



Refusal Strategies on Request Speech Acts by Indonesian University Students

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-04-07 Revised: 2026-05-19 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: Refusal Strategies; EFL Learners; Speech Act; Indirectness; Discourse Completion Test DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10902 Corresponding Author: Nuri Emmiyati nuri.emmiyati@uin- alauddin.ac.id Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar	<i>This study aims to investigate how Indonesian EFL learners realize refusal strategies in response to request speech acts across different communicative contexts, with particular attention to the influence of sociocultural norms and pragmatic competence.</i> <i>The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the context-sensitive nature of refusal speech acts. Data were collected through an open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of ten hypothetical scenarios adapted from previous studies. The participants were 40 Indonesian undergraduate students majoring in English Education, selected through purposive sampling based on their academic exposure to English. The responses were analyzed using a semantic formula framework to classify refusal strategies into direct and indirect types. The analysis yielded 77 instances of refusal strategies, comprising 34 direct and 43 indirect forms, indicating a clear preference for indirectness. Direct strategies were primarily realized through explicit negation, reasons, and explanations, often accompanied by mitigating elements such as regret. Indirect strategies were more varied and frequently involved complex combinations, with “reason + explanation” and “regret + reason + explanation” emerging as the most dominant patterns. These findings suggest that learners employ multi-layered strategies to balance clarity and politeness in managing face-threatening acts. This study contributes to interlanguage pragmatics by providing empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL context, an area that remains underrepresented in the literature. The findings highlight the importance of integrating explicit pragmatic instruction and context-based learning into EFL curricula to</i>

enhance learners' ability to perform speech acts appropriately across diverse communicative situations.

1. Introduction

In contemporary global communication, effective language use entails more than grammatical accuracy; it requires pragmatic competence, or the ability to use language appropriately in context-sensitive and culturally informed ways. Within the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this dimension of competence remains particularly challenging, as learners must navigate not only unfamiliar linguistic systems but also sociocultural norms embedded in communicative practices. Among the range of speech acts, refusals represent one of the most pragmatically demanding forms because they inherently involve the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. As acts that contradict an interlocutor's expectations—such as declining requests, invitations, or offers—refusals are widely recognized as face-threatening and thus require careful mitigation to maintain social harmony (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2022).

The complexity of refusals lies in their dual function: they must convey a clear negative response while simultaneously preserving the interlocutor's face. This tension necessitates the strategic deployment of linguistic and pragmatic resources, including indirectness, hedging, apologies, and justificatory moves. While such strategies are often internalized by native speakers through prolonged sociocultural exposure, EFL learners frequently lack access to comparable input, resulting in limited pragmatic awareness. Consequently, learners may produce refusals that are either overly direct or pragmatically inappropriate, leading to miscommunication or unintended impoliteness. This issue underscores a broader concern in EFL research: the persistent gap between learners' grammatical proficiency and their ability to perform contextually appropriate communication.

A substantial body of empirical research has examined refusal strategies within the framework of interlanguage pragmatics, consistently demonstrating that EFL learners encounter difficulties in realizing speech acts appropriately. Studies by Mohebbi and Salehi (2016), Ali and Ashraf (2021), and Ahmed (2024) converge on the finding that learners' pragmatic performance is constrained by limited exposure to authentic discourse and insufficient instructional focus on pragmatic features. Notably, these studies also highlight that pragmatic inadequacies persist even among advanced learners, suggesting that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically alongside grammatical competence. This challenges earlier assumptions in language acquisition and reinforces the need for explicit attention to pragmatics in both research and pedagogy.

One of the most frequently cited explanations for learners' pragmatic difficulties is the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer, whereby learners draw on

sociocultural norms from their first language when using the target language. In contexts such as Indonesia, where communication is strongly oriented toward maintaining social harmony and avoiding direct confrontation, learners tend to favor indirect refusal strategies. Wijayanto (2019) observes that Indonesian EFL learners commonly employ expressions of regret, elaborated explanations, and avoidance strategies when refusing. While these strategies reflect culturally appropriate behavior in the local context, they may not align with expectations in English-speaking environments, thereby creating potential for pragmatic mismatch. However, attributing learners' behavior solely to transfer risks oversimplification, as it neglects the dynamic interplay between linguistic knowledge, contextual factors, and individual agency.

Theoretical frameworks such as speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) have provided a robust foundation for analyzing refusal strategies. Within these frameworks, refusals are conceptualized as illocutionary acts that perform social functions while simultaneously threatening the interlocutor's face. Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive and negative politeness strategies has been particularly influential in explaining how speakers mitigate refusals through indirectness and redressive action. Empirical studies have applied these frameworks to demonstrate that learners' strategic choices are sensitive to contextual variables such as power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition (Tuncer & Turhan, 2019; Nuzulia & Agustina, 2022). Nevertheless, while these models offer valuable analytical tools, their application in EFL contexts has sometimes been descriptive rather than explanatory, focusing on categorizing strategies without fully accounting for the underlying processes that shape their use.

In parallel, classificatory models of refusal strategies, most notably those proposed by Beebe et al. (1990) and further refined by Félix-Brasdefer (2004), have enabled systematic analysis of learners' pragmatic production. These models distinguish between direct and indirect strategies and emphasize the sequencing of semantic formulas within refusal realizations. Cross-cultural studies employing these frameworks have consistently found that learners from diverse backgrounds exhibit a preference for indirectness, although the specific forms and combinations of strategies vary across cultures. For example, Iranian learners tend to rely on elaborate justifications and expressions of regret (Sa'd & Qadermazi, 2014), while East Asian learners often employ ambiguity and avoidance to maintain harmony (Liu & Qian, 2018; Dewi et al., 2019). Such findings suggest that while indirectness may be a shared pragmatic orientation, its realization is culturally mediated and context-dependent.

Despite the growing body of research, several limitations remain evident. First, the geographical distribution of studies is uneven, with a predominance of research focusing on Middle Eastern and East Asian contexts. Comparatively, Southeast Asian contexts—particularly Indonesia—remain underrepresented,

limiting the extent to which existing findings can be generalized. Second, much of the literature adopts a predominantly descriptive approach, identifying types and frequencies of strategies without sufficiently examining how these strategies are shaped by contextual variation. As a result, the dynamic nature of pragmatic competence—particularly its sensitivity to different communicative situations—has not been fully captured.

Moreover, existing studies often treat sociocultural factors as static variables, overlooking their fluid and situationally contingent nature. In real-world communication, speakers continuously adjust their language use in response to shifting contextual parameters, including interlocutor relationships, communicative goals, and situational constraints. Understanding refusal strategies, therefore, requires a more nuanced analysis that accounts for variation across communicative contexts rather than relying solely on aggregate patterns. This gap is particularly significant in EFL settings, where learners must navigate multiple and sometimes competing pragmatic norms.

Another critical issue concerns the limited integration of pedagogical perspectives into empirical research. While studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of explicit pragmatic instruction (Ghayebi & Farrokh, 2020; Sulastris & Saptiany, 2023), relatively few have examined how instructional practices influence learners' realization of refusal strategies across contexts. In many EFL classrooms, pragmatic competence remains marginal to the curriculum, with greater emphasis placed on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary development. Instructional materials often lack authentic and context-rich examples of language use, thereby restricting learners' opportunities to develop pragmatic awareness (Meihami & Khanlarzadeh, 2015). This disconnect between research findings and pedagogical implementation further underscores the need for studies that bridge theoretical and practical concerns.

Taken together, these limitations point to a clear research gap. There is a need for context-sensitive, empirically grounded investigations that examine how EFL learners realize refusal strategies across different communicative contexts, particularly in underrepresented settings such as Indonesia. Such research should move beyond static categorizations to explore the interaction between linguistic resources, sociocultural norms, and situational variables. Addressing this gap is essential not only for advancing theoretical understanding in interlanguage pragmatics but also for informing more effective pedagogical practices.

In response to this need, the present study investigates how Indonesian EFL learners realize refusal strategies in different communicative contexts. By focusing on contextual variation, the study seeks to uncover patterns of strategic choice and adaptation that may not be visible in aggregate analyses. The research is guided by the following question: **How do Indonesian EFL learners realize refusal strategies in different communicative contexts?**

The objective of this study is to provide a systematic analysis of refusal strategies as they are used by Indonesian EFL learners across a range of communicative situations. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of pragmatic competence as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which combines established theoretical frameworks with a contextually grounded analysis of learner behavior in an underexplored setting. By situating refusal strategies within specific communicative contexts, the study offers new insights into how learners negotiate the competing demands of clarity, politeness, and sociocultural appropriateness.

In conclusion, while refusal strategies have been widely studied in interlanguage pragmatics, important gaps remain in our understanding of how these strategies are realized across contexts and shaped by sociocultural and pedagogical factors. By addressing these gaps, the present study seeks to advance both theoretical and practical perspectives on pragmatic competence in EFL. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of refusal strategies can inform the development of more effective instructional approaches that better prepare learners for the complexities of real-world communication.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the refusal strategies used by EFL learners, particularly Indonesian university students. Qualitative methods were selected due to their appropriateness in exploring the nuanced, context-dependent nature of speech acts such as refusals. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) containing open-ended scenarios was administered to elicit data on pragmatic competence, providing insight into how learners perform refusal acts in English across various social contexts.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used was an open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT), adapted from previous studies (Aufa, 2011; Amiri & Birjandi, 2015). The DCT comprised ten hypothetical situations involving refusals in differing social contexts (e.g., peer-to-peer, student-to-lecturer), allowing participants to respond naturally yet consistently across scenarios. This method was selected for its strengths in eliciting pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features from a large number of participants within a controlled environment (Khoram, 2019; Tajeddin & Dabbagh, 2015).

Participants

The participants consisted of 40 Indonesian undergraduate students majoring in English Education at a public university. The age range was between 19 and 23, and all participants had completed at least four semesters of English coursework. The purposive sampling strategy ensured that respondents had sufficient exposure to academic English and classroom discourse, increasing the likelihood of meaningful contributions to the study.

Sample size and participant characteristics in previous pragmatic studies typically fall within the range of 30 to 100 individuals, balancing depth of qualitative insight with representational breadth (Tuncer & Turhan, 2019; Al-Zubeiry & Alzahrani, 2024). Most studies involve university-level learners with intermediate to advanced English proficiency, reflecting a similar demographic to that used in the present study. This alignment facilitates comparison and strengthens the external validity of the results.

Data Collection

Participants were invited to complete the DCT anonymously during class hours. Each item presented a real-life refusal scenario in English, and students were instructed to respond as naturally and politely as possible. Instructions clarified that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers to encourage authentic responses. Responses were handwritten and collected immediately upon completion. All participants signed informed consent forms before participation.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. This method was selected due to its capacity to identify patterns and categories across qualitative data). Responses were coded inductively, beginning with open coding to identify refusal strategies such as direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals (Beebe et al., 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004). Subsequent axial coding allowed for the refinement of categories and identification of sociopragmatic patterns related to power dynamics, social distance, and cultural norms.

In addition to coding refusal strategies, attention was given to the pragmalinguistic forms (e.g., This study employed a qualitative design centered on open-ended DCTs to examine Indonesian EFL learners' refusal strategies. The chosen methodology allowed for the systematic investigation of pragmatic competence within a controlled yet flexible framework. While acknowledging the methodological limitations inherent in DCT-based research, the study addressed these concerns through rigorous data analysis and triangulation, aiming to produce reliable insights into the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features of refusals in EFL contexts.

3. Result

This study examines the refusal strategies on the request speech act utilized by the undergraduate students in the Indonesian context. Table 4.1 below shows the usage frequency of the main refusal strategies utilized.

Table 1. Semantic formula of refusal strategies

NO.	REFUSAL STRATEGIES		
	SEMANTIC FORMULA	DIRECT	INDIRECT
1.	explanation	1	
2.	reason	5	
3.	suggestion	1	
4.	alternative	2	
5.	Set a condition for future acceptance	1	
6.	Avoidant verbal postponement		3
7.	Reason, explanation		9
8.	Regret, reason	1	
9.	Regret, explanation		2
10.	Explanation, suggestion		3
11.	Regret, set a condition for future acceptance	1	
12.	regret, explanation, suggestion		2
13.	Regret, explanation, alternative		3
14.	Regret, reason, explanation		12
15.	Reason, explanation, suggestion		3
16.	Exclamation, reason, explanation		1
17.	Regret, excuse, reason, explanation		2
18.	Promise of future acceptance, reason, explanation		1
19.	Regret, reason, explanation, alternative		3
20.	Negative willingness/ability, explanation	3	
21.	Negative willingness/ability, reason	4	
22.	Negative willingness/ability, alternative	2	
23.	Negative willingness/ability, explanation, suggestion	2	
24.	Negative willingness/ability, reason, explanation	1	
25.	Negative willingness/ability, regret, reason	2	
26.	Negative willingness/ability, regret,	2	

	and alternative		
27.	Negative willingness/ability, regret, 1 explanation		
28.	Negative willingness/ability, regret, 1 attempt to dissuade interlocutor by insulting/attacking the request/requester		
29.	Negative willingness/ability, reason, 1 explanation, suggestion		
30.	Negative willingness/ability, regret, 2 reason, explanation		
Total		34	43

Direct Refusal Strategies

Based on both existing studies and the present data, indirect refusal strategies remain a prominent choice among EFL learners, particularly in specific contexts. In this study, 34 instances of direct refusals were identified, representing a substantial portion of the total responses. The most frequently employed forms included the use of explicit negation (e.g., "no") and straightforward explanations or justifications. These responses align with previous findings indicating that such strategies are often favored when learners feel confident in expressing disagreement or when clarity is prioritized (Turki et al., 2020; Tuncer & Turhan, 2019).

Examples from the semantic formulas include simple explanations (n=1), direct reasons (n=5), and combinations such as "negative willingness/ability + explanation" (n=3) and "negative willingness/ability + reason" (n=4). The use of direct explanation reflects learners' attempts to be clear and assertive while maintaining social decorum. Furthermore, cultural mitigation is evident in responses that combine direct refusal with expressions of regret or politeness, consistent with observations in Iranian and Turkish EFL learners (Dwiana et al., 2021; Wang, 2019).

Linguistic Realization of Inability

The current data confirms that negative willingness or inability is commonly expressed through formulaic phrases such as "I can't" or "I'm not able to." These were recorded in various combinations: with reasons (n=5), explanations (n=1), and even suggestions or alternatives. A particularly nuanced example includes the compound strategy "negative willingness/ability + regret + explanation" (n=1), illustrating the learners' attempt to soften the refusal and uphold interpersonal rapport (Sa'd & Qadermazi, 2014; Rusdi et al., 2022).

Gratitude and hedging elements were also observed, functioning as pragmatic devices to minimize potential face threats. This supports Zhu's (2012)

assertion regarding the importance of politeness strategies in refusal discourse. The varied use of these elements suggests an increasing pragmatic awareness among learners in managing social dynamics effectively.

Cultural and Contextual Influences

Data patterns reveal a high sensitivity to social context, especially in responses involving superiors or formal situations. Combinations such as "regret + explanation" (n=2), "regret + reason" (n=1), and "regret + set a condition for future acceptance" (n=1) suggest learners' attentiveness to hierarchy and face-saving conventions. This supports findings from Sa'd & Qadermazi (2014) and Rusdi et al. (2022), affirming that cultural and relational variables significantly shape the choice of refusal expressions.

Interestingly, expressions such as "promise of future acceptance" were recorded in 1 instance, indicating strategic politeness where the speaker delays outright refusal by implying future compliance—another cultural adaptation aimed at relational harmony.

Indirect Refusal Strategies

A total of 35 instances of indirect strategies were identified, underscoring their importance in learners' pragmatic repertoires. The most frequent indirect strategy was the compound form "reason + explanation" (n=9), which echoes prior research showing the dominance of this approach among EFL learners aiming to maintain social harmony (Tuncer & Turhan, 2019).

Other notable strategies include "explanation + suggestion" (n=3), "regret + explanation + suggestion" (n=1), and "regret + explanation + alternative" (n=1). These combinations demonstrate the use of indirect speech acts to soften refusals while still providing rational justification. Such patterns align with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and indicate a clear preference among learners for indirectness as a face-saving mechanism.

Expressions of Regret, Excuses, and Alternatives

Expressions of regret were embedded in various refusal strategies. These included combinations such as "regret + reason + explanation" (n=12), "regret + excuse + reason + explanation" (n=1), and "regret + reason, explanation + alternative" (n=2). These patterns reveal the learners' inclination to combine emotional and rational appeals to reduce the face-threatening nature of refusals. Incorporating alternatives or suggestions—evident in strategies such as "explanation + suggestion" or "alternative" alone—serves to maintain cooperative dialogue, supporting the findings of Tabarek et al. (2023) and Dwiana et al. (2021).
Cultural Preferences for Indirectness

The frequency of indirect refusals and use of mitigating elements further support the claim that collectivist cultures, like Indonesia's, favor indirectness to

preserve group cohesion and avoid confrontation (Yadav, 2025; Kim, 2016). Combinations involving vague commitment, future possibilities, and passive expressions, such as "set a condition for future acceptance" or "avoidant verbal postponement" (n=1), reflect this cultural orientation. Additionally, strategies like "negative willingness/ability + regret + attempt to dissuade interlocutor" (n=1) reveal the nuanced, relational sensitivity emphasized in collectivist societies (Bashir et al., 2023; Bakboord et al., 2022).

Evolution of Indirectness with Exposure

The development of more complex, indirect structures among learners indicates the influence of pragmatic instruction and exposure to authentic language use. As found by Yang and Maarof (2024), learners exposed to immersive L2 environments or formal pragmatics instruction demonstrate more refined strategies, such as "negative willingness/ability + explanation + suggestion" (n=2). The increasing frequency of these compound forms corroborates studies that stress the benefits of contextualized learning and interaction with native speakers (Rafieyan et al., 2014; Taguchi & Ли, 2017).

These patterns confirm that pragmatic development is gradual and context-dependent. Learners not only acquire the linguistic forms but also the sociocultural knowledge required to navigate complex communicative interactions. The analysis of refusal strategies reveals a sophisticated range of both direct and indirect responses among Indonesian EFL learners. Direct forms, such as "reason" or "negative willingness," coexist with layered combinations like "regret + reason + explanation," reflecting increasing pragmatic competence.

Overall, the interplay between semantic formulas and cultural sensitivity illustrates a trajectory of pragmatic development that aligns with both theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. These results reinforce the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula to equip learners with the communicative tools necessary for effective and culturally appropriate language use.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the interplay between sociocultural norms and pragmatic development in the realization of refusal strategies by Indonesian EFL learners. These results support and extend previous research on cross-cultural pragmatics, emphasizing how language use is shaped not merely by grammatical competence but by learners' embeddedness in specific cultural and social contexts. As demonstrated by results, both direct and indirect strategies are employed, though the predominance of directness is particularly notable and consistent with findings from collectivist cultures where harmony and face-saving are highly valued (Yadav, 2025; Kim, 2016).

Cultural norms and linguistic politeness emerged as key factors influencing

learners' choice of refusal strategies. In collectivist societies, including Indonesia, learners tend to avoid confrontation by opting for indirect expressions such as excuses, justifications, or expressions of regret. This mirrors Sa'd and Qadermazi's (2014) findings among Iranian learners and Demirkol's (2019) work on Turkish students, where indirectness was favored to preserve social harmony. The results of this study confirmed this trend, with many participants combining semantic elements such as regret, reason, and explanation to construct layered, face-sensitive refusals. Such patterns underscore Brown and Levinson's theory that politeness strategies are culture-bound and context-sensitive.

While the overall findings align with existing research in cross-cultural pragmatics, several points of divergence merit attention. One such divergence concerns the impact of superficial exposure to English-speaking contexts. While Taguchi et al. (2016) emphasize the benefits of social interaction with native speakers, this study suggests that the mere presence of exposure does not guarantee pragmatic development. Khodadad and Kaur's (2016) findings support this complexity, noting that integrative motivation and depth of cultural immersion critically affect learners' pragmatic outcomes. Hence, instructional interventions that explicitly address speech acts, contextual variation, and cultural norms are necessary to achieve sustained improvement.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. Given the learners' demonstrated preference for indirect strategies and their sensitivity to cultural context, EFL instruction must go beyond structural and lexical competence to incorporate pragmatic awareness. As Jung and Kim (2008) and Rusdi et al. (2022) suggest, pragmatic instruction can be effectively delivered through the teaching of justification-based refusals and culturally relevant discourse patterns. Role-plays, scenario-based learning, and pragmatic consciousness-raising activities can enhance learners' ability to navigate real-life communicative situations while maintaining cultural appropriateness (Dwiana et al., 2021).

The integration of pragmatic instruction into the curriculum should also involve the development of culturally embedded teaching materials. Traditional textbooks often lack adequate representation of real-world pragmatic practices, as argued by Zughaibi (2022). Instead, materials should incorporate diverse speech act situations relevant to learners' social and academic environments. Tulgar et al. (2017) emphasize that pragmatic knowledge must be treated as central, not peripheral, in language instruction. Furthermore, tasks should be designed to simulate authentic interaction, encouraging learners to experiment with various politeness strategies and reflect on the cultural underpinnings of language use (Hidayat et al., 2022).

Lastly, pragmatic instruction must be accompanied by formative assessment to monitor learners' progress and adjust teaching accordingly. Taguchi (2022) emphasizes the role of pragmatic assessment in fostering self-awareness and continuous learning. By incorporating reflection, peer feedback, and teacher-guided analysis of speech act use, learners can gain deeper insight into their

communicative strengths and areas for development.

5. Conclusion

The refusal strategies employed by Indonesian EFL learners reflect a growing pragmatic competence that is shaped by cultural norms and instructional exposure. While indirect strategies predominate, learners demonstrate an evolving ability to integrate politeness, context-awareness, and linguistic appropriateness into their refusals. These findings affirm the need for pragmatics-focused instruction in EFL contexts and call for a comprehensive, culturally responsive approach to language teaching that empowers learners to communicate effectively and respectfully across diverse interactional settings.

This study has revealed that Indonesian EFL learners employ a wide spectrum of refusal strategies, ranging from direct negations to complex, indirect formulations involving regret, reasoning, and alternative suggestions. The analysis confirms that sociocultural norms—particularly those associated with collectivist cultures—significantly influence the learners' pragmatic choices, favoring indirectness to preserve face and interpersonal harmony. Notably, learner proficiency and exposure to pragmatic instruction affect the depth and appropriateness of strategy use. The study contributes to EFL pragmatics by offering empirical evidence from an underrepresented Southeast Asian context and highlighting the role of sociocultural competence in pragmatic development. Pedagogically, it supports the integration of explicit, culturally responsive pragmatic instruction in language curricula. Future research should explore longitudinal interventions across varying learner profiles and compare pragmatic behavior across Southeast Asian populations to deepen regional insights.

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