
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Saying “No” Across Cultures: Refusal Strategies of Saudi EFL Learners and American English Speakers

Dr. Haifa Almotiary

Assistant Professor, English Language Institute, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Dr. Haifa Almotiary, E-mail: halmotiary@uj.edu.sa

| ABSTRACT

Speech act theory conceptualizes language use as a form of action in which utterances perform communicative functions beyond their propositional content. Within this framework, refusals are defined as negative responses to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Unlike simple acceptances, refusals are interactionally complex because they require speakers to reject an interlocutor's expectations while maintaining social harmony. Such strategies often involve indirectness, explanations, apologies, expressions of regret, or alternative suggestions, and their selection is influenced by social variables such as relative power, social distance, and the imposition level of the initiating act. In second language contexts, learners' ability to manage refusals effectively reflects their developing pragmatic competence rather than purely linguistic accuracy. Moreover, indirect refusals should not be viewed as a communicative weakness, but as pragmatically motivated choices shaped by sociocultural norms. This study investigates the refusal strategies employed by Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and American English speakers across varying social contexts, with particular attention to differences in directness and mitigation. The findings indicate that refusal strategies are shaped by the interaction of cultural norms, politeness conventions, and contextual social variables. While both groups tend to avoid direct refusals in higher-status contexts highlighting the universal importance of face concerns—differences emerge in the use and degree of mitigation, reflecting culture-specific interpretations of politeness. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that Saudi EFL learners' refusal behavior does not represent pragmatic failure but a combination of cultural transfer and strategic adaptation to English pragmatic norms. These findings emphasize the importance of incorporating pragmatic instruction into EFL pedagogy, particularly for speech acts involving high face threat, such as refusals.

| KEYWORDS

Speech act refusal; Interlanguage pragmatics; Saudi EFL learners; Cross-cultural pragmatics; Politeness strategies; Mitigation.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 30 July 2026

PUBLISHED: 16 August 2026

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2026.8.9.4

1. Introduction

Speech act theory conceptualizes language use as a form of action in which utterances perform communicative functions beyond their propositional content (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1976). In this tradition, refusal is defined as a negative response to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Unlike simple acceptance, refusal is interactionally complex, because it involves rejecting an interlocutor's expectations while maintaining social harmony.

Interlanguage pragmatics extends speech act theory to second language contexts, focusing on how learners acquire and perform pragmatic actions in non-native languages (Ding, 2022). From this perspective, pragmatic competence involves grammatical knowledge and the ability to select contextually appropriate strategies that align with sociocultural norms. Refusals have been widely examined in interlanguage pragmatics because they require learners to balance linguistic forms, pragmatic intent, and social considerations simultaneously.

A foundational model for analyzing refusal strategies was proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), who developed a taxonomy that distinguishes between direct refusals, indirect refusals, and refusal adjuncts. This framework has been extensively adopted in subsequent research and serves as the analytical basis for categorizing refusal strategies in the present study.

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Refusals as Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Theory

Politeness theory offers a crucial lens through which to understand why refusals are particularly challenging speech acts. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), refusals constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they potentially threaten the interlocutor's positive face (desire to be approved) and negative face (desire for freedom of action). Consequently, speakers often employ mitigation strategies to reduce the interpersonal impact of refusals.

These strategies may include indirectness, explanations, apologies, regret expressions, or alternative suggestions. The choice and sequence of such strategies are influenced by the speaker's assessment of social variables, including relative power, social distance, and the imposition level of the initiating act. In second language contexts, learners' ability to manage face effectively through refusals reflects their ability to develop pragmatic competence rather than purely linguistic accuracy.

Within this framework, indirect refusals are not interpreted as communicative weaknesses, but as pragmatically motivated choices aimed at preserving social harmony. This theoretical stance is particularly important in cross-cultural research as the norms governing politeness and indirectness vary substantially across communities.

Research on refusal strategies across different cultures has shown that in the context of power imbalance or social distancing, refusals are often realized through indirect and mitigated strategies. Studies investigating refusal strategies across cultures have demonstrated that when interactions involve social distancing or an imbalance of power, speakers tend to employ indirect and mitigated refusal strategies. For example, Beebe et al. (1990) conducted a pioneering study of refusal strategies among native English speakers and Japanese learners of English. Using discourse completion tasks (DCTs), the authors identified recurring patterns in how refusals were structured and proposed a comprehensive taxonomy consisting of direct, indirect, and adjunct to refusals. This study demonstrated that refusal behavior is highly sensitive to social variables such as power relations and social distance, and that second language (L2) learners often differ from native speakers in both the range and sequencing of refusal strategies.

Consistent with these results, Xiumin and Nuan (2022) compared the refusal strategies of native speakers of Chinese, Korean, and American English using a DCT. The findings revealed universal tendencies, such as a general preference for indirect refusals and culture-specific differences in the use of mitigation, sequencing, and supportive moves. American speakers tend to employ direct refusal, whereas Chinese and Korean speakers rely more heavily on indirect strategies and elaborate explanations, particularly in hierarchical situations.

Similarly, another study found that social status and distance significantly influenced pragmatic choices, leading to more formal and indirect strategies for addressing higher-status interlocutors. For example, Yan and Bidin (2025), in a mixed-methods study, examined refusals proposed by Chinese and Malaysian university students in English. The results showed that Chinese students used indirectness strategies across different contexts, even with peers, whereas Malaysian students used indirect strategies with higher-status interlocutors and more direct strategies with peers. Malaysian students primarily used indirect strategies with individuals in positions of power, favoring directness when interacting with their peers. In contrast, Chinese students consistently used indirect communication strategies across various contexts, including with their peers.

Liu et al. (2025) examined how international students in Thailand wrote requests and refused emails to professors in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Using written email tasks and interviews, the study found that refusals relied heavily on negative politeness strategies, and that social distance and pragmatic transfer strongly shaped students' choices. This study also identified new and optional rhetorical moves not captured in earlier frameworks.

Although these studies are significant, they have several limitations. Some rely exclusively on written DCT, which may not fully reflect how refusals are produced in natural spoken interactions (Beebe et al., 1990). In addition, studies have focused primarily on institutional settings and have not examined everyday refusal contexts. Another limitation is that although cultural differences were clearly identified, individual variables such as sex and proficiency were not analyzed. Collectively, these studies provide important insights into cross-cultural politeness of refusal. However, their reliance on written data, limited attention to spoken interaction, restricted cultural scope, and insufficient consideration of sex highlight the need for further research.

2.2 Studies on Arabic speakers of English

Huwari et al. (2023) investigated the refusal strategies produced by Jordanian Arabic and English speakers, highlighting the influence of cultural norms on politeness. The results showed that Jordanian speakers favored indirect strategies, formulaic expressions, and extensive justification, especially when refusing higher-status interlocutors. English speakers, while polite, tended to produce more direct and concise refusals. This study focused on cultural comparisons. Cultural differences were observed; for example, when Jordanians used justifications referencing God or family related concerns (consistent with a collectivist culture), whereas Americans provided excuses that reflected their personal preferences (consistent with an individualist culture). These findings reflect the cultural norms of the Jordanian society.

Qadi (2021) examined the frequency and use of refusal techniques among 20 Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students but did not explicitly mention a comparison with American participants. Al-Shawali (1997) examined the use of refusal strategies among Saudi learners and found that Americans and Saudis employed comparable refusal formulas, except for direct refusals. Al-Juraywi (2021) explored pragmatic transfer in refusal produced by advanced female Saudi EFL learners. Despite their

high linguistic proficiency, learners frequently transferred Arabic pragmatic norms to English, particularly in the use of extended explanations and indirectness. These findings suggest that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical proficiency. The study focused only on advanced learners, leaving open questions regarding how pragmatic transfers operate at lower proficiency levels. The findings are difficult to generalize to all advanced Saudi EFL learners of both sexes, because the sample size was relatively small and consisted of only female participants. Some social variables, such as social distance, sex, and age of the interlocutor, were not investigated. Examining the influence of these variables is essential for an in-depth analysis of pragmatic behavior in the speech act under study; however, it is difficult to conduct statistical analyses and precisely identify the effect of each variable when many contextual factors are involved.

Alhwairiny (2024) investigated how female Saudi EFL learners perform refusals in English, paying particular attention to FTAs and social variables. These findings indicate a strong preference for indirect strategies and adjuncts, particularly in interactions involving higher-status interlocutors. The study also highlighted the role of sex norms in shaping politeness. This study only examined female participants, thus limiting its applicability to mixed-sex contexts. In addition, the exclusive focus on Saudi learners without a native speaker comparison group restricts cross-cultural interpretations. Sex appears to be an important variable. However, previous studies have not examined sex differences in detail. To address these limitations, this study answers the following questions:

1. What refusal strategies do Saudi EFL learners and American English speakers use in various social contexts?
2. How do the refusal strategies of Saudi EFL learners and American English speakers differ in terms of directness and mitigation?
3. How do social variables (power, distance, and sex) shape the refusal strategy use in both groups?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 40 postgraduate students (17 female and 23 male) enrolled at a university in Southern California. Their ages ranged from 23 to 29 years. The sample consisted of 20 native American speakers of English and 20 Saudi learners of EFL. All participants were enrolled in graduate-level programs and had comparable academic backgrounds, which helped control for educational levels across groups. The Saudi participants had advanced English proficiency and regularly used English in their academic studies. Participation was voluntary and all participants were informed of the purpose of the study prior to data collection. Two instruments were used for data collection.

3.1.1 Background Questionnaire

We administered a background questionnaire to gather demographic information, including age, sex, native language, educational level, and cultural background.

3.1.2 Oral Discourse Completion Task (Oral DCT)

We employed an oral DCT to elicit refusal strategies in controlled speech-like situations. The task consisted of 12 scenarios designed to elicit refusal of four initiating acts: requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. The scenarios systematically varied in terms of social power (higher, equal, or lower) and the social distance between interlocutors.

For the purposes of the present study, we only analyzed refusal responses to requests and invitations, as these contexts were most relevant to the research questions. Oral DCTs are widely used in interlanguage pragmatic research because they allow for the controlled manipulation of social variables while approximating spoken pragmatic performance (Beebe et al., 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected individually. All participants completed the oral DCT in English, regardless of their first-language background, to ensure comparability of responses at the pragmatic level. Each scenario was presented orally by the researcher and participants were asked to respond verbally as they would in a real-life situation. The participants were encouraged to respond spontaneously and were not given additional planning time. All responses were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. All analyses reported in this study are based on responses from a full sample of 40 participants.

3.3 Data Analysis

The refusal responses were analyzed using the taxonomy proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), which categorizes refusal strategies into three types: direct refusals (explicit rejection statement), indirect refusals (explanations, excuses, or alternative suggestions), and adjuncts to refusals (e.g., apologies or expressions of regret accompanying refusals).

All oral DCT responses were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were subsequently segmented into individual refusal responses, each treated as a single unit of analysis. The data were coded using a refusal taxonomy. Coding focused on the pragmatic function of each response, rather than its specific linguistic form. To ensure coding reliability, a second-trained rater independently coded a subset of the data. We calculate inter-rater agreement and resolved any discrepancies through discussion.

Following the coding process, we calculated frequency counts for each refusal strategy type and computed percentages to examine the distribution of strategies across participant groups and social contexts. The analysis compared refusal strategy use between Saudi EFL learners and American English speakers and examined differences related to sex and social variables, including power and social distance.

Finally, we compared the resulting patterns across groups to identify similarities and differences in refusal strategy use. We interpreted these patterns in relation to social variables such as power relations and politeness considerations as well as broader cultural norms influencing pragmatic behavior.

4. Results

To address RQ1, refusal strategies produced by Saudi EFL learners and American English speakers were analyzed across different social context. Table 1 presents the distribution of refusal strategies by ethnicity and social status.

Table 1. Percentages of Refusal Strategies by Ethnicity and Social Status

Status	Technique	American	Saudi
Lower-status	Direct	15%	30%
	Adjunct	40%	20%
	Indirect	45%	50%
Equal-status	Direct	25%	20%
	Adjunct	65%	60%
	Indirect	10%	20%
Higher-status	Direct	0%	0%
	Adjunct	50%	40%
	Indirect	50%	60%

When refusing invitations from lower-status individuals, American and Saudi participants most frequently used indirect strategies (45% and 50%, respectively). However, Saudi participants employed direct strategies twice as often as Americans (30% vs. 15%), while Americans used adjunct strategies more frequently than Saudis (40% vs. 20%, respectively). For equal-status interlocutors, both groups showed a strong preference for adjunct strategies (65% Americans and 60% Saudis). Americans used direct strategies slightly more often than Saudis (25% vs. 20%), whereas Saudis employed indirect strategies more frequently (20% vs. 10%).

The most striking similarity between the two cultural groups appeared in refusals of higher-status interlocutors, in which neither group used direct strategies (0%). Americans divided their strategies equally between adjunct and indirect approaches (50% each), while Saudis showed a stronger preference for indirect strategies (60%) than adjunct strategies (40%).

The findings show that both Saudi EFL learners and American English speakers employ a range of direct, indirect, and adjunct refusal strategies. However, indirect strategies and adjuncts dominated most social contexts, confirming that refusals are treated as FTAs requiring mitigation. This pattern aligns closely with earlier cross-cultural refusal research, which consistently reported a preference for indirectness regardless of language or culture (Beebe et al., 1990; Xiumin & Nuan, 2022).

Despite this shared preference for indirectness, clear cross-cultural differences emerged in the distribution and realization of the strategies. The Saudi participants relied more heavily on indirect strategies and adjuncts, particularly in interactions involving higher-status interlocutors. This mirrors findings from Arabic–English studies showing that Arabic speakers

often avoid explicit rejection and instead use extended explanations, apologies, and expressions of respect (Huwari et al., 2023; Kordestanchi et al., 2023; Azam, et al., 2025). In contrast, American participants demonstrated a greater tolerance for explicit refusal components, especially in lower-status and equal-status interactions; this tendency was also observed in prior studies comparing English-speaking norms with other cultures.

These results suggest that, while indirectness is a shared pragmatic norm, cultures differ in the extent to which explicit rejection is considered acceptable, reinforcing the view that refusal behavior is shaped by culturally specific politeness conventions.

To address RQ2, the analysis revealed systematic differences in levels of directness and mitigation between the two groups. Saudi participants showed a strong tendency to avoid overt rejection, often omitting explicit refusal statements and relying on excuses, apologizing, and respectful language. This tendency was particularly evident in refusals directed at higher-status interlocutors, where direct strategies were entirely absent. Such findings are consistent with previous research indicating that Arabic-speaking learners prioritize face preservation and relational harmony over communicative efficiency (Al-Sallal, 2024).

The American participants, while avoiding direct refusal in high-status contexts, were more willing to include explicit rejection in lower- and equal-status situations. This pattern reflects English politeness norms, where clarity and brevity may coexist, particularly when social distancing is minimal (Xiumin & Nuan, 2022).

The findings further indicate that mitigation is not simply a marker of politeness but a culturally conditioned pragmatic practice. Saudi refusals tend to include more elaborate explanations and honorific expressions, whereas American refusals often rely on fewer but clearer mitigating moves. This difference echoes observations from Persian–English refusal research, which similarly reports greater elaboration in cultures emphasizing deference and respect (Kordestanchi et al., 2023).

To address RQ3, the effects of power, social distance, and sex on refusal strategy use were examined for both groups. Table 2 presents the percentages of refusal strategies by sex and social status. As shown in table 2, male and female participants differed in their use of direct, indirect, and adjunct refusal strategies across the various social status conditions.

Table 2. Percentages of Refusal Strategies by Sex and Social Status

Status	Technique	Male Responses	Female Responses
Lower-status	Direct	43.4%	5.8%
	Adjunct	13.0%	52.9%
	Indirect	52.1%	41.1%
Equal-status	Direct	8.69%	41.1%
	Adjunct	82.6%	47.0%
	Indirect	8.69%	23.5%
Higher-status	Direct	0%	0%
	Adjunct	47.8%	41.1%
	Indirect	52.1%	58.8%

The data revealed significant sex differences in refusal strategies. When refusing invitations from lower-status interlocutors, male participants used direct strategies much more frequently than female participants did (43.4% vs. 5.8%). Conversely, female participants employed adjunct strategies far more often than male participants (52.9% vs. 13.0%, respectively). Both sexes used indirect strategies at relatively high rates, although males showed stronger preference (52.1% vs. 41.1%).

For equal-status interlocutors, this pattern shifted dramatically. Males overwhelmingly preferred adjunct strategies (82.6%), while females distributed their strategies more evenly between direct (41.1%) and adjunct (47.0%) approaches. This finding contradicts previous research suggesting that women tend to be less direct than men in refusal situations, indicating that social status may interact with sex in complex ways and influence communication strategies.

When refusing invitations from higher-status interlocutors, both male and female participants avoided direct strategies (0%). Instead, both groups relied primarily on indirect strategies, which occurred more frequently than adjunct strategies. Indirect strategies accounted for 51.9% of the male responses and 57.7% of the female responses, whereas adjunct strategies accounted

for 44.6% and 40.2%, respectively. The difference between the direct and adjunct strategies was slightly more noticeable among the female participants.

Social status has emerged as the most powerful determinant of refusal to use strategies. Across both cultural groups, refusals addressing higher-status interlocutors were marked by a complete avoidance of direct strategies and an increased reliance on indirect refusals and adjuncts. This finding strongly supports politeness theory, which predicts heightened mitigation in contexts involving power asymmetry (Brown & Levinson, 1978) and is consistent with previous refusal studies conducted in academic and institutional settings (Liu et al., 2025).

Sex-based analyses revealed complex context-dependent patterns. Male participants were more likely to employ direct refusal in lower-status interactions, while female participants relied more heavily on adjunct strategies. Interestingly, in equal-status contexts, female participants demonstrated greater use of direct strategies than male participants, contradicting earlier assumptions that women are consistently less direct in refusal situations. This finding supports recent observations that sex interacts with situational variables rather than operating as a fixed determinant of pragmatic behavior (Alhwairiny, 2024). These results suggest that sex effects on refusal behavior cannot be interpreted independently of social status, a point that has been insufficiently addressed in earlier studies, where sex was treated as a secondary or descriptive variable.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Interpretation of Finding and Theoretical Implications

Taken together, our findings confirmed that refusal strategies are shaped by interactions between cultural norms, politeness conventions, and social variables. The strong avoidance of direct refusal in higher-status contexts across both groups supports the universal relevance of face concerns, whereas the differences in mitigation patterns reflect culture-specific interpretations of politeness. This finding reinforces Beebe et al.'s (1990) argument that refusal behavior cannot be fully understood without reference to the social context and cultural norms.

Importantly, the study also extended prior research by demonstrating that Saudi EFL learners' refusal behavior reflected both cultural values and strategic adaptation to English pragmatic norms rather than mere pragmatic failure. That finding aligned with research on pragmatic transfer, which showed that L2 learners selectively drew on L1 norms while negotiating target language pragmatic expectations (Al-Juraywi, 2021).

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating pragmatic instruction into EFL contexts, particularly for speech acts involving high face threats, such as refusals. Awareness of how politeness norms differ across cultures may help learners avoid misinterpretations and pragmatic breakdowns. Moreover, the results suggest that instructions should address social variables explicitly rather than presenting refusal strategies as context-independent formulas.

Statements and Declarations

Funding This study received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

ORCID ID: 0000000215269841

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the affiliated organization or those of the publisher, editors, and reviewers.

References

- [1] Alhwairiny, M. A. (2024). Refusal strategies of Saudi EFL female learners: Exploring the interplay between face-threatening acts and social variables. *حوليات أداب عين شمس*, 52(3), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.21608/aafu.2024.416304>
- [2] Al-Juraywi, J. a. H. (2021). Pragmatic transfer in advanced Saudi EFL learners' refusals. *Arab World English Journal*, 278, 1–85. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/th.278>
- [3] Al-Sallal, R. E. (2024). Pragmatic analysis of refusal strategies in spoken English of Bahraini and Indian L2 learners. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2321682>
- [4] Huwari, I. F., Al-Khasawneh, F. M.S., Rababah, L. M., Alruzzi, K. A., & Alqaryouti, M. H. (2023). An intercultural study of refusal strategies used in Jordanian Arabic and American English. *Information Sciences Letters*, 12(7), 3159–3166. <https://doi.org/10.18576/isl/120741>
- [5] Austin, J. (1975). *How to do things with words*, pp. 177–182. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198245537.001.0001>
- [6] Azam, S., Qazi, M. H., & Saleem, T. (2025). Analyzing intonational variation and pragmatic strategies in high-imposition requests and refusals by L1 and L2 speakers. *Corpus Pragmatics*, 9(3), 367–389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41701-025-00195-4>
- [7] Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). *Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals*. In *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*. Newbury House.
- [8] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978). *Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction*. pp. 56–311: Cambridge University Press.

- [9] Ding, L. (2022). Analysis of pragmatic failure and Strategies in cross-cultural communication. *International Journal of Linguistics Literature & Translation*, 5(5), 72–77. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijlt.2022.5.5.9>
- [10] Kordestanchi, B., Sarkhosh, M., & Moafian, F. (2023). The gentle craft of saying “No” in Persian and English: A cross-cultural and cross-linguistic slant. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 27(3), 592–614. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-31702>
- [11] Liu, Y., De Nguyen, N. D., Nguyen, H. C., & Wannaruk, A. (2025). Rhetorical move structures and politeness strategies employed in request and refusal emails by international students in a Thai ELF context. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2025.2466284>
- [12] Qadi, A. H. (2021). Use of refusal strategies among Saudi EFL students: An investigative study. *English Language Teaching*, 14(7), 27. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n7p27>
- [13] Searle, J. R. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), 1–23.
- [14] Xiumin, L., & Nuan, L. (2022). A cross-cultural study of refusal speech acts in China, Korea, and America. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.23977/langl.2022.050301>
- [15] Yan, G., & Bidin, S. J. (2025). Refusal strategies and face concerns: A cross-cultural study of Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 7(10). <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i10.11026>