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Saying 'No' Politely: The Use of Refusal Strategies by Moroccan EFL University Learners

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Abstract: This study investigates the refusal strategies employed by Moroccan EFL university learners across a variety of social situations. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research draws on data from Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) and Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) to explore how learners refuse requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. The analysis reveals that indirect strategies are the most frequently used, significantly outnumbering direct and adjunctive strategies across the collected responses. Statistical tests confirm that this preference is consistent across all scenarios. Interview data further reinforce these results, showing that students tend to issue refusals when a situation is beyond their capacity or conflicts with personal or cultural values. Learners often opt for polite, indirect expressions to reduce the risk of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain social harmony. These findings underscore the influence of sociocultural norms on pragmatic behaviour and provide valuable insights into interlanguage pragmatics. The study highlights the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction into EFL curricula to better equip learners with the communicative skills needed for effective interaction in real-life situations.

Keywords: Refusal strategies, Moroccan EFL university learners, refusal speech acts, FTAs, DCT, FGIs

1. Introduction

Pragmatics remains a complex and evolving field within linguistics, with ongoing scholarly debate regarding its definition and boundaries. Foundational theorists such as Morris (1938), Levinson (1983), Hashiuchi and Oku (2005), and Kecskes (2016) have significantly contributed to delineating its scope, positioning pragmatics alongside syntax and semantics as a central branch of linguistic inquiry.

Morris (1938) introduced a semiotic framework that divides linguistic study into three domains: syntax, concerned with the formal relations among signs; semantics, dealing with the relation of signs to the objects they denote; and pragmatics, which focuses on the relation of signs to their interpreters (p. 6). This triadic structure underscores the multilayered nature of language. Syntax governs sentence structure, semantics examines decontextualized meaning, while pragmatics explores how meaning is shaped by context, speaker intent, and social dynamics (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

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Building on Morris's foundational work, Levinson (1983) emphasized the functional and contextual nature of pragmatics. He defined it as "the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized in the structure of a language" (p. 9), thereby highlighting its central concern with how language is used in authentic social interactions. For instance, the use of the French pronouns 'tu' and 'vous', both translated to "you" in English, varies significantly depending on the level of formality and the social distance between interlocutors. In a job interview, a candidate may ask, 'vous avez reçu mon CV?' —have you received my CV?, using the formal 'vous' to convey respect. In contrast, a sibling might say, 'tu as téléphoné à ton père?' —have you called your father ?, where 'tu' signals familiarity between respondents. These examples exemplify how pragmatic choices encode social meaning and relational nuances (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mey, 2001).

Kecskes (2016) advances this view by proposing that pragmatic meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of individual intentions and societal norms. Rather than viewing meaning as a fixed entity transmitted by the speaker and decoded by the hearer, Kecskes adopts a dynamic, dialectical approach, emphasizing that interlocutors jointly shape meaning during interaction (p. 26). This perspective situates pragmatics at the intersection of linguistic competence and communicative performance (Thomas, 1995; Verschueren, 1999), reflecting its concern with how language functions in practice, not merely in theory.

A core distinction between pragmatics and semantics lies in their treatment of context. While semantics seeks to analyse meaning in abstraction, pragmatics investigates how meaning is inferred, negotiated, and contingent upon extralinguistic variables such as speaker identity, cultural norms, and communicative goals (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). In formal contexts, speakers often adopt a respectful and distant register; in informal settings, language becomes more intimate and relaxed. These shifts are pragmatically significant, as interpretation is heavily reliant on social context and mutual understanding.

Thomas (1995) highlights the role of shared background knowledge in ensuring communicative success. Pragmatic failure, misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication, often occurs when interlocutors do not share the same cultural, linguistic, or situational knowledge. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature further illustrates this point: much of what is meant in conversation is not explicitly stated but inferred based on shared assumptions and adherence to the cooperative principle.

Pragmatics also encompasses the performative dimension of language. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) argued that language is not merely descriptive but action-oriented; speakers do things with words. Levinson (1983) supports this view, emphasizing that pragmatics examines the functions that utterances perform in discourse (p. 8). For instance, in a Muslim Indian context, the utterance "you are divorced!" may not just communicate information but enact a legal speech act with immediate consequences (Searle, 1979; Mey, 2001). This example illustrates how pragmatics considers not only the meaning but also the force and effect of utterances, shaped by cultural and contextual frameworks.

Moreover, this focus on use over abstraction distinguishes pragmatics from syntax and semantics. It also brings into focus the distinction between sentences and utterances. Levinson (1983) notes that a sentence is "an abstract theoretical entity," whereas an utterance is "the issuance of a sentence in an actual context" (p. 18). Thus, while semantics might examine what a sentence could mean in principle, pragmatics investigates what a speaker means in a given context.

Levinson (1983) identifies several key components of pragmatic analysis: deixis, implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and discourse structure (p. 27). These phenomena highlight the field's

complexity and its reliance on both linguistic form and extra-linguistic context. Deixis, for example, ties meaning to speaker-relative coordinates like time, place, and person. Implicatures rely on inference rather than direct expression, while presuppositions and speech acts reveal the background assumptions and functions embedded in utterances.

Expanding on these foundations, Hashiuchi and Oku (2005) proposed a complementary model where grammar and pragmatics function together in meaning-making. In their view, grammar provides an abstract, formal system, while pragmatics ensures that linguistic forms are employed appropriately and effectively in real communicative contexts (p. 11). Kecskes (2016) echoes this integration by stressing that meaning is neither wholly encoded in language nor solely derived by inference—it emerges from the cooperative effort of participants engaged in discourse.

1.1. Performative Functions in Pragmatic Theory

In 'How to Do Things with Words' (1962), J.L. Austin fundamentally transformed the understanding of language by challenging the traditional view of statements as mere conveyors of truth or falsity (p. 1). He argued that language functions not only to describe but also to perform actions, introducing the concept of the performative utterance—utterances that enact what they state. Austin famously claimed that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action (p. 5).

Performative utterances gain their meaning and efficacy through appropriate contextual conditions and conventional procedures. For example, in the ceremonial naming of a ship, the utterance "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" is not descriptive but performs the act of naming itself, contingent upon the speaker's authority, the ceremony's formalities, and sincere intention (p. 5). This illustrates the illocutionary force of language—how utterances perform actions such as commanding, promising, or declaring.

Austin distinguished three components of speech acts: the locutionary act (producing an utterance), the illocutionary act (the communicative intent), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). Building on Austin's framework, Searle (1969) classified speech acts into categories including assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, highlighting language's role in performing diverse social actions.

This performative perspective has since become central to pragmatics, informing analyses of institutional discourse, intercultural communication, and politeness strategies (Searle, 1979; Thomas, 1995; Mey, 2001). Austin's work thus shifted linguistic study from static form descriptions to dynamic, context-dependent action, emphasizing that meaning emerges through use in social interaction.

1.2. Conversational Norms and the Cooperative Principle

Effective communication relies not only on linguistic competence but also on adherence to socially accepted conversational norms that enable mutual understanding and cooperation. Pragmatics focuses on how meaning is often inferred rather than directly expressed, particularly in indirect speech acts where interlocutors negotiate meaning through shared inference and cooperative intent (Grice, 1989; Thomas, 1995).

Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle is central to this process, positing that participants in a conversation work collaboratively to ensure their contributions are appropriate to the purpose and direction of the exchange (p. 26). Speakers are expected to provide sufficient and relevant information, be truthful, and express themselves clearly. When these expectations are not fully met—

whether by providing too much or too little information, being deliberately ambiguous, or flouting norms—hearers rely on context and shared knowledge to infer implied meanings, or implicatures.

For example, a speaker might respond with additional details beyond what was asked or employ sarcasm that contradicts the literal meaning of their words. Such deviations prompt listeners to seek underlying intentions, illustrating how pragmatic meaning depends heavily on context and the cooperative assumptions shared between interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yule, 1996).

However, not all pragmatic inferences are intended or recognized as such (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101). Successful communication presupposes a sufficient overlap of cultural, linguistic, and situational knowledge. In its absence, pragmatic failure and misunderstandings can occur (Thomas, 1983).

Moreover, communication is inherently interactive; interlocutors are active participants who interpret, infer, and sometimes strategically violate conversational norms to achieve politeness, indirectness, or emphasis. This dynamic process underscores the complexity of pragmatic interpretation beyond simple sender-receiver models (Leech, 1983; Cutting, 2002).

1.3. The Pragmatics of Politeness

Politeness encompasses manners, respect, and emotional consideration, operating both consciously and unconsciously in communication. It is shaped by the relationship between interlocutors and expressed through verbal and non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, which play a key role in interpersonal exchanges (Goffman, 1967).

Yule (1996) defines politeness as “the means employed to show awareness of another person’s face” (p. 60), where face represents an individual’s desired self-image. The deployment of politeness varies according to social distance and power dynamics: greater social distance necessitates protection of the hearer’s negative face (freedom from imposition), whereas closer relationships reinforce positive face (desire to be liked and accepted).

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model identifies two universal face wants—negative and positive face—and views politeness as a rational strategy to manage FTAs within interactions (p. 283). They define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves” (p. 61), vulnerable to loss or enhancement. Speakers use rationality to select appropriate strategies that balance communicative goals with face preservation (p. 64). Politeness thus functions as a pragmatic tool essential for navigating social interaction.

1.4. The Pragmatics of Refusal Speech Acts

Refusals represent one of the most complex and face-threatening speech acts, as they inherently challenge interpersonal harmony. Umale (2011) characterizes refusals as acts that damage both the speaker’s and the hearer’s face, potentially disrupting social equilibrium (p. 18). Defined as responses that decline offers, invitations, requests, or suggestions (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990), refusals may be realized directly (e.g., “No, I can't”) or indirectly through strategies such as excuses, hedges, or expressions of regret.

Adjuncts often precede the core refusal, serving to soften its impact. Phrases like “I’d love to, but...” or “I appreciate it, but...” are examples of such mitigating elements (Campillo et al., 2009). These strategies are shaped by sociocultural variables, including social status, power relations, and the degree of imposition, which determine whether a direct or indirect approach is appropriate (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Direct refusals employ on-record strategies that clearly convey rejection without significant mitigation. While explicit, speakers may still use softeners such as tone or polite expressions to lessen the FTAs (Yule, 1996, p. 63). Indirect refusals, on the other hand, are off-record and strategically ambiguous. Chen (1996) highlights the cognitive demands of indirect strategies, which require sensitivity to context to avoid miscommunication. Sub-strategies include excuses, postponements, and offering alternatives (Beebe et al., 1990).

The use of refusal strategies is also culturally and hierarchically embedded. Fitri et al. (2020) and Al Okla (2018) demonstrate that individuals in subordinate positions tend to use indirect refusals to preserve social harmony, while those with more power may respond more bluntly. Proficiency in the target language further influences strategy choice; Wannaruk (2008) found that more proficient learners are better able to use nuanced indirect strategies and apply pragmatic norms from their L1 appropriately (pp. 328–331). In contrast, lower-proficiency speakers risk pragmatic failure (p. 333).

Adjuncts, though not refusals per se, function as pragmatic tools that support the act of refusal. They act as "semantic auxiliaries" (Campillo et al., 2009, p. 142), facilitating the speech act by reducing potential threat. Yule (1996) frames these elements as "mitigating devices" (p. 63) that contribute to face-saving in social interaction.

Ultimately, understanding the pragmatics of refusals—especially the use of indirectness and adjuncts—is essential in cross-cultural communication. Misinterpretation of such strategies can lead to pragmatic failure and strained relationships, particularly in cultures where face-saving is paramount (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010).

1.5. Empirical Studies on Pragmatics and Refusal Strategies

Empirical research across Arab speech communities consistently reveals a strong preference for indirect refusal strategies, with direct refusals more selectively used depending on contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and speech act type. In Jordan, Al Issa (2003) found that EFL learners overwhelmingly employ indirect forms—such as excuses, apologies, and regret expressions—to mitigate FTAs; similarly, Al Shalawi (1997) reported Saudi learners favour indirect refusals in high-imposition situations, reserving direct refusals for more informal or equal-status contexts.

In Oman, Al Mahrooqi and Al Aghbari (2016) showed that reasons and regret formulas were dominant, especially when addressing interlocutors of higher status. In Iraq, Abdul Sattar et al. (2009) and Jasim (2017) observed frequent use of excuses, future acceptance, and justification, while direct refusal forms remained rare. In Egypt, comparative research by Nelson, Al Batal, and El Bakary (2002) demonstrated that Egyptian Arabic speakers significantly preferred indirect refusals—using tactics like partial acceptance, white lies, and elaborate explanations—more than American English speakers did.

An exception to this pattern appears in Algeria, where Benbouya and Rabab'ah (2022) reported that direct strategies, especially expressions of inability or unwillingness, were frequently used across different social-status contexts. Turning to Morocco, El Mouden and Ouaouicha (2019) documented that Moroccan university students predominantly made refusals with indirect devices—such as hedging, gratitude expressions, and explanations—with direct strategies occurring only in low-imposition scenarios.

Bouzidi (2020) corroborated these findings, noting elaborate and mitigated refusal forms among Moroccan EFL learners, aligned with sociocultural norms of politeness. In addition, interlanguage

pragmatics research by Linde (2009) and similar investigations revealed Moroccan learners often transfer indirect speech-act norms from their L1 into their L2 refusals, sometimes showing a directness level greater than American interlocutors in written DCT tasks, especially in imperative forms (Linde, 2009; see also Abdou & Abidi, 2022). These Moroccan-based studies affirm that while direct refusals are contextually available, the indirect strategy remains the normative mode of refusal across both L1 and L2 contexts in Morocco.

2. Methodological Considerations

The pragmatic research paradigm, which integrates elements of positivism/objectivism and interpretivism/constructivism, naturally supports the use of a mixed methods research design. This design enables the concurrent collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing the researcher to compare and triangulate findings for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. According to Creswell (2013), mixed methods research combines open-ended (qualitative) and closed-ended (quantitative) data to effectively address research questions and hypotheses (p. 217).

This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, which aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do Moroccan EFL university learners employ refusal speech act strategies in their interactions? (2) How are politeness strategies used in the realization of refusals? and (3) What sociocultural parameters influence the choice of particular refusal strategies?

The combination of qualitative and quantitative inquiries justifies the adoption of a mixed methods design, as qualitative research is suited to exploring participants' concepts, perceptions, and communicative intentions (p. 212), whereas quantitative research facilitates the examination of frequencies, patterns, and statistical significance (p. 155). Data for this study were collected through prompts from DCTs, which provided a structured yet flexible means of eliciting both qualitative and quantitative responses. The quantitative phase involved coding and statistically analysing these responses to identify patterns and differences, while the qualitative phase focused on interpreting the pragmatic choices made and their underlying sociocultural meanings.

2.1. Subjects

The study involved 300 respondents, comprising 169 female and 131 male students. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of 26.5. All participants were enrolled in Moroccan universities, primarily studying English at the School of Arts and Humanities in Fes-Sais and the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. To ensure participants were sufficiently qualified to understand and appropriately respond to the twelve scenarios in the DCT questionnaire, only senior students were selected for this study.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Age by Gender

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

2.2. Data Collection Techniques

The DCT questionnaire used in this study consists of twelve (12) scenarios, as shown in the table below, representing various role-play situations involving different social statuses—lower, equal,

and higher. As in table 2 and following Beebe et al. (1990), the written DCT is divided into four (4) categories of stimuli: refusals to three (3) requests, three (3) offers, three (3) invitations, and three (3) suggestions (p. 3). Each category includes scenarios set in three social contexts, where respondents must react to interlocutors of lower, equal, and higher status. In other words, for each situation, participants are expected to respond to conversational prompts while assuming three distinct social roles based on status.

In addition to the DCT, a focus group interview was conducted with six students, providing them the opportunity to respond to the scenarios more openly and without the constraint of having to refuse, as required by the DCT.

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 foreign language class

To clarify this point further, one type of scenario in the DCT questionnaire involves refusing requests, which are designed to reflect different social status relationships: lower, equal, and higher. For example, in item 12, a lower-status situation is presented where a boss asks an employee to stay late and work extra hours. In contrast, item 1 depicts a high-status context, where a person of higher status must decline a request from a worker seeking a salary increase. Item 2 represents an equal-status scenario, in which a student refuses a classmate's request to borrow notes. The participants' responses, summarised in table 3, will be analysed using the refusal classification framework developed by Beebe et al. (1990), which distinguishes refusals into three categories: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and refusal adjuncts.

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...*)	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

- 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 interlocutor
   - Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (*I won't be any fun tonight* to refuse an invitation)
   - Guilt trip (waitress to customers who want to sit a while: *I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.*)
   - 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.*

Respondents' semantic responses to the twelve DCT scenarios were systematically coded and grouped as shown in table 4. For example, a reply such as "I promise I will do it next time" to the first scenario involving a salary raise request was categorized as a promise of future compliance, which represents an indirect refusal strategy. To organize the data for analysis, each refusal strategy outlined by Beebe et al. (1990) was assigned a distinct code. After completing the coding, the responses were analysed using IBM SPSS (version 20) to identify how frequently each refusal strategy occurred and to explore the specific strategies participants used in reaction to each 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	

3. Results and Discussion

Table 5 displays the distribution of refusal strategies used by Moroccan EFL university learners in response to the DCT scenarios. The study categorizes refusals into three main types: adjuncts to refusals, direct refusals, and indirect refusals. Across all participants, a total of 3,600 refusal strategies were identified, with 2,028 instances of refusals from one group and 1,572 from another, reflecting the varied use of these strategies within the sample.

Table 5
The distribution of refusal strategies employed by Moroccan EFL university learners

Strategy Type	Female (n = 2028)	Male (n = 1572)	Percentage	Total
Adjunct	64 (3.2%)	447 (28.4%)	30%	511
Direct	665 (32.8%)	781 (49.7%)	4%	1446
Indirect	1317 (64%)	344 (21.9%)	66%	1661
Total	2028 (100%)	1572 (100%)	100%	3600

Data in table 5 reveal that Moroccan EFL university learners predominantly use indirect refusal strategies, accounting for 66% of instances. Adjuncts to refusals make up 30% of the strategies employed, while direct refusals are much less common, representing only 4% of the total responses. This indicates a strong preference for more subtle refusal strategies over direct ones when turning down requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations.

Direct refusals can be categorized into two types: performative and non-performative. Performative refusals use explicit verbs such as “I refuse” or “I decline,” while non-performative refusals rely on simpler expressions like “No” or “I can’t” without performative verbs. Analysis shows that the vast majority of direct refusals—about 97%—are non-performative, with only a small fraction—around 3%—being performative. This suggests that most direct refusals are expressed in non-performative manner.

Indirect refusal strategies, unlike direct refusals, do not carry the same forcefulness. These strategies encompass a variety of types. An interlocutor is considered to use an indirect refusal if their response

begins with expressions of regret, wishes, excuses, alternatives, past or future acceptance, promises, principles, philosophical statements, attempts to dissuade the speaker, acceptance functioning as refusal, or avoidance. Data shows that avoidance (31.2%) and regret (27.7%) are the most frequently employed strategies by Moroccan EFL university learners, with only a 3.5% difference between them.

Avoidance, which includes behaviours such as silence, hesitation, or inaction, ranks first, occurring 736 times and accounting for 31.2% of the responses. Regret follows closely, used 653 times (27.7%). The third most common strategy is dissuading the interlocutor—such as criticizing the speaker's request, letting them off the hook, or defending one's own position—which represents 18.1%. Other indirect refusal strategies appear less frequently: promises (8.4%), acceptance as refusal (7%), philosophical statements (2.4%), alternatives (2.1%), wishes (1.4%), excuses (1%), principles (0.3%), and past or future acceptance (0.3%) each constitute less than 10% of the total indirect refusals.

Adjuncts to refusals differ from direct refusals in that they use various mitigating strategies to soften the refusal and make it less direct. These strategies include expressing positive feelings or opinions, showing empathy, using pause fillers, and offering appreciation. As shown in Figure 25, among the adjuncts to refusals—which make up 30% of the total responses—40% begin with an expression of gratitude before delivering the refusal. Close behind, 39% involve statements of positive feelings or opinions. Pause fillers account for 16% of adjuncts, while expressions of empathy are the least common, representing only 2%.

Furthermore, findings confirm that female participants used indirect refusals far more often (64%) than males (21.9%), while males preferred direct strategies (49.7%). This aligns with Kharraki (2001) and Talouizet (2021), who found Moroccan women favour polite, indirect forms like excuses and expressions of regret. Similar trends appear in Al-Kahtani (2005) and Al-Issa (1998), who link female indirectness to cultural norms of modesty. Beebe et al. (1990) also observed that women in collectivist cultures tend to avoid direct refusals.

The chi-square test of independence, in table 6, reveals a highly significant association between refusal strategy types and situational contexts ($\chi^2 = 2103.03$, df = 176, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the choice of refusal strategy is strongly influenced by the specific situation faced by the learners.

Table 6
Chi-Square Test of Independence between refusal strategy types and situations

Statistic	Value
Chi-square (χ^2)	2103.03
Degrees of freedom	176
p-value	< 0.001 (0)

Notably, the data show that indirect refusal strategies, such as avoidance, regret, and dissuading the interlocutor, are the most frequently employed by Moroccan EFL university learners across a variety of scenarios. For instance, avoidance alone accounts for the largest proportion of responses (20.4%), closely followed by regret (18.1%) and dissuading interlocutor strategies (11.9%). These indirect strategies allow learners to refuse in a way that mitigates potential face-threatening effects, which aligns with cultural communication norms that prioritize politeness and maintaining harmony.

The variation in strategy use across situations also suggests that learners adjust their refusal strategies depending on the social context, showing pragmatic sensitivity. The predominance of indirect

refusals highlights their preference for less confrontational and more nuanced speech acts, possibly reflecting sociocultural factors and the learners' developing pragmatic competence in English.

The findings also reveal that the primary concern of Moroccan EFL university learners is to employ indirect refusal strategies combined with polite expressions to minimize FTAs. The FGI data support and reinforce the results obtained from DCT, showing that Moroccan EFL university students consistently use indirect refusal strategies when turning down requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations. They deliberately choose these indirect forms to convey refusals respectfully, aiming to protect interlocutors' feelings and preserve their social face.

Importantly, refusal is generally resorted to only when the request or invitation is beyond the respondent's capacity or control. As Participant 1 noted, "I think we should refuse an invitation, an offer, request, or suggestion when it's beyond me and out of my control." Additionally, refusals are more acceptable when the proposal contradicts personal or cultural values. Participant 2 explained, "There are several cases when we should decline a request, offer, invitation, or suggestion. For example, for suggestions we can refuse them if they are against our values or moral codes." These perspectives confirm that refusals are carefully considered and culturally sensitive, used only when necessary due to practical limitations or moral grounds.

4. Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate how Moroccan EFL university learners perform the speech act of refusal across a range of social situations. Drawing on data from (DCT), (FGIs), and descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, the study offers valuable insights into the pragmatic choices learners make when turning down requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions.

The overall findings reveal that indirect refusal strategies are overwhelmingly preferred by Moroccan EFL university learners. Across all situations analysed, indirect strategies constituted the highest percentage of refusals, significantly outnumbering both direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals. This consistent preference reflects learners' heightened awareness of the potential social consequences of refusals, and their desire to maintain politeness, mitigate offense, and preserve the interlocutor's positive face.

The interviews further reinforced this trend, with participants expressing that refusal is typically resorted to when the request or offer is beyond their capacity or when accepting would violate personal values or cultural norms. Their use of indirect language serves not only as a protective tool against confrontation but also as a reflection of culturally embedded norms that prioritize harmony and respect in interpersonal communication.

Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests, confirmed the significance of these patterns. Indirect strategies were used with remarkable consistency across all 12 situations, highlighting that context plays a role in shaping the form of refusal, but not in displacing the general preference for indirectness. Visual and numerical data alike underscore this dominant tendency.

In conclusion, the study affirms that Moroccan EFL university learners strategically favour indirectness as a culturally appropriate and pragmatically effective means of conveying refusals. These results contribute to our understanding of interlanguage pragmatics by illustrating how cultural values and linguistic competence converge to influence speech act realization. The findings also underscore the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness and instruction into EFL curricula to enhance learners' sociolinguistic competence in real-world communication.

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