Iraqi EFL University Student's Implicit Ways of Saying "NO" to Invitations

A graduation paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B. Edu. Course in English language and literature

Prepared by

Ahmed Hassanein Mahdi

Supervised by

Dr. Ahmed Sahib Mubarak.

2023-2024

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

﴿وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا﴾

صدق الله العلي العظيم

"طه" "١١٤"

Dedication

To

my lovely mother

and

my late father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the teaching staff member of our department for all their effotrs and help during the the four years I spent in the department.

Special thanks and respect are due to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Ahmed Sahib Mubarak for his continuous cooperation , advice and guidance in the process of writing this paper.

Introduction

1.1 The Problem of the Study

This research paper deals with the way Iraqi EFL university students use implicit ways of saying "no" to invitations. This topic is concerned with the speech act of refusal. Searle(1969) defines the speech act of refusal as the negative counterpart of acceptance and consenting. Refusal can be of two kinds direct and indirect. The direct refusal refers to the use of the expression of actual or definite refusal such as (I refuse, I can't come I don't want to). Indirect refusals on the other hand refer to speech act ways that speakers use to minimize or soften the illocutionary force of their refusals to save or maintain the favorable face of the listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

As for the Iraqi EFL students, the ways of saying "no" implicitly to invitations hasn't been studied thoroughly, to the best of the researcher's knowledge. So we are unaware if the students are able to successfully say "no" implicitly. So the following questions should be answered:

1-Can EFL students use the speech act of refusal appropriately?

2-What are the direct and indirect strategies EFL students use concerning the speech act of refusal?

1.2 Aims of the Study

1-Investigating whether EFL university students can use the speech act of refusal appropriately or not.

2- Identifying the direct and indirect strategies EFL students use.

1.3 The Hypotheses

The study hypothesizes that:

1-Iraqi EFL university students will use direct refusal strategies more frequently than the indirect ones.

2-Iraqi EFL university students employ explicit strategies when declining invitations, influenced by their Iraqi culture, they prefer directness.

1.4 The Limits of the Study

The study is limited to 30 undergraduate fourth-year students randomly chosen from the Department of English of the College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, during the academic year 2023-2024.

1.5 Value of the Study

The research findings can be used for comparative linguistics, as they provide a basis for contrasting the ways in which different cultures express politeness and refusal in language, also EFL students, teachers, syllabus designers, educators and curriculum developers can benefit from insights into the strategies employed by Iraqi EFL students.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Speech Act Theory

Yule (2020:157) defines the speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance, such as "requesting", questioning", "commanding" or "informing". It is a method by which linguists and philosophers tried to make a classification to the ways in which humans use language Aitchison (2004 : 106). Understanding speech acts is crucial in pragmatics, the study of language use in context. It helps to analyze how language is not just a tool for conveying information but a means of performing various social actions. For instance, saying "I promise" not only conveys information but also commits the speaker to a future action.

- Mom, would you please help me with the homework?
- Once I finish with the dishes dear, I promise.

Understanding the context and the speaker's intention is crucial for correctly interpreting speech acts. Pragmatics explores how these acts contribute to effective communication and how meaning goes beyond the literal interpretation of words. It adds a layer of complexity to linguistic analysis by considering the social and cultural context in which language is used. Speech acts are divided into direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts are acts which are expressed clearly by the most obvious linguistic means for example: (Go to bed!), indirect speech acts on the other hand possess the syntactic structure usually associated with another act (isn't past your bed time?) Aitchison(2004:107).

2.2 Components of Speech Acts

The locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts are the fundamental elements that constitute a speech act, Leech (1983: 199) defines them as the following:

- "locutionary act: performing an act of saying something."
- " illocutionary act: performing an act in saying something."
- " Perlocutionary act: performing an act by saying something"

The locutionary act involves simply uttering words in a particular language, whereas the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts convey a more intricate message to the listener. The illocutionary act communicates the speaker's intentions behind the utterance, and the perlocutionary act reveals the intended impact the speaker aims to have on the listener. This can be illustrated with a simple example:

- Would you close the door, please?

The surface form and the locutionary act in this utterance constitute a question with a distinct meaning (Close the door). The illocutionary act implies a request made by the speaker, while the perlocutionary act signifies the speaker's wish for the listener to go and close the door.

The locutionary act is likely the least ambiguous. According to Bach and Harnish (1979: 19), who discuss Austin's ideas, Austin identifies three aspects of the locutionary act. Austin claims that to say anything is:

- Always to perform the act of uttering certain noises (a phonetic act)
- Always to perform the act of uttering certain vocables or words (a phatic act)
- Generally to perform the act of using that [sentence] or its constituents with a certain more or less definite 'sense' and more or less definite 'reference', which together are equivalent to 'meaning'

The essence of the speech act theory revolves around illocutionary acts. These acts are intricately linked to the speaker's intentions, encompassing actions such as stating, questioning, promising, requesting, giving commands, threatening, and more. Yule (1996: 48) asserts that the illocutionary act is executed through the communicative force of an utterance, commonly referred to as the illocutionary force of the utterance. In essence, the illocutionary act guides how the entire utterance should be understood within the conversation.

Perlocutionary acts, the final component of speech acts, aim to elicit a specific response or effect from the listener. While perlocutionary acts may appear similar to illocutionary acts at times, a crucial distinction sets them apart. The differentiation lies in the two levels of success in executing illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, a concept best illustrated through a simple example:

- Would you close the door?

Considered merely as an illocutionary act (a request in this case), the act is successful if the hearer recognizes that he should close the door, but as a perlocutionary act it succeeds only if he actually closes it.

2.3   Speech Acts of Refusal

The speech act of refusal is defined as the negative counterpart of acceptance and consenting. Refusals are complicated due to the fact that they are influenced by some social factors, as gender, social distance, and power. How to say "no" is more important than the answer itself. It is assumed that interlocutors are socially expected to know when to use the appropriate form of refusals. Depending on ethnicity and cultural linguistic values, the speaker must know the appropriate form and its function. Refusals are used to reject the speech acts of requests, invitations, suggestions, offers, etc., and occur regularly in communication. Although refusal acts occur in every culture and language, cross -cultural studies have revealed differences

not only in the ways different cultures express rejections, but also in how they show politeness when doing so. Culture thus plays a key role in selecting the strategies used to perform a refusal. Refusals, which can damage the face of the speaker and the addressee, are categorized as face-threatening acts. Al-Kahtani (2005) claims that uttering 'no' is hard for non-native speakers of a language. Refusals are delicate speech acts to perform. Refusing a request can be uncomfortable for the respondent who refused what was asked of them as well as for the asker who was refused. Speakers who can effectively utilize politeness strategies and indirect strategies are better able to lessen face threats and save face for both participants. In doing so, they avoid potential failures in their interpersonal relationships.

The sociolinguistic forms refer to the actual language forms used to realize the speech act (e.g., sorry vs. excuse me, really sorry vs. very sorry) as Cohen (1996: 255) points out. The speakers' sociolinguistic ability would consist of their control over the selection of these forms, which includes their control over the register of these forms, from most intimate to most formal. The language forms are the actual words or phrases selected in order to realize the speech act in the given sociocultural situation: for example, the expression of regret in an apology for knocking someone down, registration of a grievance in a complaint against a landlord, specification of the objective of a request for assistance from a classmate, or the refusal of an invitation to go out for dinner and a show. For instance, when students are asked to dinner by their professor and they cannot make it, turning down an invitation may well be socioculturally appropriate, but the reply "No way!" would probably constitute a sociolinguistically inappropriate choice of forms for realizing the speech act set of refusal. The problem is that, socioculturally, this phrase would be interpreted as rude and insulting, unless the students had an especially close relationship with their professor and the utterance was made in jest. A more appropriate response might be the following: "I would love to but I have a prior engagement I can't get out of" (ibid).

In this sense, Brown and Levinson (1987: 66) argued that refusal is an act which disregards the positive face of addressees. In regards, some studies have found that refusal is sensitive to social variables (Chen, 1995). A refusal may be mitigated by means of adverbs or mental state predicates, a justification of refusal, an indefinite response, an alternative, a postponement, or by setting a condition for future acceptance (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008).

A- Would you like to come?
B- Later, I have some unfinished business. (adverbs).
A- We will through a party.
B- I don't go to parties(justification of refusals)
A- Can you write me a letter?
B- May be for another time. (Postponement) .. etc..

As producing the speech act of "refusal," a speaker expected to say "no" to a request or invitation directly or indirectly by creating a face threatening act to the listener or the responder and limiting the listener's needs. Therefore, the speech act of refusal to be used properly in English necessitates that learners must be pragmatically competent (Chen, 1995).

2.4   Felicity Conditions of Speech Acts of Refusal

Austin introduced the concept of felicity conditions, defining them as follows (Austin, 1962: 14 -15):

1. There must be an accepted conventional procedure with a specific effect, involving the utterance of specific words by specific individuals in specific circumstances.
2. The individuals and circumstances must be suitable for invoking the specific procedure in a given case
3. All participants must correctly and completely execute the procedure.
4. In cases where the procedure is intended for individuals with particular thoughts or feelings, or for initiating certain conduct,

a participant invoking the procedure must both intend and subsequently engage in such conduct.

The term of felicity conditions is still in use and it is not restricted only to performatives anymore. As Yule (Yule, 1996: 50) observes, felicity conditions cover expected or appropriate circumstances for the performance of a speech act to be recognized as intended. He then proposes further classification of felicity conditions into five classes: general conditions, content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions and essential conditions. According to Yule (Yule,1996:50), general conditions presuppose the participants' knowledge of the language being used and his non-playacting, content conditions concern the appropriate content of an utterance, preparatory conditions deal with differences of various illocutionary acts (e.g. those of promising or warning), Sincerity conditions count with speaker's intention to carry out a certain act and essential conditions 'combine with a specification of what must be in the utterance content, the context, and the speaker's intentions, in order for a specific act to be appropriately (felicitously) performed'.

Performed in response to other speech acts like offers, invitations, suggestions, and requests, the act of refusing signifies the unwillingness to undertake a particular action. As the speaker opts not to commit to future actions, refusal falls into the commissives category To ensure effective refusals, specific conditions, known as felicity conditions, must be met. Below in the table are the felicity conditions for the speech act of refusal (adapted from Barron, 2003, 128).

Types of rules (conditions)	Refusal
Propositional content	S predicates a future act to H.
Preparatory	S is not able to perform A.
Sincerity	S does not want to be obliged to do A.
Essential	Attempt by S to inform H that S will not do A.

(S refers to speaker; H refers to hearer; A refers to act)

2.5 Refusal strategies

People often use different strategies in refusing. The following sections is going to shed light on the strategies used in the speech act of refusal in English:

2.5.1 Direct Refusals

This is Beebe et.al (1990) first major refusal strategy directed at direct or direct behavior. There are two "Performative" and "Non-performative" kinds of direct refusals. The direct performative refusal refers to the use of the expression of actual or definite refusal for example (I refuse):

- A-Would you like to go to cinema with us?
- B-I'll have to refuse, I got something to do.

Without any redressive face action, this strategy is a direct way to say no to things. Here, the speakers intentionally used face-threatening (a threat to another person's self image) phrases in a straightforward, clear and concise way to allow the hearer to comprehend his / her point of view of saying(no) on the invitation. The impact of this sort of direct refusal speech acting on the emotion of the hearer is that it

makes the hearer feel ashamed, scorned, disrespected and humiliated, whether in private or public areas. Non-performative direct refusal strategy on the other hand also has two kinds: flat (no) which has the same mental effect as performative direct refusal on the hearer and adverse readiness or capacity without the word' no'

- A: There's a party today, can you come?
- B:I appreciate your invitation, but unfortunately, I won't be able to attend the event.
- A: Will you paint the wall of my kitchen?
- B:Thank you for thinking of me, but I won't be able to take on that task.

 Though still a face-threatening act, non-performative direct refusal strategy of negative willingness or ability (for example I can't come) is a bit soft and the hearer does not really feel hurt or humiliated or ashamed as the direct performative:

- A: It's my birthday tomorrow, you should come.
- B: Sorry, I can't come.

2.5.2 Indirect Refusals

Indirect refusals refer to speech acting methods that speakers use to minimize or soften the illocutionary force of their refusals to save or maintain the favorable face of the listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The effect of this strategy on the hearer's emotion is based on their observation that he / she really feels appreciated, loved and happy or be connected or belong to a member of a group (Yule 2020) even when his / her request cannot be granted. The following are some of the indirect strategies according to the Beebe et al (1990) taxonomy of refusals:

1-Statement of regret (I'm sorry, I apologize)

- A: Can you help me with the baggage?
- B: I apologize, I'm in a hurry

2-Wish ('I wish I could help you')

- A:Could you help me with my math test?
- I'm terrible at math, I wish I could help you.

3-Excuse, reason, or explanation ('I am ill')

A- You should join us.
B- I don't feel well, I'm ill.

4-Set condition for future/past acceptance ('If I had enough money')

- A: Can you lend me some money to buy this book?
- B: If I had enough money I would have bought it for you.

5-Promise of future acceptance ('I'll do it next time')

A- Could you explain this to me?
B- I'll do it next time.

6-Avoidance. For example:

Situation: You ask your friend to go with you to the market. He will refuse by doing the following:

- He will hesitate when he responds to you.
- Physical departure… he will leave.
- Silence: He will keep silent.
- He will change the subject.
- He will tell a joke.

3. Empirical Work

3.1 Data Collection and Description

Direct Refusal Strategies Table:

Situation No.	Performative	Non performative	Plain "no"	Incorrect Responses
1	8	5	0	0
2	6	2	2	1
3	9	1	5	0
4	9	6	8	0
5	10	1	1	1
Total: 75	42	15	16	2

Indirect Refusal Strategies Table:

Situation No.	Regret	wish	Excuse reason or Explanation	Set condition for past or future acceptance	Promise for future acceptance	Avoidance	Incorrect responses
1	3	1	15	0	2	0	1
2	8	0	7	0	0	0	2
3	6	0	10	0	0	0	0

4	0	0	0	0	9	0	3
5	0	1	8	0	0	0	1
Total: 75	17	2	40	0	9		7

3.2 Data Analysis

In situation 1, the subject is invited by his friend for dinner and a magic show. Fifteen students used the indirect refusal strategy and gave a reason or excuse to not come by saying for example *I have an exam tomorrow.* This Strategy is the most suitable to be used here. One of them used expression of wish and three used statement of regret.

In situation 2, the subject is invited by his boss to join him for lunch. Six students used the performative act of refusals saying for example *I refuse, I have an appointment* and two of them used plain "no" which is not appropriate for this situation because the boss is of higher rank and is not supposed to be spoken like that. Eight used regret as a refusal and seven used a reason which are more appropriate to this situation for example *sorry I have to go with my son to market.*

In situation 3, the subject invites his uncle for his birthday. Again most of them used the indirect refusal strategy of giving reason or explanation which can be appropriate for this situation. Nine used the performative act of refusal and six used the strategy of regret and one used non-performative refusal strategy for example *I wish I could but I can't* regret, and non-performative strategies can be appropriate also to be used here.

In situation 4, nine used the performative verb strategy of refusal and nine used the indirect strategy of promise for future acceptance the latter may be the most suitable for this situation for example *I promise you we'll be there next time.* Six used non performative act of refusal saying *I can't come I'm busy.* Eight used plain "no" it's not appropriate to say that because your neighbor might see it as rude or impolite.

In situation 5, the subject is invited to a party by his friend. Ten used the direct performative verb strategy and eight used the indirect strategy of giving reason for example *your house is far I'll be late,* which is appropriate for this situation in particular. One student used plain "no" which is not appropriate may be because he did give a reason or explanation to refuse, which is more appropriate. One also used non performatives saying *I can't come. It's far.*

The analysis above shows that most of the students used direct refusal strategy (performative verb) and indirect refusal strategy of excuse, reason or explanation. They sometimes weren't successful because they used the direct strategies where the indirect strategies are more appropriate and vice versa. The students sometimes fell short in using the appropriate strategy because they lack the needed knowledge about speech act and properties in general.

4.Conclusion

This study has arrived at the following conclusions:

1-According to its findings, the study found out that EFL students demonstrated varied proficiency levels in using the speech act of refusal. While many students used both direct and indirect refusal strategies appropriately, some struggled to apply the right strategy in different situations. Overall, it appears that EFL students have the basic ability to use the speech act of refusal with various proficiency levels depending on their personal exposure to the authentic use of English.

2-EFL students used the direct refusal strategies like with direct performative verb strategies more frequently than other direct strategies. Their use of indirect strategies rested on giving reasons or excuses. Additionally, the use of such strategies as setting conditions for future acceptance was notably absent among the students.

3-Students also used non performative verb direct and plain "no "strategies, concerning the indirect strategies they used regret, wish, and promise for future acceptance. Additionally, some Students faced challenges in selecting the appropriate strategy for specific situations, indicating a lack of the needed knowledge about speech act and properties in general.

References

Aitchison, J. (2010). *Linguistics: A Practical Introduction to Contemporary Linguistics*. Hachette UK

Al-Kahtani, S. (2005). *Refusals Realizations in Three Different Cultures: A Speech Act Theoretically Based Cross-cultural Study*. Journal of King Saud University.

Austin, John Langshaw. *How to do Things with Words*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Bach Kent, Robert M. Harnish. *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979

Barron, A. (2003). *Acquisition in Interlanguage Pragmatics: Learning How to do Things with Words in a Study Abroad Context* (Vol. 108). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Beebe, Leslie, Tomoko, Takahashi, and Robin Uliss-Weltz. (1990). "*Pragmatic Transfer in ESL Refusals*." In R. Scarcella, E. Andersen, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *The Development of Communicative Competence in A Second Language*. New York: Newbury House.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge, MA: The M. I. T. Press.

Chen, H.J. (1995) *Pragmatic Judgment on Refusals*: *Its Reliability and Consistency*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Council on the teaching of foreign language, Anaheim, California (ERIC Document: No. ED 391381).

Cohen A. D. *Developing the Ability to Perform Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press 1996.

Félix-Brasdefer, J.C. (2008) *Perceptions of Refusals to Invitations: Exploring the Minds of Foreign Language Learners*. Language Awareness.

Leech, Geoffrey. *Principles of Pragmatics*. New York: Longman Singapore Publishing, 1983.

Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Yule, G. (2020). *The Study of Language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Yule, George. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998