

## REFUSAL STRATEGIES OF UNDERGRADUATES IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL SITUATIONS IN AN ACADEMIC CONTENT

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**Abstract.** The research paper reports a study on the use of refusal strategies to requests by a group of Malaysian undergraduate students. The study aims to investigate the type of refusal strategies used by Malaysian undergraduate students and the patterns that form their refusal statements in formal and informal situations. A DCT questionnaire comprising four critical situations was distributed to obtain their written responses about their refusal strategies. The results show that Malaysian undergraduate students prefer using the indirect approach to refusing in both formal and informal situations. The patterns of refusals in the study show that refusals in formal situations were lengthy and extensive encompassing more than three semantic formulas compared to refusals in informal situations which were brief and concise comprising less than three semantic formulas. Overall, the study shows that the students prefer indirect refusals displaying a priority for preserving face and maintaining good, social relationships with others.

**Keywords:** *refusal, speech act, strategies, context, Malaysian undergraduate students*

### Introduction

Communication requires performing numerous language functions or speech acts such as giving opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying, requesting, inviting, refusing, apologizing, complimenting, complaining and so forth. These functions are often performed differently in different contexts and cultures. For instance, in communication across cultures, there are differences in the degree to which people from different cultures are direct or indirect during their interactions. Interactants rely on their own cultural literacy or pragmatic competence (Ishihara and Cohen, 2022) to communicate and understand each other. Ishihara and Cohen (2022) explain that it is important for interactants to be able to make sense of the language functions performed during interaction with regard to what is said or not said, how something is said, and why, in order for interaction to flow smoothly. They refer to this ability as cultural literacy or pragmatic competence and that it is an important part of being communicative and should be taught and incorporated into language education. Eslami (2010) also argue that pragmatic instruction of speech acts is important in second and foreign language education to help learners communicate more effectively and successfully.

Studies of speech acts have received much attention in the context of research in language and communication. One popular speech act that has garnered consideration is refusal or how people say “no” when something is asked of them such as a request, a favour or an invitation. In the context of Malaysia, although several studies have investigated this speech act (e.g. Yan and Bidin, 2025; Razali and Abdullah, 2021; Mohd Jalis et al., 2019; Amirrudin and Salleh, 2016; Kathir, 2015; Abdul Sattar et al., 2011), there is nevertheless a need for more research into why and how people say ‘no’

to increase understanding of Malaysians in various cultural contexts. The current study thus focuses on refusal to request in order to gain insights into how it is performed by Malaysian undergraduate students in the context of a university. In fact, in the higher education institutional setting, it can be said that students have higher chances to encounter requests in their daily communication across all hierarchy of people, starting from fellow course mates, lecturers, office administration staff, heads of departments, deputy deans and deans. Therefore, the researchers decided to investigate the use of refusal strategies and their patterns in the construction of refusals to requests in formal and informal situations of undergraduate students in a public university. The three research questions are: (1) What are the types of refusal strategies used in formal and informal requests by a group of Malaysian undergraduate students? (2) What are the patterns of refusals found in formal and informal situations? (3) How do the refusal strategies and their patterns in formal and informal situations differ?

## Literature review

### Refusal and refusal strategies

A refusal to a request is defined as a response where the speaker fails to engage in an action proposed by the requester, effectively denying the request (Beebe et al., 1990). Because it signals a conflict of interest, refusals are described as a "major cross-cultural sticking point for many nonnative speakers" (Beebe et al., 1990). It is described as a complex, face-threatening speech act that impacts the positive face of the requester and can lead to influence the refuser's negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The complexity of the act is in successfully being able to perform the noncompliant nature of the act while accommodating the face needs of the requester and refuser. In order to study how people managed refusals in communication, Beebe et al. (1990) conducted a study using natural conversational data in cross-cultural communication encounters involving American native speakers of English and Japanese speakers of English and built a taxonomy of strategies with specific semantic formulas comprising three primary strategies; first is direct refusal where the speaker performs the refusal explicitly or states negative willingness such as 'I can't' or 'No', second is indirect refusal where the speaker uses mitigators like expressing regret, making excuses, giving reasons, explanations, providing alternative suggestions, or avoiding a response, and third is adjuncts where the speaker does not directly refuse but implies it through remarks that soften the impact of a refusal such as by showing gratitude, empathy, or positive opinions. Refer to *Table 1* for Beebe et al. (1990) Taxonomy of Refusal Strategies.

**Table 1.** Taxonomy of refusal strategies.

| Strategies and semantic formulas                | Examples                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Direct                                          |                                                               |
| Performative Refusal                            | I refuse/ decline                                             |
| Direct No/Negative Willingness/Inability        | No! / I can't/I won't                                         |
| Indirect                                        |                                                               |
| Statement of Regret                             | I'm sorry / I apologize / Unfortunately.                      |
| Wish                                            | I wish I could / I would like to but.                         |
| Reason/Excuse/Explanation                       | I have a lot going on right now.                              |
| Statement of Alternative                        | Someone else would do a much better job.                      |
| Set Condition for Past/Future Acceptance        | If I have extra time, I will definitely.                      |
| Future Possibility/Promise of Future Acceptance | I will join the next one.                                     |
| Statement of Principle                          | I can't ignore if you ask to me for something.                |
| Hedge                                           | I'm not sure / I will inform you if there is any possibility. |
| Adjuncts                                        |                                                               |
| Gratitude                                       | Thank you for your invitation / I appreciate...               |
| Statement of Positive Opinion                   | Hope you enjoy.                                               |

Request for Empathy  
Greetings  
Acknowledgement of Receipt

I think you can understand my situation.  
How are you doing these days?  
I got your email/message.

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Source: Beebe et al. (1990).

### **Related studies**

As noted earlier, there are several studies on refusals to request in the Malaysian context. These studies report similar findings. Malaysians rarely perform direct refusals that involve an explicit 'No'. Instead, they state negative ability that is often mitigated with indirect strategies and adjuncts. They employ a variety of semantic formulas that range from expressing regret and apology, giving reasons, explanations, excuses, showing gratitude, suggesting alternative solutions, and promising future willingness to accept. The earliest study on refusals is Abdul Sattar et al. (2011) who investigated the preferred strategies used by Malay university students in Malaysia to refuse a request in English in an academic context. Data collection used Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire that involved interaction in situations of refusing requests to higher, equal and lower status persons. The findings showed that when refusing higher status persons, participants used terms of address to show respect, expressed negative ability, provided explanations, and offered alternative solutions. In contrast, when refusing participants of lower or equal status, participants expressed regret or apology, stated negative ability, provided explanations, made excuses, suggested other alternative avenues, and expressed possibility of future acceptance. Across the differing status levels, refusals were expressed indirectly, except that with persons of higher status, terms of address were used while with persons of lower or equal status, regret, apology, excuses, and expressions of future acceptance were offered.

Kathir (2015) investigated patterns of refusal in English used by academicians from two Malaysian universities when given an invitation or requested to do a favour. The data was collected using DCTs that involved formal and informal settings in the workplace and other social situations as well as oral interviews with the participants. The findings showed that the participants were largely indirect, providing explanations and made excuses to support their refusals. They used discourse particles or pragmatic markers such as 'lah', 'right', 'you know', and 'dear' as polite forms to mitigate their refusals and were diplomatic in their approach. The study showed that they displayed pragmatic competence and showed cultural awareness and ethnic sensitivities when dealing with refusals. Amirrudin and Salleh (2016) conducted a study to analyze the speech act of refusals along with their strategy types among Malay university students when communicating in English and made a comparison between male and female students. The results showed that the learners employed both direct and indirect strategies but had a higher use of refusals that were expressed indirectly. The strategies were performed using largely regret and excuses in the context of their daily communication. The study also showed that female students used the direct strategy more than the male students.

Mohd Jalis et al. (2019) investigated similarities and differences in Malay and German refusal speech acts realised through Malay and German languages as the first language. This study analysed DCT situations involving formal and informal settings with low, high and equal power distance between interlocutors and examined the refusal strategies and corresponding linguistic forms used by the Malay and German native speakers. The Malay speakers were employees from local Malaysian universities while the German speakers were employees who had experience working in Malaysia. The

most-used strategy by both groups across the formal and informal situations was the indirect strategy with reasons, explanations and excuses making up their refusals. The Malay respondents, however, tended to also use more statements of regret and apology as part of their refusal strategy. Often times, the Malay speakers also used religious terms in their refusal strategy where the term ‘Inshaa Allah’ (Arabic word meaning ‘if God wills’) was used to execute refusals. In the formal settings, the Malay respondents used a higher frequency of strategies than the Germans in order to mitigate a refusal while the Germans used slightly more direct strategies than the Malays in order to be clear and avoid ambiguity.

Razali and Abdullah (2021) investigated refusals to request expressed in English by Malay students in a Malaysian university and found that the most frequent strategies used by the respondents were indirect strategies involving expressions of regret and giving reasons, explanations, and excuses. In informal situations, the study found instances of promising future willingness to accept, such as when responding to invitations to a party. In a more recent study, Yan and Bidin (2025) compared refusal strategies of Chinese Business English students and Malaysian Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students when communicating in English. The students were from Chinese and Malaysian public universities respectively. Data was collected using DCTs across formal and informal contextual situations and high, low, and equal social status and social distance. Both groups were similar in that both favoured indirect refusal strategies. The most frequently used strategies by both groups were providing excuse, reason and explanation, offering alternatives, and showing gratitude and appreciation. They differed in that the Malaysian students expressed regret or apology while the Chinese employed hedging and postponement strategies such as ‘I’ll think about’ as strategies to convey temporal refusal. The Chinese students also employed longer, more complex refusal formulas than the Malaysians. For both groups, however, social status and distance significantly influenced their pragmatic choices where both groups mitigated their refusals more when communicating with persons of higher social status and social distance such as professors and bosses.

Although a number of studies have been conducted on refusals by Malaysians, it is nevertheless worthwhile to continue researching this particular speech act. Exploring how Malaysian students navigate this speech act in various speech situations can still reveal much needed information about Malaysian cultural norms as well as the communication and pragmatic skills of Malaysian students that can help contribute to understanding their interlanguage pragmatics, potential for communication in cross-cultural encounters, and needs for instructional pragmatics.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Participants***

This study involved 30 Malaysian third-year undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia regardless of gender and ethnic group constraints. They were aged between 22-24 years. All participants were Malaysians who had studied English as a second language and had received their primary and secondary education in Malaysia. In the Malaysian education system, Malay is taught and used as the national language of the country while English is taught as the country’s second language.

### ***Data collection***

A discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaire was used to obtain written responses about refusal strategies from the participants of the study. The questionnaire in this study consisted of four open-ended questions which included a short description of those formal and informal situations that were most likely to be encountered by undergraduate students in their daily life conversational settings with fellow students. During the data collection, participants were given 30 minutes to respond to the questionnaire. This is in line with Kasper and Dahl (1991) who note that answering a DCT questionnaire should not exceed this time limit in order to avoid participants experiencing tiredness or physical exertion. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the participants. In order to help the researchers formulate the DCT situations as realistically as possible, a focused group discussion (FGD) involving six representative sample of Malaysian undergraduates was used to obtain the necessary information. The situations are presented in *Table 2*. To verify the suitability and reliability of the situations included in the DCT questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted. Primarily, the researchers wanted to see whether the situations created are understandable to the participants and can generate the data required for the study with regard to responses, strategies and patterns that show how refusals are structured. Apart from that, it was used to determine the time taken for the participants to complete responding to the four situations in the DCT. The pilot study involved five participants, one male and 4 female undergraduate students, from the same university. The pilot showed that all the DCT situations were understandable and familiar to the participants. They took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. All of them were able to respond to the situations and produce refusal responses needed for the study.

**Table 2.** *Description of the situations.*

| Category    | Case                                                                             | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Formal      |                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Situation 1 | The President of a club requests you to emcee a club event.                      | Hi! Our Emcee is not present here. Can you be the immediate emcee for our club event today?                                                                                                                                                    |
| Situation 2 | The Chair of a seminar requests you to make a presentation at a student seminar. | Hi! We need fifteen students to perform a task. I have been looking for students who can do the task and your name came to mind. Would you mind reading some of these articles and presenting them for our upcoming student seminar next week? |
| Informal    |                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Situation 3 | A friend requests you to take photos at a seminar.                               | Hi! I need your help. Can you take some pictures of the guest speaker using my camera?                                                                                                                                                         |
| Situation 4 | A friend requests you to submit an assignment to a lecturer.                     | I have burned the midnight oil just to finish my assignment on time. I need some rest. Can you help me submit my assignment paper to the lecturer at his office room?                                                                          |

### **Data analysis**

The collected data were classified according to the refusal strategies used in the participants' refusal utterances and analyzed by matching words, phrases, or sentences that met particular semantic criterion or strategy in the framework used for the study. Data analysis for identifying the types of refusal strategies in this study was guided by the framework set by Beebe et al. (1990), which is a prominent framework of refusal statements in the literature (*Table 1*). The pilot study also showed that Beebe et al. (1990) taxonomy was suitable for analyzing the participants' responses.

## Results and Discussion

### Situation 1: Formal

*Request: Hi! Our Emcee is not present here. Can you be the immediate emcee for our club event today?*

In this situation, the participants were asked to refuse the request of being an emcee of an event when requested by a fellow student who is the President of the club. The analysis showed that a combination of direct, indirect and adjunct strategies was used that oriented towards being indirect as the approach to manage the refusal. The refusal patterns used are presented in Table 3. The findings show that the refusal patterns used involved the use of semantic formulas that ranged from 3-5 formulas. The most frequent pattern for the refusal was 'Regret + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation' with a majority of responses, 26.7% (8 out of 30 responses), using this pattern. For example, I'm really sorry, (Regret) I can't be the emcee for this event (Inability). I'm lacking of skills related to emcee tasks (Excuse/Reason/Explanation). The second most used patterns, with a frequency of 16.7% (5 out of 30 responses) respectively, were 'Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative' and 'Positive Opinion + Regret + Performative Refusal + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative'. Examples of these patterns are presented below:

*Erm, sorry! (Regret), I have no experience or what so ever (Excuse/Reason/Explanation), can we just go and select someone else? (Alternative)*

*It's not that I do not want to be an emcee (Positive Opinion), but I'm very sorry (Regret) that I have to decline this (Performative Refusal). I don't have any experience of doing it before (Excuse). Maybe you could find someone who qualified to be an emcee (Alternative).*

**Table 3.** The result of patterns in Situation 1.

| Category                                                                                   | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal pattern                                                                            |           |            |
| Regret + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                             | 8         | 26.7       |
| Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative                                           | 5         | 16.7       |
| Positive Opinion + Regret + Performative Refusal + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative | 5         | 16.7       |
| Positive Opinion + Gratitude + Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative            | 4         | 13.3       |
| Regret + Future Possibility                                                                | 4         | 13.3       |
| Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative                                        | 3         | 10.0       |
| Performative Refusal                                                                       | 1         | 3.3        |
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula                                                      |           |            |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                                                  | 25        | 83.3       |
| Statement of Apology/Regret                                                                | 18        | 60         |
| Statement of Alternative/Suggestion                                                        | 17        | 56.7       |
| Statement of Negative Willingness/Inability                                                | 11        | 36.7       |
| Statement of Positive Opinion                                                              | 9         | 30         |
| Performative Refusal                                                                       | 6         | 20         |
| Gratitude                                                                                  | 4         | 13.3       |
| Future Possibility                                                                         | 4         | 13.3       |

Two other patterns with a frequency of 13.3%, (4 out of 30 responses), was 'Positive opinion + Gratitude + Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative' and 'Regret + Future Possibility'. Examples of these patterns are:

*This is actually a good opportunity (Positive opinion), thanks for the offer (Gratitude) but I'm sorry (Regret) I have no prior experience being on stage (Excuse/Reason/Explain). Hopefully you'd be able to find a suitable replacement (Alternative).*

*Sorry (Regret), I'll try to help out next time (Future Possibility).*

Ten per cent (10%) (3 out of 30 responses) used the pattern 'Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative' as shown below:

*I don't think I can do it (Inability) because I have never ever been an emcee at any official events before (Excuse/Reason/Explanation). But, may I suggest you my friend, Zureen? (Alternative)*

The direct strategy was least used as an independent pattern with a frequency of 3.3%. Example from the data is I might have to turn down this (Performative Refusal). Table 3 displays the types of refusal strategies and semantic formulas employed in Situation 1 categorised as per Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The most frequently used strategies were indirect and adjunct strategies. Giving excuses, reasons or explanation was the most frequent formula (83.3%) (25 out of 30 responses). The second most frequently used formula (60%) (18 out of 30 responses) involved apologising or expressing regret. The next most used formula was to provide alternative suggestions (56.7%) (17 out of 30 responses), followed by expressing negative willingness or inability to perform the request at 36.7% (11 responses out of 30).

### **Situation 2: Formal**

*Request: Hi! We need fifteen students to perform a task. I have been looking for students who can do the task and your name came to mind. Would you mind reading some of these articles and presenting them for our upcoming student seminar next week?*

In the second situation, the refusal is about turning down a fellow student who is the Chair of a Seminar when asked to perform an oral presentation after reading some journal articles. The analysis again showed the use of a combination of direct, indirect and adjunct strategies that oriented towards an indirect approach of refusing. There were no occurrences of the direct strategies being used independently. Table 4 displays the refusal patterns in Situation 2. The findings also show that the refusal patterns used involved the use of semantic formulas that ranged between 3-5 formulas. The most frequently used pattern was 'Regret + Performative Refusal + Excuse/Reason/Explanation' with a frequency of 26.7% (8 out of 30 responses) that showed regret at first before proceeding to a direct refusal followed with reason, explanation or excuse to clarify the refusal. Examples of this pattern are:

*I'm really sorry, (Regret) I might have to turn down the favour (Performative Refusal). I have other plans to do for the weekend. It might be difficult for me to be able to finish reading the articles on time (Excuse/Reason/Explanation).*

*I'm very sorry (Regret) that unfortunately I have to decline this (Performative Refusal) because I'm very busy working on my assignments that I have to focus on until end of this month (Excuse/Reason/Explanation).*

**Table 4.** The result of patterns in Situation 2.

| Category                                                                      | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal pattern                                                               |           |            |
| Regret + Performative Refusal + Excuse/Reason/Explanation                     | 8         | 26.7       |
| Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                            | 5         | 16.7       |
| Gratitude + Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Inability                    | 5         | 16.7       |
| Regret + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative                  | 4         | 13.3       |
| Positive Opinion + Gratitude + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Regret | 3         | 10.0       |
| Positive Opinion + Regret + Performative Refusal + Gratitude                  | 2         | 6.7        |
| Gratitude + Positive Opinion + Inability + Future Possibility                 | 2         | 6.7        |
| Gratitude + Regret + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation                    | 1         | 3.3        |
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula                                         |           |            |
| Statement of Apology/Regret                                                   | 28        | 93.3       |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                                     | 26        | 86.7       |
| Statement of Negative Willingness/Inability                                   | 15        | 50         |
| Gratitude                                                                     | 13        | 43.3       |
| Performative Refusal                                                          | 10        | 33.3       |
| Positive Opinion                                                              | 7         | 23.3       |
| Statement of Alternative/Suggestion                                           | 4         | 13.3       |
| Future Possibility                                                            | 2         | 6.6        |

The second most frequent patterns were 'Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation' and 'Gratitude + Regret + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Inability' with a frequency of 16.7% (5 out of 30 responses) respectively. Both patterns share a similar root, regret followed with excuse/reason/explanation, but the latter has additional two strategies, show of gratitude and statement of inability. Examples of this pattern are:

*I'm truly sorry (Regret) because my schedule is quite packed this few weeks and I'm afraid I can't focus on this (Excuse/Reason/Explanation).*

*I'm very sorry, it's not my intention to go against you (Regret/Apology), but I think that I might not be the best presenter if I were to be chosen (Excuse/Reason/Explanation).*

*This is such an honour for me (Gratitude) but I'm very sorry to disappoint you (Regret). On the day of the seminar, I have to attend an important club meeting as I'm one of the board members. (Excuse/Reason/Explanation) I'm afraid that I can't do it (Inability).*

Another pattern, with a frequency of 13.3% (4 out of 30 responses), was 'Regret + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Alternative'. For example:

*I'm so sorry (Regret), I'm afraid that I cannot do the presentation (Inability) because I have something coming up next week and the assignments are mostly due next week (Excuse/Reason/Explanation). I'm sure other students can help you for the seminar and I can suggest you my friends. (Alternative)*

Ten per cent (10%) (3 out of 30 responses) displayed 'Gratitude + Positive Opinion + Inability + Excuse/Reason/Explanation + Regret'. For instance:

*It's sound interesting (Positive Opinion) and thank you for choosing me (Gratitude) but I can't do this for you this time (Inability). I've something else to focus on (Excuse/Reason/Explanation). Sorry to disappoint you (Regret).*

Table 4 displays the types of refusal strategies and semantic formulas employed in Situation 2 categorised as per Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The most frequently used strategies were indirect and adjunct strategies. The most used, with a frequency of 93.3% (28 responses out of 30), was to apologise or to express regret. Giving excuses, reasons or explanation was the second most frequently used formula (86.7%) (26 responses out of 30). This was followed by negative willingness or inability to perform the request (50%) (15 responses out of 30) and to show gratitude (43.3 %) (13 responses out of 30).

### ***Refusal strategies and patterns in formal situations***

In order to identify the most frequently used strategy types in formal situations (Situation 1 and 2 with 60 responses in total), the researchers counted the total number of uses reported for each strategy type by using Microsoft Excel. Then, the data were tabulated and presented in a table (Table 5). The most frequently used semantic formulas were giving reason, excuses or explanation (85%) (51 out of 60 responses), followed by expressing regret or apology (76.7%) (46 out of 60 responses), expressing negative willingness or inability to perform the request (43.3%) (26 out of 60 responses) and offering alternative solutions (35%) (21 out of 60 responses). There were a variety of strategy patterns used to manage the refusals in the formal situations but the most frequently used refusal patterns involved a combination of 3-5 semantic formulas, mainly expressing regret or apology, giving reasons and explanation, expressing negative willingness, and providing alternatives. The direct strategy types, mainly expressing negative willingness or inability, were used, but not as independent strategies to execute refusals. They were always used alongside the indirect and adjunct strategy types.

**Table 5.** *The result of patterns in Formal Situation 1 and 2.*

| Category                                    | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula       |           |            |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation                   | 51        | 85         |
| Statement of Apology/Regret                 | 46        | 76.7       |
| Statement of Negative Willingness/Inability | 26        | 43.3       |
| Statement of Alternative/Suggestion         | 21        | 35         |
| Gratitude                                   | 17        | 28.3       |
| Statement of Positive Opinion               | 16        | 26.7       |
| Performative Refusal                        | 16        | 26.7       |
| Future Possibility                          | 6         | 10         |

### ***Situation 3: Informal***

*Request: Hi! I need your help. Can you take some pictures of the guest speaker using my camera?*

Situation 3 deals with how participants would refuse an informal request from a friend to take pictures on one's camera. The findings show a combination of direct, indirect and adjunct strategies was used with an orientation towards being indirect in executing the refusal. Several patterns were found involving the use of 1-4 semantic formulas as shown in Table 6. There were occurrences of independent use of direct

strategies mainly ‘Negative Willingness/Inability’, however, the frequency was low. The most frequently used pattern was ‘Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Statement of Alternative’ (33.3%) (10 out of 30 responses). For instance:

*My apology! (Regret) I’m jotting down notes here, (Reason/Explanation/Excuse) so can you ask someone else to do it? (Alternative)*

*Hi! I’m sorry (Regret) I’m quite shy to stand there and take pictures of the guest speaker (Excuse/Explanation/Excuse). I think it’s better if you yourself take the pictures as you know more on how to handle your own camera (Alternative).*

*Apologize me, my friend (Regret), actually I want to go to the ladies (Excuse/Explanation/Excuse). Can you ask, Shoby? (Alternative)*

**Table 6.** The result of patterns in Situation 3.

| Category                                                                        | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal pattern                                                                 |           |            |
| Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative                                | 10        | 33.3       |
| Regret + Alternative                                                            | 7         | 23.3       |
| Performative Refusal + Reason/Explanation/Excuse                                | 5         | 16.7       |
| Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative                                         | 3         | 10.0       |
| Negative Willingness/Inability                                                  | 2         | 6.7        |
| Performative Refusal + Regret/Apology + Alternative + Reason/Explanation/Excuse | 2         | 6.7        |
| Future Possibility                                                              | 1         | 3.3        |
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula                                           |           |            |
| Statement of Alternative/Suggestion                                             | 22        | 73.3       |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                                       | 20        | 66.7       |
| Regret/Apology                                                                  | 19        | 63.3       |
| Performative Refusal                                                            | 7         | 23.3       |
| Statement of Negative Willingness/Inability                                     | 2         | 6.7        |
| Future Possibility                                                              | 1         | 3.3        |

The second most frequently used pattern was ‘Regret + Alternative’ with a frequency of 23.3% (7 out of 30 responses). An example of this is:

*I’m sorry (Regret), but I think you can take the pictures of the guest speaker after his speech ended (Alternative).*

‘Performative Refusal + Reason/Explanation/Excuse’ (16.7%) (5 out of 30 responses) was another pattern used. For example:

*No (Performative Refusal), my camera skill is pretty bad (Reason/Explanation/Excuse).*

*I wish I can (Performative Refusal), but I want to listen to him/her first (Reason/Explanation/Excuse).*

‘Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative’ was one more form found in the data with 10% (3 out of 30 responses). Examples are below.

*Erm I don’t feel comfortable using people’s thing (Excuse/Explanation/Excuse). You can ask someone else. (Alternative)*

*Hmm I don't think this is a good time. The speaker is still talking.  
(Excuse/Explanation/Excuse) Let's do it together later (Alternative).*

'Negative Willingness or Expressing Inability' was another pattern to refuse the request (6.7%) (2 out of 30 responses). Examples are I don't think I can help you to do this and I can't do it right now. These are examples of independent use of the direct strategy to execute the refusal. However, the strategy was of a lesser frequency. Future Possibility \*as an expression of temporal refusal occurred once (3.3%). The response was Erm, I promise I'll help you later. Table 6 displays the types of refusal strategies and semantic formulas employed in Situation 3 categorised as per Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The most frequently used strategies were indirect and adjunct strategies. The three most used formulas were suggesting alternatives (73.3%), giving reasons or explanations (66.7%), and apologising or showing regret (63.3%). Direct strategies were also used such as performative refusal or refusing directly (23.3%) and stating unwillingness or inability to perform the request (6.7%).

#### **Situation 4: Informal**

*Request: I have burned the midnight oil just to finish my assignment on time. I need some rest. So, can you help me submit my assignment paper to the lecturer at his office room?*

Situation 4 deals with refusal to the request of asking help from a friend for submitting an assignment paper to the lecturer's room. The refusal patterns involved direct, indirect and adjunct strategies that displayed being indirect as the approach to manage the refusal (Yan and Bidin, 2025; Razali and Abdullah, 2021; Mohd Jalis et al., 2019; Amirrudin and Salleh, 2016; Abdul Sattar et al., 2011; Beebe et al., 1990). The refusal patterns involved the use of 2-4 semantic formulas. Refer to Table 7 for the patterns. The most frequently used pattern was 'Regret/Apology + Inability + Reason/Explanation/Excuse' (33.3%) (10 out of 30 responses). For example:

*I'm so sorry (Regret) I couldn't help you to submit the assignment (Inability).  
Actually, I'm not in college today. I've a program outside and will only be back the day after tomorrow (Reason/Explanation/Excuse).*

**Table 7.** The result of patterns in Situation 4.

| Category                                                     | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal pattern                                              |           |            |
| Regret + Inability + Reason/Explanation/Excuse               | 10        | 33.3       |
| Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse                           | 7         | 23.3       |
| Regret + Inability + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative | 6         | 20         |
| Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative             | 4         | 13.3       |
| Performative Refusal + Inability + Reason/Explanation/Excuse | 3         | 10         |
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula                        |           |            |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation                                    | 30        | 100        |
| Regret/Apology                                               | 27        | 90         |
| Negative Willingness/Inability                               | 19        | 63.3       |
| Alternative/Suggestion                                       | 10        | 33.3       |
| Performative Refusal                                         | 3         | 10         |

A similar structure with a frequency of 23.3% (7 out of 30 responses) involved 'Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse'. For example:

*I'm sorry, (Regret) but I already sent mine and I need to meet my academic supervisor right now. I have to go (Reason/Explanation/Excuse).*

Two other structures that were also similar are 'Regret + Inability + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative' (20%) (6 out of 30 responses) and 'Regret + Reason/Explanation/Excuse + Alternative' (13.3%) (4 out of 30 responses each). For instance:

*Sorry (Regret), I don't think I can do it (Inability) as I am short on time at the moment (Reason/Explanation/Excuse). I think Mavis can do it for you (Alternative).*

*Oh, I'm so sorry (Regret). I can't do it (Inability), I'm too tired as I need rest because I also did the assignment the whole night and not getting enough sleep (Reason/Explanation/Excuse). However, I could ask my friend to send it to the office for you (Alternative).*

*I'm very sorry (Regret) but I won't be dropping by his office room today (Reason/Explanation/Excuse). Maybe you could try ask someone else (Alternative).*

Table 7 displays the types of refusal strategies and semantic formulas employed in Situation 4 categorised as per Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework. The most frequently used strategies were indirect and adjunct strategies. The most used formulas were giving reasons, excuses or explanations (100%), apologising or showing regret (90%) and offering alternative solutions (33.3%). Direct strategies were also used such as 'Statement of Negative Willingness or Inability' (63.3%) and 'Performative Refusal' (10%). However, direct strategies were not used independently but rather integrated with indirect and adjunct strategies.

### **Refusal strategies and patterns in informal situations**

The most frequently used strategy types in informal situations were tabulated and presented in Table 8. This involved combining the responses in Situations 3 and 4 resulting in 60 responses in total. The most frequently used strategy types were indirect and adjuncts: giving reason, excuses or explanation (83.3%) (50 out of 60 responses), followed by expressing regret or apology (76.7%) (46 out of 60 responses) and giving alternative solutions (53.3%) (32 out of 60 responses). The direct strategy that was most used was expressing negative willingness or inability to perform the request (35%) (21 out of 60 responses). There were a variety of strategy patterns used to manage the refusals in the informal situations and the frequent patterns involved expressing regret, reason/explanation/excuse, giving alternative solutions and expressing negative willingness (Yan and Bidin, 2025; Razali and Abdullah, 2021; Mohd Jalis et al., 2019; Amirrudin and Salleh, 2016; Kathir, 2015; Abdul Sattar et al., 2011; Eslami, 2010; Beebe et al., 1990). Direct strategy types were rarely used as independent strategies to execute refusals in informal situations (3.3%) (2 out of 60 responses) and were most often integrated with the indirect and adjunct strategy types.

**Table 8.** The result of patterns in Informal Situation 3 and 4.

| Category                              | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Refusal strategy and semantic formula |           |            |
| Excuse/Reason/Explanation             | 50        | 83.3       |

|                                             |    |      |
|---------------------------------------------|----|------|
| Statement of Apology/Regret                 | 46 | 76.7 |
| Statement of Alternative/Suggestion         | 32 | 53.3 |
| Statement of Negative Willingness/Inability | 21 | 35   |
| Performative Refusal                        | 10 | 16.7 |
| Future Possibility                          | 1  | 1.2  |

### ***Comparison of refusals in formal and informal situations***

The comparison between the formal and informal situations shows that the refusal patterns and types of strategies used in both situations were similar. Refusals were indirect and non-straightforward. Indirect strategies primarily ‘Reason/Explanation/Excuse’, ‘Statement of Regret/Apology’ and ‘Statement of Alternatives’ were used in combination with the direct strategy ‘Negative Willingness/Inability’ to structure the refusals. In both the situations, direct strategies were rarely used explicitly and independently as strategies to execute refusals. However, the refusals in formal situations were elaborate and complex in comparison to the refusals in the informal situations which were brief. The refusals in the formal situations were expressed in an extensive and circumlocutory fashion comprising longer stretches of words and containing more semantic formulas (ranging from 3-5 formulas) while the refusals in the informal situations were short, concise and comprised less semantic formulas (fluctuating from 1-4 formulas). This is probably because the formal situations involved communication with a person of higher status (in Situation 1 it was the President of a club and in Situation 2 it was the Chair of a seminar). This dynamic may have resulted in higher face threat causing extra effort into polite discourse to address the positive face of the requestor and negative face of the refuser. The findings are consistent with findings made by other local studies in Malaysia on refusal strategies such as Yan and Bidin (2025), Razali and Abdullah (2021), Mohd Jalis et al. (2019), Amirrudin and Salleh (2016), Kathir (2015), and Abdul Sattar et al. (2011). The consistency is probably due to the Malaysian cultural background that pays attention to practices that prioritise harmony in personal and working relationships despite the strain or conflict that has to be carried out. Scholars note that there is often a concern in Malay culture for relational harmony in achieving interactional goals (Paramasivam, 2024; Abdul Sattar et al., 2011; Goddard, 2004; Lim, 2003).

The study found that the three main types of refusal strategies, direct, indirect and adjuncts, proposed in Beebe et al.’s (1990) framework were employed by Malaysian undergraduate students when responding to the four situations included in the study. Broadly, nine semantic formulas were found in refusal responses that was used in combination to form several refusal patterns in their statements. Two were direct strategies, ‘Performative Refusal’ and ‘Negative Willingness/Ability’, five were indirect strategies, ‘Regret/Apology’, ‘Reason/Explanation/Excuse’, ‘Alternative’, ‘Wish’, and ‘Future Possibility’, and two were adjuncts, ‘Gratitude’ and ‘Positive Opinion’. The findings show that the students’ choices of refusal strategy types and pattern constructions changed strategically according to the different formality of the situations. However, the highly preferred strategies in both formal and informal situations was indirect strategies, primarily ‘Regret/Apology’, ‘Reason/Explanation/Excuse’, and ‘Alternative’, combined together with the direct strategy, ‘Negative Willingness/Ability’. In formal situations refusals had a longer sequence while in informal situations refusals were brief and succinct. Direct strategies were rarely used independently as refusal strategies and were most often used in combination with indirect strategies and adjuncts.

## Conclusion

The study has significance for the development of cultural literacy or pragmatic competence amongst non-native speakers of English with regard to strategy teaching and training. By highlighting the types and patterns of refusal strategies used by Malaysian learners, the study can help teachers establish the strategies that should be included into curriculum and expose learners to the variety available. In strategy teaching, Eslami (2010) argues that it is best to expose learners to the wide repertoire of strategies existing and allow them to make their own choices when communicating. She says it is important for teachers to acknowledge and respect learner's individuality and freedom of choice in strategy use and selection. No single strategy or pattern works for every learner. Their choices reflect their views of themselves and their social positions in the L2 environment. In this way, learners will be able to actively create a new interlanguage and identity in their language learning process. In addition, the communicative context is also highly dynamic and constantly evolving (Fetzer, 2022); no single strategy or pattern will work for every situational context. Communicators thus need to constantly adapt in order to convey their messages appropriately and successfully. It is therefore critical for learners to have a repertoire or range of strategies at their disposal and to be trained to tap on them flexibly during communication.

As sequels to the study, similar research but with a larger sample size is recommended so as to verify the findings on a larger scale. It is also suggested to include learner variables such as proficiency level in order to gain insights into strategy use, learner needs, and pragmatic development across different proficiency levels. It would also be good to include social status and social positions into the different DCT situations in order to gain insights into how social power and social distance can affect pragmatic choice and strategy use. It is also recommended that future studies include multiple methods of data collection (such as observation of authentic discourse in natural settings, role play, verbal reports, or interviews with participants) and quantitative data analysis (such as word frequency analysis and mean length utterance analysis) to improve triangulation efforts and gain deeper insights into pragmatic production and comprehension of the students. It is also valuable to conduct research into the refusal patterns used in the Malaysian workplace and to make comparisons with patterns used in the academic context so as to obtain understandings into not only how the refusal speech act is manifested in the professional context but also how adaptation occurs when shifting from the academic context to the workplace context. In this way universities can better prepare students to navigate the speech act through the design of targeted English for Specific Purposes training materials such as English for the workplace and the professions, English for finishing school and so on. With the rise of hybrid work and digital education, future research should also involve how the online context shapes the choice of refusal strategies such as refusals through email, the Slack platform, social media like WhatsApp Instant Messenger and so on. It would also be worthwhile to conduct research into refusal patterns with participants from the different ethnic groups in Malaysia such as Malays, Chinese and Indians in order to expand, deepen and sharpen our insights into the pragmatic choices of the different groups so as to facilitate interethnic and intercultural communication among fellow Malaysians.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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