THE INVESTIGATION OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES USED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to investigate the refusal strategy used by Acehnese EFL university students and how the interlocutor’s power status affects on it. The sample of this study were 25 students at fifth-semester of English language department of Syiah Kuala University. In collecting the data, this study used a discourse completion test consisting of 10 situations, and semantic formula were analyzed and categorized according to the Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990). The results show that the students used different manners in presenting the refusal strategies. In refusing the interlocutors, they tended to choose an indirect strategy by stating regret or saying 'sorry', and excuses or explanations, while the direct and adjunct strategies were the least to be used. Moreover, this study has also been shown that the interlocutor's status became a significant role in the number of strategies used for refusing. The higher the status of our interlocutor was, the more polite the use of refusal strategies the participants employed. Additional analysis revealed that the students’ culture greatly influences the presenting of their strategy in refusing. The study's results are expected to pave future research concerning English foreign language learners' refusal strategies.

Keywords: refusal strategies, pragmatics, speech acts, semantics formula.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays researchers have been investigating different areas of pragmatics in order to better understand how a language is used. As

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Leech (1983, p. 1) states that when we understand the pragmatics, we generally may comprehend the idea of language itself; how the crucial needs of language in communication. This explains that having only linguistic competence would not be enough to fully understand how individuals convey in their day by day life. To become pragmatically competent, one should have the ability to perform speech acts, to express and interpret non-literal meanings, to perform politeness function, discourse functions, and to use cultural knowledge.

Speech act refers to an act that is performed when making an utterance of, for instances, giving order and making promises (Austin, 1962). Speech act in its practice can be analyzed in many types of discourse part. Speech acts such as requests, refusal, and apology might be the major part of communicative action. Furthermore, (Searle, 1974) classified the classes of speech act into 5 categories namely: representative (assertive), directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations. The speech act of refusal under the ‘expressives’ category is the primary subject investigated in this study, for example: saying ‘no’ to an offer, suggestion, and etc., either directly or indirectly.

As stated by Beebe et al. (1990, p. 56), refusal is "A significant diverse 'sticking point' for some foreign-language speakers". Refusal strategies are noticeably studied in the field of pragmatic research since it is considered to be complicated and complex (Abed, 2011). Refusals, as a special case of speech act, present a major challenge for nonnative English speakers because they need to combine English as the target language and the culture as two different kinds of communication part. As Al-Kahtani (2005) explains, refusing an offer can be a difficult task, even for a native language. The refusal speech act is often seen as a sensitive pragmatic act where speakers need to be careful in choosing right words; otherwise, there is a risk for the communication breakdown between speakers and listeners. Thus, Brown and Levinson (1987) conclude that refusing in the right manner should be considered as one aspect of pragmatic competence since the refusal as a speech act might be a face-threatening act with the risk of damaging one’s face.

Al-Kahtani (2005) points out that different cultural background perform refusal in different ways. Based on previous research, Americans used different refusal according to their degree of familiarity with the interlocutors. Meanwhile, in Indonesian culture, people still used indirect strategy because they still apply a politeness strategy. It is influenced by the culture itself. Thus, culture is considered to play an important role in determining the refusal strategies employed by a
speaker (Al-Khateeb, 2009, p. 20). Because of the complex nature of speech act and an innate risk in offending others, it is imperative that learners of pragmatics be facilitated to interpret as well as implement speech acts successfully (Eslami, 2010). Besides, by preparing learners with linguistic knowledge forms or stylistic strategies would be necessary so that they can construct different ways of conveying intended meanings in various contexts or situations.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The Nature of Refusal**

Refusal is also defined as “a major cross-cultural sticking point for many non-native speakers” (Beebe et al., p. 56). In daily communication, refusal is often utilized to reject the speech acts of request, invitations, suggestions, offers, and so forth (Sadler & Eroz, 2001). However, all cultures and languages always use refusal in their daily communication. Based on the cross-cultural studies, the differences have shown not only in the ways they presented the strategy but also how polite they were. In choosing the strategies, culture shows a crucial role. Refusals are “one of relatively small number of speech act, rather than as an act initiated by the speaker” (Gass & Houck, 1999, p. 2). Speakers might find it more complicated to do the refusal act in a foreign language as they fear to be wrong and offending interlocutors. Thus, having enough knowledge of grammar or various vocabulary can not guarantee misinterpretation from happening when one does not administer the pragmatic knowledge properly. Therefore, an interlocutor must know when to use the appropriate form and its function.

**Speech Act**

The concept of the speech act was first introduced by Austin in 1962 in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin believed that when one is speaking, not only language comes out but also there are action followed, whether it is obvious or not. The essential part of this work captivates an important characteristic of language; when you say something, you may also involve doing something. For instance, by stating “I am sorry”, not only does a speaker utter a phrase in English, but also perform an act, i.e. to apologize.

Studying speech acts may be seen as similar to studying sentence meanings since sentences may represent the speech act (Searle, 1979). Although speech acts can be both direct and indirect, people commonly
use indirectness which can express the manner of politeness (Bruti, 2006) or simply make their speech more interesting (Justovà, 2006). Speakers should make sure that Listeners can grasp the embedded manner, so that they can understand the message and respond appropriately (Justovà, 2006).

**Pragmatic Competence**

According to Thomas (1983) pragmatic competence is characterized as the capacity to effectively impart and include information as well as the grammar level. Morris was the one who first introduced the concept of pragmatics (Levinson, 1983). He distinguished the term along with the other two categories which are syntax and semantics. Unlike semantic and syntax, pragmatics is focused on the language users. The point that pragmatics stresses is the context in which users, particularly speaker(s) and listener(s), interact with one another. This is aligned with Yule (1996), deducing this type of situation into the definition of pragmatics as “the study of contextual meaning” (p. 3).

A number of studies have exhibited that EFL/ESL learners do not adequately comprehend the pragmatics concept (Eslami, 2010). Consequently, these pupils often times fail to communicate properly with the native speaker and, therefore, the communication breakdown appears. Nelson, Al Batal & El Bakary (2002) argue that one factor that causes pragmatic failure is that native speakers misinterpret what L2 speakers mean to state.

**Semantic Formulas**

A semantic formula relates to "A word, expression, or sentence that fulfills a specific semantic standard or system, and at least one of these can be utilized to carry out the act concerned" (Cohen, 1996, p. 265). A semantic formula is defined as "The ways by which a specific act of speech is performed, as far as the essential substance of an expression, such as an explanation, a clarification, or another option" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, p. 48). For instance, when a person needs to reject an invitation to a companion’s home for dinner by answering "I'm sorry, I have plans already. Maybe next time," this was classified as: I'm sorry [excuse], I already have plans [reason], Maybe next time [alternative statement ] (Beebe et al., 1990, p. 57). Another example is a refusal on an offer to buy a gift for a daughter as in" Sorry honey [Excuse], I can not buy it, because it does not suit your age [regret]. I will buy you another one [Alternative].
Power Status

By considering the context, someone can refer power to an authority or influence and can be owned in either a situation or many different ones (Liu, 2004, p. 15). In conversation, the degree of indirectness and formality are highly determined by the condition if interlocutors are powerful enough over speakers (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). However, different cultures have a different interpretation of power. Interestingly, individuals from high-power distance culture embrace power as a component of society, individuals from low-power distance cultures. The power ought to be utilized just when it is valid (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002). The differences of power between parents and their children can be viewed as parents holding a higher power than do their children.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Participants

The participant of this research includes 25 students who major in the English Department. The participants were selected by implementing the purposive sampling technique. Moreover, for the interview section, the researcher selected only 5 students as the representative. It was undertaken because of time limitations. The researcher selected the participants to participate in the study based on their availability.

Research Instrument

The research instruments of this study were a written discourse completion test (DCT) that was adopted from some experts who have conducted studies about refusal strategies. DCT can be defined as one of the most frequently employed methods and instruments in research with a pragmatic basis (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). In the present study the test (DCT) is developed by Beebe et al. (1990). A little modification was developed and designed by the researcher herself. The situations cover only the university and daily life conversations in order to have the test become more contextual. Besides, the interview was applied as the second research instrument. It was to clarify the participants’ responses and to assure that their answers were based on their real opinion.

Technique of Data collection

The technique of data collection in this study was the discourse completion test (DCT) and interview. In collecting the data, the
The researcher spent three days; one day for distributing the DCT test and two days for interviewing the participants. Firstly, the researcher asked for permission from the lecturer who taught the class. Then, the researcher expressed her objectives in that class. After that, the researcher distributed the DCT sheet to each student in the class and then explained the questionnaire and how to answer it for 2 minutes. Then, on the second and third days, the interview was executed by the researcher.

An interview can be defined as a data collection method which is undertaken by asking questions in a direct manner to one respondent or more (Aburrahman & Muhidin, 2011, p. 89). Thus, this method was used in the present study so that the discussion about the answers of respondents taking in DCT could be more easily elaborated. This was to make sure that what the students had written in DCT suited the response in the interview.

**Technique of data analysis**

The researcher analyzed the data qualitatively and quantitatively. In analyzing the data of DCT, the researcher used three steps. First of all, the whole responses were coded into several parts, i.e. ‘direct refusals’, ‘indirect refusals’ and ‘adjuncts to refusals’ based on the semantic formulas in the classification of refusal developed by Beebe et al. (1990). Second, after the coding process was completed, the researcher used the quantitative way to classify how many students used the refusal strategies in each situation. The result was explained further by the researcher as she provided the descriptive statistics to present the detailed description of the result. Last, the researcher ranked and identified which semantic formula was used frequently.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Result**

This study aimed at investigating the use of refusal strategies used by English department students of Syiah Kuala University and how the EFL learner’s strategies affected by the power-status of the interlocutor. This first situation led the students to refuse to do their parents’ suggestion who has high-level status. The participants were found to avoid direct refusal such as “no” because saying “no” to a person who has a higher status than them indicates an impolite way. The students’ responses from DCT sheet are presented in the following.
Table 1. Students’ Refusal Strategies from DCT Sheet of Situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refusal Strategies</th>
<th>Semantic Formula Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct refusal</td>
<td>Negative willingness</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect strategies</td>
<td>Statement of regret</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excuse, reason, explanation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indefinite reply</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dissolve: let the interlocutor off the hook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance function as refusal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the finding above, we can see that most of the participants give statement of regret when refusing their parents, which is included in indirect strategy. Instead, they tended to give excuse, reason, and explanation. In fact, there were twenty people uttering so. The direct strategies, however, were not used frequently. They were the non-performative (negative willingness/ability) used by nine people. There is one interesting answer from the participant who chose the strategy indefinite reply, as in “ok, I will follow my parents suggestion” because she did not want to make her parents disappointed of her. It shows us that in Acehnese culture, the polite strategy is still applied when we want to respond the suggestion from someone who has a higher level than us. In addition, they use statement of dissolve: let the interlocutor off the hook and acceptance function as refusal.

Table 2. Students’ Refusal Strategies from DCT Sheet of Situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refusal Strategies</th>
<th>Semantic Formula Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct refusal</td>
<td>Non-performative statement: No Negative willingness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect strategies</td>
<td>Statement of regret</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excuse, reason, explanation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this situation, the participants refused to interview their junior. It indicates that the interlocutors’ status was lower than the participants’. In this case different strategies were identified. A direct strategy was very likely to be used. As shown above, it is known that a participant happened to refuse by using non-performative (no) as part of the direct strategy, two participants using non-performative (negative willingness/ability) strategy. However, indirect strategy was used much more often by the participants compared to the direct one. A majority of them stated regret, which was then followed by excuse, reason, and explanation when refusing. They also used statement of alternative and acceptance function as refusal are slightly less frequent than giving an excuse, a reason, and an explanation. Also, the students employed adjuncts as they were uttering statement of positive opinion and pause fillers.

Table 3. Students’ Refusal Strategies from DCT Sheet of Situation 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refusal Strategies</th>
<th>Semantic Formula Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct refusal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-performative</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>statement: No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative willingness</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of regret</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse, reason,</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explanation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This situation concerns about the relationship between participants with his/her ex girlfriend. They have to refuse his/her exe’s wedding invitation, which indicates that the participants’ status is equal with the interlocutors. Indirect strategies were used frequently than the direct ones. Therefore, over half of the students were likely to use indirect approaches. There were statement of regret, excuse, reason, and explanation. Nonetheless, the direct strategies were frequently used by the students. The strategies were the non-performative (negative willingness/ability) and non-performative (No) which were used by six people for each strategy. There was one participant using the strategy lack of enthusiasm. She mentioned that she was not interested in this situation because she did not have the experience in her real-life situation. Then the adjunct that they used were statement of gratitude and appreciation, which was chosen by one participant.

Discussion

The Use of Direct Strategy

As for the Acehnese foreign language speakers, they applied ‘no’ pretty often in refusing people with the same power level and friend’s invitations, requests, and offers. Wannaruk (2008) similarly argued that a straightforward “no” can be used among friends as they are close to each other. Thus, the direct strategy can be adopted in this context.

‘Negative willingness/ability’ was the other type of direct strategy used by the English department students of Syiah Kuala University in refusing cousin’s wish, friend’s suggestion, and invitation. The ‘negative ability’ was used because they decided to be direct but could still sound friendly.

The Use of Indirect Strategy

The investigation concludes that in all situations indirect strategies were preferred. The greater number of choices in these strategies was the statement of excuse, reason, explanation, statement of alternative and it was proved in the students’ DCT sheet. This study reported that the
participants used an indirect strategy to each level of the interlocutor’s power status. People tended to choose a respectful way to communicate with others because this habit could be linked to the Indonesian culture, especially in Aceh. These results apparently have similarities with what Herman et al. (2013, as cited in Chojimah, 2015) have previously discovered stating that Indonesian EFL learners preferred using indirect strategies when they attempted to refuse invitations, suggestions, offers, and requests. According to Aziz (2000), indirectness is best considered as the speakers’ wisdom, which is to avoid social disharmony when refusing someone.

The Use of Adjunct

The participants used the statement of gratitude or appreciation more than just the others among those four adjuncts and this adjunct was preferred particularly for suggestions from the interlocutors with equal status. Using the statement of gratitude or appreciation in refusals to someone of higher status was less frequent than to those with equals or to those of lower status. In expressing gratitude, the uneasiness and displeasure brought by refusal would be trimmed down as it may indicate the feeling of respect and interpersonal closeness between the interactants. Hence, even though the refusal is conveyed in a direct way, it is still considered polite in accordance with the gratitude expression (Chojimah, 2015).

A positive opinion statement was the most frequently used. This strategy was preferred especially for asking (situation 2) and suggestion (situation 9). This is in line with Sa’d and Mohammadi (2014) expressing that positive opinion assumes the speaker was aware of the interlocutor’s face and worried about it. The participants used the strategy ‘positive feeling/opinion’ in order to show that she / he still had the same positive attitude about the offer to have a strong relationship with the interlocutor. Another reason behind the use of this strategy was because of the regular use of ‘positive feeling’. Finally, pause fillers and statements of empathy became the last chosen by participants.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

After collecting and analyzing all the data, this study found that the interlocutors were mostly refused through indirect strategy. This type of strategy was utilized for every level of the interlocutor. The strategies most preferably used include excuse, reason, and explanation, after
which the statement of regret ranked the second. Both of the strategies were categorized as indirect means of refusal. The second most preferred strategy by participants was direct strategy. The use of the statement of negative willingness was more often then saying ‘No’ directly. It was used to refuse the interlocutors directly, but still showed the polite way when refusing them. The least preferred strategy was adjunct strategy. The participants used it only in several situations. The statement of alternative ranked the first applied by the participants, followed by positive feelings, pause fillers, and statements of empathy.

In conclusion, the researcher found that the participants in this study had pragmatic background knowledge because, by using indirect refusals, they delicately declined someone especially the higher status person. It is essential that the speaker refuses in an applicable and acceptable manner so that the refusal does not cause the damage to the communication. Besides, it can be seen from the results that face-threatening acts were appeared by this research participants’ counciousness of probability the refusal. They have chosen polite ways as a reason to refuse their interlocutors.

REFERENCES


