DOI: 10.56794/VSSR.4(221).70-91

Gender Distinction in Refusal Face-saving Strategies: A Case of English-majored Students at a University in Vietnam

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Received on 26 August 2024. Accepted on 6 November 2024.

Abstract: The current study is aimed at investigating refusal face-saving strategies employed by English majors at Thủ Dầu Một University (TDMU) and exploring possible gender distinctions in refusal strategies. The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) concerning 10 refusal situations of invitations and requests was employed as the research instrument. The 120 participants were made up of 60 males and 60 females, resulting in approximately 1,200 speech acts of refusal (SARs). To identify face-saving strategies used by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), quantitative data was processed and classified according to the refusal strategies used in selected situations based on the framework suggested by Beebe et al (1990). The findings show that expressing regret and giving excuses or explanations are among the preferred formulas used in SARs, thus reflecting students' reluctance to express their disinclination to comply. The adoption of these formulae indicates the influence of Vietnamese culture in respondents' realizations of refusals in English. From the survey results, several pedagogical recommendations were made for second language instruction in general and for English language teaching and learning at TDMU in particular.

Keywords: Refusal, speech acts of refusal, face-saving, face-threatening.

Subject classification: Linguistics.

1. Introduction

Success in communication depends greatly on the ability to recognize speakers' communicative intentions and pragmatic meaning of their utterances as

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human communication is a combination of cooperation and understanding. Those who may be regarded as fluent in a second language thanks to their phonetic, syntactic, and semantic knowledge of that language are at times still unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate. Numerous problems in communication occur as people not only speak different languages but use them in different ways according to specific social and linguistic norms, values, and social-cultural conventions (Larina, 2008).

Existing studies of speech acts can be divided into two groups: group 1 focusing on studies which examine native speakers' speech act realization, either focusing on one language ('intra-language' studies) or two languages, and group 2 focusing on studies which investigate characteristics of non-native speakers' speech acts in comparison to native speakers' ('inter-language' studies). Compared with certain speech acts that have received more attention than others, such as requests and apologies, refusals are still researched less. It seems necessary to scrutinize refusals in various languages and cultures to have a better understanding of various concepts in the societies in which a certain language is used (Janney & Arndt, 1993).

The aim of the current study is to identify face-saving strategies employed by TDMU English-majored students while performing SARs. From the strategies identified, the current study investigates possible gender distinctions relating to the choice of face-saving strategies with regards to refusals among this group of students. To guide the research, the following questions were put forward: *(i) Which face saving-strategies do TDMU students employ to perform SARs?* and *(ii) Are there any significant gender distinctions for the choice of face-saving strategies in refusals?*

This academic work is expected to create its own values. Accordingly, it can help EFL learners gain further knowledge and have an excellent command of face-saving strategies for refusal cases while they are performing SARs. As politeness plays a crucial role in achieving a harmonious relationship and it is also a good catalyst for forming a strong connection among society members, the results of the current study will help EFL students learn how to prevent refusal utterances from threatening the other person. This study also makes the students recognize the importance of uttering words appropriately and wisely for a good face-saving speech act. In terms of communication, the study will make a major contribution towards mastering workable face-saving strategies in general and possible gender distinctions in particular in order to communicate effectively under any circumstances. In the field of linguistics, this research will add another source as a useful reference for further research. Readers will be able to comprehend the refusal principles through detailed explanations about a wide range of terms as well as the types and theories that have been proposed in this field of linguistics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

2.1.1. Refusals

In daily conversations, people use language to interact with others. They are making utterances to express their feelings or thoughts, and employing a wide range of speech acts. People not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, they also "perform actions through those utterances to express themselves" (Yule, 1996: 47). A speech act is a unit of speaking, which can perform different functions in communication (Austin, 1962). In order to actualize communication purposes, people tend to perform intended speech acts while giving a talk.

Refusal is a type of speech act that is projected as a response to another individual's request, invitation, offer or suggestion which means it is not speaker-initiative (Hassani, Mardani & Hossein, 2011). A refusal is to respond negatively to an offer, request, and invitation (Ramos, 1991). Refusals are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and belong to the category of *'commissives'* because they commit those who make refusals to (not) performing an action (Searle, 1977). Refusals function as a response to an initiating act and are considered a speech act by which a speaker "fails to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen et al., 1995: 121).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, refusals are important as they are sensitive to social variables such as gender, age, level of education, power, and social distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990). Refusals are complicated speech acts that require not only long sequences of negotiation and cooperative achievements, but also "face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the non-compliant nature of the act" (Gass & Houck, 1999: 2).

In the view of Al-Eryani (2007), a refusal is a negative response to an offer, request, and invitation. Refusals occur in all languages as all the other speech acts; however, not all languages refuse in the same way nor do people feel comfortable when refusing the same invitation or suggestion. In various societies, uttering and receiving a message of "No" requires special skills. As a result, the interlocutor must be well aware of how to use the appropriate forms and functions.

Owing to the fact that failing to refuse appropriately can risk the interpersonal relations of the speakers, refusals usually consist of various strategies to avoid offending conversational partners. It requires a high level of pragmatic competence, and the choice of these strategies may vary through languages and cultures. In refusing invitations, offers and suggestions, gratitude was regularly

expressed by American English speakers, but rarely shown by Egyptian Arabic speakers (Nelson, Al-batal & Echols, 1996). Beebe et al. (1990) developed the classification scheme for refusals including the following types:

Direct strategies:

Performative statement (e.g., "I refuse").

Non-performative statement: (1) "No"; (2) Negative willingness/ability (e.g., "I can't", "I won't be able to join you").

Indirect strategies: (1) Regret (e.g., "I'm very sorry"); (2) Explanation (e.g., "I want to leave now because of some personal problems"); (3) Future acceptance (e.g., "I will help you tomorrow after the final exam"); (4) Principle (e.g., "I don't like lazy students who rarely prepare for the lessons"); (5) Philosophy (e.g., "Excuse is worse than sin"); (6) Self-defense (e.g., "You should have attended classes"); (7) Criticism; (8) Attack.

Adjuncts to refusals: (1) Positive opinion (e.g., "Congratulations on your promotion. I am very glad!"); (2) Gratitude (e.g., "Thanks for the invitation"); (3) Agreement (e.g., "Yes, I agree, but …").

2.1.2. Face-saving acts

Pragmatically, face is the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself or herself by the line others assume he or she has taken during a particular contact (Goffman, 1967: 5). Face can be lost, maintained, saved, and protected. The importance of face has been found in almost every culture, yet its meaning and use differ substantially (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Face has two aspects, namely negative and positive ones. Negative face is "the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 13), and positive face is "the desire to be approved in some respects" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 13).

Face is a sacred thing for every human being, it is an essential factor that communicators all must pay close attention to. If one wants his or her face cared for, he or she should care for those of others (Goffman, 1959). So, people try to protect the face of others, and at the same time save their own. If one does not want to lose his or her face, the safest way is not to damage the face of others. Indirectness is a way to show politeness to others and it is used in various speech acts, such as requests, invitations, etc. in the event possible refusals or conflicts occur.

Politeness is regarded as a face-saving strategy effectively meeting both the positive and the negative face needs of the interlocutor (Usami, 2002). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person's negative face will show concern about imposition and a person's positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a

common goal (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Yule (2006) indicates that understanding how successful communication is actually a process of interpreting not just what speakers say, but what they "intend to mean". When somebody says "Well! I'm really busy" to refuse an invitation directly, the person doing the inviting may feel hurt. However, if someone says "I really appreciate it but I have another plan already" or "I'd love to, but I am supposed to finish my report on time", then most likely there is less impact on the hearer and his self-esteem, or "face" is saved.

Considered to be face-threatening acts among various speech acts, refusals threaten the face of those who extend invitations because they contradict expectations and restrict the freedom to perform an act. Refusals may threaten the addressee's public image to maintain approval from others.

2.2. Previous studies

Previous research on speech acts, especially refusals, has provided a range of insights into how different cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence refusal strategies. However, there are notable gaps and limitations that this current study seeks to address.

In the study of the indigenous population and the non-native rejections from academic advising sessions, Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig (1992) revealed that both native and non-native speakers predominantly used explanations in their refusals, with non-native speakers showing a higher tendency to use avoidance strategies. This contrasts with the current study, which focuses on the specific face-saving strategies employed by Vietnamese EFL learners, highlighting how gender influences these strategies.

Ikoma & Shimura (1994) carried out a study with English as L1 and Japanese as L2, attempting to investigate pragmatic transfers in refusal by American learners of Japanese as a second language. The findings indicated no significant differences between American and Japanese subjects in terms of specificity in excuses. The current study, however, identifies clear distinctions in refusal strategies among Vietnamese learners, emphasizing gender differences and the cultural importance of face-saving in Vietnamese communication.

Nguyen (1998, cited in Pham, 2011) illustrated 12 factors that might affect the choice of refusal strategies in communication. These factors may include age, gender, residence, mood, occupation, personality, topic, place, communicative environment/setting, social distance, time pressure, and position whereas the present study builds on this by specifically examining gender distinctions in refusal strategies among Vietnamese EFL learners, contributing to a deeper understanding of how these factors play out in a specific cultural and educational context.

Beckers (1999) found that Americans varied their refusal strategies according to social status (high, low, equal) rather than social distance (stranger, acquaintance, and intimate), while Germans varied their refusal strategies according to social distance, rather than social status. Germans also employed fewer semantic formulae than Americans did in all 18 situations. Additionally, they used fewer semantic formulae overall. However, the current study differs by focusing on the Vietnamese context, where social harmony and face-saving are paramount, leading to a high frequency of indirect strategies regardless of social status or distance.

Felix-Brasdefer (2003) investigated speech act performance among native speakers of Mexican Spanish, native speakers of American English, and advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language in refusals. The author found significant differences in the frequency, content, and perception of refusal strategies between learners and native speakers. Similarly, the current study also finds differences in the way Vietnamese EFL learners use refusal strategies, particularly in the context of gender distinctions, but it places a greater emphasis on the cultural imperative of saving face.

A study of sociocultural transfer and its motivating factors within the realization patterns of the SARs generated by Jordanian EFL learners was carried out by Al-Issa (2003). The results indicated that sociocultural transfer made a profound impact on the EFL learners' selection of semantic formulae, the length of their responses, and the content of the semantic formulae. Al-Issa highlighted the impact of sociocultural transfer on EFL learners' refusal strategies. The current study aligns with this by showing how Vietnamese learners' refusal strategies are influenced by their sociocultural background, but it adds a layer of analysis by focusing on gender distinctions and the role of face-saving strategies.

With reference to cross-cultural distinctions in refusing a request in English and in Vietnamese, Phan (2001) stated that both English and Vietnamese people tended to use more indirect SARs than direct ones. Comparing the degree of directness and indirectness of refusals expressed by English and Vietnamese subjects, all the English-speaking respondents were believed to be more direct than the Vietnamese ones. The current study confirms this trend among Vietnamese EFL learners but extends the analysis to explore how these indirect strategies are employed differently by males and females to maintain social harmony.

In recent years, a variety of studies, such as those by Çiftçi (2016), Tuncer (2016, 2019), Allami et al. (2017), Paraskevi-Lukeriya & Tatiana (2017), and Nhat (2018) have continued to explore refusal strategies across cultures, often focusing on politeness, social status, and gender distinctions. The current study contributes to this body of research by offering a detailed examination of refusal strategies in the Vietnamese EFL context, with a particular focus on face-saving and gender.

Despite the extensive literature on refusals, there has been a lack of systematic research on face-saving strategies in SARs among Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly regarding gender distinctions. Previous studies have largely focused on situational variations, cross-cultural comparisons, and pragmatic transfer. However, they have not thoroughly investigated how Vietnamese EFL learners navigate the delicate balance of refusing while maintaining face, especially across gender lines.

To fill these gaps, the current study examines the specific face-saving strategies used in SARs by Vietnamese EFL learners, with a particular focus on gender distinctions. It adopts the framework of semantic formulas and the classification scheme of refusal strategies suggested by Beebe et al. (1990). By doing so, this study not only contributes to the understanding of pragmatic competence in a Vietnamese context but also provides insights into the broader field of second language pragmatics, particularly in relation to gender and culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study aims to examine TDMU students' perceptions and use of refusal strategies through a quantitative approach, chosen for its ability to generate substantial and reliable data. By presenting the results quantitatively, the study records the frequency of Speech Act Realizations (SARs), providing in-depth insights into the aspects under investigation.

The questionnaire, designed as a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), presents respondents with 10 realistic scenarios of five invitations (situations 1-5) and five requests (situations 6-10) requiring spontaneous responses. The DCT was selected for its flexibility in focusing on specific variables and its effectiveness in gathering extensive data quickly, as noted by Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989). This approach facilitates statistical analysis by enabling the survey of a large number of participants.

Collected data was categorized based on Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal strategies framework, with some modifications. Responses were analyzed by matching phrases or sentences to specific semantic criteria. Data was then entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-version 16) for frequency analysis. An independent sample T-test was also used to compare the mean scores of male and female participants to explore possible gender distinctions in face-saving strategies.

As the study purposefully attempted to find out a variety of face-saving strategies for SARs with reference to the research questions, various aspects to

investigate possible gender distinctions were examined. Some semantic formulae were also added as they appeared in the data at high frequencies. A few were also removed from the list as they were not found in the data.

3.2. Research site and sampling method

The research took place at TDMU, a public university under the management of the People's Committee of Bình Dương province. The university offers training programs in various disciplines at both university and postgraduate degree level.

The questionnaire was distributed to 120 randomly-selected English-majored students at TDMU - 60 males and 60 females. They came from different backgrounds, including freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and part-time ones. English-majored students were chosen as they were believed to have certain abilities in the use of English in communication.

3.3. Data collection

The data collection process took approximately four months. With the help of the program director, the research group visited different classes and randomly selected the 120 students. The participants were then provided with details about the study's objectives and were made aware that their participation was on a voluntary basis, and that they had the right to quit at any time.

To fulfill the objectives of the study, each participant was asked to give responses to 10 situations in the form of a questionnaire which included 10 different refusal situations they might encounter in daily life, in which a person poses a question (regarding an invitation or a request) to another person. Participants were supposed to place themselves in the respondent's position and imagine what they would say in each scenario. The invitations (situations 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) or requests (situations 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) in the questionnaire were not to be accepted but refused as the researcher mainly concentrated on how EFL learners performed SARs. In the space provided, the participants were required to write down exactly how to refuse in each situation. They should also include pauses or hesitating devices as part of their communication habits. All groups of situations consisted of three different variables: age (18-20, 21-23, 24-26, over 26 years of age), gender (male, female), and education background (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior or part-time student).

3.4. Data analysis

The data analysis process was carried out by going through the data collected from the survey questionnaire, looking for occurrences of refusal utterances, and

then marking them down. To find out certain face-saving strategies pursued by the respondents, the responses collected through the questionnaire were coded and analyzed by relying upon the taxonomy of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). These strategies were classified by matching word(s), phrase(s), or sentence(s) that met a particular semantic criterion or specific strategy relying on the SARs in each situation.

The collected data was later entered in SPSS (version 16) software in the form of frequency count of refusal strategies and then participants' responses to situations in the questionnaire were added for relevant statistical analysis. The frequencies of the participants' responses were calculated and presented in percentage format to see different preferred face-saving strategies. To examine gender distinctions in face-saving strategies and obtain reliable findings in gender distinctions in them among male and female participants in the investigated situations, the means scores of both gender groups were compared through an independent sample T-test. The alpha level was set at 0.05.

3.5. Ethical considerations

To protect the rights of the participants, prior to the survey, the researcher got their consent, and all detailed information related to this research was thoroughly explained so that the participants were aware of their voluntary participation and the possible risks involved. To encourage the participants' proactive involvement, the research group presented a wide range of benefits they might obtain from participating in the study, including having shared experience of effective English learning, obtaining reliable English material sources and getting access to good websites to learn and improve their English.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. General data analysis

Table 1: Strategies for SARs Employed by Males and Females

Strategies for SARs	Codes	Males	Females
Direct performative	IA	4	0
Direct non-performative: No	IB1	64	0
Direct non-performative: Negative willingness ability	IB2	53	2
Indirect-statement of regret	IIA	152	167

Indirect-statement of wish	IIB	4	46
Indirect-excuse/reason/explanation	IIC	198	223
Indirect-statement of alternative	IID	35	40
Indirect-set condition for future/past acceptance	IIE	3	2
Indirect-promise of future acceptance	IIF	23	54
Indirect-statement of principle	IIG	32	0
Indirect-rhetorical question	IIH	3	2
Indirect-threat/statement of negative consequences	III	2	3
Indirect-unwillingness	IIJ	8	22
Indirect-postponement	IIK	19	27
Adjuncts to refusals: Statement of positive opinion/feeling/ agreement	IIIA	0	7
Adjuncts to refusals: Statement of empathy	IIIB	0	5
Total	T-SARs	600	600

As can be seen from Table 1, 600 strategies were used in the male participants' refusals. The most common strategy was providing an *excuse, reason, or explanation* for the SARs, which occurred 198 times. This was followed by a *statement of regret*, which occurred 152 times. Other frequently used strategies included *direct non-performative "NO"* (64 occurrences) and *negative willingness/ability* (53 occurrences). Four strategies were used at low frequencies with only a few occurrences consisting of *direct performative, statement of wish, setting conditions for future/past acceptance, rhetorical question, and threat/statement of negative consequences*. Unfortunately, *statement of positive opinion/feeling/agreement* and *statement of empathy* were not utilized by these male participants.

Similarly, 600 strategies were used by female participants in their SARs. Among these strategies, indirect strategies involving *excuse, reason, or explanation* were recorded with high frequencies (223 occurrences). This was followed by a *statement of regret*, with 167 occurrences. Strategies used with relatively high frequencies included *promise of future acceptance* (54 occurrences), *statement of wish* (occurrences), and *statement of alternative* (40 occurrences). *Negative willingness/ability, setting conditions for future acceptance,* and *rhetorical question* were the least commonly used strategies, with only two occurrences each, while *direct performative, direct non-performative,* and *statement of principle* were not recorded in females' refusals.

With regard to the *statement of principle*, 32 cases were recorded in males' SARs while none was recorded in females'. Similarly, while seven cases of

statement of positive opinion/feeling/agreement and five cases of *statement of empathy* were recorded by female students, none of these strategies were recorded in male students' speech.

The above findings highlight the impact of gender on the use of face-saving strategies for refusal acts. Although male and female students tend to make similar choices in using the most preferred strategies, they create two opposing trends in using the number of strategies to perform refusals. It also demonstrates that males were likely to be more direct than females in refusals. However, the distinction in the degree of employing indirect strategies between males and females was not as great as the degree of the opposite strategies utilized by males and females.

4.1.2. Situational analysis

Situation 1

Figure 1: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 1

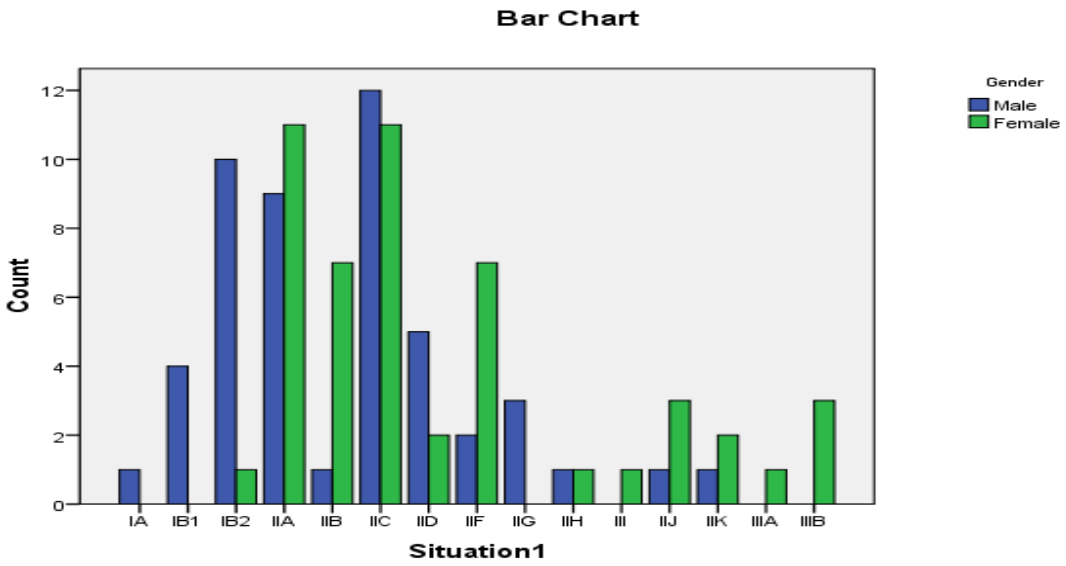
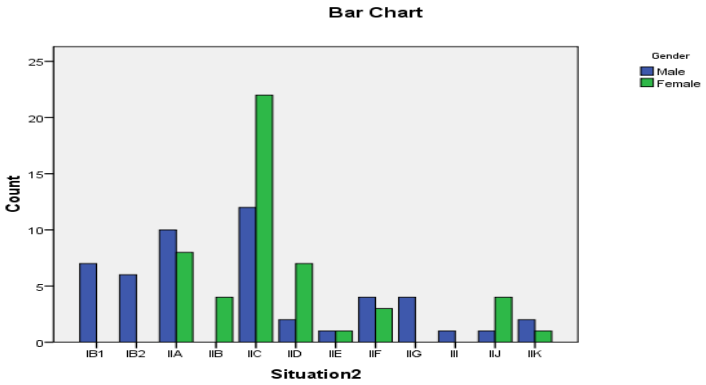


Figure 1 shows that there is a distinction in refusal strategies between males and females in Situation 1. Males utilized 35 SARs for nine indirect strategies whereas females utilized 45 SARs. Strategies IIA and IIC were of the highest frequencies among the 15 utilized. Direct strategies IA and IB1 were only utilized by males while strategies IIIA and IIIB were produced by females only. Strategy IB2 recorded by males (10 SARs) occurred at a much higher frequency than that by females (only 1 SAR). On the contrary, the frequencies of strategies IIB (7 SARs) and IIF (7 SARs) identified by females were higher than those identified by males (1 SAR and 2 SARs respectively). However, the other strategies did not indicate much distinction between males and females in terms of frequencies.

Situation 2

Figure 2: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 2



As can be seen from Figure 2, refusal strategies are differently employed by males and females in Situation 2. Males utilized 37 SARs for nine indirect strategies whereas females utilized 50 SARs for eight indirect strategies. Strategies IIA and IIC were both commonly used with high frequencies. However, the frequencies of strategies IIA and IIC between males and females was completely different (i.e. 12 SARs by males but 22 SARs by females in strategy IIC). It was also noticeable that direct strategies IB1, IB2 and III were utilized by males only whereas strategy IIB was just identified in females' refusal speech acts. More females also made use of strategies IID and IIJ than males did. Frequencies of the other strategies were not considerably different between males and females.

Situation 3

Figure 3: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 3

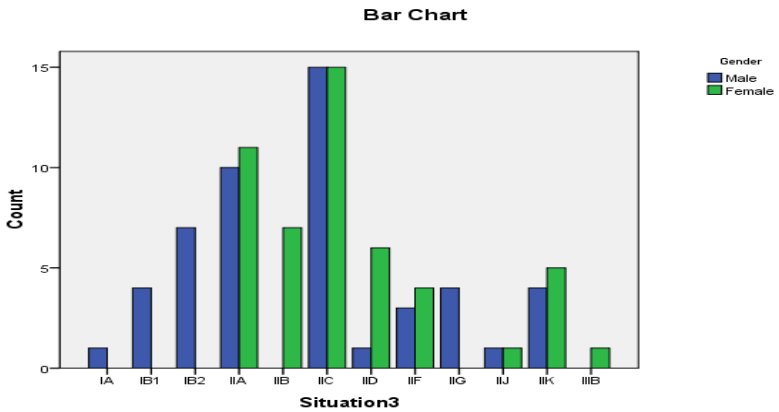
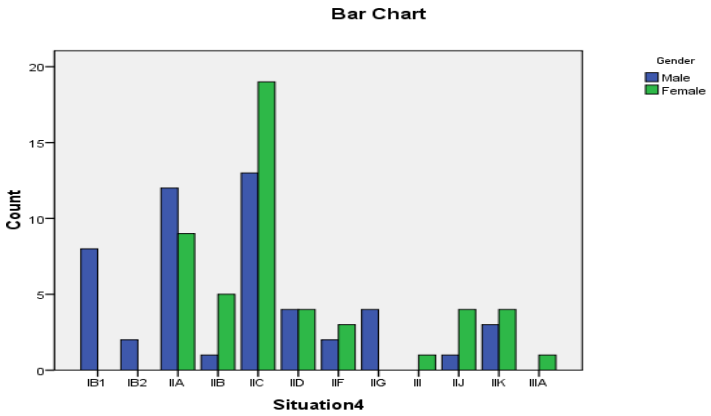


Figure 3 illustrates that there is a distinction in refusal strategies between males and females in Situation 3. Males utilized 38 SARs for seven indirect strategies whereas females utilized 49 SARs for seven indirect strategies. Strategies IIA and IIC were of the highest frequencies among 12 identified strategies. A distinguishing feature noted from the table is the same number of SARs for strategy

IIC among males and females (15 SARs each). Males also remained using direct strategies (IA, IB1 and IB2) for their refusals while these categories were not recorded by females. Another distinction between the two groups was the use of strategy IIB. While seven SARs were recorded by males, they did not produce any SARs of IIB. For other strategies, females were recorded with higher frequencies than males.

Situation 4

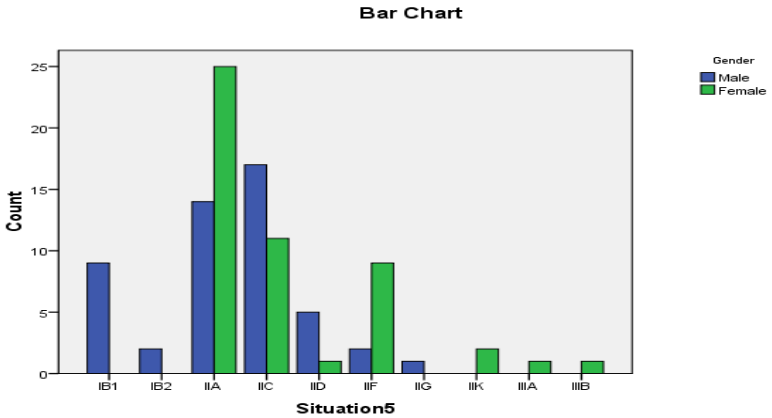
Figure 4: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 4



As can be seen in Figure 4, males utilized 40 SARs for eight indirect strategies whereas females utilized 49 SARs for eight indirect strategies. There were also some variations in the number of SARs. Indirect strategies were recorded with 40 SARs by males and 50 SARs by females. Direct strategies were utilized by males with 10 SARs only.

Situation 5

Figure 5: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 5

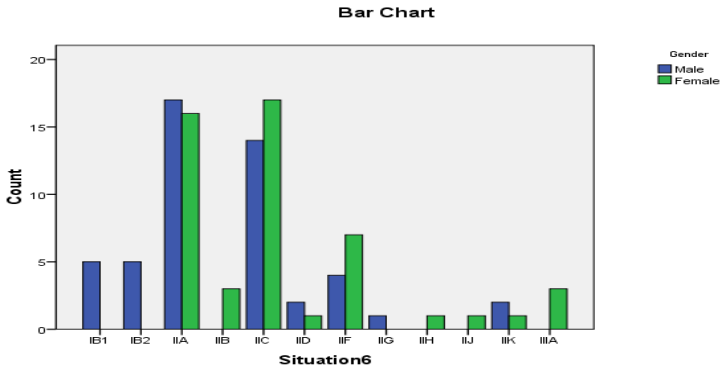


There was a distinction in using refusal strategies by males and females for Situation 5 (Figure 5). Males utilized 39 SARs for five indirect strategies whereas

females utilized 48 SARs. Three indirect strategies commonly used by females were IIA, IIC and IIF with 25 SARs, 11 SARs and 9 SARs respectively. Two indirect strategies IIA and IIC were also utilized by males with high frequencies (14 and 17 SARs respectively). Direct strategies were still recorded in males' refusals as nine SARs of strategy IB1 were recorded in their speech.

Situation 6

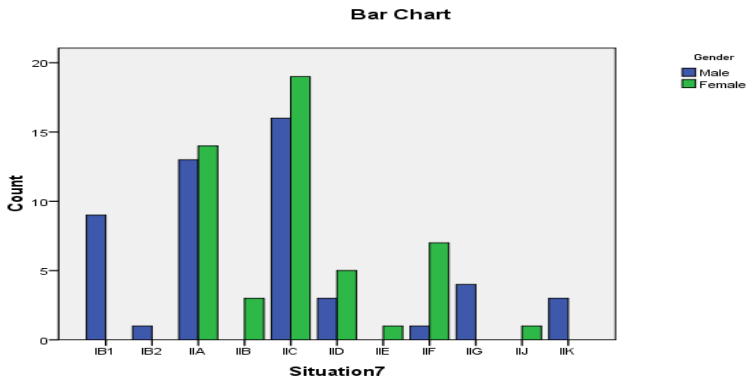
Figure 6: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 6



As can be seen in Figure 6, males utilized 40 SARs for six indirect strategies whereas females utilized 47 SARs for eight indirect strategies. Males and females utilized the highest numbers of SARs in their refusals within the two commonly-used strategies IIA and IIC. Indirect strategies that indicated different patterns of SARs included IIB, IID and IIF. In addition, direct strategies IB1 and IB2 were recorded among males' refusals only.

Situation 7

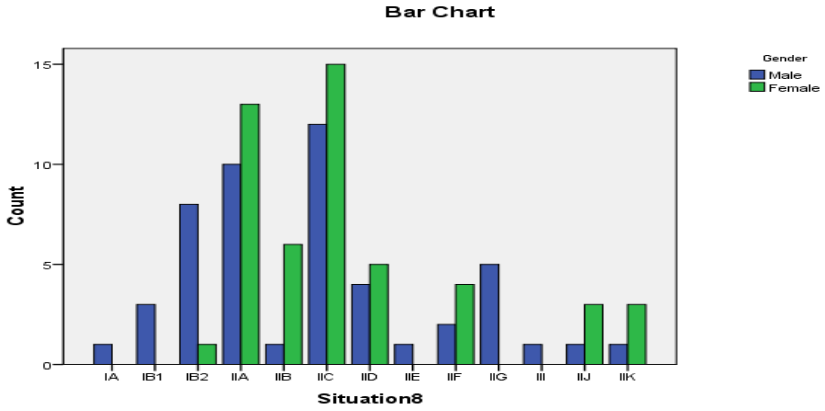
Figure 7: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 7



As shown in Figure 7, males utilized 40 SARs for six indirect strategies while 50 SARs for seven indirect strategies were employed by females. Two indirect strategies with the highest number of frequencies used by both males and females were IIA and IIC. It is worth-noticing that indirect refusal strategies outnumbered among males compared to females in this situation.

Situation 8

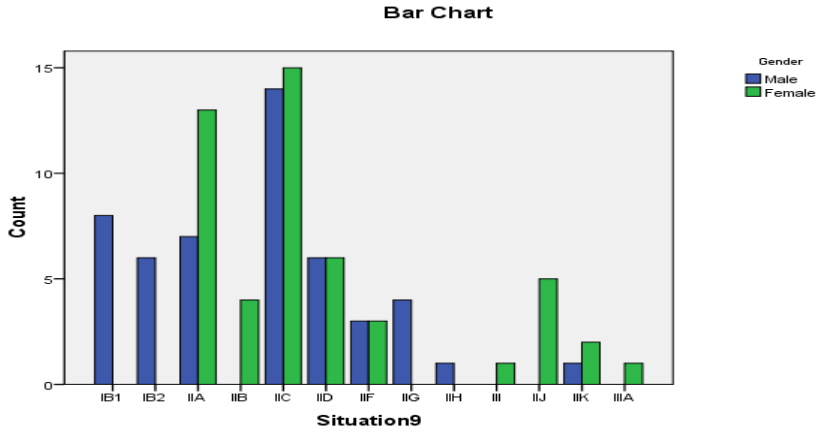
Figure 8: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 8



A distinguishing feature of Figure 8 is the high number of indirect strategies employed by both males and females. Males utilized 38 SARs for 10 indirect strategies whereas 49 SARs were performed by females for seven indirect strategies. It was noticeable that females were recorded with a higher number of SARs in terms of strategy IIB compared with males. Another distinction occurred in the usage of direct strategies. While direct strategies were utilized by males only, the frequencies of IIF, IIJ and IIK from females were higher than those from males.

Situation 9

Figure 9: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 9

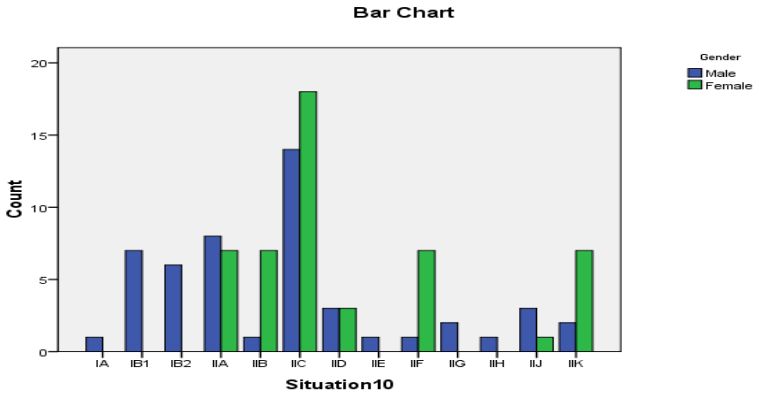


It can be seen from Figure 9 that there are a few distinctions in the way males and females utilized SARs in this situation. Males employed 36 SARs for seven indirect strategies while 49 SARs for eight indirect strategies were employed by females. Strategies IIB and IIJ were utilized by females with four and five SARs respectively whereas males did not employ any SARs in these categories. Direct strategies IB1 and IB2 were employed by males with 14 SARs but not by females.

While two indirect strategies IIG and IIH were not utilized by females, strategies IIB, III and IIJ were not produced by males.

Situation 10

Figure 10: The Frequencies on Refusal Strategies for Situation 10



As can be seen from Figure 10, females utilized 50 SARs for ten indirect strategies in their refusals, whereas males employed less SARs of these kinds with 36 expressing seven indirect strategies. SARs of direct strategies were identified in males' refusals, but not in females'. While strategies IIB, IIC, IIF, and IIK were used with higher frequencies in females' refusals, strategies IIA and IIC were employed with higher frequencies in males' accounting for eight and 14 SARs respectively.

4.1.3. Independent sample T-test analysis

Table 2: The Independent Sample T-test on the Refusal Strategies Employed by Males and Females

		Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Male and female refusal strategies	Equal variances assumed	5.453	.022	-3.024	98	.003	-2.06000	.68118	-3.41178	-.70822
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.024	91.467	.003	-2.06000	.68118	-3.41299	-.70701

To provide deeper insight into the findings collected from the questionnaire and situational analysis, an independent-sample T-test was also conducted to assess if distinctions exist on refusal strategies in terms of gender. The test values as displayed in Table 2 indicate a significant distinction in the scores of face-saving strategies between males and females (M=-2.06; SD=.68; t=-3.024). Based on the p-value (with p=.003), which was less than .05, gender distinctions in refusal strategies are also highlighted. From these results, it can be seen that there is a statistically significant difference in the use of refusal strategies among genders.

4.2. Discussion

The analysis of the data reveals several key trends regarding refusal strategies used by males and females. Consistent with previous research, both genders frequently employed indirect refusal strategies, indicating a shared tendency to handle refusals with care. This approach reflects a desire to avoid direct confrontation and maintain politeness, aligning with the findings of earlier studies on indirectness in refusals.

However, there are notable contrasts with past research in the specific strategies employed. The two most commonly applied ones, namely statements of regret and excuses/ reasons/explanations, were used extensively by both males and females. Their frequency of use was quite similar, with males using excuses/reasons/explanations in 198 SARs and females in 223 SARs. This shared preference reflects a cultural emphasis on maintaining harmony and "saving face," a finding that supports the view of Vietnamese society's emphasis on etiquette and respect (Tran, 1998 & 2001; Le, 2001; Ngo, 2001; Truong, 2001).

In contrast, previous research has not always highlighted the degree to which specific strategies like excuses/reasons/explanations dominate over statements of regret. The current study finds that both genders used excuses/reasons/explanations more frequently than statements of regret, underscoring the importance of face-saving strategies in Vietnamese communication. This finding builds on the notion that, in Vietnamese culture, providing reasons for refusals is crucial to avoid humiliating the interlocutor.

Distinct differences between genders also emerged. Males used direct refusal strategies, such as a flat "No" and expressions of negative willingness, more frequently than females, who did not use the flat "No" and used negative willingness less often. This contrasts with previous research suggesting that both genders use indirect strategies equally. The current study indicates that males are more likely to be direct, while females tend to be more indirect in their refusals.

Further gender-based distinctions were observed in the use of specific strategies. Females preferred using promises of future acceptance, statements of wish, and expressions of empathy more frequently than males. For example, females used promises of future acceptance in 54 SARs compared to 23 by males.

These findings contrast with the belief that males are generally more direct, as females demonstrated a greater use of indirect strategies, including statements of empathy and positive opinion.

The absence of adjuncts to refusals (such as statements of positive opinion or empathy) among males further illustrates this contrast. Females used phrases like "What a pity!" and "I feel really sorry to…" in their refusals, aligning with the cultural value placed on empathy and affection. This contrasts sharply with males, who did not use such strategies.

The study also reaffirms Sapir's (1929) and Brown's (1994) views on the inseparability of language and culture. It demonstrates that mastering L2 refusal strategies requires an understanding of the sociocultural values of the target culture. This highlights the necessity for Vietnamese learners to be equipped with knowledge of these factors to enhance their communicative competence in EFL classrooms. Recognizing these gender-based differences and sociocultural factors will aid learners in developing effective communication skills and reduce the impact of discrimination and prejudice, thereby boosting their confidence in various communicative situations.

In summary, while both genders employ indirect strategies to manage refusals, the current study reveals significant gender-based differences in strategy use. Males are more likely to use direct refusals, while females show a greater inclination towards indirectness and face-saving strategies. These findings align with, and expand upon, the works of Brown & Levinson (1987), Fraser (1990), Smith (1998), and Nguyen (1998, cited in Pham, 2011), reinforcing the notion that gender influences refusal strategies.

From the research results, several pedagogical recommendations were also made for L2 instruction. Language instructors should design and implement contextualized, task-based activities that expose learners to a range of pragmatic inputs and encourage appropriate output. These activities will help them develop their pragmatic abilities and better navigate real-life communicative situations in EFL classrooms.

It is essential for instructors to teach language forms and functions within the context of communicative oral activities. By simulating both formal and informal situations, learners can develop their sociolinguistics abilities and learn to perform speech acts effectively and appropriately.

Language instructors should prepare learners to apply the target language across diverse contexts. This involves incorporating both sociocultural and sociolinguistic insights into the curriculum and textbooks, ensuring that learners understand when and how to use different refusal strategies appropriately.

To support the development of pragmatic competence, interactive classroom activities should be organized based on the communicative approach. These

activities should include practical scenarios and role-plays that reflect real-world communication.

It is advisable to provide learners with materials that offer detailed guidance on performing appropriate refusals and understanding the context in which various refusal strategies are used. This will help them grasp the nuances of different strategies and their cultural implications.

On the part of the students, they should be taught that direct refusals, while sometimes perceived as harsh, are generally acceptable among native speakers. Developing an awareness of this cultural norm will help students manage their expectations and reduce misunderstandings or feelings of hurt in such situations.

Students should be made aware that without explicit knowledge of other cultures, they may misinterpret the intentions of interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding cultural variations in communication can improve their ability to interact effectively and empathetically.

5. Conclusion

As stated earlier, the aim of the current study is to identify face-saving strategies employed by TDMU English-majored students while performing SARs. The findings highlight the impact of gender on the use of face-saving strategies for refusal acts. Generally, male refusals are different to those of females, though they do share some similarities. Although males and females tend to make use of their own preferred strategies, they create two opposing trends in using the number of strategies to perform refusals. It is worth noticing that males are likely to be more direct than females in SARs and the distinction in the degree of employing indirectness strategies between males and females is not as great as the degree of directness strategies they use. Apparently, males perform their refusals on the basis of social principles like law and order, in contrast, females tend to act on the basis of social harmony. EFL students should be aware that direct refusals are generally acceptable among native speakers, and without explicit cultural knowledge, communicators are prone to misinterpret the intentions of the interlocutors with a different cultural background.

Regardless of its contributions, the current study cannot avoid several limitations as not all refusal strategies in the category were used by males and females. While this study was restricted to verbal language only, other factors such as prosody (intonation, tone, and stress), non-verbal gestures and facial expressions were not observed. Due to the methodology of written data elicitation, there is also a limitation in the fact that written data has no time constraints, so participants could correct their answers. As a result, the responses may vary in what participants

really say in actual situations, and naturalistic data collection processes, namely role-plays or recordings made in natural settings, would be desirable in more extensive studies. Additionally, this study only concentrated on gender as the major variable while other potentially relevant factors were not notably investigated and left for future research. As the study only used DCT as a research tool, which might have yielded data different from naturally occurring reality, future studies should exploit data from a corpus of spoken language in natural settings.

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