International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 7, Issue 5, 2025
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

Gender and the Pragmatics of Refusal: A Study of Moroccan University Learners of English

Abdelaziz EL HAMMOUCHI
Adjunct Professor & EFL Teacher, Sefrou,, Morocco

DOI: http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v7i4.2247
APA Citation: El Hammouchi, A. (2025). Gender and the Pragmatics of Refusal: A Study of Moroccan University Learners of English. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 7*(5).106-124. http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i5.2247

Received:
09/07/2025

Accepted:
20/08/2025

Keywords:
Pragmatics, Speech Acts Theory, Refusal Strategies, Politeness Theory, Gender Differences, DCT.

Abstract

This study investigates the use of refusal strategies within the framework of pragmatics and politeness theory, with a specific focus on gender-based patterns among Moroccan university learners of English. The research explores whether male and female participants employ refusal strategies similarly across various situations. Using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire, data were collected and analysed quantitatively to identify the frequency and types of refusal strategies used. The findings reveal that male and female participants generally follow comparable patterns in their use of refusal strategies, with only minor differences observed in a single situation. These results contribute to the understanding of gender and pragmatic competence, offering insights into how politeness and social norms shape refusal behaviour in a second language context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is a complex concept that scholars often find challenging to define. However, several researchers (Morris, 1938; Levinson, 1983; Hashiuchi & Oku, 2005; Kecskes, 2016) have endeavoured to delineate its scope by offering definitions that address its primary themes. Stephen Levinson (1983) is among those who sought to clarify the operational boundaries of pragmatics. As discussed by Morris (1938), Levinson (1983) posited that pragmatists should concentrate on three fundamental concepts alongside pragmatics: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (p. 2). Each of these fields addresses specific linguistic and non-linguistic issues. Specifically, syntax is defined as '*the study of formal relations of signs to one another*', semantics as '*the relation of signs to the objects to which signs are applicable*', and pragmatics as '*the study of the relation of signs to interpreters*' (Morris, 1983, p. 6).

Pragmatics is not solely concerned with the linguistic description of language; rather, it pertains to the performances that utterances enact in conversations (p. 8). Within this definition, three key terms warrant scrutiny: performance, utterances, and the verb 'do'. Performance, as opposed to competence, is crucial for understanding the significance of language use in the definition of pragmatics. While competence refers to theoretical knowledge of a language,

performance pertains to the practical application of that language in concrete situations (Chomsky, 2008, p. 34). Consequently, pragmatics focuses on the performance of language within specific contexts, as well as the influences that speakers exert on hearers to elicit certain actions. For instance, the utterance '*you are divorced!*' in a Muslim Indian context serves the function of terminating a marriage. In contrast, in another context, it may convey a different meaning and effect on the hearer.

In natural conversations, individuals often rely on *inferencing* to convey their meanings and render conversational implicatures visible and beneficial in the communication process. However, making inferences carries the risk of misunderstanding if the context is not shared. Mutual knowledge is essential for making inference constructive rather than a barrier between the speaker and the hearer.

In a recent endeavour to approach pragmatics, Hashiuchi & Oku (2005) proposed a complementary perspective by asserting that grammar, defined as '*the abstract formal system of language*', and pragmatics, which pertains to '*the principles of language use*', are complementary domains (p. 11). Both linguistic codes and language use are essential for conducting a pragmatic analysis of an utterance. Linguistics serves as the foundation from which pragmatists embark on their exploration of human interactions.

In a similar vein, Kecskes (2016) advocated for a dialectical approach to addressing interaction within the field of pragmatics (p. 26). He emphasised that the meanings conveyed between a speaker and hearer are of paramount importance in an utterance. Unlike traditional methods of analysing utterances, attention should be directed toward the reciprocal process of producing and interpreting meanings. Both hearers and speakers collaborate to facilitate a fruitful, cooperative, and effective exchange.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Speech Act Theory

In his work, Austin (1962) challenged the traditional view of statements, emphasizing that speech acts perform actions rather than merely describing or reporting situations. He introduced the concept of 'utterances' as actions performed through speech, exemplified by an official naming a ship as 'Queen Elizabeth'—an act that, in context, creates a new name for the vessel and obligates the audience to use it.

2.2.Cooperative Principles

Effective communication relies on adherence to conversational maxims, including quantity, quality, relevance, and manner, as outlined by Grice (1989). These principles facilitate mutual understanding by guiding speakers to provide sufficient, truthful, pertinent, and clear contributions. Violations, such as providing extraneous information or irrelevant responses, can lead to misunderstandings. For example, in a dialogue where one participant's response exceeds the necessary information, the cooperative principle is breached, potentially confusing. Similarly, insincerity or irrelevance undermines effective exchange. Maintaining these maxims ensures clarity and comprehension in communication, as emphasised by Brown & Levinson (1987) and Grice (1989).

2.3.Politeness Theory

Politeness, as defined by Oxford Dictionary, involves manners and respect for others' feelings ('politeness', n.d.). It encompasses verbal and non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, which convey respect and social awareness. Yule (1996) describes politeness as the means to acknowledge another's face, influenced by social distance; greater distance often involves negative face, while closer relationships employ positive face. Brown & Levinson (1987) identify politeness strategies as universal, rooted in rationality and face management, where face is the public self-image individuals seek to preserve or enhance. The face is dynamic and emotionally invested, reflecting feelings and social status. Communicators aim to satisfy their needs, either maintaining or improving their social image, which is central to Politeness Theory.

2.4.Refusal Speech Acts

The refusal speech act is defined as 'a face-threatening act [which] … disrupts harmony in relation. It causes damage both to the face of the speaker and the listener (Umale, 2011, p. 18). It constitutes an act of declining a suggestion, request, offer, or invitation from a communication participant (Beebe et al., 1990, p. 56). This decline may be executed through direct performatives/non-performatives or indirect refusal strategies such as expressions of regret, wishes, or alternative statements (p. 73). Such refusals are often preceded by statements that lead participants to decline a given request, offer, suggestion, or invitation. These initial statements are referred to as adjuncts. Adjuncts prominently feature in sentences such as 'I'd love to, but…', 'I empathise with your situation, but…', 'uhm…', 'I appreciate it, but…', 'oh…', and similar expressions.

The issuance of refusals is contingent upon socio-cultural factors, including social status, degree of politeness, level of imposition, power relations, and social distance. These social factors are fundamental in determining the face-threatening acts and the nature of

refusals that interlocutors may employ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 15). For instance, an interlocutor of lower status refusing a request from one of higher status differs from a higher-status individual refusing a request from someone of lower status. The same principle applies in situations where interlocutors vary in terms of power, social distance, and degree of politeness. In essence, the Politeness Theory is crucial to the study of refusals as it underpins issues such as face wants and face-threatening acts, and seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how, why, how often, and what semantic formulas are employed to realise the refusal speech act.

In a similar vein, Tnack (2002) contended that refusals occur when the speaker directly or indirectly says *no* to a request or invitation (p. 2). It involves declining interlocutors' proposals either through direct performatives or indirect statements aimed at preserving the listener's face. Tnack (2002) argued that it constitutes 'a face-threatening act to the listener/requestor/inviter' (ibid.). In this context, the indirect strategies of refusal are subtle and require the learner to possess pragmatic competence to discern what interlocutors intend to convey.

2.5.Direct Refusal

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), direct refusal acts employ on-record direct politeness strategies. In this context, the speaker is fully aware of the hearer's intentions and does not seek to minimise face-threatening acts as much as they aim to maximise them (p. 68). The needs of speakers fall into two categories: one group who refuse to be imposed upon or intrude upon their private space, and another who desire to socialise and be accepted and praised by community members. Within this framework, Yule (1996) posited that speakers who perform direct speech acts (refusals in this context) resort to '*mitigating devices*' to soften their speech and minimise face-threatening acts (p. 63).

2.6.Indirect Refusals

In contrast to direct refusal strategies, indirect refusal strategies involve declining requests, offers, invitations, or suggestions through subtle pragmatic patterns. Comprehending such pragmatic patterns necessitates pragmatic awareness/competence (Chen, 1996; Alrefaee & Al-Ghamdi, 2019). Conversely, misinterpreting refusal acts can lead to communication breakdowns and jeopardise interpersonal relationships (ibid.). Figure 14 illustrates that indirect refusals are more complex than direct ones, as they can be subdivided into ten sub-strategies (regret, wish, excuse, statement of alternative, future or past acceptance, promise, statement of philosophy, dissuading the interlocutor, acceptance as refusal per se, and avoidance).

Fitri et al. (2020) and Al Okla (2018) conducted a study on the realisation of indirect refusal strategies. Indirect refusal strategies are the result of cultural constructs that individuals acquire across generations (Fitri et al., 2020, p. 462; Al Okla, 2018, p. 330). They maintained that the utilisation of indirect refusal strategies is influenced by the level of power status that exists between interlocutors. For example, criticism and avoidance are indirect refusal strategies, which entail a bald on-record politeness strategy, and are employed between an individual of high power status and a counterpart of low power status. Unlike direct refusal strategies, which are used in intimate contexts (Wannaruk, 2008, p. 327), indirect refusal strategies are employed in non-intimate contexts (Fitri et al., 2020, p. 462).

Wannaruk (2008) suggested that the level of language proficiency significantly impacts the employment of refusal strategies (p. 328). Individuals with high language proficiency are more likely to opt for indirect refusal strategies as they can articulate themselves more effectively than those with lower proficiency. Furthermore, pragmatic transfer is often evident among highly proficient language learners (p. 331), while pragmatic failure is frequently observed among less proficient language learners (p. 333).

2.7.Adjuncts to Refusals

Campillo et al. (2009) argued that adjuncts to refusals are not refusals by nature; rather, they are semantic auxiliaries that assist in generating refusals (p. 142). In their study on refusal strategies, Campillo et al. (2009) proposed a taxonomy of refusal strategies similar to that of Beebe's (ibid.).

The pre-refusal adjunct '*this is a great idea, but,..., I'd love to but,..., thanks so much but,..., fine, but,..., and I'm sure you'll understand, but,...*' is considered an adjunct to refusal. These are employed as 'mitigating devices' (Yule, 1996, p. 63) to soften utterances and avoid damaging the hearer's face. Unlike direct refusals, which employ bald on-record strategies as previously mentioned, adjuncts to refusals operate off-record. Given that this method of refusal is indirect and employs initial statements as illustrated in Figure 16, interlocutors must be cognizant of (cross-)pragmatic features employed in utterances to prevent misinterpretation of what is said versus what is meant, thereby grasping the intended meanings concealed within utterances. In summary, direct refusals are evident on-record strategies, while indirect refusals (including adjuncts to refusals) are subtle off-record strategies.

2.8.Empirical Studies on Gender and Refusal Strategies

Wang (2019) conducted a comprehensive study that compared the use of refusal strategies among male and female English majors. The findings indicated that females tend to

employ indirect refusal strategies more effectively than their male counterparts (p. 1040). In a separate investigation by Pourshahian (2019), which focused on refusals as a face-threatening act within the Iranian context, it was observed that both genders predominantly utilised indirect refusal strategies over other forms (p. 177).

Notably, female Iranians exhibited a distinct tendency to issue refusals in a manner that is characterised by politeness and indirectness (ibid). In contrast, male Iranians were more inclined to adopt direct refusal strategies. Furthermore, a group study conducted on the speech act of refusal among Khowar language speakers by Saaed et al. (2021) revealed that both males and females utilised a comparable range of indirect and direct refusal strategies (p. 1514).

Additionally, research by Youssef & Al-Khawaldeh (2021) highlighted a significant influence of gender on the expression of refusals within the Jordanian context (p. 37). This body of work underscores the nuanced ways in which gender influences communication strategies, particularly in the realm of refusals, across different cultural settings.

3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The pragmatic paradigm, which mingles between positivism/objectivism and interpretivism/constructivism, inevitably sets the way for the researcher to adopt a mixed research design combining concurrently qualitative and quantitative methods at once to compare results during data interpretation. This type of research design allows for complementary results that provide better answers to research questions and treats issues under study from different angles rather than from a one-sided perspective. Creswell (2013) argued that mixed research methods involve both open-ended (qualitative) and closed-ended (quantitative) types of data in response to research questions and hypotheses (p. 217).

There are two fundamental research questions in this study:

1. How do Moroccan male and female university-level learners of English employ refusal speech act strategies in their interactions?
2. To what extent do gender-based differences manifest in the use of refusal strategies among Moroccan university learners of English?

The nature of these research questions strengthens the idea of employing a mixed research design to answer research inquiries while collecting and interpreting data. It is so because qualitative research generally deals with views, concepts, and meanings of the recipients towards a certain area of research (p. 212), as in research question 1, while quantitative research treats surveys, numbers, and statistics (p. 155), as in research question 2.

Statistical significance is calculated to quantify the degree of probability that exists between independent and dependent variables (Mahuli & Mahuli, 2015). Such statistical testing is quantitative in nature because it deals with numbers and statistics, and it also aims at generalising results from the population size to the whole population under study. However, qualitative data aims to make sense of the nonnumeric types of information and explore issues under study (Averill, 2014).

3.1.Subjects

Respondents consist of three hundred (300) participants, separated into one hundred and sixty-nine (169) for females and a hundred and thirty-one (131) male students. Their age ranges from 18 to 35 years with a mean age of 26.5. These students belong to Moroccan universities; they are mainly studying English at the School of Arts and Humanities, Fes-Sais, and the School of Arts and Humanities, Meknes. Since filling out Discourse Completion Test (DCT) questionnaires require participants to be relatively qualified enough to grasp and then respond correspondingly to the twelve situations, senior students were chosen to fulfil this study.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Age by Gender

Statistic	**Male Group (n = 131)**	**Female Group (n = 169)**
M	26.79	27.44
Minimum	12	19
Median	27	28

3.2.Data Collection Techniques

The realisation of refusal speech act- be it direct, indirect, or adjunct- entails employing DCT questionnaires as a primary means of collecting data. DCT was originally generated by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) to study requests and apologies. This instrument was initially developed by the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns) project (p. 210) to study how different speech acts are realised cross-culturally.

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) employed sixteen (16) situational prompts divided into eight (8) request situations and eight (8) apology situations (p. 211). They were addressed to four hundred (400) participants with equal number of males and females; half of the informants are native Americans, and the other half are EFL students at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem (p. 199). Results of the CCSARP project were ambitious and allowed for a comparison and an analysis of request and apology patterns (p. 210).

The DCT questionnaire of this study contains twelve (12) scenarios as in the table below pertaining to different role-play situations ranging from lower, equal to higher statuses. As adopted from Beebe et al. (1990), the DCT written questionnaire is categorised into four (4) types of stimuli to which respondents should write down their refusal to three (3) requests, three (3) offers, three (3) invitations and three (3) suggestions (p. 3). Each category of these four stimuli includes three levels of social contexts wherein recipients are requested to react to situations of lower, equal, and higher statuses. In other words, in each situation, the recipients are expected to react to conversational stimuli playing three different social roles: higher, equal, and lower statuses.

Table 2

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) Situations by Stimulus Type

Stimulus type	**DCT**	**Situation**
Request	#12	Stay late at night
	#2	Borrow class notes
	#1	Request raise
Invitation	#4	Boss's party
	#10	Dinner at friend's house
	#3	Fancy restaurant (bribe)
Offer	#11	Promotion with move to small town
	#9	Piece of cake
	#7	Pay for broken vase
Suggestion	#6	Write little reminders
	#5	Try a new diet
	#8	More conversation in the foreign language class

To illustrate more on this point, one of the types of DCT questionnaire is refusing requests. Turning down requests was designed according to lower, equal, and higher social statuses. For example, in one of the items of the DCT questionnaire (item 12), which is related to a lower status situation (status of the hearer), the boss requests a worker to spend some extra hours and stay up late at night to finish up a task. Another questionnaire item (item 1), however,

is about a high-status person (status of the hearer) wherein the refuser (hearer), who is high in status, must turn down the request of the worker (speaker) who wants a raise in his/her wage. A third request situation (item 2) is about equal status stimulus in which recipients must turn down the request of a classmate who asks to borrow class notes.

As in Table 3, the collected answers of the respondents will be scrutinised according to the refusal classification chart made by Beebe et al. (1990) in their own study. Refusals are threefold: direct, indirect, and adjuncts to refusals.

Table 3

Classification of Refusal Strategies: Direct, Indirect, and Adjuncts with Illustrative Examples

Direct	**Indirect**	**Adjuncts**
1. Using performative verbs (*I refuse*) 2. Non-performative statement o "*No*" Negative willingness/ability (*I can't. /I won't. /I don't think so*)	1. Statement of regret (*I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...*) 2. Wish (*I wish I could help you...*) 3. Excuse, reason, explanation (*My children will be home that night. /I have a headache*) 4. Statement of alternative o I can do X instead of Y (*I'd rather.../I'd prefer...*) o Why don't you do X instead of Y (*Why don't you ask someone else?*) 5. Set condition for future or past acceptance (*If you had asked me earlier, I would have...*) 6. Promise of future acceptance (*I'll do it next time. /I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...*) 7. Statement of principle (*I never do business with friends.*) 8. Statement of philosophy (*One can't be too careful.*) 9. Attempt to dissuade the interlocutor o Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (*I won't be any fun tonight* to refuse an invitation) o Guilt trip (waitress to customers who want to sit a while: *I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.*)	1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (That's a good idea.../I'd love to...) 2. Statement of empathy (I realize you are in a difficult situation.) 3. Pause fillers (uhh/well/ oh/uhm) 4. Gratitude/ appreciation

- Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack (*Who do you think you are? /That's a terrible idea!*)
- Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
- Let interlocutor off the hook (*Don't worry about it. /That's okay. / You don't have to.*)
- Self-defence (*I'm trying my best. /I'm doing all I can do.*)

10. Acceptance that functions as a refusal

- Unspecific or indefinite reply
- Lack of enthusiasm

11. Avoidance

- Nonverbal
  - Silence
  - Hesitation
  - Doing nothing
  - Physical departure
- Verbal
  - Topic switch
  - Joke
  - Repetition of part of request (*Monday?*)
  - Postponement (*I'll think about it.*)
  - Hedge (*Gee, I don't know. /I'm not sure.*

Semantic formulas used by respondents to react to the 12 situations of the DCT questionnaire were coded and then classified according to table 4. For example, if a respondent reacts to situation 1 which is about requesting a raise in salary with the following: “I promise I will do it next time”, then it is classified as a promise of future acceptance. Hence, this response is considered to be an indirect strategy to refusal.

Data were coded to facilitate their analysis. Each type of refusal strategy identified by Beebe et al. (1990) was assigned a specific code. After coding the semantic formulas used by the respondents, the data were analysed using IBM SPSS (version 20) to determine the

frequency of each refusal strategy and to examine the refusal strategies employed in response to each initial stimulus.

Table 4

Coding of Refusal Strategies: Direct, Indirect, and Adjuncts

Direct Refusal	Indirect Refusal	Adjuncts to Refusals
1a Performative	**2a** regret	**3a** positive feelings
1b Non-performative	**2b** wish	**3b** empathy
	2c excuse	**3c** pause filters
	2d alternative	**3d** appreciation
	2e condition for future acceptance	
	2f promise	
	2g principles	
	2h philosophy	
	2i dissuade	
	2j acceptance	
	2k avoidance	

Table 5 presents the distribution of refusal strategies employed by female and male Moroccan university learners of English in response to the DCT situations. The three major categories of refusal strategies considered in this study are adjuncts to refusals, direct refusals, and indirect refusals. The total number of refusal strategies produced by female participants is 2,028, while male participants produced a total of 1,572, amounting to an overall total of 3,600 instances.

Table 5

The distribution of refusal strategies employed by female and male Moroccan university learners of English

Strategy Type	Female (n = 2028)	Male (n = 1572)	Total
Adjunct	64 (31.8%)	447 (28.4%)	511
Direct	665 (32.8%)	781 (49.7%)	1446
Indirect	1317 (64.9%)	344 (21.9%)	1661
Total	2028 (100%)	1572 (100%)	3600

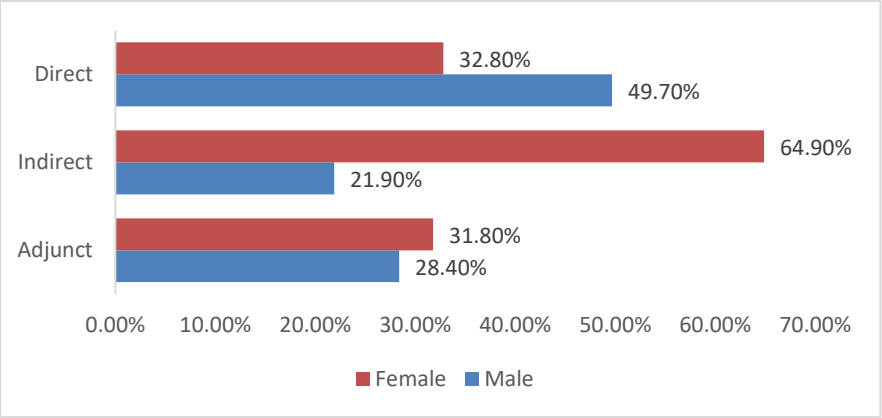
An examination of the data reveals several noteworthy patterns. Firstly, adjuncts to refusals, which serve as additional elements accompanying the main refusal without constituting a refusal on their own (e.g., expressions of gratitude, apologies, or softeners), were employed more frequently by male participants (n = 447; 28.4%) than by female participants (n = 64; 3.1%). This indicates that male learners tended to rely more heavily on adjuncts to mitigate the force of their refusals.

In terms of direct refusal strategies, which convey explicit and unambiguous rejection (e.g., through performative verbs such as “I refuse " or non-performative expressions such as “No” or “I can’t”), male participants again showed a higher preference for this type of strategy. Specifically, direct refusals accounted for 49.7% (n = 781) of all refusal strategies produced by males, compared to 32.8% (n = 665) among female participants. This suggests that male learners tend to express their refusals more explicitly and directly than their female counterparts.

By contrast, indirect refusal strategies, which are characterised by less explicit forms of refusal and often involve hints, excuses, or other mitigating devices, were predominantly favoured by female learners. Female participants employed indirect refusals in 64.9% (n = 1,317) of cases, whereas only 21.9% (n = 344) of male refusals fell under this category. This notable gender-based variation implies that female learners are generally more inclined to avoid direct confrontation or explicit rejection by resorting to indirect forms of refusal.

Figure 1

The distribution of refusal strategies employed by female and male Moroccan university learners of English



These findings reveal significant gender differences in the use of refusal strategies among Moroccan university learners of English. Male participants demonstrated a higher tendency to use both direct refusals and adjuncts, reflecting a more explicit and perhaps

assertive approach to refusing. Conversely, female participants overwhelmingly favoured indirect refusal strategies, suggesting a greater sensitivity to politeness, face-saving considerations, or social harmony when issuing refusals. These patterns may be reflective of underlying socio-cultural norms and gendered communication styles within the Moroccan EFL context.

To examine potential gender-based differences in the use of refusal strategies among Moroccan university learners of English, the Mann–Whitney U test was employed for each of the twelve situations included in the DCT questionnaire. The Mann–Whitney U test was selected as an appropriate non-parametric alternative to the independent samples t-test, given the ordinal nature of the data and the likelihood of non-normal distribution.

Table 5

Mann–Whitney U Test Results for Gender Differences in Refusal Strategies Across Situations

Situation	Mann-Whitney U Statistic	P-value	Statistically Significant (at alpha=0.05)
S1_score	11003.50	0.9160	No
S2_score	11180.50	0.8268	No
S3_score	10487.00	0.3726	No
S4_score	9627.00	0.0252	Yes
S5_score	10723.50	0.5576	No
S6_score	10065.50	0.1002	No
S7_score	10666.00	0.4398	No
S8_score	11345.50	0.6182	No
S9_score	9973.50	0.1036	No
S10_score	10867.00	0.7506	No
S11_score	9944.50	0.0852	No
S12_score	10655.50	0.3617	No

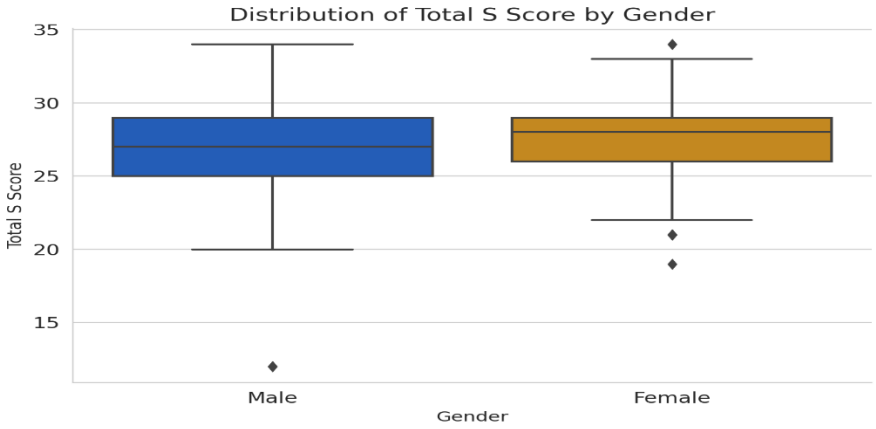
As shown in Table 5, the results reveal that for the majority of situations, there were **no statistically significant differences** between male and female participants in their use of refusal strategies. Specifically, in 11 out of the 12 DCT situations, the obtained *p*-values exceeded the alpha threshold of 0.05, indicating that any observed differences in refusal strategies between male and female learners in these situations are not statistically significant and may be attributed to random variation rather than systematic gender-based differences.

However, a statistically significant difference was detected for **Situation 4**, where the Mann–Whitney U statistic was 9,627.00, with a corresponding *p*-value of 0.0252, which is below the conventional 0.05 significance threshold. This finding suggests that male and female participants employed refusal strategies differently in this specific situation, implying that gender plays a significant role in shaping refusal behaviour within the particular contextual constraints of Situation 4.

While the remaining situations did not yield significant differences, it is important to note that in some cases (e.g., Situations 6, 9, and 11), the *p*-values approached the 0.05 threshold, suggesting a potential trend towards gender-based variation that may not have reached statistical significance due to sample size or variability within the data. These near-significant results warrant further investigation in future studies with larger or more diverse participant groups. The results of the Mann–Whitney U tests suggest that while gender does not appear to be a significant factor influencing refusal strategies in most situations, there are specific contexts, such as Situation 4, where gender-based differences become apparent.

Figure 2

Boxplot of Total Refusal Strategy Scores by Gender



As depicted in Figure 2, a boxplot was created to visualise the distribution of the Total S Scores for male and female participants. The Total S Score reflects the overall refusal strategy performance across all situations in the DCT. The boxplot demonstrates that both male and female participants exhibit relatively similar distributions, with slight variations in medians and ranges. The median Total S Score for male participants is approximately 27, whereas the median for female participants is slightly higher, around 28. The interquartile ranges for both groups are comparable, suggesting similar variability in responses.

However, it is noteworthy that male participants exhibit a wider overall range, with scores extending from approximately 20 to 34, while female scores range from around 22 to

33. Additionally, both groups show the presence of outliers, particularly a low outlier among males around a score of 13 and a low outlier among females around 19. These visual patterns align with the findings from the Mann–Whitney U tests, where no statistically significant gender-based differences were detected for the overall refusal strategy use, indicating that, despite minor distributional differences, both groups performed similarly in their refusal strategies.

Figure 3

Boxplot of Refusal Strategy Score of Situation 4 by Gender

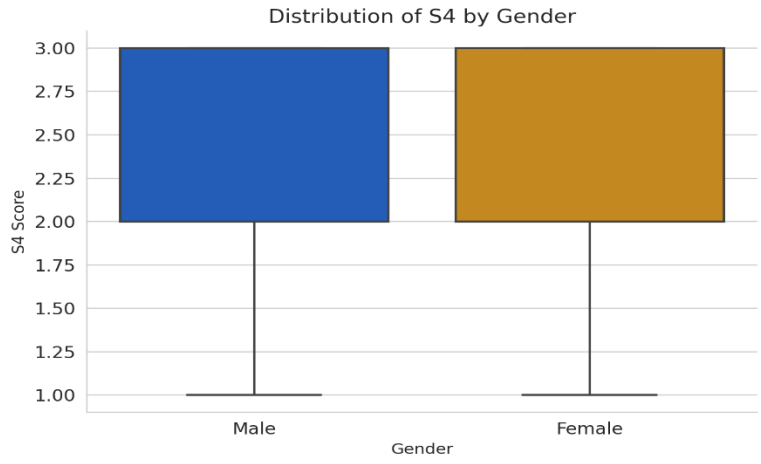


Figure 3 presents the boxplot for the S4 Score by gender, offering a visualisation of how male and female participants responded specifically to Situation 4 of the DCT, which, as revealed by the Mann–Whitney U test, was the only situation to demonstrate a statistically significant gender difference ($p = 0.0252$).

The boxplot indicates that both male and female participants displayed identical median scores for Situation 4, with a median of approximately 2. However, a closer examination reveals slight differences in the range and distribution. While the visual spread for both groups appears identical, the statistically significant difference suggests that subtle variations in the overall pattern of responses—such as differences in score frequencies or specific refusal strategy types—may underlie this result, even though these differences are not overtly visible in the boxplot.

The combination of visual and statistical analysis suggests that, overall, male and female Moroccan university learners of English demonstrate comparable patterns in their refusal strategy use, with no significant gender-based differences in the total scores. However, the significant difference detected in Situation 4 suggests that specific social or contextual factors within that scenario elicited divergent pragmatic behaviour between genders. These

findings warrant further qualitative exploration of the refusal strategies employed in Situation 4 to uncover the nature of these differences and their potential socio-cultural underpinnings.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study set out to explore gender-based differences in the use of refusal strategies among Moroccan university learners of English. Through a combination of quantitative and visual data analyses, the research aimed to determine whether male and female learners employ different pragmatic strategies when performing the speech act of refusal across a variety of social situations.

The findings, derived from the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) responses and subsequent Mann–Whitney U tests, revealed that, overall, there are no statistically significant differences between male and female learners in their use of refusal strategies across the majority of the twelve situations examined. This outcome suggests that both groups exhibit comparable pragmatic competence in managing refusals, regardless of gender, when communicating in English as a foreign language.

However, a notable exception was observed in Situation 4, where the results indicated a statistically significant difference between male and female participants. While the exact nature of this difference requires further qualitative investigation, it highlights the importance of considering situational and contextual factors when analysing speech act performance. The gender-based variation observed in this specific scenario suggests that certain social contexts may trigger distinct pragmatic behaviours among male and female learners, possibly shaped by culturally embedded gender norms, interpersonal dynamics, or perceptions of social distance and power relations.

The boxplot visualisations further supported these findings, showing minimal variation in the overall distribution of refusal scores between genders, with both groups demonstrating similar central tendencies and response ranges. Nonetheless, the subtle statistical differences detected in Situation 4 underscore the need for caution when interpreting visual data alone and emphasise the value of integrating both inferential statistics and graphical representations in pragmatic research.

Overall, the results of this study contribute to the broader field of interlanguage pragmatics by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between gender and refusal strategy use within the Moroccan EFL context. While the general similarities across genders are encouraging, the situationally specific differences observed highlight the complexity of speech act realisation and the influence of sociocultural and contextual variables.

Future research could further explore refusal strategies in other Arabic-speaking contexts to examine the role of regional and cultural variation in pragmatic behaviour. Additionally, comparative studies across different proficiency levels may reveal developmental patterns in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Qualitative analyses, such as discourse or conversation analysis, could also uncover the subtleties behind the quantitative findings, particularly in situations where significant gender-based differences emerge.

By shedding light on the intersection of gender, pragmatics, and context within the Moroccan EFL setting, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of interlanguage pragmatics and supports the development of more effective, culturally responsive pedagogical practices.

REFERENCES

Al Okla, N. H. (2018). The effect of culture and power on refusal strategies among Saudi and American university students. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 8*(4), 326–334. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v8n4p326

Alrefaee, Y., & Al-Ghamdi, N. (2019). Refusals among Yemeni EFL learners: a study of negative pragmatic transfer and its relation to proficiency. *Online Submission*, *25*, 191-214.

Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do things with words. Oxford University Press.

Averill, J. B. (2014). "It's a mixed-methods study": Lessons learned from an intervention study designed to improve health for rural-dwelling older adults. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 8*(1), 70–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689813490830

Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. C. Scarcella, E. S. Andersen, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.), Developing communicative competence in a second language (pp. 55–73). Newbury House.

Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). Applied Linguistics, 5(3), 196–213. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.3.196

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. Cambridge University Press.

Campillo, P. S., Safont, M. P., & Codina, M. F. (2009). Pragmatic transfer in refusal strategies by Spanish EFL learners: The effect of proficiency. In A. Martínez-Flor & E. Usó-Juan

(Eds.), Speech act performance: Theoretical, empirical and methodological issues (pp. 147–168). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/lllt.22.09cam

Chen, X. (1996). Chinese learners' development of pragmatic competence in English refusals: A case study. Language Teaching and Research, 28, 1–8.

Chomsky, N. (2008). Language and mind (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Fitri, N., Heriyanto, D., & Wahyuni, D. (2020). The realization of refusal strategies by EFL learners: A socio-pragmatic study. *International Journal of Instruction, 13*(3), 457–472. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13332a

Grice, H. P. (1989). Studies in the way of words. Harvard University Press.

Hashiuchi, F., & Oku, M. (2005). Complementary approaches to pragmatics and grammar. Language Sciences, 27(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2004.10.003

Kecskes, I. (2016). Language, meaning, and context: The pragmatic turn in linguistics. Routledge.

Levinson, S. C. (1983). Pragmatics. Cambridge University Press.

Mahuli, S., & Mahuli, A. (2015). Basic concepts of biostatistics. *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research, 9*(6), JE01–JE06. https://doi.org/10.7860/JCDR/2015/13078.6065

Morris, C. (1938). Foundations of the theory of signs. In O. Neurath, R. Carnap, & C. Morris (Eds.), International encyclopedia of unified science (Vol. 1, pp. 1–59). University of Chicago Press.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Politeness. In Oxford English Dictionary (3rd ed.). Retrieved June 27, 2025, from https://www.oed.com/

Pourshahian, B. (2019). Refusal as a face-threatening act: Iranian EFL learners' performance. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies, 7*(1), 175–181.

Saaed, A., Zahra, N., & Nawaz, M. (2021). Speech act of refusal: A comparative study between male and female speakers of Khower language. Multicultural Education, 7(4), 1511–1517.

Tnack, A. (2002). Strategies of refusal across cultures. *Journal of Pragmatics, 34*(1), 1–14.

Umale, J. (2011). Pragmatic failure in refusal strategies: British versus Omani interlocutors. *Arab World English Journal, 2*(1), 18–46.

Wang, H. (2019). Gender differences in the use of refusal strategies: Evidence from Chinese EFL learners. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 9(9), 1036–1042. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0909.06

Wannaruk, A. (2008). Refusal strategies in English by Thai EFL learners. *Kasetsart Journal: Social Sciences, 29*(2), 316–327.

Youssef, R., & Al-Khawaldeh, N. (2021). The role of gender in realizing the speech act of refusal: Evidence from Jordanian Arabic. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies, 21*(1), 25–43.

Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford University Press.