Refusal Strategies Among Omani EFL Students

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Abstract
The main objective of this study was to investigate the refusal speech act among Omani EFL college students. It examined how they refused in various situations and whether their responses were appropriate in terms of culture and accurate in terms of language. Forty-one English as foreign language (EFL) learners completed a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of 12 scenarios by supplying written refusals to three requests, three suggestions, three invitations, and three offers. Students’ responses were rated by two professors: one a native English speaker and the other not. A convenient sampling procedure was employed. The findings indicated that students’ responses were largely inappropriate and inaccurate. Further examination showed that they were heavily influenced by the students’ culture, many being mere translations of refusal responses in Omani Arabic. Others were inappropriate because they were too direct, due to students’ lack of knowledge of the role of social status when issuing refusals to a person of high status. Language mistakes were mainly in the sentence structure, which affected the meaning clarity. Findings suggest that, to help students become better communicators in English, it is important to teach them directly the most common speech acts, especially those they might frequently use in their everyday conversations with professors and classmates.

Keywords
refusal strategies, pragmatics, communication, EFL, Oman

Introduction: Language, Culture, and Communication
It is a truism that language and culture are intertwined. Language is the carrier of culture and culture the substance of language: The two cannot exist separately (Romaine, 2000). To succeed in communicating with others, one must be aware of the culture behind the language used in communication (Tanck, 2004). When speaking a foreign language, the issue of culture becomes critical. English as Foreign language (EFL) learners, especially those with languages different and distant from English psychologically, culturally, phonologically, and syntactically, may struggle when attempting to communicate in English. Non-proficient language learners are not only jeopardized by their imperfect language knowledge but obstructed by their inadequate knowledge of culture. To compensate for their lack of knowledge, EFL learners may fall back on their own linguistic cultural reservoir, translating utterances from their mother tongue and applying their own cultural rules when communicating in English (Al-Eryani, 2007; Lauper, 1997). This might lead to pragmatic errors that could result in misunderstanding and embarrassment or pragma-linguistic failure (Riley, 1989; Thomas, 1983; Umale, 2011). Hence, it is essential to integrate pragmatics in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. To avoid breakdowns in communication, it is important to explore how culture and linguistic background can affect one’s utterances or speech acts to raise student and instructor awareness of this and help them address it appropriately. This is especially important nowadays as “cross-cultural communication is becoming an integral part of life, with globalization and rapid advances in new technology” (Umale, 2011, p. 19). In addition, employment opportunities in the local and global market increasingly demand good language proficiency and communicative ability. Therefore, teaching pragmatic rules in a way that they would involve communication strategies and speech acts will give students the English knowledge and communicative competence that will secure good job placements after graduation.

The present study aimed to explore how well Omani college English language learners communicate in English and what factors could have influenced them. Taking the refusal speech act as a case in point, it sought to discover how Omani EFL college students used English when refusing requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions presented to them in a set

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Literature Review: Speech Acts

The intimate connection between language and culture is clearly reflected in people’s everyday language use as it portrays different functions or speech acts. For this reason, studying speech acts has been the focus of much recent research. It is well known in sociolinguistics that Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) were the first researchers to speak of speech act theory. They maintained that speech acts are meaningful forms of behavior regulated by rules. Hence, a speech act is an utterance carrying a language function that is based on performance not on description (Baleghizadeh, 2007). To put it more succinctly, a speech act is an action performed by an utterance (Belza, 2008; Bruti, 2006). The utterance usually carries an attitude, and this attitude corresponds to the speech act being performed (Bach, n.d.). The listener’s understanding of the attitude leads to understanding the speech act.

Studying speech acts is similar to studying sentence meanings, because sentences can express speech acts (Searle, 2001). Speech acts are either direct or indirect, and people usually use indirectness either to show more politeness (Bruti, 2006) or to make their speech more interesting (Justovà, 2006). This must be clear to the hearer, who needs to understand the message to respond appropriately (Justovà, 2006).

For a speech act to be culturally appropriate, knowledge of the spoken language’s culture is crucial (Umale, 2011). This is an important aspect of communicative competence and speakers of a given language need to know how to perform speech acts to function appropriately. Although speech acts are universal in themselves, different cultures express them differently (Al-Kahtani, 2005; Miller, 2005; Morsi, 2010) as cultural factors have an important impact on their frequency, distribution, and functions. According to Al-Khateeb (2009), “cultural factors play a role in the development of diverse ways of talking and communicating” (p. 20).

Examples of speech acts include requesting, offering, apologizing, complimenting, congratulating, sympathizing, and refusing, all of which are language-based actions. Because this article focuses on refusals as produced by Omani EFL college students, the following section reviews the literature on this particular speech act.

Refusal as a Speech Act

Refusal is a “face-threatening act that tends to disrupt harmony in relationships” (Umale, 2011, p. 18). Due to its sensitivity, a refusal can be perceived differently between speaker and listener. It is a negative response to another speech act issued in the form of a request, invitation, or suggestion (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah, & Suleiman, 2011). Due to their nature, refusals can affect people’s relationships adversely if perceived as impolite or uncaring. According to Umale (2011), refusals may damage the positive face of the speaker and threaten the negative face of the listener. Therefore, the author continues to “mitigate threats to face” caused by refusals, speakers can use politeness strategies (p. 19).

Soepriatmadji (2010) and Umale (2011) maintain that several social factors may affect refusal strategies, such as gender, age, setting, topic, educational level, status, and interlocutors. Social status and social distance between interlocutors are major factors and thus figure quite frequently in studies focusing on refusal. They affect the directness or indirectness of refusals. Of course the direct way of refusing an invitation is simply to say “no,” “I can’t,” “I will not,” or “I don’t think I can” (Abed, 2011). Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) found that, when speaking with people from the same social status, U.S. native speakers of English used indirect refusal while native speakers of Japanese used indirect refusals with people of higher status and direct refusals with people of a lower status. In Malaysia, Malays were found to avoid the use of direct refusals with people of higher status, but used the direct “no” when refusing people of equal or the same status (Abdul Sattar et al., 2011). As for gender, it was found that although males use more direct refusals than females, refusal strategies based on gender are usually not apparent in other areas (Abed, 2011; Soepriatmadji, 2010). Nelson, Al-Batal, and El Bakry (2002) found that both Egyptian and U.S. males and females use direct refusals, but Egyptian men tend to be more direct than U.S. males and females of both countries.

Indirect refusal strategies include, among other things, showing regret, giving excuses, making suggestions, and promising later acceptance (Abed, 2011). According to Al-Kahtani (2005), U.S. native speakers of English tend to use regret when refusing people from a higher or equal status more often than giving excuses, while Saudis and Japanese use more explanations and give more excuses. Arabs and Japanese also show gratitude when refusing an invitation or request. Tanck (2004) confirms that native speakers of English use regret followed by an excuse. Malaysians, however, tend to use the regret strategy when refusing in all situations, regardless of social status.

As for speakers of English as a foreign or second language, refusal strategies have been found to be influenced by the culture of their native language (Al-Eryani, 2007; Lauper, 1997). Lauper found that Spanish English speakers’ use of refusal strategies was similar in both English and Spanish and that these differed from English speakers’ strategies. Yemeni English language learners’ refusal strategies were not as direct as Americans’, and they often offered reasons for the refusal. Moreover, Yemeni learners’ refusals showed,
in addition to linguistic competence in English, evidence of native culture influence (Al-Eryani, 2007).

English speakers from Ghana were found to use excuses often when refusing familiar or unfamiliar people because it is impolite in Ghanaian culture to refuse without offering an excuse (Safro, 2011). Safro also indicated that people in close relationships sometimes refuse by asking clarification questions or repeating the request or suggestion. However, Delin and Tavil (2010) found that Turkish learners of English use direct refusals with close relatives and friends but indirect ways with distant relationships. Their main indirect refusal strategies were giving excuses, showing regret, or showing regret followed by a statement about future or past acceptance.

As seen above, culture can have a salient effect on students’ communication skills and their use of various speech acts. If cultural transfer takes place, then miscommunication or a breakdown in communication can take place. Because the main objective of learning English as a foreign language is to communicate with people with whom students do not share a mother tongue, it is essential that they master the art of communicating appropriately and accurately while observing English’s pragmatic and linguistic rules. This study attempts to examine the ways in which Omani EFL college students expressed refusal in various situations and whether these were appropriate in terms of culture and accurate in terms of language.

Method

Participants

The population of the study came from the Department of English in a higher education institution in Oman. The study employed a convenient sampling procedure. It was administered in spring 2012 and fall 2013. Forty-one EFL learners (22 males and 19 females) agreed to participate after being informed in class of the study’s objectives and of the voluntary nature of participation. Participants majored in English and belonged to three different departments: Education, English Arts, and Translation. Being in the second, third, fourth, and fifth years of their programs, their English levels ranged from low-intermediate to high-intermediate based on their linguistic performance in a reading test. The reading test was used with other groups of students from previous years, and it proved to be a good measure of their linguistic competence. The authors decided on the validity and reliability of the instrument used by having a panel of researchers checking it and then piloting it in one of the reading classes. The authors then counted the responses of all the participants to the test as offered below and examined them according to their linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriacy.

Material and Procedure

A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was administered to participants. It consisted of 12 scenarios requiring participants to supply a written refusal to three requests, three suggestions, three invitations, and three offers. Each of the three scenarios in each group sought a refusal to a person of a different status. The first required a refusal to an equal status person, the second to a higher status person, and the third to a lower status person. The DCT was designed by the researchers and based on the work of Beebe et al. (1990) and Umale (2011). The appendix details the scenarios that participants were presented with.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by describing the refusal strategies employed and checking their linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness. The authors also explored how sensitive learners were to the role of social status in issuing refusals and listed pragma-linguistic errors characterizing the collected refusals.

The refusals were rated by two professors in the Department of English at Sultan Qaboos University—native and non-native speakers of English—who judged the responses based on accuracy and appropriateness. In some cases, the professors reacted to the responses by stating why they sounded inappropriate. A non-native speaker rater was employed for two reasons: (a) to be able to clearly see whether the Arabic culture influences responses especially when the non-native rater placed a check mark besides a pragmatically inappropriate response and (b) to cross check the ratings of both professors.

According to Umale (2011), arriving at a correct refusal strategy entails either a statement of reason (e.g., “I cannot come because I have to take my wife to the hospital”) or regret (e.g., “I am sorry”). Therefore, the responses given by EFL learners were divided into two idea units and were assigned a value of either 1 for a reason or 2 for regret.

Following Beebe et al. (1990), Nelson et al. (2002), and Umale (2011), the refusals in this study were also described according to the categories presented in Table 1. It is important to note that the expressions supplied in the table represent real refusals taken from our data.

The analysis addressed the following issues:

1. Types of strategies used by EFL learners to refuse: direct/indirect.
2. How the learners addressed refusals to interlocutors of distinct social status.
3. Pragmatic-linguistic failure: length and content.
4. Native speakers’ ratings of response accuracy.

Results

Types of Strategies Used in Refusals

As stated earlier, the researchers observed that two types of strategies were used in the refusals produced by the Omani
learners: direct and indirect. We address direct responses first and then move to the indirect strategies employed.

**Direct strategies.** Because the study explored refusals in requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations, responses varied in terms of being direct or indirect across the four groups. Results suggest that Omani EFL learners use more direct refusals of requests with people of low status because 23 (56%) direct refusals surfaced when an employee asked his boss to leave work early. Examples of direct refusals include “No, don’t go now. I will let you leave the office early today,” “No, you have to finish your job, then deal with your personal issues,” and “I cannot! We have some work to do.”

There were nine (22%) direct refusals to a person of equal or higher status. This paralleled the direct refusals to an offer made by a person of higher status. Refusals that surfaced with people of equal and higher status included “No, I don’t have money. Actually, I invite you, feed you to give me 500 RO [Omani Rials] for this month” and “I cannot, my boss! This weekend, I must play much [play a match] and be with my parents at home.”

In invitations, six (15%) direct refusals appeared with friends (e.g., “No, I don’t like magic shows. I don’t like to go outside my house” and “I cannot go tonight. Maybe next time”). Six learners directly refused invitations from friends, while only three directly refused invitations made by a person of higher or lower status. Examples of these include “No, I don’t have money. Actually, I invite you, feed you to give me 500 RO [Omani Rials] for this month” and “I cannot, my boss! This weekend, I must play much [play a match] and be with my parents at home.”

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Offers, as kind social gestures, are special speech acts that demand careful responses. Direct refusals may break up relations. They may also be considered as negative, impolite, and abrupt. The researchers observed that learners were quite insensitive to the status of the person who made the offer. They used 22 (54%) direct refusals with a higher status person (e.g., “No, my old beautiful car; that is impossible. Thank you for the offer” and “Not my old car. It is very very precious. I can’t let it go. It is a treasure for me”). Eight (20%) direct refusals were given to the same status and six (15%) to low status people.

Learners sounded abrupt, rude, and/or extremely negative toward refusals that interfered with their life or future. They used 25 (61%) direct refusals with low status people and 20 (49%) with friends. Examples of the direct refusals included “No, Sir! My future is to become a scientist rather than a football player;” “No, I cannot! It is not a career in our societies. It is just a hobby” (both heard in a response to a careers counselor suggesting a football career), and “No, I am fine! I can handle the situation. There is no need to go to Malaysia.”

Although learners sounded careful when refusing suggestions made by a higher status person, we suspect that the scenario affected the responses to a large extent.

Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of direct refusals along with the status of the person to whom the refusal was issued:

Although Umale (2011) argued that “Omanis used the highest number of direct strategies in refusing requests and offers” (p. 26), this study found that Omani learners used direct refusals with offers and suggestions. The highest number of direct refusals surfaced in answers to a low status person.

**Indirect strategies.** Participants were also observed to refuse requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions indirectly. This happened when they regretted acceptance, gave reasons, showed consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings, presented a philosophical view, wished they were able to fulfill the request, and gave promises of future acceptance. In some cases, two of the above strategies were used simultaneously, but with a variation in the order they came in.

The researchers observed that Omani learners tended to use 52 (42%) regrets to requests for money as they used 24 (19%) to a person of the same status and 19 (15%) to a person with a higher status (e.g., “Unfortunately, I am sorry. I don’t have this amount of money” and “Sorry, you cannot because we have a lot of works needed to be done today”). They tended to use the word “wish” when refusing requests for money, as in “I wish I could give you, but I seriously don’t have more than I need.” In the collected responses,
six (5%) learners showed solidarity with and consideration for the feelings of a requestor of the same or higher status. However, none gave any promises for future help with money. Ten (8%) responses involving reason and consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings were given to a person of the same or higher status (e.g., “Sir, I have to go somewhere that time. I can come next weekend if you want”). In contrast to responses to a same status person, only one (1%) wish was given to a person of higher status. The researchers observed that with a person of low status, learners neither showed any consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings nor expressed wishes for, or promises of, future acceptance. The majority of responses were direct refusals or regrets. Respondents sometimes also used a variety of reasons to reject requests, such as “I have lots of tasks assigned for you. I cannot let you go.” One philosophical statement in response to a request made by a person of low status was “work is work!”

Because invitations are kind gestures that bring people together, learners were observed to be extremely polite when refusing them. The majority of responses (46 or 37%) showed consideration for the inviter’s feelings, regardless of the status of the person involved. And 20 (16%) responses showed considerations for, and appreciations of, kind invitations given to a higher and lower status person. Examples included “I would be glad to come,” “I appreciate your invitation,” “It is an honor, but I have been already invited to have lunch with one of my friends,” and “Oh what a nice thing!” However, the researchers observed that, with friends, learners tended to use more regrets, such as “I am sorry, but I really don’t feel like it.” One response involved a philosophical statement made in response to an invitation from an employee—“I don’t think it would be appropriate if I attended your daughter’s birthday party.” Moreover, a total of eight (7%) wishes were made in response to these invitations.

Offers are other types of acts that help solidify relations because the person who offers help, money, or anything in this way shows kindness. Similarly, the responses given to offers varied greatly. When the housemaid spoiled a new shirt while ironing, learners responded with “Don’t worry because I have many other shirts” and “Oh it is ok I have others and I don’t need it.” They used 36 (29%) responses showing consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings with a higher status person (e.g., “Thank you but I don’t want to sell my car,” and “Thank you. There is no need to do that”).

Suggestions can be regarded as intruding statements. A person suggesting a particular matter can be taken as interfering with the interlocutor’s business. Repetition, a new technique to refuse a suggestion, was introduced in refusing suggestions (e.g., “Malaysia!!! I heard about it. It is a good idea to go there but not now because we are in the beginning of the semester”). One notable difference in responses was the huge number of philosophical responses (n = 12, or 10%) produced to suggestions, such as “Soccer does not buy you a great life but science will”.

EFL learners used a variety of strategies to refuse. However, we observed that they used regret more when responding to requests, and they showed consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings when refusing offers.

**The role of status.** One of the objectives of this study was to explore whether Omani EFL learners were aware of the social status of their interlocutor when issuing refusals to requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. Although the overall figures for direct refusals show sensitivity toward the status of the interlocutor, the researchers were rather concerned about the high number of direct refusals produced in offers where high status people were concerned. In fact, many responses were more negative, abrupt, and rude than the literature would suggest.

However, the current study lends some support to Umale’s (2001) finding that “Omanis use more caution and care in dealing with people of higher status” (p. 28). We observed that we had substantial figures for “consideration of the interlocutor’s feelings” across the four groups. In a number of responses, the learners revealed no difference in responding to a friend or a person of a low status.

### Table 2. Number and Percentage of Direct Refusals and Status of the Person to Whom the Refusal Was Issued.

| Direct | Same status | High status | Low status |
|--------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| (request for money) | 4 (3%) | 5 (4%) | 23 (19%) |
| (invitation for dinner and magic show by a friend) | 6 (5%) | 3 (2%) | 3 (2%) |
| (offer made by a friend to meet your son’s principal) | 8 (7%) | 22 (18%) | 6 (5%) |
| (suggestion by a friend to go to Malaysia) | 20 (16%) | 15 (12%) | 25 (20%) |

*The percentages are calculated by dividing the total number of direct responses by the total number of responses (i.e., 123 responses).
Pragma-linguistic failure. Culture plays a crucial role in determining expected refusals produced by Omani EFL learners to requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. The researchers observed that a large number of respondents transferred their Arabic speech habits into English. In Arabic, people tend to give elaborate and detailed refusals so that the feelings of the interlocutor are not hurt—for example, "I am sorry. I can’t let you go before you finish your work (Table 3). However, if you are in a hurry, at least finish the urgent tasks that I’ve given you.” However, this may not work with English speaking cultures, which often demand directness and clear responses. Moreover, a lengthy response such as the one above might well result in pragma-linguistic failure.

Omanis are sometimes described as being overly friendly (Umale, 2001). Therefore, when refusing invitations, offers, and suggestions, they might sound “obsequious” (to use Umale’s term); they use many introductory statements before they state their refusal (e.g., “I appreciate your invitation, but I am sorry I really can’t come. Wish your daughter a happy birthday”). In a number of cases, a reason for refusing the offer or invitation is given.

The study suggests that Omani EFL learners use a variety of refusal strategies. In many cases, two strategies are often used together (i.e., regret followed by reason, consideration of the interlocutor’s feelings followed by reason, a wish followed by a reason). Umale (2001) argued that this semantic formula is very prevalent in Arabic. Omanis using Arabic are likely to express regret or consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings followed by reasons for a refusal (e.g., “Thanks dear but I hope to excuse me because I have an appointment with my love,” “That is a good idea but I like to keep the old things because they are very precious,” and “Sorry dear, my mother does not feel good, I need to stay at home to take care of her. Again sorry”). This formula is quite common in the responses EFL learners used as refusals in the present study. Moreover, many also expressed a wish then refused the offer or invitation. For example, one learner responded with “I would be glad to attend, but I am really busy at this time.” According to Umale, native English speakers tend to express regret and give reasons. They rarely show consideration for the interlocutor’s feelings or express a wish, which means that the EFL learners featured here transferred their Omani cultural norms and acts of speech to express refusals in English. This transfer might result in pragma-linguistic failure and may hinder smooth communication with native speakers of English.

| Table 3. Examples of Indirect Strategies Used by the Respondents. |
|-------------------------------------------------|
| Regret | Reason | Consideration of interlocutor’s feelings | Philosophy | Promises of later approval | Wish | Let the interlocutor off the hook | Repetition |
|--------|--------|------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|------------|
| Requests/status | | | | | | | |
| Same    | 19     | 4    | 6   | 1  | 0  | 5   | 0  | 0  |
| Higher  | 24     | 4    | 6   | 0  | 0  | 1   | 0  | 0  |
| Lower   | 9      | 5    | 0   | 1  | 0  | 0   | 0  | 0  |
| Total   | 52     | 13   | 12  | 1  | 0  | 6   | 0  | 0  |
| %       | 42%    | 11%  | 10% | 1% | 5% | 5%  |    |    |
| Invitations/status | | | | | | | |
| Same    | 12     | 4    | 14  | 0  | 0  | 5   | 0  | 0  |
| Higher  | 8      | 6    | 22  | 0  | 0  | 1   | 0  | 0  |
| Lower   | 9      | 4    | 20  | 1  | 1  | 2   | 0  | 0  |
| Total   | 29     | 14   | 46  | 1  | 0  | 8   | 0  | 0  |
| %       | 24%    | 11%  | 37% | 1% | 7% | 7%  |    |    |
| Offers/status | | | | | | | |
| Same    | 0      | 3    | 23  | 4  | 0  | 0   | 0  | 0  |
| Higher  | 3      | 1    | 10  | 3  | 0  | 1   | 0  | 0  |
| Lower   | 1      | 0    | 3   | 0  | 0  | 0   | 31 | 0  |
| Total   | 4      | 4    | 36  | 7  | 0  | 1   | 31 | 0  |
| %       | 3%     | 3%   | 29% | 6% | 1% | 25% |    |    |
| Suggestions/status | | | | | | | |
| Same    | 1      | 0    | 9   | 1  | 2  | 6   | 0  | 1  |
| Higher  | 2      | 8    | 5   | 9  | 0  | 0   | 0  | 0  |
| Lower   | 1      | 6    | 3   | 2  | 0  | 0   | 31 | 0  |
| Total   | 4      | 14   | 17  | 12 | 2  | 6   | 0  | 1  |
| %       | 3%     | 11%  | 14% | 10%| 2% | 5%  | 1% |    |

*aThis represents the percentages of the total number of each strategy versus the total number of all the responses received, which equals 123 (41 students × 3).
Table 4. Native Versus Non-Native Ratings.

| Type/speaker | Native’s ratings | Non-native’s ratings |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------------|
|              | Accuracy | Appropriateness | Accuracy | Appropriateness |
| Request      | 52  | 80  | 26  | 32  |
| Invitation   | 52  | 81  | 7   | 46  |
| Offer        | 55  | 65  | 17  | 31  |
| Suggestion   | 61  | 81  | 24  | 30  |
| Total*       | 45% | 62% | 15% | 28% |

*This represents the percentages of the total numbers of ratings in each column versus the total number of ratings made by the raters, which equal 429.

Native and non-native speaker’s ratings of responses. The refusals given by EFL learners were rated by native and non-native speakers of English who were asked to judge the responses based on two criteria: accuracy of language and appropriateness to English speaking culture(s). They were asked to place a check or cross in the cell indicating their choice (accurate vs. inaccurate; appropriate vs. inappropriate) and supply a comment. It was noted that the raters failed to comment on all the responses given. Table 4 illustrates the number of responses in terms of accuracy and appropriateness, as judged by the two speakers. It is important to note that there are about 129 refusals in each of the four types.

Table 4 reveals that the non-native speaker of English considered many EFL learners’ responses to be inaccurate. This may suggest low proficiency in English on the part of EFL learners. Many faulty statements involving grammatical and structural errors were produced (e.g., “No, no. I will but another ones. That’s fine,” “That’s kind of you but I have lots of work to so I am sorry,’’ and “No, I don’t want I have no time”). However, the native speaker rater marked the majority of refusals as grammatically accurate. The researchers observed that the native speaker rater generally focused more on what could be accepted as “spoken” language in terms of conveying the meaning rather than as “written” responses, which were full of mistakes in tenses, punctuation, conjunctions, and structures. For example, a refusal such as “Sorry, I cannot. Also, I have my own responsibilities and duties” was considered to be accurate by the native speaker despite having an inappropriate conjunction in the statement. We also observed that the native speaker overlooked the fact that these responses included many repetitions and faulty prepositions and punctuations such as “Oh! I am sort, this weekend I am going to my homeland” and “I would if I could but I can’t because I will be busy up to my nose during the weekend.”

In terms of appropriateness, the non-native speaker judged many responses as informal with no positive feeling (e.g., “Sorry my boss, I’ve already planned to do something in the weekend”), too direct/negative (e.g., “Sorry my friend, I can’t lend you because I have a lot of responsibilities”), abrupt/odd (e.g., “No, I don’t have money. Actually, I invite you, feed you in order to give me 500 OR for this month”), and repetitive, as in “I really really understand your problem, but unfortunately I don’t have that amount.” In terms of appropriateness, the researchers observed that the non-native speaker of English, similar to the Arab respondents, was influenced by Arabic norms and speech acts when rating responses. He viewed statements that considered the interlocutor’s feelings and those that expressed regret to be appropriate. For instance, he passed statements such as “I would really like to help you, but I have other commitments during the weekend, and I would like be very busy,” and “You know that I would love to help you, but I am busy in this weekend.” Statements that expressed direct refusal or listed a reason were considered inappropriate by the non-native speaker. The native speaker of English marked fewer statements as inappropriate, revealing moderate competency on the part of EFL learners with regard to pragma-linguistic competence. She considered direct refusals such as “No, I can’t because I don’t have that amount of money,” to be too brusque; “Am sorry I can’t. I have other plans and I can’t ruin them,” to be offensive; and “Sorry but I am very busy,” to be curt.

Discrepancies, though strikingly salient, can be attributed to two facts: (a) the native speaker has lived long enough in Oman to know that Omani is generally too friendly to express direct refusals. Thus, she accepted responses expressing regret, reason and consideration of an interlocutor’s feelings and overlooked status in many scenarios and (b) the native speakers’ focus was observed to be more on the message expressed by the refusal.

Discussion and Conclusion

Omani EFL learners used a variety of pragma-linguistic strategies to address refusals across the four different situations (requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions). To illustrate, it was observed that Omani EFL learners used a few direct refusals. However, they used a large number of indirect refusals, which express reason, regret, wish, and other indirect strategies. The highest number of direct refusals was found in refusing requests and suggestions. While requests are often hard to fulfill, suggestions may sound like intrusion into others’ business. Hence, requests and suggestions received some negative, abrupt, and curt refusals. It was surprising to the researchers to find that...
Omani EFL learners used direct refusals with people who are higher in status than themselves. These may potentially cause a threat to “face” when used with a boss or when negotiating a business deal. Direct instruction on the importance of social status when addressing refusals in English might increase awareness about accuracy and fluency related to refusals in English.

Most likely, EFL learners’ Arabic cultures played a crucial role in influencing the refusal strategies used. Many of these strategies result in mere transfer of L1 speech norms to L2, causing miscommunication, misunderstanding, and offense. Normally, people ensure that they maintain face in Asian cultures, avoid putting interlocutors into embarrassing predicaments, and respond politely to friends and people of a lower status. Omani EFL learners greatly impinged on social status when they use direct refusals to an offer made by a person of a higher status. This warrants examination of other factors that may result in blunt and harsh refusals such as the low key and high key content of the message (Hall, 1976). This is especially important because the type of offer can cause anger, frustration, or interference with one’s business.

There were apparently large differences in the ratings of accuracy and appropriateness by the native and non-native speaker raters. The researchers observed that the native speaker rater considered the majority of the learners’ responses to be grammatically and pragmatically acceptable. As pointed out earlier, these responses may sound acceptable when spoken but not written. To illustrate, a response that drops the third person singular s may not hinder understanding; however, it is certainly ungrammatical. The native speaker considered this to be fine. However, the non-native speaker, who had received formal instruction on the English language, was more meticulous in judging the accuracy of these written responses. Responses lacking the third person singular s, and those using wrong verb tenses or those with misplaced prepositions and punctuation were marked wrong by the non-native speaker. The differences between the native and non-native are due to differences in their level of tolerance for errors, their training, teaching experiences, and their linguistic orientations. We were expecting a difference, but the degree of difference was not anticipated.

Although this study provided a number of emergent understandings in an area that is largely under-researched in the Omani context, it had a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the collected refusals were written responses and not natural reactions. It is very important to note that respondents are likely to have given different refusals when facing real situations. Second, the study did not interview the raters to collect more data or check why responses were judged in the way they were. We believe that the raters’ explanations may have differed from those we have provided, which could have revealed the actual reasons behind the high percentage of accurate and appropriate responses rated by the native speaker compared with the non-native speaker’s ratings. However, despite these concerns, the current study does suggest that EFL learners make serious pragmatic errors in issuing refusals. Moreover, it maintains that the refusals they use are not sensitive to the social status of the interlocutors.

Appendix

A. Requests

Scenario (1) presents a request for money from a person of equal status. You are working in a college. You are married and one of your married colleagues who has a big family comes to your house to borrow money.

Colleague: I’ve got a big family and I just don’t know where the money goes. The children always need one thing or another. Could you lend me $100 for a month?
You:  
Colleague: It’s OK. I’ll borrow from someone else.

Scenario (2) presents a request for help from a person of higher status. You are working in a college. Your boss, who is the head of your department, asks you to work during the weekend to help him.

Boss: Would you be kind enough to come in on the weekend to help me with some library work?
You:  
Boss: Well, then maybe next weekend.

Scenario (3) presents a request from a person of low status to leave work early. You are a manager in an insurance office. A clerk has some important work to do. He asks you to release him early in the afternoon but you yourself have a lot of pending work that needs his presence.

Clerk: I’ve got some important personal matters to see to today. Would it be OK if I leave work early?
You:  
Clerk: Then, could I leave early tomorrow?

2. Invitation

Scenario (4) invites a friend for dinner and a magic show at a hotel. Your friend phones to invite you for dinner and a magic show at a hotel.

Friend: We’ve arranged a get-together at the Crowne Plaza. There’ll be dinner and a magic show for children. Would you like to join us?
You:  
Friend: Well, I can understand your position.

Scenario (5) involves a boss’s invitation to an employee for lunch

Boss: How about lunch at my place tomorrow?  
You:  
Boss: Oh, I understand. That’s much more important.

Scenario (6) involves an employee’s invitation to you (the boss) to his daughter’s birthday party

Employee: I’ve arranged a small party for my daughter’s birthday on Monday and I’d be delighted if you could come along
You:  
Employee: It’s Ok. Don’t worry about it.
3. Suggestion

Scenario (7) presents a friend's suggestion to take a break and go to Malaysia. You work as a lecturer in a college. The workload is very high and you are getting stressed. Your friend suggests that you take a break and go to Malaysia. You:

Friend: Your work is getting you down. Why don’t you take a break and go to Malaysia?

You: ________________________________

Friend: You could still think about it later on.

Scenario (8) involves a counselor's suggestion to you (a student) to take up a career

Counselor: John, you’re so good at football. Why don’t you make it your career?

You: ________________________________

Counselor: Well, it was only a suggestion. It’s your decision.

Scenario (9) involves a housemaid's suggestion to take a taxi. You’re in a strange place waiting for your friend James to pick you up because you have to meet an important person to discuss some business prospects. You are pressed for time and your friend is going to help you with transport. You’ve been waiting for an hour and he hasn’t shown up. You telephone him and he is not at home. His housekeeper suggests that you take a cab and come to the house.

Housekeeper: Normally James is very punctual. It seems he’s got stuck somewhere. Perhaps you could take a cab and come here.

You: ________________________________

Housekeeper: Well, if you don’t want to come, just let me have your name and address.

4. Offer

Scenario (10) presents a friend's offer. You are a businessman and have little free time as you have just started your own business. Your son has been a nuisance at school and the principal wants to meet you in this connection. You generally do all your work yourself and without the help of others. Your friend offers to meet the principal on your behalf and do all your work yourself and without the help of others.

Friend: if you don’t have time, I can go and sort things out.

You: ________________________________

Friend: Well, it’s up to you.

Scenario (11) involves an offer from a manager. You are a schoolteacher who is visiting a car showroom and you show interest in an expensive model. The manager of the showroom is eager to sell it to you but you don’t have the amount of money required and so you ask for a huge discount. The manager offers to help you sell your old car at a good price.

Manager: If you are really interested in purchasing this model, I can help you sell your old car at a good price.

You: ________________________________

Manager: Well, it was just a suggestion.

Scenario (12) involves an offer from a domestic helper. You have a domestic helper at home. While ironing your clothes, he spoils one of your expensive shirts.

Helper: Sir, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to but while ironing your clothes, I have burnt your shirt. Please tell me from where you have purchased it? I will replace it with a new one.

You: ________________________________

Helper: But, the mistake was mine.

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Note

1. Many of the responses supplied by English as foreign language (EFL) learners are syntactically flawed and grammatically incorrect. A discussion of the accuracy of these responses as per the ratings of a native and non-native speaker will follow. Thus, for credibility reasons, we have written down the inaccurate responses without correcting them.

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