1 (equal status)	P (%)	Situation 2 (higher status)	P (%)
Indirect	Statement of regret	30	40.54	26	37.14
	Wish	2	2.70	3	4.28
	Reasons, explanation	30	40.54	30	42.86
	Statement of alternative	6	8.11	3	4.28
	Past acceptance	0	0	1	1.42
	Statement of principle	1	1.35	1	1.42
	Statement of philosophy	0	0	0	0
	Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	0	0	0	0
	Acceptance that functions as refusal	0	0	0	0
	Avoidance	0	0	1	1.42
	Statement of positive opinion	4	5.40	4	5.71
	Statement of empathy	0	0	0	0
	Pause, fillers	3	4.05	1	1.42
	Gratitude	0	0	0	0
Total		74		70	

Table 2 shows that in situation 1 (equal status), participants chose the same number of reasons and statement of regret (40.54%) and then followed by giving alternative (8.11%). Whereas in situation 2 (higher status), the participant chose reasons and explanation (42.86%), followed by statements of regret (37.14%), and giving positive opinion (5.71%).

The research findings indicate that most participants choose indirect refusals. This confirms that as refusal is one of the speech acts that can threaten the hearer's face, the speaker tends to mitigate the refusal.

The most frequent choice of indirect refusal found in the present study is giving reasons and explanations. This is in line with that of Al-Eryani (2007) who studied how Yemeni performed refusals, Ghazanfari, et.al (2013) who investigated cross-linguistic differences in refusal speech act among native Persian and English speakers, and Asmali (2013) who studied the refusals made by three groups of nonnative speakers of English. Further, the content of reasons also varied which really reflected the speakers' culture. Once, the reason was sincere as seen in the refusal of S24. However, it was sometimes a fictitious reason by saying that the notes were not with her at that time as found in S21's refusal. This happened when refusing a person of equal status but with distant relationship, which was sometimes called as white lies (Felix-Bradfeser, 2008).

> S24: I'm really sorry, but *I need my notes to study*.
> S21: .... Mmm, I'm so sorry, *I forget to bring my notes today, I can't remember where I put my notes*, so you can ask to another students.

Furthermore, whether refusing someone with equal status and higher status, the EFL learners in Banten chose the statement of regret as seen in S15. This is in line with that of Sattar, et.al. (2011) who studied refusal strategies performed by Malay university students, which showed that regret was mostly chosen by the participants.

> S15: *Sorry*, I can't. I have to study with that. (to an equal status interlocutor)
> S15: *I am sorry,* I can't. I already have an appointment with my family, but I can finish our work at my home, maybe.   (to a higher interlocutor)

Apologizing was one of the ways to mitigate the refusal made by the participants in order to decrease the offense level as Goffman (1971 in Ogiermann, 2009: 47) proposed that apologies were important to restore and maintain social harmony as they allowed "the participants to go on their way, if not with satisfaction that matters are closed, then at least with the right to act as if they feel that matters are closed and that ritual equilibrium has been restored."

One direct strategy chosen by all research participants, whether to their equal status interlocutors or higher status interlocutors, was giving negative willingness. However, this negative willingness was followed by other strategies, such as giving reasons or statement of regret as shown in S12:

S12: Sorry, *I can't.* I need my notes to prepare exam too.
(to equal status interlocutor)
S12: Sorry, Sir, *I can't.* I have other business, and I can't finish up this work
(to higher status interlocutor)

The absence of performing direct strategy by only giving negative willingness in the present study indicated that all participants seemed to be more polite by lessening the degree of directness.

Giving alternatives were more chosen when the participants refused the request given by their classmates or equal status interlocutors than to their lecturers (S28):

S28: Sorry, I could not. My note is being borrowed by Andi. *I think you can borrow it to other friends.*

Giving alternatives, according to Chen (1995) is to soften the threatening power of refusals. In the present study, to refuse their classmates' refusals, several participants tried to give alternatives. This indicated that they wanted to keep their friendship in harmony by saving their friends' positive face.

In regards with the refusals to their lecturers or those who had higher status, the EFL learners in Banten tended to give positive opinions as shown in S24:

S24: *I'd love to, It would be better if we can finish it,* but I'm really sorry, sir, I already have an appointment so I have to go back.

By giving a positive opinion, the participants seemed to show that actually they really wanted to accept the request. This strategy would help them to be more polite to their lecturers, those who had higher status than them.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the research result showed that most EFL learners chose indirect strategies to refuse by giving reasons and explanation followed by the statements of regret. In relation with the social status, in giving the indirect refusals as the addition of giving reasons and regret, the EFL learners tended to provide alternatives to the request given by their classmates or equal status. However, they tended to provide positive opinions to refuse a request given by someone with the higher status.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

Name (initial): …………………….   Age: …………………….

Native Language: ……… ……….   Sex: …………………..

Directions: *Please read the following two situations. After each situation, you are asked to write a response in the blank after "you." Respond as you would in an actual conversation.*

Situation 1: You are a college student. You attend classes regularly and take good notes. Your classmate often misses a class and asks you for the lecture notes. At this time, you don't want to lend him your notes anymore.

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

You:

…………………………………………………………………….........................

……………………………………………………………………………………

Classmate: OK, then I guess I'll have to ask somebody else.

Situation 2: You are at your lecturer's office to do a research project together. It's closing to the end of the day and you want to leave work.

Lecturer: If you don't mind, I'd like you to spend an extra hour or two tonight so that we can finish up with this work.

You:

……………………………………………………………………………………

…..................................……………………………………………………………

Lecturer: That's too bad. I was hoping you could stay.