



Realization of Speech Acts of Refusals and Pragmatic Competence by Turkish EFL Learners

Turgay Han
 Kafkas University

Assiye Burgucu-Tazegül
 Kafkas University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to examine a) how lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level Turkish learners of English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) realize refusals in English, b) the differences between native and non-native speakers of English in the use of refusals, and c) if L2 proficiency affects possible pragmatic transfer or not. The participants in the study included 18 native speakers of English for control (9 native speakers of Turkish and 9 native speakers of English) and 18 non-native speakers of English for the study group (9 lower-intermediate level and 9 upper-intermediate level Turkish EFL learners), all of whom were undergraduate students. The data were collected through role-plays. The results showed that a) the participants frequently preferred indirect strategies for refusals rather than direct ones, b) Turkish EFL learners performed pragmatic transfers while using refusal strategies, c) L1 pragmatic transfer decreases with an increase in EFL proficiency, and d) EFL learners in both groups gave greater importance to status than native English speakers did. The results of the study may be applied to further research in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *Speech acts, pragmatic competence, refusals in English, Turkish EFL learners*

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence has been a topic of interest in EFL studies for the last two decades. Pragmatic competence is understood "...from the point of view of [language] users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal, 1997, p.30 cited in Ifantidou, 2013, p.94). A lack of pragmatic competence may lead to problems for an L2 speaker attempting to perform particular speech acts, which refer to a combination of individual speech acts that are performed together (Murphy & Neu, 1996). Each discrete speech act has a certain communicative purpose, such as "asking for the time," "apologizing," and "refusing," and refusing," which itself can involve a variety of different speech acts. As producing the speech act of "refusal", a speaker is expected to say "no" to a request or invitation directly or

indirectly by creating a face-threatening act to the listener or the responder and limiting the listener's needs; therefore, the speech acts of refusal necessitates pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996). These sort of speech acts require pragmatic competence as speakers might either say 'no' or communicate refusal through facial expression, for example.

There are three speech acts that a speaker is expected to perform when issuing a refusal: (a) an expression of regret (e.g., "I'm very sorry."), (b) a direct refusal (e.g., "I can't attend your birthday party."), and (c) an excuse (e.g., "I have an important exam.") (Chen, 1996).

Bayat (2013) states that "speech acts take part outside the language dimension of communication" (p.219). Language learners do not only acquire the grammar and vocabulary of a language, but they also learn how to use the speech acts of that language appropriately while communicating (Bayat, 2013). That is why understanding and producing speech acts is thought to be an indispensable constituent of a language learner's grammatical and social knowledge about learning a language and using the utterances appropriately in the target language (Bella, 2011).

Several studies have been conducted to examine EFL learners' use of speech acts (e.g. Ahn, 2007; Halenko & Jones, 2011), and it is not surprising that they have frequently concentrated on speech acts that are fundamental in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Most relevant to the present study is the finding that, people from different cultures find it challenging to produce negative responses to invitations, suggestions, offers, or requests, as the refusal may cause conflict with the interlocutor's communicational purposes (Siebold & Busch, 2015). Thus, inappropriate realizations of refusals can corrupt the interaction between interlocutors, as these speech acts involve some degree of offensiveness (Shokouhi & Khalili, 2008).

When people from two distinct cultures communicate with each other, they generally reflect the norms that are peculiar to their own cultures (Al-Issa, 2003). Therefore, the cultural background of people may affect the way they interact, interpret and apprehend (Al-Issa, 2003). These types of reflections are termed as pragmatic transfer. Generally, it refers to "deviation from the target norms due to cross-cultural differences" (Aksoyalp, 2009, p.33). Furthermore, when one applies his/her own cultural norms while interacting with others in the second/foreign language, sociocultural transfer takes place (Al-Issa, 2003).

Similar to other speech acts that presuppose the use of certain strategies, refusal strategies applied by speakers of any language vary depending on the social status, power, age, gender and educational level of the interlocutors (Felix-Brasdefer, 2008). Thus, interlocutors should have sufficient knowledge of each others' background in order to use proper refusal forms, as to alleviate the adverse impacts of direct refusals (Felix-Brasdefer, 2008).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, previous studies have indicated that no research has directly examined a) the link between the EFL proficiency level and the use of speech acts of refusal, and b) the link between EFL proficiency level and interlocutor status, especially within the context of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level Turkish learners of English. It is also unclear how effective the use and transfer of mother tongue acts is while interacting with native English speakers. This study aimed to examine whether there was a significant correlation between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency; further, if pragmatic transfer had facilitating or debilitating effects on learners' language proficiency with regards to lower and upper English proficiency level Turkish learners of English with English speakers' refusal strategies as baseline data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of the following studies on pragmatic competence was to assess language learners's ability to use language forms in various environments to the effect of employing a variety of communicative acts and achieving particular communicative goals by analyzing the relationship between the speaker and the culture related setting (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Lightbrown & Spada, 1999). Regarding the communicative approach to language teaching, it is maintained that there is no direct correlation between a learner's fluency in a second/foreign language and his/her ability to produce language that is acceptable in terms of social and cultural norms (Tanck, 2004). Thus, it is possible that a language learner who is fluent in the target language sometimes unable to perform socially and culturally proper language (Tanck, 2002).

Recently, researchers in the field of linguistics have carried out numerous studies on the use of speech acts of refusal in a variety of cultures and languages (Abed, 2011; Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Asmalı, 2013; Bulut, 2003; Çapar, 2014; Chang, 2009; Delen & Tavil, 2010; Genç & Tekyıldız, 2009; Lee, 2013; Morkus, 2014; Sattar, Lah & Suleiman, 2011; Shokouhi & Khalili, 2008; Tamimi Sa'd & Mohammadi, 2014; Valipour & Jadidi, 2014). However, few studies analyzing speech acts of refusal have examined to how the production of speech acts of refusal relates to different proficiency (low vs. high) level contexts and native and non-native speaker contexts.

Genç and Tekyıldız (2009) investigated the relationship between learners' use of speech acts and the region of their residence (urban or rural), focusing on the use of refusal strategies by Turkish EFL students. A discourse completion questionnaire (DCQ) was used to detect possible differences between the preferred refusal strategies of Turkish EFL students and those of native English speakers (NESs) in relation to rural or urban areas of residence of the participants. Both 101 Turkish EFL students and 50 NESs were divided into two groups according to their geographical origins: rural or urban. The results showed that the four groups produced similar refusal strategies in general. Furthermore, the interlocutor's status was found to have an important effect on the strategy preferences of the speakers. Similarly, most of the participants generally used indirect strategies so as to be politer. However, Turkish EFL students frequently chose direct strategies while using the speech acts of refusal, unlike NESs who were mostly indirect while refusing.

In a study similar to Genç and Tekyıldız's research, Bulut (2003) aimed to determine whether there were any significant differences between the refusal strategies of American English (AE), Turkish (TT) and Turkish English (TE) regarding the most frequently used pragmatic norms. The data were collected through closed-role play and a discourse completion task (DCT), and the subjects of the study constituted three groups of students: an interlanguage group (composed of Turkish EFL learners), American native speakers, and Turkish native speakers. The results revealed that AE speakers' refusal statements were shorter than those of the TT and TE groups during the DCT. However, the AE group's refusal responses were found to be longer than those of the TT and TE groups in the closed-role play data. Also, it was observed that all three groups mostly preferred the indirect strategy while refusing. Furthermore, it was found that the semantic formulas used in refusing are similar cross-culturally, whereas the ways in which people express these pragmatic norms vary from culture to culture. Semantic formula is a term that denotes "a word, phrase or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy" (Cohen, 1996, p.265). Along the same lines, Asmalı (2013) carried out a study investigating the differences that could occur in non-native English speakers' (non-NESs) refusal strategies. The speech acts that

were performed by these non-NESs were evaluated according to their appropriateness for given situations. Forty-five prospective non-NES teachers from Latvia, Poland, and Turkey participated in the study as three separate groups, each of which was composed of 15 teachers. The data were collected using a DCT and the Speech Act Appropriateness Scale (Cohen, 1994; North, 2000; Sasaki, 1998). The findings showed that there was no significant difference among the groups in terms of the strategies employed in refusing, although they had different cultural norms of their own. Moreover, the participants in each group used nearly the same number of speech acts of refusal in their responses to the given situations.

In order to detect the impact of L1 pragmatic transfer on English refusals, Çapar (2014) conducted a study on the strategies that Turkish EFL learners usually employ when they refuse in specific Turkish mother tongue contexts and EFL contexts. Eighty-two female students were divided into two groups based on their proficiency levels (62 intermediate level and 20 elementary level students). One group completed an English DCT, while the other group completed a Turkish DCT. Further, 10 randomly chosen students were interviewed after the application of the DCTs. The findings showed that the English DCT group preferred to refuse mostly by stating a reason, excuse, or regret. Likewise, the Turkish DCT group used the same strategies while refusing. Both groups generally used indirect strategies when they refused people from high and low status and they used direct strategies when they refused a friend. However, it was discovered that the learners' native language pragmatic awareness was higher than their L2 pragmatic knowledge. Thus, it was recommended that the incorporation of DCTs into EFL classroom settings might enhance learners' pragmatic awareness in L2.

Delen and Tavil (2010) examined EFL students' realizations of three speech acts: refusals, requests, and complaints. A DCT taken by 90 students from a Turkish foundation university revealed that all students had the ability to realize the speech acts of requests and refusals; however, they were incapable of making complaints efficiently. Further, the strategies that they applied when they performed these three acts were limited in number.

Similarly, in another context, Shokouhi and Khalili (2008) focused on the differences between Iranian speakers of English and Persian speakers in the production of refusal strategies in relation to the subjects' gender and social status. Thirty randomly selected male and female Iranian EFL learners were placed into two groups by gender. Data were collected through a DCT in two steps: first the English form of the DCT and then the Persian form of the same DCT were administered to the same participants. The findings showed no significant difference between female and male learners' production of refusals.

Another study by Sattar, Lah and Suleiman (2011) dealt with Malay university students' preferred refusal strategies and semantic formulas. Data were collected through a DCT from 40 students. The results showed that Malay university students mostly preferred to employ the strategy of making excuses to perform the act of refusing, which was regarded as an outcome of the Malaysian learners' cultural background.

In another related study, Morkus (2014) investigated differences between Egyptian speakers and American speakers in the production of refusals. In order to determine certain discourse-level patterns peculiar to refusal acts more indigenously, the researcher obtained the data of the study through role-plays. The participants in the study were 10 American and 10 Egyptian native speakers. The findings of the research demonstrated that Egyptian speakers used more words than American speakers did in their realization of refusals. Another distinctive difference was that American speakers were more direct than Egyptian speakers when performing speech acts of refusal.

Likewise, Allami and Naeimi (2011) examined the way in which Iranian EFL learners produced refusals by analyzing the strategies and semantic formulas that they applied in relation to the learners' language proficiency levels and the interlocutors' social status. To obtain data for the study, the researchers administered a DCT (in English) to 30 Persian learners of English. The same DCT was translated into Persian and administered to 31 Persian native speakers. The participants' responses were compared in order to determine the impact of L1 on L2. The results of another related study, conducted with the participation of 37 American native speakers, were used as a baseline for the comparison of the data. The findings of the study revealed certain differences between Iranian and American speakers in the realization of refusals regarding "shift" and the content of the semantic formulas. Also, the interlocutors' social status was found to be an important factor affecting participants' responses. Further, the data indicated that Iranian learners transferred their native language pragmatic norms when they refused their interlocutors.

A similar study on pragmatic transfer by Chang (2009) examined the impact of L1 on L2 in Mandarin speakers' realization of refusals. The data collection instrument was a DCT. Thirty-five American college students (AE), 41 English-major seniors (SE), 40 English-major freshmen (FE), and 40 Chinese-major sophomores (CC) participated in the study. Participants' responses were examined for the content and frequency of semantic formulas. The results indicated significant differences among the groups in respect to the frequency and content of the semantic formulas that they applied. However, they all used an almost equal range of semantic formulas.

In 2013, Lee conducted a study to apprehend whether Korean EFL learners had the ability to produce refusals fluently and appropriately. Forty Korean EFL learners were categorized into two groups based on their language proficiency. Their capability in the realization of refusals was assessed through a role-play task. The results of the study demonstrated that learners who had a lower language proficiency level found it difficult to produce appropriate refusals. Also, all of the participants had difficulty in refusing interlocutors of lower status. Moreover, it was determined that learners' fluency in their production of refusals varied in accordance with their familiarity with the situations they faced. Wannaruk (2008) also studied refusals between American speakers and Thai EFL learners of different levels. The data was collected with DCT-based interviews with a view to possible situations for refusals. The results show that language proficiency affected the transfer of speech acts of refusals; low-level EFL learners especially made frequent transfers from their L1 to L2.

Recently, researchers also focused on politeness strategies applied in order to soften refusing (Abed, 2011; Tamimi Sa'd & Mohammadi, 2014; Valipour & Jadidi, 2014). In 2014, Tamimi Sa'd and Mohammadi carried out a study on the sociolinguistic competence of Iranian EFL learners in producing appropriate refusal strategies. A DCT was used to collect data. In total, 30 Iranian students (divided into two groups, separated by gender) participated in the study. The findings indicated that both males and females produced similar politeness strategies and that Iranian learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences should be raised as they needed improvement.

Abed (2011) investigated the existence of pragmatic transfer in Iraqi EFL learners' production of face-threatening acts (e.g. apologies, requests, complaints, and disagreement) of refusal strategies. In order to compare the the data obtained from a DCT, three groups of participants were included in the study (30 Iraqi EFL learners, 15 Iraqi Arabic native speakers, and 10 American native speakers of English). Each group's use of semantic formulas, refusal adjuncts, and refusal strategies were compared with the others'. The data results revealed that Iraqi EFL learners positively transferred their native language pragmatic norms into the foreign language that

they were learning. While American speakers were found to be more polite when refusing a person of higher or equal status, Iraqi speakers were more polite when refusing a person of lower status. Also, it was found that although Iraqi female learners used fewer refusal strategies than males, the number of refusal adjuncts that they used was higher than that of the males.

In order to emphasize the importance of politeness strategies for communicating in the target language, Valipour and Jadidi (2014) analyzed Iranian English language teachers' appropriate use of speech acts, such as refusals, apologies, greetings, and requests. The study was conducted with the participation of 30 randomly chosen English language teachers. The data of the study were gathered through a multi-choice discourse completion test (MCDT) and a written discourse completion test (WDCT). Analysis of the refusal strategies revealed that the participants mostly used excuses and explanations in their responses. Further, all of the participants were found to be familiar with appropriate politeness strategies.

All the studies mentioned above concern different nationalities, genders, and people of different social status. This research indicates that it is a challenging matter for non-native speakers to produce appropriate speech acts in various contexts. Further, most of the studies focused on comparing non-native speakers with native speakers of the language in terms of the production and comprehension of refusals. Since realization of refusals is mainly based on cultural background and social factors such as age, gender, status, and context, second language learners might find it complicated and difficult to perform them in an appropriate manner (Genç & Tekyıldız, 2009). That is why it is rather difficult to identify common denominators in the existing research. It is worth noting that the pragmatic norms and cultural expectations of the people of a specific culture play an important role in accommodating to that society (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). That is why if learners fail to acquire adequate knowledge of language use in different social contexts appropriately, this might lead to misunderstandings between the interlocutors or might spoil the communicative event (Martínez- Martínez-Flor & Beltrán-Palanques, 2014). Although the limited number of studies in the Turkish EFL context examined the speech acts of refusals (e.g. Asmalı, 2013; Bulut, 2003; Çapar, 2014; Delen & Tavil, 2010; Genç & Tekyıldız, 2009), these studies did not examine the link between the language learners' various language proficiency levels and native/non-native speaker dichotomy in a Turkish context. Thus, this study aims at bridging this research gap.

The available research on speech acts as refusals in general in Turkey also seems too limited. Some studies have focused on EFL and learners' use of refusals (e.g. Aksoyalp, 2009; Moody, 2011; Sadler & Eröz, 2002). Additionally, immature teaching methodologies for cross-linguistics and interlanguage field; ineffective communication act strategies in adult foreign language performance; and students' lack of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and social status awareness in the Turkish language training system may cause defects or failure. There is a gap in the research that examines the acts of refusals of Turkish speaker of English, this raise a question: how could FL learners deal with this? This research aims to provide a basic reference for researchers on the speech acts of refusals of Turkish EFL learners.

The present study aims to examine how Turkish learners of English at lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency levels realize the speech acts of refusal in English language and to examine the differences between NES and non-NES, and also to determine whether L2 proficiency affects pragmatic transfer or not. Similar to Allami and Naeimi's (2011) study, the present study intends to shed light on the link between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency in EFL contexts by comparing the refusal strategies of Turkish speakers and English speakers. The following research questions guided this study:

What differences are there in the use of semantic formulas between Turkish EFL learners and native English speakers?

Are there any similarities or differences between the refusal strategies employed by low proficiency Turkish EFL learners and upper-intermediate proficiency Turkish EFL learners, and how do these differ from those employed by native speakers

In what ways does social status affect the perception of the severity of the refusal strategies used by Turkish learners of English with lower intermediate and upper intermediate language proficiency levels?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of/included/were constituted by four groups of volunteers: 9 lower-intermediate level Turkish-speaking learners of English (LTE), 9 upper-intermediate level Turkish-speaking learners of English (UTE), 9 English native controls (BE), and 9 Turkish native controls (TT). The reason why lower and upper proficiency level students were selected is that convenience sampling procedure was followed while selecting the participants. All the subjects were undergraduate students at a state university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years of age. A purposive non-random sampling procedure was followed in the selection of participants among volunteers. Briefly, the comparisons were carried out with British students as a target-control group whose performance was also contrasted with that of another control group consisting of Turkish students performing the same task in Turkish language (their L1).

The subjects of the first two groups, the Turkish EFL learners, were of similar language learning background, had passed the university entrance exam, and had been studying English for at least four years after graduating from high school. The learners were assigned to the different groups based on their KPDS scores (a standardized public English proficiency exam in Turkey). The lower-intermediate group included students who had a grade below 75% and the upper-intermediate group included students who had a grade above 75%. None of these participants had had any experience in any English speaking country lasting more than a month. However, some of students had completed Erasmus in any countries where English was used natively and spent a few months abroad. For the native speaker groups, the native Turkish speakers were senior students in the Turkish Philology Department, while the native English speakers were from the United Kingdom. They were students in the Multilingualism Department at London Metropolitan University.

Instruments

The instruments for this study included (a) a background questionnaire, containing a series of demographic questions about the participants (e.g. gender, age, English proficiency level, overseas experience, educational background and school grade) (see Appendix A), and (b) 6 Enhanced Open-Ended Role-Plays (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000; Felix-Brasdefer, 2002) (see Appendix B). An enhanced role-play differs from a traditional role-play in that it includes detailed contextualized information about the setting and the interlocutors. The role-plays, which were

modified by the researcher based on conversation practice in various situations and at different status levels, contained six scenarios and included two types of stimuli to refusal (i.e. requests and offers). The background questionnaire and the instructions for the role-plays as well as the six role-play scenarios were translated into Turkish using the back translation technique for native speakers of Turkish. It is important to indicate that the English version was given to both the native speakers of English and the Turkish EFL learners. The Turkish version was given to the native speakers of Turkish. The researcher preferred to employ the role-play method, as assessing pragmatic performance speed becomes difficult when using paper-and-pencil type of outcome measures (e.g., written DCT) (cf. Li, 2012). “Ideally, all data analyzed in studies on language use should come from natural, ethnographic observations in which participants employ language authentically while not aware of being observed” (Labov, 1972 cited in Yu, 2011, p.1131). In addition, the use of the role-play method allowed the researchers to observe authentic language use in a natural setting, where the learners were not aware of being observed, which is ideal for any study on language use (Ghobadi and Fahim, 2009) .

A classification scheme was used for data analysis. The data was transcribed and coded according to the scheme proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). Refusal strategies were adapted to a/the Turkish context and classified into direct and indirect refusals in the scheme in addition to adjuncts to refusals. The classification categories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Taxonomy on the speech acts of refusals

Classification & coding scheme of refusal strategies of the present study
I. Direct refusal
1. No
2. Negative willingness/ability (e.g., “I won’t / I don’t think so / I can’t”.)
II. Indirect refusal
1. Statement of regret (e.g., “I’m sorry / Sorry! / I apologize / Unfortunately / I beg your pardon-‘Kusura bakma’ ”.)
2. Wish (e.g., “I wish I could / Honestly, I wish”.)
3. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., “I have a newborn baby”.)
4. Statement of alternative (e.g., “Ask another friend / You can find someone else to interview”.)
5. Set condition for acceptance (e.g., “If I guessed, I would not allow the cleaning!”.)
6. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., “It’s not a big deal / Don’t worry! / Never mind”.)
7. Postponement (e.g., “Maybe later, I can eat it.”)
8. Topic switch (avoidance) (e.g., “Let’s have a cup of coffee or tea”.)
9. Repetition (e.g., “In Istanbul! / Dessert! / Extra 3 hours!”.)
10. Self-defense (e.g., “ You know, I gave my notes to you many times/ before I worked and helped you”.)
11. Lack of empathy (e.g., “This is not my problem or responsibility!”)
12. Joke (e.g., “Dessert! I do not want to kill myself”.)

13. Criticism (e.g., “You have never come to the lesson / You are always absent”.)

III. Adjuncts to Refusals

1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g., “I would like to / This is a good opportunity / It looks awesome”.)

2. Statement of empathy (e.g., “I know you have taken pains but / I know this promotion is important”.)

3. Pause filler (e.g., “Umm / Hmm”.)

4. Gratitude (“Thank you! / Thanks so much”.)

5. Getting interlocutor attention (e.g., “Look! I have allowed you to clean my office”.)

Direct refusals refer to phrases such as “No, I won’t” or “I refuse”. Indirect refusals are indirect strategies that speakers use to minimize the offense to the hearer and they can include, for example, statements of excuses, regrets, some other alternatives, or postponement. Additionally, adjuncts to refusals include the positive opinion of the interlocutor or expressions of empathy or gratitude.

Procedure

The researcher modified some role-play situations and changed them in some ways in order to meet the needs and fit the context of the present study. For example, the name of the class was changed from the History of Latin America to the History of the Turkish Revolution; the name of the company and the cities were also changed. All the role-plays were performed inside the classroom. Firstly, the background questionnaires were distributed to the subjects. The researcher only explained the instructions before the role-play began and was not otherwise involved in the conversation process. The English data with EFL learners was collected by a native speaker who was an English instructor at Kafkas University. A native speaker who worked as an English lecturer at London Metropolitan University collected the English data with native speakers of English, and a Turkish language instructor at Kafkas University collected the Turkish native speakers’ data. The role-plays were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Beebe et al.’s (1990) coding and classifying approach was used for refusal strategies or semantic formulas (see Table 1). The researcher encoded the frequencies of the semantic formulas used by Turkish EFL students (lower and upper intermediate) and native students (English and Turkish) in each scheme for all groups and calculated inter-group percentages formulas. Furthermore, the alteration of the frequencies of the semantic formulas by the status of interlocutors was taken into consideration (cf. Allami & Naeimi, 2011). The character used for higher status was a manager or an employer. A classmate and a friend were used to represent equal status. For lower status, a janitor and a junior person were included. The framework of stages was also used to analyze refusals of requests and offers; previously, Garcia (1992) used the framework of stage approach “invitation-response and insistence-response” and the same approach was followed in the present study, but a reference was to “offer/request and response, insistence and response, invocation and response”.

An example of such an interaction from the present study is shown below from Role-play 2 in which the speaker requests and invokes the employee to work an extra 3 hours after work.

Example:

- 1 *S: Could I speak to you for a minute please? I need your help,*
- 2 *You know we are really busy right now first week of*
- 3 *the semester, we work extra 3 hours tonight, until 9 o'clock,*
- 4 *the book boxes have arrived and could you help us please?*
- 5 *E: Ohh, emm, I would like to do that but I can't.*
- 6 *S: Just for 3 hours!*
- 7 *E: I can't, I promise to my mom for this evening, I couldn't postpone*
it, so I'm sorry sir!
- 8 *S: OK.*

In this interaction, the first stage of request-response consists of the eliciting act and the initial refusal, followed by the second stage of insistence-response. In the first stage, line 5, three strategies are used: 1. Pause filler: "Ohh, emm;" 2. Adjuncts to refusal (i.e. statement of positive opinion/feeling): "I would like to do;" and 3. Direct refusal: "I can't." In the second stage, lines 7 and 8, the insistence-response, the participant used different strategies including, firstly, repeating the direct refusal and then adding an excuse/reason/statement of regret.

RESULTS

A series of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed to examine a) how frequently semantic formulas were used, b) the differences in the use of speech acts of refusals by groups with different language backgrounds, and c) refusal strategies based on interlocutor statuses.

Use of semantic formulas

Twenty categories of refusal formulas were grouped as "direct refusals," "indirect refusals," and "adjuncts to refusals" based on Beebe et al.'s scheme (1990) (as cited in Chang, 2009). Table 2 shows the frequency of semantic formulas in refusals employed by native speakers of Turkish (TT), native speakers of British English (BE) and Turkish EFL learners (lower and upper intermediate levels) and the comparison of the frequencies of the refusal strategies used in each situation.

Table 2. Inferential statistics for "direct refusals", "indirect refusals" and "adjuncts to refusals" used by each group

Refusal strategies	Statistics	Group			Group			Group		
		a	b	t	a	c	t	a	d	t
		BE	TT	Value	BE	LTE	Value	BE	UTE	Value
Direct	mean	2.33	3.00	.284	2.33	4.11	*.008	2.33	2.44	.806
	sd	1.00	1.50		1.00	1.45		1.00	.88	
Indirect	mean	8.44	9.44	.427	8.44	7.22	.409	8.44	8.88	.715
	sd	2.78	2.40		2.78	3.30		2.78	2.26	
Adjunct	mean	3.22	2.20	.160	3.22	1.77	*.026	3.22	2.26	.346
	sd	1.39	1.48		1.39	1.09		1.39	1.00	

* $p < .05$

** $n=9$

a Native Speakers of English (British)

b Native Speakers of Turkish

c Lower-intermediate proficiency Turkish EFL learners

d Upper-intermediate proficiency Turkish EFL learners

Table 2 shows the results of the t-test performed to examine significant direct, indirect, and adjunct refusal strategy differences between the four participant groups. The results showed that a) there were significant differences in the use of adjunct and direct refusal strategies between native English speakers and lower-proficiency Turkish EFL learners, indicating that lower-proficiency level EFL learners applied different refusals and adjuncts than native English speakers, b) there were no significant differences between the native English speakers and upper-proficiency level EFL speakers, indicating that when the EFL speakers had a proficiency close to native speakers, they could apply similar refusal strategies, and c) there were no significant differences between Turkish native speakers and English native speakers, indicating that L1 background did not affect the use of refusal strategies; in other words, these participants used similar refusal strategies.

Table 3

Frequency of semantic formulas in refusals of requests/offers one by one (all role play)

Formulas	Respondents			
	9 Native English	9 Native Turkish	9 Lower-int. Turkish	9 Upper-int. Turkish
Direct refusal	25	30	28	19
Regret	23	21	26	28
Wish	0	1	0	2
Excuse, reason, explanation	22	32	30	20
St. alternative	0	5	2	7
Set condition of acceptance	0	1	1	0
Let interlocutor off the hook	10	13	6	7
Postponement	5	0	1	4
Topic Switch	0	1	0	0
Repetition	3	5	1	2
Self-defense	0	0	1	5
Lack of empathy	0	5	0	2
Joke	1	2	0	4
Criticize	5	0	3	4
St.pos.opinion / feeling	4	12	8	9
St. of empathy	0	2	0	0
Pause fillers	15	3	5	12
Gratitude	12	6	4	4
Get int. attention	0	0	0	1

% of each group that used a given formula.

Table 3 shows the similarities and differences between the strategies used by 9 British native speakers, 9 Turkish native speakers, and 18 Turkish EFL learners (9 lower-intermediate and 9 upper-intermediate) who participated in the role-plays regarding speech acts of refusals.

The most common type of refusal formula and the most frequently used indirect refusal strategy in all four groups was excuse/reason/explanation, accounting for roughly 19% of all strategies used by each group in the six refusal situations. On the other hand, statements of excuses and regrets were usually closely linked and the findings showed that the second most frequently used indirect strategy for all four groups was regret. This was most frequently used by the upper-int. EFL group (13%) and least frequently used by the native Turkish group (6%). It is also important to point out that topic switch and setting a condition of acceptance were less popular for all the groups.

An interesting point is that the lower-intermediate Turkish EFL learners most frequently used direct refusal, while the rest of the groups were quite equal in this respect. Among all groups, excuse/reason/explanation, direct refusal, and regret were the most frequently coded semantic formulas, respectively.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the use of semantic formulas by Turkish EFL learners by status

Role plays	Interlocutors Status	Semantic formulas	Group LTE	UTE	BE	TT
# 1	Equal	Direct	7(31%)	4(18%)	3(13%)	8(36%)
		“no”				
		Regret	5(21%)	6(26%)	8(34%)	4(17%)
# 4	Upper	Excuse	6(23%)	9(34%)	7(26%)	4(15%)
		Direct	4(33%)	3(25%)	2(16%)	3(25%)
		“no”				
# 6	Lower	Excuse	7(21%)	8(25%)	8(25%)	9(28%)
		Gratitude	4(20%)	7(35%)	7(35%)	2(10%)
		Direct	9(31%)	8(27%)	4(13%)	8(27%)
		“no”				
		Hook	3(12%)	6(25%)	8(33%)	7(29%)

Table 4 shows the differences in the use of semantic formulas used by Turkish EFL learners with interlocutors of equal, upper, or lower social status. The results showed that a) while the LTE group frequently preferred direct strategies for refusing interlocutors with equal status, the UTE group preferred an “excuse” strategy, indicating that proficiency level affected semantic formula preferences in contacting equal status interlocutors, b) LTE and UTE groups refused interlocutors with upper and lower status similarly, indicating that the proficiency level had no impact upon the semantic formula preferences if the interlocutors are from lower and upper status, and c) the LTE group performed more refusing strategy norm transfers than the UTE group did while refusing interlocutors with equal and upper status. Both LTE and UTE groups made similar level of transfers from their L1 (Turkish), indicating that proficiency level affected the frequency of semantic formula transfers from L1. As the proficiency level increased, the learners could transfer less from their L1; however, it did not significantly affect the transfer while refusing lower status interlocutors.

CONCLUSION

The present paper makes an attempt to examine the speech act of refusals by studying the differences and similarities among Turkish EFL learners at two proficiency levels (lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency levels) and native Turkish /English speakers, and, additionally, the impact of social status upon the perception of the severity of the refusals among Turkish EFL learners.

In general, all participants in each group produced similar refusal strategies. Results showed that, in parallel with similar studies (e.g. Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Asmalı, 2013; Çapar, 2014; Genç & Tekyıldız, 2009), the subjects generally preferred to use indirect strategies so as to be more polite. In fact, the majority of the participants avoided such direct refusals as “No, I can’t,” “I don’t,” and they mostly used indirect refusals by expressing their excuses, reasons, or regrets. With respect to the first research question posed in this present study, ‘What differences are there in the use of semantic formulas between Turkish EFL learners and native English speakers?’, these results corroborate other studies (e.g. Sattar, Lah & Suleiman, 2011; Valipour & Jadidi, 2014) in which all participants mostly preferred excuses and explanations as semantic formulas while refusing. In short, the overall results showed that indirect refusals ranked as the most common type of refusal formula and ‘excuse/reason/explanation’ was the most frequently used indirect refusal in both languages and all groups. Further, some results of the present study revealed differences in the use of directness between the English learner groups, as lower-intermediate Turkish EFL learners frequently used direct refusals rather than other forms.

Regarding the second research question, ‘Are there any significant differences between the refusals employed by Turkish EFL learners with different L2 proficiency levels and by native speakers?’, upper-intermediate level EFL learners in many cases performed in a native-like manner. They mostly used indirect strategies, and, in some cases, the refusal strategies of this group approximated those of the English speakers (for example, “excuse, reason, explanation; hook; pause filler”); however, they resembled the Turkish native speakers in the use of “gratitude; statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement” strategies. Some studies have found that lower proficiency learners are more prone to transfer L1 strategies when compared to high-proficiency learners (e.g. Lee, 2013; Wannaruk, 2008). The previous studies and the present study revealed that L1 pragmatic transfer decreases with an increase in L2 proficiency. On the other hand, the performance of the lower-intermediate level EFL learners resembled their L1 performance. There was a statistically significant difference between the refusal strategy of native speakers of English and of the lower-intermediate level EFL learners.

The last research question focused on the impact of status upon refusal strategy use in terms of proficiency level with this question: ‘In what ways does social status impact upon the perception of the severity of the refusals among Turkish learners of English with different language proficiency levels?’ Whereas the present study paralleled Allami and Naeimi’s (2011) study, the relationship between the issue of language proficiency and interlocutor status showed that, similar to their native language use, both EFL learner groups frequently shifted semantic formulas in lower, equal, and higher status interlocutor contexts, it had a reverse situation with Abed’s (2011) study, which noted that Iraqi speakers were more polite and used indirect refusal formulas when refusing a person of lower status. In other words, the results of this study revealed that EFL learners at both lower-intermediate and upper proficiency tended to use direct refusal with a person with a low or equal status, as compared with a high status. To sum up, there was no significant difference between the two EFL groups, as both behaved hierarchically in respect to interlocutor status.

In order to understand and to learn how to use refusals appropriately while communicating, our study contributes to the pragmatic competence literature by comparing NESs and Turkish EFL learners of different levels through conducting Enhanced Open-Ended Role-Plays. While our study is limited by its focus on small quantities of participants, the researchers conducted convenient techniques and designs to eliminate potential risks of data quality. There is still room to increase the “authenticity” of the settings in which the data are collected, for future studies. The usage of refusal strategies by students who perform the roles in or by people of different social status in more authentic milieu may impact the results. Therefore, further research may be conducted with more participants and using different experimental designs.

Turgay Han is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Kafkas University, Turkey. His areas of research center on ESOL learning and teaching, and EFL measurement and assessment issues.

Email: turgayhan@yahoo.com.tr

Assiye Burgucu-Tazegül is an English Instructor at School of Foreign Languages at Kafkas University, Turkey. She is a Ph.D. candidate. Her interests are linguistics and individual differences in EFL learning.

Email: sybrgc@gmail.com

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You are taking a class on the history of the Ataturk's principles and History of Turkish revolution and you are one of the best students in class. You are also known among your classmates for taking very good notes during the lectures. Yesterday the professor just announced that there would be an exam next week. One of your classmates, who you don't interact with outside of class, and who misses class frequently and comes late to class, wants to borrow your lecture notes for the exam. You have previously helped this student several times, but this time you just feel that you cannot give him the lecture notes again.

Role Play 2

You have been working part-time at a bookstore for the past 7 months, and you have a good relationship with your 45-year-old boss who is pleased with your work. The bookstore opens at 7:00 a.m. and closes at 9:00 p.m. and your work shift is Monday through Friday from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. This week is a very busy one for the bookstore since it is the first week of the semester and many students come to buy their textbooks. On Friday night your boss asks you to stay for three more hours, until 9:00 p.m., to work on a new shipment of books that just arrived. But you cannot work these extra hours.

Role Play 3

You stop by your friend's house to pick him up to go to a concert where you will meet other friends. Your friend still lives with his parents and has one younger brother in high school. Your friend is running a little bit late and still needs about 10 minutes to get ready. In the meantime, his parents are entertaining you while you are waiting for him in the living room. While you are chatting with his parents his younger brother, whom you met a couple of times before, comes by to say hi, and to ask for your help with something. He is working on a school project and needs to interview you for this project. You cannot, however, help him at this time.

Role Play 4

You have been working for Sabancı Holding for almost 3 years now and you have a good relationship with your boss. Your boss has been very pleased with your work and creativity and has decided to offer you a promotion and a pay raise. However, this promotion involves relocating to İstanbul, from your hometown of İzmir. Although you like the offer, you cannot accept it.

Role Play 5

You are visiting a friend of yours who you have not seen for almost a year. Your friend is originally from Gaziantep and is so delighted that you are visiting. He prepared a big meal for you with traditional Gaziantep food as well as some nice Gaziantep dessert. At the end of the meal you feel so full, but your friend offers you more dessert and insists that you should eat it. But you actually cannot.

Role Play 6

You are a teaching assistant at a major university in İstanbul, Turkey. You usually like to stay late in your office on campus. Sometimes you stay as late as 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. and that's usually the time when janitors come to clean offices. They are usually hesitant to clean your office when they see that you are still working. However, you usually just tell them to go ahead and clean the office any way. One night while you're still working in your office one of the janitors comes in and starts cleaning. You have already seen this janitor several times before and exchanged greetings with him. While he is cleaning your office he accidentally knocks down a small china figurine and breaks it into pieces. The janitor apologizes and insists that he should pay for it. However, for you it's not a big deal, and you refuse to accept money from him.