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문학석사 학위논문

**Interlanguage Features of Chinese  
EFL Learners in the Communicative  
Act of Refusal**

중국인 영어학습자 거절화행의 중간언어적 특징

2016년 2월

서울대학교 대학원  
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이 논문을 문학석사 학위논문으로 제출함

2016년 2월

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## **Abstract**

# **Interlanguage Features of Chinese EFL Learners in the Communicative Act of Refusal**

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The purpose of the present study is to identify and analyze interlanguage features of Chinese EFL learners, focusing on the ways in which they make ‘refusals’ in English. This paper intends to figure out how the refusal strategies and linguistic forms used by Chinese EFL learners vary from those of American English speakers and to see whether or not these variances can be related to features of their native language. Moreover, the relationship between EFL learners’ L2 proficiency level and their realization of act of refusal were also examined. With regard to methodology, the present study employed the elicitation method of open role plays for data collection and analyzed the responses based on the interlocutors’ social status. Participants were composed of four groups: 12 native speakers of Chinese (NC), 12 Chinese EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level (CE-I), 12 Chinese EFL learners with higher proficiency level (CE-H), and 12 native speakers of American English (NE).

In general, the results indicated that EFL learners differ from native speakers of English in terms of L2 language use. Native Chinese speakers as well as Chinese EFL learners were more sensitive to the interlocutors' social status than the native English group. Native Chinese speakers and Chinese EFL learners used apology/regret strategies more frequently in refusing higher status interlocutors rather than equal or lower status interlocutors. In addition, the Chinese groups chose alternative and future acceptance strategies more frequently than the native English speakers. Regarding the content of the semantic formulas, the native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners both chose more specific, family-oriented reasons to mitigate the face-threatening power of refusals while the native speakers of English preferred to use more vague reasons in the speech act of refusals. The hypothesis of Takahashi and Beebe (1987) was not supported in the present study as the data showed negative correlation between the pragmatic transfer and the EFL learners' L2 proficiency level in terms of the frequency and the content of the semantic formulas (that is, transfer was found to be greater among lower proficiency learners than among higher proficiency learners). It was consistent with several previous studies (e.g., Maeshiba et al., 1996; Robinson, 1992; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989). Regarding the linguistic forms employed by the participants, the native English speakers tended to use hesitators, the modal verb '*could*', and downtoners more frequently than the Chinese EFL learners. The Chinese EFL learners, on the other hand, employed the cajoler '*you know*' and minus committers more frequently than native English speakers.

Based on the findings, the present study suggests that sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic instruction need to be integrated into the English curriculum. This can raise EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and help them become familiar with the pragmatic conventions and devices in the target language.

**Keywords:** Interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic transfer, L2 proficiency level,

Chinese EFL learners

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

As a point along a continuum, interlanguage, although neither identical to a learner's L1 or L2, shares characteristics of both (Barron, 2003: 35). Interlanguage pragmatics, a branch of interlanguage study, “explores non-native speakers' comprehension and production of speech acts, and the acquisition of L2-related speech act knowledge” (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Many studies in interlanguage pragmatics show that even fairly advanced L2 learners' communicative behavior, specifically speech acts, often systematically differs from the target language conventions; therefore, it frequently results in a lot of cross-cultural misunderstanding, communication breakdown and thus brings detrimental consequences to L2 learners by making them seemingly impolite, ill-mannered, and even rude (Bardovi-Harling, 1992; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Wolfson, 1989a).

Miscommunication can occur even though learners possess a good mastery of language form, such as phonology, vocabulary and grammar, because these cannot necessarily guarantee appropriate language use. Learners additionally need to acquire sociolinguistic or pragmatic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983), i.e., what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner.

However, a number of studies on cross-cultural pragmatics, which compared the ways in which two or more languages were used in communication (House-Edmondson, 1986: 282), have revealed that sociolinguistic rules of speaking vary across cultures (Gumperz & Hymes, 1964; Gao, Kao, & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Therefore, non-native speakers' insufficient knowledge of cross-cultural differences, along with their dependence on L1 sociocultural conventions in realizing L2 speech

acts, may hinder cross-cultural communication (Chang, 2009). For example, native speakers of English are able to mitigate the imposing force of their requests by using modal verbs (e.g., ‘could I...’), or past tense forms (e.g., ‘I wanted to...’). However, without such parallel verbal devices in their native language, Chinese EFL learners’ frequent use of English requests with ‘Can I...’ or ‘I want to...’ may be regarded as impolite or rude under some circumstances (Yu, 2002).

In the light of such factors causing miscommunication, studies of non-native speakers’ speech acts and cross-cultural communicative behavior have been regarded as vital in the field of interlanguage pragmatics to provide helpful pedagogical implications for language instruction. The growing area has focused on exploring non-native speakers’ speech acts, such as compliments, requests and apologies, but very little research has been done on non-native speakers’ refusals so far.

Refusal, denial of engaging in an action proposed by the interlocutor, has been regarded as a major “sticking point” in cross-cultural communication (Chen & Zhang, 1995). As a face-threatening act, “the inability to say ‘no’ clearly and politely has led many nonnative speakers to offend their interlocutors” (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, p.133). When carrying out a speech act of refusal, certain communication strategies or indirectness of language use may mitigate the degree of face-threat. However, a variety of factors, such as the notion of face, the politeness value, the degree of the indirectness, and types of linguistic forms are different according to languages and cultures. Hence, the linguistic barrier that already exists, in addition to the face-threatening nature of the speech act, further complicates the speech act of refusals, which also makes it difficult for non-native speakers to carry it out felicitously (Chen, 1996).

Previous studies (Morrow, 1995; Lee & Kang, 2001; Min, 2013) on the EFL learners’ speech act of refusals revealed that non-native speakers tended to be less indirect, used more negative and fewer positive strategies, and offered fewer excuses

and explanations than did native speakers. In addition, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1991) noted that although reasons were used frequently by both native and non-native speakers of English, the range of non-native speakers' content of refusal strategies was more unacceptable.

Furthermore, research findings also indicated that non-native speakers' refusals, like other speech acts, were affected by learners' L2 proficiency. There was evidence to suggest that higher proficiency learners were more likely to transfer L1 sociocultural conventions than lower proficiency learners because they have enough control over the L2 to express their feelings (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987), while other research findings (Kasper et al., 1996; Robinson, 1992; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989) revealed that more proficient learners showed less pragmatic transfer and were less likely to transfer L1 strategies than did the less proficient learners.

With regard to data collection methods, discourse completion tasks/tests (DCTs) (e.g., Al-Shalawi, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Chang, 2009; Kinjo, 1987; Liao, 1984; Lyuh, 1992) were most frequently employed, followed by other two important methods: role-plays (e.g., Lee, 2013, Taguchi, 2007, Gass & Houck, 1999; Morrow, 1995) and observation of naturalistic data (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991). DCT, which are questionnaires asking for appropriate responses in specific situations, has several advantages. For example, not only a lot of data can be easily collected, but also variables such as familiarity and social status can be controlled as well. However, the weaknesses of DCT such as lack of authenticity and naturalness of real interactions were also pointed out at the same time.

Although there are previous studies on cross-cultural speech act of refusals cover a variety of ethnic groups (e.g., American, Arabic, Egyptian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Saudis, etc.), a large amount of the research on non-native speakers' speech act of refusals in English has focused on Japanese and Korean

ESL/EFL learners (e.g., Beebe and Cummings 1985, 1996; Beebe et al, 1990; Gass & Houck 1999, Lee & Kang, 2000; Kim & Kwon, 2010; Min, 2013). L2 learners from other cultures, such as Chinese learners of English have received less attention. So far, few studies have specifically focused on how Chinese English learners vary from native English speakers in realizing the speech act refusal, and how these differences are related to Chinese EFL learners' L2 proficiency as well as the interlocutors' social status.

## **1.2 The Motivation of the Present Study**

Following previous studies, the present study tries to further explore the under-researched topic by examining Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusals in 12 different situations. This study has specific purposes, which differ from previous studies on Chinese learners' refusal in the following aspects.

Firstly, globalization tends to intensify worldwide communication, in areas including economy, politics, and culture. Through globalization, China has also established amicable relations with various countries, providing the Chinese people more opportunities to communicate with people from different cultures. One of such interactions is with America, a significant economic and trading partner of China, which has become one of the most important countries that China has come to frequently interact with. Such increased interaction between the two countries has clearly brought about, and is still bringing, great benefits to both countries in terms of economic, technological, and educational developments. At the same time, it has also increased possibilities of unintended misunderstandings due to the language barriers and different communicative styles between the two countries. This may possibly lead to unnecessary conflicts or profit loss. Therefore, it is imperative that studies be undertaken to examine cross-cultural communicative behaviors and speech acts of none-native speakers.

Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusal is an under-researched area since

previous studies on non-native speakers' speech act of refusals in English have mainly focused on Japanese and Korean ESL/EFL learners (e.g., Beebe & Cummings 1985, 1996; Beebe et al, 1990; Chang, 2009; Park, 1990; Gass & Houck 1999; Lee & Kang, 2000; Kwon, 2004; Iwata, 2006; Kim & Kwon, 2010; Min, 2013; Yu, 2014; Chung, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, although Japanese, Korean, and Chinese EFL learners possess some common features (all of them are Asian, belonging to high-context cultures and collectivists), Chinese EFL learners, with different L1 and sociocultural backgrounds have some unique features which are different from their Korean or Japanese counterparts in speech act of refusals. For instance, both Japanese and Korean EFL learners tend to use vague and less specific reasons compared to native English speakers (Beebe & Cummings, 1985, 1996; Beebe et al., 1990; Lee & Kang, 2000; Kim & Kwon, 2010), while Chinese EFL learners prefer to use more specific reasons, especially with higher status interlocutors (Chang, 2009; Jiang, 2015). It seems that the Chinese believe that such specific reasons could reduce the risk of offending the interlocutor's positive or negative face. However, a lack of knowledge in differences between culture-specific conventions and rules of speaking, probably causes confusion between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers and thus may lead to cross-cultural miscommunication.

For these reasons, it is necessary to study Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusal, which may not only help EFL to learners raise awareness of pragmatic conventions and rules of speaking in the target language but also help native English speakers to become familiar with Chinese EFL learners' distinctive features of refusal strategies. The current study may contribute to mitigating frictions in Sino-American relations and thus generate a desirable virtuous circle of cross-cultural communication.

Secondly, by investigating Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusals with

participants from mainland China, the present study makes itself unique. Most of the (limited number of) previous studies collected and analyzed data solely from Chinese EFL learners who lived in Taiwan or Chinese ESL/EFL learners who lived in the United States. It is true that “the Chinese people” refer not only to those in mainland China, but also to those in Hong Kong, Taiwan, United States, Australia, and many other geographical regions throughout the world. However, political and geographical boundaries, and also the degree of exposure to Western culture make the Chinese in different regions differ from each other with specific communication strategies and conventions. Hence, by exploring the scarcely reported group, i.e., EFL learners from the mainland China who have never been to English speaking countries, the present study intends to provide helpful and unique baseline data for future studies.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, the present study employs open role plays for data collection instead of written DCTs which were used by the most of previous studies. In spite of several advantages of DCTs such as convenience in data collection and easiness in data analysis, the present study insists on the elicitation method of open role play as it is regarded as the closest to what we might expect to reflect naturally occurring speech events (Gass & Houck, 1999). It is crucial to collect data that is as authentic as possible in order to reflect real life communication strategies and conventions. As argued earlier, data from DCTs varied greatly from data collected by naturalistic observation. Therefore, by using data from open role plays, this study will be able to provide evidence which reflects the true aspect of Chinese EFL learners’ speech act of refusal.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Based on the rationales, the present study aims to explore the following research questions

- 1) How do Chinese EFL learners realize the communicative act of refusal

compared to English native speakers?

- How do they differ in the use of semantic formulas and the content of semantic formulas?

2) How does learners' L2 proficiency affect their realization of the act of refusal?

3) Are there any differences in the linguistic forms employed by native English speakers and by Chinese EFL learners when they perform the speech act of refusal?

## **1.4 Organization of Chapters**

The present thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background and motivation of the study. Chapter 2 describes the theoretical and the empirical backgrounds of non-native speakers' speech act of refusals and their pragmatic transfer. Chapter 3 presents the method of the study, including subjects, the procedure of the experiments and the data analysis. Chapter 4 describes the results and discussions of the present study. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, and concludes with the pedagogical implications of the study and its limitations.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Background**

#### **2.1.1 Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Interlanguage pragmatics, as ‘the study of nonnative speakers’ use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge’ (Kasper & Rose 1999), is a combination of two different disciplines. Firstly, interlanguage pragmatics is a subfield of pragmatics. *Pragma*, originated from Greek, refers to action, activity, or affair. Generally, pragmatics studies a language from the viewpoint of the language users, especially of the choices they make, the sociocultural constraints they encounter in using the language in communication, and the effects their language use has on the interlocutor (Crystal, 1985). Hence, as a branch of pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics is concerned with language in use. Secondly, interlanguage pragmatics is also an offspring of the second language acquisition research, along with interlanguage syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics, and it focuses on second/foreign language learners’ use and acquisition of pragmatic knowledge.

#### **2.1.2 Pragmatic Competence**

The notion of pragmatic competence can be traced back to that of communicative competence, which was proposed by Hymes (1972) as a reaction against Chomsky’s (1965) notion of competence. In contrast to Chomsky who considered the rules of grammar alone and disregarded contextual appropriateness, Hymes’ communicative competence consists of grammatical competence as well as knowledge of the sociocultural rules of appropriate language use (Barron, 2003). It was Hymes’ idea influenced the shift in the second language teaching and learning trend from an interest in the language system in isolation to the study of language in use. This trend continued and was further developed by several researchers such as

Bachman (1990), Canale (1983) and Canale & Swain (1980). In Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence, the pragmatic competence came into its own. Three main elements, namely language competence, physiological mechanisms and strategic competence, constitute his model, and language competence is then further divided into organizational competence (including textual competence and grammatical competence) and pragmatic competence (including sociolinguistic competence and illocutionary competence).

In comparison to grammatical competence, which is considered as a decontextualized formal system of language (Leech, 1983), pragmatic competence is the ability to use language appropriately and effectively to reach a specific purpose and understand language "in context (Thomas, 1983)". In cross-cultural communication, pragmatic failure often result in more serious consequences than grammatical errors, as linguistic errors merely reveal that the speaker is less proficient in the language. On the other hand, pragmatic failure may lead to the misjudgment of a person as being unfriendly or even dishonest (Thomas, 1983, 1984).

### **2.1.3 Pragmatic Failure**

To judge an utterance as pragmatically successful, one must concern two types of judgment: the 'pragmalinguistic' judgment of the pragmatic force of a linguistic token and the 'sociopragmatic' assessment of the social distance, size of imposition, relative obligations and rights (Thomas, 1983). While pragmalinguistic failure is basically concerned as a linguistic problem, resulting from interlanguage-specific errors as well as from pragmatic transfer (Barron, 2003), sociopragmatic failure comes from cross-culturally various perceptions of which factors constitute an appropriate linguistic behavior (Thomas, 1983). A typical example of the pragmalinguistic failure is when a non-native speaker believes an utterance to have the illocutionary force of a request, but the hearer interprets the utterance as a

command, due to an inappropriate use of modification or of directness (Barron, 2003). For instance, native speakers usually mitigate the imposing force of their requests with using modal verbs, as in ‘I wonder if you could lend me 20 dollars’, while with insufficient knowledge of pragmalinguistic rules and conventions, non-native speakers’ request such as ‘Can you lend me 20 dollars?’ is regarded as impolite and inappropriate under some circumstances. An example of the sociopragmatic failure, on the other hand, is when Chinese EFL learners frequently use the Chinese way of speaking and value judgments in cross-cultural communication. For instance, faced with a compliment like ‘Your English is excellent’, Chinese interlocutors frequently negate it by answering ‘No, no, my English is really poor and it needs improving’ to show modesty. They are unaware that they have violated the Western cultural rule on receiving compliments. Hence, such an inappropriate response confuses native English speakers who usually accept the compliment by saying ‘Thank you’ to express his/her amicability.

Besides, the following example of sociopragmatic failure (Liu & Li, 2009) also comes from different conception of politeness between the Chinese and Western cultures.

Li Ping: Mrs. Johnson, I didn’t expect you could make such a beautiful  
oil painting.

Mrs. Johnson: Oh! What do you mean by “I didn’t expect”?

In Chinese culture, people tend to ‘denigrate self and elevate the other’ to show their respectfulness and modesty (Gu, 1990). In this dialogue, Li Ping wanted to ‘denigrate self’ by using ‘I didn’t expect’ to ‘elevate’ Mrs. Johnson’s ‘excellent painting skill’. However, this sounds impolite in English because ‘I didn’t expect to’ may indicate that Li Ping underestimated Mrs. Johnson’s competence in painting, which made Mrs. Johnson uncomfortable.

## 2.1.4 Pragmatic Transfer

Wolfson (1989) defined pragmatic transfer as ‘the use of rules of speaking from one’s own native speech community when interacting with members of the host speech community’. Pragmatic transfer has been regarded as a major factor in shaping non-native speakers’ pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 1992).

There are two differentiations relevant to the discussion of pragmatic transfer. Firstly, Thomas (1983), based on the distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, differentiates two types of pragmatic transfer: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer. Pragmalinguistic transfer occurs when learners transport certain forms and strategies from their native languages into their interlanguage (Barron, 2003). The transported items then influence the politeness value or illocutionary force of a particular utterance in a way which may be either similar or dissimilar to the target norm (Barron, 2003). For instance, due to the absence of past tense verb forms (e.g., ‘I wanted to...’) or modal verbs (e.g., ‘Could I...’) in Chinese, Chinese EFL/ESL learners frequently use ‘I want to...’ or ‘Can I...’ in English requests, which may be considered impolite or rude under some circumstances (Yu, 1999).

Sociopragmatic transfer, on the other hand, occurs when L2 learners perceive and interpret L2 contexts in the similar way as L1 contexts which may be different from L2 context and transfer their perceptions and interpretations about how to perform in a given situation from L1 to L2 situation (Chang, 2009). For instance, in a student’s own culture, teachers may be perceived to have a rather higher social status than in the United States in terms of social judgment, and this may lead the student to behave more deferentially than would normally be expected (sociopragmatic failure) (Moon, 1996). Yet, in spite of the distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer in the literature, Kasper (1992) revealed that these two concepts are frequently interrelated and hence are hard to

distinguish one from another in practice.

Secondly, another distinction associated with pragmatic transfer is the distinction between positive and negative transfer. Positive pragmatic transfer usually occurs “where language specific conventions of usage and use are demonstrably non-universal yet shared between L1 and L2” (Kasper, 1992: 212). According to previous studies (Blum-Kulka, 1982; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989), learners successfully transfer specific conventionally indirect forms for requesting, such as formal equivalents of ‘can you’ from Danish, German, and Japanese to English, ‘why not’ and ‘do you mind’ questions from English to Hebrew, and past tense modal forms from Danish and German to English (cited in Kasper, 1992). Negative pragmatic transfer, however, occurs when “L1-based sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge is used in L2 contexts and differs from the pragmatic perceptions and behaviors of the target community” (Kasper, 1992). With regard to previous empirical studies, much evidence of negative pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer has been found (e.g., Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Nikula, 1996; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). Such evidence sheds important lights on ways to help non-native speakers to avoid cross-cultural miscommunication.

### **2.1.5 Speech Acts**

The speech act theory still remains as one of the most significant theories in the field of pragmatics.

The concept of *speech act* originated from Austin’s (1962) idea that, irrespective of what we say, “the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action”. Austin maintains that in acting with words, a speaker produces three acts: firstly, the locutionary act, i.e., the act of uttering (morphemes, phonemes, sentences); secondly, the illocutionary act, i.e., the speaker’s (S) intention realized in producing an utterance, e.g., refusal, complain, apology; thirdly, the perlocutionary

act, i.e., the effect of an utterance on the hearer (H), e.g., to make a hearer do certain acts (Austin, 1962).

During speech act realization, pragmatic failure sometimes occurs, because of learners' pragmatic ignorance. Despite common features shared by different speech communities, the appropriateness criteria and the realization patterns of a speech act vary across cultures. However, non-native speakers prefer to transfer speech act conventions from their mother tongue to a target language, which often leads to pragmatic failure. Hence, being regarded as universally existent, culturally diverse, functionally important, and prone to pragmatic failure, speech acts is an important area in pragmatic research (Chen, 1996).

### **2.1.6 Western and Chinese Concepts of Face and Politeness**

Speech acts are realized by the employment of politeness strategies to deal with face work. Following Holmes' (1995) definition, the term 'politeness' refers to "behavior which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behavior (p.5)."

The most significant contribution to the politeness phenomenon in conversation is perhaps Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness principle. According to them, politeness phenomena are closely associated with the notion of face, which is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987, p.61). In interaction, face "can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to (Brown & Levinson, 1987)". The notion of face can be divided into two components: the positive face and the negative face. The former is the desire of the individual to "be approved of, accepted, recognized and liked by others", while the latter is the desire of the individual "not to be imposed on". It is universally common that people try to maintain each other's positive and negative face in order to get along in a society, yet how the positive and the negative face are maintained and balanced is different across cultures (Chen, 1996). According to Brown and

Levinson, several factors such as social distance, rights and obligation, size of imposition, and relative power affect the degree of mitigation to face-threatening acts.

However, the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been criticized from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. In the light of accounts from several researchers, such as Gu (1990), Mao (1994) and Matsumoto (1998), the universality of the concept of face has come into question because it presupposes that the notion of self is identical across cultures (Kasper, 1994). These researchers proposed that Brown and Levinson's focus on individualism only reflects an ethnocentric Western-bias. In Eastern cultures, more specifically in China and Japan, face is not just a personal concept, but is rather an interpersonal concept, having to do with group membership (Barron, 2003).

Eastern and Western cultures, more specifically, Chinese and American cultures are culturally and pragmatically very different from each other. According to previous studies on face, it is said that people from collectivistic and individualistic cultures assign different meanings to the content notions of face (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998). For example, the Chinese, classified as collectivists, tend to emphasize the inclusion of others, the nonimposition of self on others, and other-directed face work competence. Concerning more about others' thoughts on one's worth than about oneself, face is regarded as social self-respect and projected social image in collectivistic cultures. To Chinese people, losing and gaining face is closely related with issues of social dignity, pride, respect, insult, and humility, etc.

In contrast, individualists such as Americans tend to emphasize the noninclusion of others, nonimposition by others, and self-presentational facework competence. In American culture, face is mostly connected with self-presentation, self-worth and self-value (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998).

Thus, with lack of knowledge in differences between the Chinese and American

notion of face, politeness value, and sociolinguistic rules, Chinese learners of English are at risk of threatening interlocutors' positive or negative face in realizing speech acts, which may lead to detrimental cross-cultural miscommunication.

### **2.1.7 Speech Act of Refusal: A Face-threatening Act**

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people involved in social interaction generally cooperate to maintain each participant's face. However, certain speech acts such as refusals, complaints, requests, and disagreements are, by their very nature, likely to threaten both the speaker's and the interlocutor's positive or negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) termed such acts that intrinsically infringe on a person's positive or negative face as a *Face Threatening Act* (FTA).

Refusal, in other words, denial to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor, has been regarded as a typical face-threatening act and a "major sticking point" in cross-cultural communication (Chen & Zhang, 1995). In conveying a negative response, which contradicts the expectation of the interlocutor, the speaker is at a great risk of offending the interlocutor's positive or negative face. To reduce this risk, a speaker needs to keep a balance between politeness and clarity in his/her refusal message, which asks for a high level of pragmatic competence. However, besides some common refusal strategies in different cultures, the degree of indirectness, contents of refusals, types of linguistic forms and the politeness value vary across languages and cultures. Moreover, in addition to the face-threatening nature of the speech act, the linguistic barrier that already exists further complicates the speech act of refusals and makes it difficult for non-native speakers to carry it out in a target-like manner (Chen, 1996).

## **2. 2 Previous Studies on Speech Act of Refusals**

### **2.2.1 Cross-cultural Comparison of Refusal Speech Acts**

Perhaps the most well-known study on cross-cultural speech act of refusal was

conducted by Beebe and Takahashi (1990). In their study, Beebe et al. analyzed data from native speakers of Japanese, native speakers of English, and Japanese learners of English. Participants were asked to respond to a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of 12 written situations including invitations, requests, suggestions and offers. Then, the participants' responses were analyzed based on the order, frequency and content of the semantic formulas. The results showed that Japanese learners of English differed from native English speakers, and resembled native speakers of Japanese in their speech act of refusals. Japanese speaking Japanese and Japanese English learners displayed noticeable code switching in the frequency of apology/regret formulas between higher and lower status interlocutors, whereas American English speakers did not. However, American English speakers employed more regret responses when refusing an equal's request over a lower and higher status person's request. This study revealed that Japanese participants (native Japanese speakers and Japanese EFL learners) were particularly sensitive to high versus low status in their code-switching, whereas native speakers of English were sensitive to status equals versus status unequals. With regard to the content of semantic formulas, excuses made by native Japanese and Japanese EFL learners seemed to be more vague and less specific than those of native English speakers.

By using a DCT, Iwata (2006) analyzed refusal strategies used by 104 Japanese EFL students and 100 English native speakers. The findings indicated that American speakers tried to provide a fairly honest reason, while Japanese EFL students preferred to choose reasons not under their control. Ebsworth and Nobuko (2011) also examined refusals negotiated and understood by adult female native speakers of American English and Japanese. A request was refused with open role-plays produced by 8 pairs of Japanese and 8 pairs of American English speakers and then semi-structured post-hoc interviews with participants and interpretations were triangulated with bilingual experts. Results indicated that while both groups used

fillers, softeners, hedges, and backchannels, fragmented utterances were more common among Japanese speakers. Americans frequently offered alternative plans and commented on the importance of honesty while Japanese participants often implied refusal, using postponement. Some American refusals were experienced as impolite by Japanese informants, while Americans identified the Japanese postponement strategy as problematic.

Park (1990) investigated speech acts of requests and refusals between English and Korean. Data from 52 adult native speakers of English (native English teachers at Korean language institutes or universities), 110 non-native speakers of English (undergraduates majoring in English) and 108 native speakers of Korean (undergraduates in other majors) were collected by using the Discourse Completion Tests. The results indicated that although the structure of Adjuncts + Head Act + (Closing Adjuncts) was shared among the three subject groups, the quantity of the adjuncts was varied according to social factors. English native speakers used the most number of adjuncts, followed by non-native speakers and Korean native speakers. In the use of adjuncts, non-native speakers used less alternatives. In addition, among the Head act strategies, an “excuse” form was used most frequently.

Lee and Kang (2001) also conducted a study by comparing refusal strategies used by native Americans and Korean EFL learners by using DCT. They reported that compared to the native American group, the Korean EFL learners tended not to use direct refusal strategies such as ‘I can’t’ or ‘no’. They also found that refusal strategies employed by Korean EFL learners were generally more vague in that they express gratitude and regret/apology frequently.

In addition, Jung and Kim (2008) studied the speech act of refusal used by Korean EFL learners. By analyzing DCT data, they found that when refusing interlocutors of higher status, Korean EFL learners tended to use regret/apology strategies frequently while native English speakers preferred to use direct strategies.

However, when refusing equal status interlocutors, native English speakers preferred to use alternative and dissuade interlocutors strategies (e.g. criticism) while Korean EFL learners still used regret/apology strategies frequently due to the modesty and humbleness in Korean culture.

Besides, Kim and Kwon (2010) also analyzed the nature of L1 influence. With DCT data, they found that native Korean and Korean EFL learners tended to provide less specific reasons and more indirect refusal strategies than native English speakers. They stated that Koreans' indirect refusal strategies may appear rude to native English speakers and may probably lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings between the native English speakers and Korean EFL learners.

The relevant studies on the Chinese speech act of refusals were not as rich as other languages such as Japanese or Korean. With a 16-item production questionnaire, Chen et al. (1995) investigated substantive refusal in Chinese by analyzing data from fifty male and fifty female native speakers of Chinese living in the U.S. The analysis of the data showed that giving reasons (32.6%) was the most frequently used refusal strategies in native Chinese speakers, which may be the best justification for refusal without running the risk of losing or hurting *mianzi* (face) on either side. It was followed by the alternative (14%), for example, 'Can you consider next year?' or 'Can you let me do it after my exam?' as the next frequently used strategy in Chinese refusal, which enabled refusers to avoid a direct confrontation. The high frequency of offering alternatives, which was used to soften the threatening power of refusals, showed the influence of the notion of "respectfulness" and "modesty" in Chinese politeness conceptions.

Liao and Bresnahan (1996) used DCT to investigate refusal strategies used by university students in the United States and Taiwan. The findings revealed that Americans were less likely to refuse a friend, Chinese a family member. Also, Chinese people were more economic at making excuses which may be due to a

politeness hypothesis of *dian-dao-wei-zhi* ‘marginally touching the point’. In addition, significantly more Chinese offered specific reasons for refusing a high-status interlocutor. The ways in which politeness was manifested in both culture reflected modest nature of the Asian countries and the non-self-denigrative nature of Western countries.

With regard to Chinese EFL learners’ speech act of refusal, Chen (1996) metapragmatically compared Americans’ and Taiwanese EFL learners’ criteria for appropriateness of refusal responses. The metapragmatic questionnaire included four refusal-eliciting scenarios, and each scenario was followed by six refusal statements which were randomly selected from the DCT data made by native and nonnative speakers. The findings revealed that participants from both groups conformed with their judgment of low-appropriateness statements collected from nonnative speakers, and high-appropriateness statements made by native speakers. Chen reported that the native speakers considered directness, effectiveness, clarity and truthfulness as the most important with valuing individuality and asserting the function of the speech act, whereas the Taiwanese English learners were more concerned about preserving face, being indirect and avoiding embarrassment.

More recently, Chang (2009) used DCT and analyzed refusal strategies produced by native speakers of Chinese, Chinese EFL learners with different proficiency levels, and native speakers of English. The refusal responses were then analyzed in terms of the content and the frequency of semantic formulas. The results indicated that Chinese EFL learners with higher and lower proficiency levels, like the native speakers of Chinese, used significantly fewer direct refusal strategies than did the native speakers of English. In addition, although there were several similarities among the four groups in the content of the semantic formulas, due to pragmatic transfer, some excuses only appeared in the native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners’ refusals and never appeared in the native American refusals. For example,

native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners used “my notes are not perfect” in refusing a classmate’s request to borrow class notes while none of the American group did so.

Besides, Jiang (2015) studied refusal speech act produced by Chinese high school EFL learners. By analyzing written DCT data, this research suggested that in terms of the frequency of semantic formulas, American speakers liked to use more direct refusal strategies and positive feelings than the Chinese speakers. Apparent pragmatic transfer could be found in Chinese EFL learners with higher and lower proficiency levels as regard to the frequency of semantic formulas. For instance, both the Chinese speakers and EFL learners used address forms while no one in native English group used them. In addition, a large amount of pragmatic transfer could be found in the content of refusal strategy of excuse. Statistics showed that both the native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners used similar content as an excuse when giving a rejection. In terms of pragmatic transfer and L2 linguistic ability, results indicate that co-relationship was negative.

### **2.2.2 L2 Proficiency and Pragmatics Transfer**

Although many empirical studies have revealed that transfer may exist at different proficiency level (e.g., Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Olshtain and Cohen, 1989; Takahashi and DuFon1989, Beebe et al., 1990), the relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer has always been regarded as controversial. Only a few of studies have considered the relationship between pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency in non-native speakers’ speech act of refusals.

For example, by analyzing the written refusals of Japanese speakers of English, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) discovered pragmatic transfer effects in the distribution and frequency of semantic formulas. According to their report, while the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer occurred among Japanese ESL/EFL learners at both higher and lower levels of proficiency, higher proficiency learners tended to

transfer more, since they had enough control over the L2 to express their L1 sociocultural norms and feelings more freely (Chang, 2009).

However, controversial findings from a few studies, such as Takahashi and DuFon's (1989) study, revealed that when perform a speech act of request, Japanese ESL learners with higher proficiency level were affected less by their L1 strategies than the lower proficiency learners. Also, Robinson's (1992) study showed that ESL learners at lower proficiency levels tended to be influenced by L1 refusal style more than the higher proficiency learners. Moreover, Maeshiba et al. (1996) demonstrated that Japanese ESL learners with lower proficiency level were more likely to transfer L1 apology strategies than the higher proficiency learners. Besides, Chang's (2009) study, which examined the refusals of Chinese speakers of English at different proficiency levels, reported that Takahashi's hypothesis that transfer increases as the non-native speakers' L2 proficiency increases was not supported in her study.

### **2.2.3 Data Collection Methods for Studies on Interlanguage Pragmatics**

The methodology, more specifically data collection methods, has been regarded as one of the most important factors in interlanguage pragmatic research. To ensure the value, validity and reliability of studies, proper and reliable data collection methods have been carefully investigated over the years. Wolfson (1986) suggested that methods for collecting speech act data can generally be categorized into two types, i.e., observation and elicitation. With regard to previous studies, observation of naturalistic data, discourse completion tasks/tests (DCT), and role plays seem to be the three major data collection methods for the speech act research.

#### **2.2.3.1 Observation of Naturalistic Data**

As a highly context-driven discipline, pragmatics may be best investigated with an observational approach when a speech act really occurs and is recorded

immediately as authentic and natural data, documenting specific utterances (tones, pitches, pauses, etc.) with description of events, situations, gender, status, and the relationships of the interlocutors. Collected as actually happened data, they help readers and researchers easily reconstruct the whole speech act event to judge the pragmatic appropriateness of the interlocutors (Chen, 1996).

However, few studies employed this method because of its limitations. The disadvantages of collecting “authentic data” are that large samples are too difficult to come by, since examples of a particular speech act may occur unpredictably and rarely (Wolfson, 1986). In addition, without intervening, not only variables are hard to be controlled, but also research findings are difficult to be generalized from individual, limited and inconsistent situations. With regard to previous research on non-native speakers’ speech act of refusals, only Bardovi-Harling and Harford (1991) employed the observation approach. Refusal strategies from academic sessions, which were performed by native and non-native speakers were analyzed and compared by the researchers.

### **2.2.3.2 Discourse Completion Task/Test (DCT)**

The most widely used elicitation method in speech act research is the discourse completion task/test (DCT). A DCT is a written questionnaire containing a series of briefly described situations, followed by a dialogue with blank lines drawn for the specific responses. Participants are asked to provide what they would actually say under given situations. The advantages of the DCT are obvious. Firstly, a great number of data can be gathered in a relatively short period of time from a wide range of respondents with different characteristics. Secondly, it allows researchers to easily control variables of the situation (e.g., age, gender and social status of the subjects in a given speech act), and thus providing the coherent findings to the research, which might have been difficult to achieve with other research methods (Wolfson, 1989).

However, disadvantages of the DCT are also noteworthy. Collected by written

questionnaires, responses from DCTs can hardly reflect real-life interaction and natural conversation with respect to 1) strategies and the range of formulas used 2) the actual wording occurred in real interaction 3) the length of response or number of turns it takes to fulfill the function 4) the depth of emotion that qualitatively affects the content, tone and form of linguistic performance, etc. (Beebe & Cumming, 1985). There have been numerous studies on non-native speakers' speech act of refusals using DCTs (Al-Shalawi, 1997; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Chang, 2009; Chen et al, 1995; Kinjo, 1987; Liao, 1994; Lyuh, 1992.).

### **2.2. 3.3 Role Play**

Since naturalistic data are difficult to come by and data from DCTs can hardly reflect the real-life conversation, role plays are sometimes used to collect authentic data. In a role play, participants are given instructions that specify the initial situation, the roles, and communicative goals, without prescribing conversational outcomes.

Role plays generally can be divided into two types: closed role plays and open role plays. Closed role plays are similar to oral version of the DCTs, which ask participants to provide a one-turn oral response to a given situation. As a type of elicitation methods that is closed, a closed role play does not allow for a free range of answers and interaction, which is questionable whether or not it can truly reflect the naturally occurring conversation (Gass & Houck, 1999).

In an open role play, interaction is played out by two participants in response to situations given by the researcher. The advantages of the open role play are that not only the pragmatic interactions can be investigated in contexts, but also researchers can observe the negotiation process and other characteristics of natural conversation more easily (Chen, 1996). Furthermore, it is replicable and thus allows for native-nonnative comparison in cross-cultural studies (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p.229). In a study of non-native speakers' speech act of refusals, in addition to oral/written DCTs, Turnbull (1994) also employed actual telephone calls and open role

plays. The results revealed that data from both oral and written DCTs varied greatly from data collected by naturalistic observation and by open role plays in the internal structure of the speech acts and in the distribution of types of the speech acts. Then, comparing open role play data with naturalistic data, Turnbull reported that although the former seem to be more repetitive and rambling, they were similar to the latter in many respects. Hence, among common data elicitation methods, open role plays seem to be the closest to what we might expect to reflect naturally occurring speech events (Gass & Houck 1999).

Admittedly, open role plays are not problem-free. For instance, participants tend to be obliged to produce the item the investigator is interested in studying (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) and thus may threaten the validity of the study. Besides, open role plays are time-consuming in data analysis.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The participants in the present study include 20 male and 28 female Chinese college students and native speakers of American English who are living in China: 12 Chinese native speakers, 12 native speakers of American English, 12 Chinese EFL learners with higher L2 proficiency, and 12 Chinese EFL learners with intermediate L2 proficiency. The following are the participant groups:

(1) Native speakers of Chinese (NC): Baseline intra-cultural data from Chinese native speakers were collected as a potential source of the EFL learners' different realization behaviors from target norms. Twelve undergraduate students whose mother tongue is Mandarin participated in this experiment. They were from 7 different majors at the same university and their majors were not related to English. The average age in this group was 21.5 years old.

(2) Native speakers of English (NE): Baseline cross-cultural data from English native speakers were collected for investigating Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage features. 12 native speakers of American English who live in China participated in this experiment. They were English teachers or exchange students at the same university in China. The average years they have stayed in China were 2.6 years and the average age of this group was 31 years old.

(3) Chinese EFL learners (CE-H/I): Two groups of English EFL learners were selected to represent higher proficiency and intermediate proficiency learners respectively. Different proficiency levels were determined by two college English exams implemented in the People's Republic of China, which are the CET-4 (The College English Test Band-4) and the TEM-8 (The Test for English Majors Band-8).

The CET is a "National English as a Foreign Language Test" in the People's

Republic of China, which includes two levels, i.e., Band-4 and Band-6. Those who received scores over 425 (710 in total) in Band-4 are qualified to take CET-6, which is much more difficult in all aspects, including listening, reading, and writing (speaking test is not included). The TEM is a test for English majors, which includes two levels: Band 4 and Band 8. TEM-8 is the highest level for English major students.

Therefore, the intermediate proficiency group was composed of 12 college students from 7 different majors (non-English major) who had only passed the CET-4, while participants in the higher proficiency group were 12 English majors who had passed the most difficult exam TEM-8.

The average ages of the higher and intermediate proficiency groups were 22 and 20 respectively, and the average years they had studied English were 10 and 8.5 years respectively. All participants from the EFL learners group are able to speak only two languages, which are Chinese and English. They reported that they had never been to English speaking countries and that they had learned English only from school instruction.

**Table 1 Information for participants**

Participants	Average age	Major/ Occupation	English Proficiency (average years of learning English)
NC	21.5	7 different majors/non-English majors	
NE	31	English teachers/ exchange students (average length of stay in China: 2.6 years)	Native speakers
CE-H	22	English majors	TEM-8 (10 years)

### 3.2 Description of the Role-play Materials

The elicitation material used for data collection in this study was the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) developed by Beebe et al (1990). However, the written role play questionnaires were adapted into oral role plays (see Appendix A). In addition, to ensure the materials sound more familiar and natural to Chinese participants, names of cities or restaurants in the original DCT questionnaire were slightly changed. For instance, “Hicktown” was replaced by “Shanghai”.

The 12 situations were categorized into three invitations, three requests, three offers and three suggestions to elicit refusals. Meanwhile, each item specified the refuser’s social status relative to the interlocutor (high, equal, low).

In order to collect Chinese native speakers’ responses, the English versions of the 12 situations and descriptions were translated into Chinese (Appendix B) and then participants from this group were asked to provide corresponding refusals in Mandarin. The translations was kept as close to the original English versions as possible. Furthermore, to ensure the validity of the Chinese version of descriptions and situations, a Chinese-English bilingual was invited to check the content and appropriateness of the Chinese version of the scenarios.

**Table 2 12 refusal situations.**

12 refusal situations			
Initiating act	Item	Social status	Situation
Offer	#12	$S < H$	Promotion with move to Shanghai
Offer	#1	$S = H$	Another piece of cake

Offer	#8	$S > H$	Pay for broken vase
Request	#5	$S < H$	Work extra hours
Request	#2	$S = H$	Borrow class notes
Request	#11	$S > H$	Request raise in pay
Invitation	#10	$S < H$	Boss's party
Invitation	#3	$S = H$	Dinner at a friend's house
Invitation	#7	$S > H$	Expensive restaurant
Suggestion	#9	$S < H$	Write reminders (notes)
Suggestion	#6	$S = H$	Try colorful clothes
Suggestion	#4	$S > H$	More conversation in class

Social status in Scenario

$S > H$  The speaker has more power

$S < H$  The hearer has more power

$S = H$  The speaker and the hearer have equal power

### 3.3 Data Collection

The participants, randomly chosen on the campus with fliers posted on various departments' boards, were students or teachers of Yanbian University and Yanbian University of Science and Technology from the People's Republic of China. To ensure that the participants fully understand the undergoing experiments, instructions were given to all participants both orally and in written form. Each participant had about ten minutes to prepare their answers. Then, a trained interviewer (an English major who had passed TEM-8) initiated the dialogues based on the given 12 situations (Appendix C) to elicit the participants' speech act of refusals. Participants from the Chinese EFL learners' group and the native speakers of English group were asked to provide responses in English according to the English version of the 12 situations. Participants from the native speakers of Chinese group, on the other hand, were asked to respond in Chinese based on the Chinese versions of the 12 situations. All participants were asked to imagine themselves in the actual

12 situations and to make refusals by giving proper and adequate reasons to their interlocutors. It takes an average of ten minutes for each participant to finish his/her answer. When experiments were finished, every participant received a gift for their time and effort.

The following are instruction and examples of the test items.

Instructions: please imagine yourself in the following 12 situations and make a refusal (with proper and adequate reasons) to your interlocutor. Respond as if you were in the actual situation.

Scenario 1: You are at a friend's house for lunch. Your friend offers you another piece of cake.

Scenario 2: You are a hard-working college student. You attend class regularly and take good notes. But your classmate often misses class and wants to borrow your lecture notes before the examination.

The experiments took place in a quiet room with one participant facing one interviewer at once, and all the dialogues were carefully recorded by using a smart phone recorder. Before the experiment, all participants were given a short questionnaire to complete, which included questions about their demographic information (Appendix D), and signed a consent form (Appendix E) for the study. Besides, EFL learners were asked to provide responses to additional questions on the questionnaire (Appendix D). Examples of these additional questions are: "Have you ever learnt how to perform appropriate speech acts in college?" and "Do you know how to perform English refusal appropriately?", etc.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Taxonomy of Refusals**

Data collected by open-role plays were analyzed by the author on the basis of semantic formulas of refusals proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). To ensure the validity

and the reliability of data analysis, a Chinese-English bilingual was invited to check responses from two randomly chosen situations (among twelve situations) for each group. A Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a high correlation between the author and the bilingual, which was  $r = .784, p = .000 (p < .01)$ .

Beebe et al.'s refusal taxonomy was developed by analyzing refusal strategies used by twenty Japanese speaking Japanese, twenty Japanese speaking English and twenty Americans speaking English, using the written discourse completion test (DCT). In this study, a list of semantic formulas used by Americans and Japanese EFL learners was carefully categorized. This taxonomy, which covers a wide range of possibly occurring semantic formulas in the speech act of refusal and was used as a method to analyze the taxonomy in most of the following studies on the speech act of refusal (Lee & Kang, 2000; Kwon, 2004; Iwata, 2006; Zhou, 2007; Jung & Kim, 2008; Chang, 2009; Kim, 2009; Kim & Kwon, 2010; Yu, 2014; Chung, 2014; Jiang, 2015).

Hence, the present study also modified Beebe et al.'s (1990) list of semantic formulas to analyze the data. A semantic formula refers to "a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question (Cohen, 1996, p 253)." According to Beebe et.al (1990), refusals consist of a sequence of a semantic formula as an independent idea unit and an adjunct to semantic formula as a supporting idea unit. Semantic formulas can independently function as a refusal utterance (direct and indirect strategies), while adjuncts to semantic formulas cannot independently function as a refusal because they often imply positive opinions or feelings in response to the requests (adjunct strategies). For example, here is a refusal of a friend's offer to have another piece of cake: "I would love to, but I am really full. I'd rather try it later", this can be coded as: [positive opinion][excuse, reason][alternative].

However, in the present study, acceptance that functions as a refusal (e.g., lack of enthusiasm) and nonverbal aspect in avoidance (e.g., silence, physical departure) were not examined.

The classification categories of refusals are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3 Classification of refusal strategies**

---

**I. Direct**

A. "No"

B. Negative willingness/ability ("I can't." "I won't". "I don't think so.")

**II. Indirect**

A. Apology, regret (e.g., "I'm sorry. . ."; "I feel terrible. . .")

B. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help. . .")

C. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., "I have other plans")

D. Alternative

1. "I'd rather. . ." "I'd prefer. . ."

2. "Why don't you ask someone else?"

E. Avoidance

1. Repetition of part of request, etc. (e.g., "Monday?")

2. Postponement (e.g., "I'll think about it.")

3. Hedging (e.g., "I don't know." "I'm not sure.")

F. Future or past acceptance (e.g., "I'll do it next time")

G. Philosophy (e.g., "Everyone makes mistakes")

H. Dissuade Interlocutor

1. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., "Don't worry about it." "That's okay." "You don't have to.")

2. Self-defense (e.g., "I'm trying my best." "I'm doing all I can do.")

3. Criticize the request/requester, etc. (statement of negative of feeling or opinion)

### III. Adjuncts to refusal

- A. Positive opinion/feeling or agreement ("That's a good idea. . ."; "I'd love to. . .")
- B. Empathy (e.g., "I understand...")
- C. Pause fillers (e.g., "well", "oh", "uhm")
- D. Gratitude/appreciation (e.g., "Thank you...")

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(Beebe et al., 1990, p.72)

#### 3.4.2 Frequency and Content of the Semantic Formulas

Once all the participants' responses were coded, refusal strategies produced by NC, CE-H, CE-I, and NE groups were analyzed by the author in terms of the frequency and the content of semantic formulas. In addition, the social status of speaker and the EFL learners' L2 proficiency levels became important factors in further analyzing the data. This is because status plays an important role in Chinese social interaction due to the influence of the Confucian ethical system. L2 proficiency level has also been regarded as an important variable in EFL learners' speech act behavior. Hence, with different cultural backgrounds and L2 proficiency levels, the features in the frequency and the content of semantic formulas in the speech act of refusal may differ between the four groups. However, social distance was not examined in the present study, and therefore, the social distance between interlocutors and refusers could be understood as neutral.

The frequency of semantic formulas means the number of times that one particular semantic formula occurs in each situation in each groups. Hence, the data were calculated by using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{The number of one particular semantic formula in each situation in each group}}{\text{The number of total semantic formula in each situation in each group}} * 100\%$$

The frequency of semantic formulas used by each group was carefully analyzed according to the interlocutors' social status. The baseline data from the native speakers of Chinese were then consulted to identify the possible occurrences of pragmatic transfer. The results were converted into percentages for the purpose of reporting.

Qualitative assessments were used to find out similarities and differences in the frequency of semantic formulas used in Chinese EFL learners' refusals. First of all, according to the Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification system, semantic formulas were categorized as "direct refusals", "indirect refusals" and "adjuncts to refusals" to examine the overall tendency of each group in choosing semantic formulas. Second, since status plays an important role in Chinese social interaction, detailed semantic formulas such as reason, regret, alternative, etc. (Table 3) chosen by each group were further analyzed based on the interlocutors' social status.

Variability in the content of the semantic formulas used by the four groups in each of the situations were also carefully analyzed. These differences in the frequencies and content of semantic formulas were investigated to figure out interlanguage features as well as social values and conventions embedded in different cultures.

### **3.4.3 Linguistic Forms in Native and Non-native English Speakers**

A pragmalinguistic analysis was also conducted to investigate a general trend in linguistic forms employed by native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. Downgraders which modulate the impact of the speaker's utterance on the hearer (Edmondson, 1977; House & Kasper, 1981) were used as a method of analyzing the data. Since the types and frequencies of downgraders may affect the politeness of a speech act, the number of certain downgraders employed by participants in the whole situations were calculated. The following are the downgraders which were employed

in the present study.

1. Hesitator

Deliberately employed malformations, used to impress on Y the fact that X has qualms about performing his ensuing act.

(e.g., *erm, er/ah, stuttering, reduplication*)

2. Play-down

Syntactical devices used to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the addressee, e.g.

(a) *past tense: I wondered if...*

(b) *durative aspect marker: I was wondering if...*

(c) *modal: Mightn't,...*

3. Downtoner

Sentence modifiers which are used by X in order to modulate the impact his utterance is likely to have on Y.

(e.g., *just, simply, possibly, perhaps*)

4. Cajoler

Cajolers are elements used to increase, establish, or restore harmony between the interlocutors.

(e.g., *you know, you see*)

5. Minus (-) committer

Sentence modifiers which are used to lower the degree to which the speaker commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition. The speaker thus explicitly characterizes his utterance as his personal opinion (e.g., *I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion*).

(Edmondson, 1977; Kasper, 1981, p.166-168)

The data from the native Chinese speakers were not investigated due to the lack of similarity between the downgraders in the English and the Chinese language.

According to Blum-Kulka (1982, 1983), the conventional use of certain forms and the downgraders in the speech acts will not be readily translatable across languages as they are language-specific features.

## Chapter 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Frequency of the Semantic Formulas

#### 4.1.1 Group Differences in the Frequency of the Semantic Formulas

Table 4 indicates patterns of semantic formulas used by the four groups in all situations. Generally, while native speakers of Chinese and Chinese EFL learners of intermediate proficiency level heavily relied on the indirect refusals (73.6% and 71.4%, respectively) and used relatively fewer adjuncts to refusals (12.2% and 18.2%, respectively), native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners of the higher proficiency level used less indirect refusals (60.0% and 65.4%, respectively) and more adjuncts (25.8% and 24.9%, respectively) than the other two groups.

**Table 4 Semantic formulas for four cultural groups (All situations, \*: raw score)**

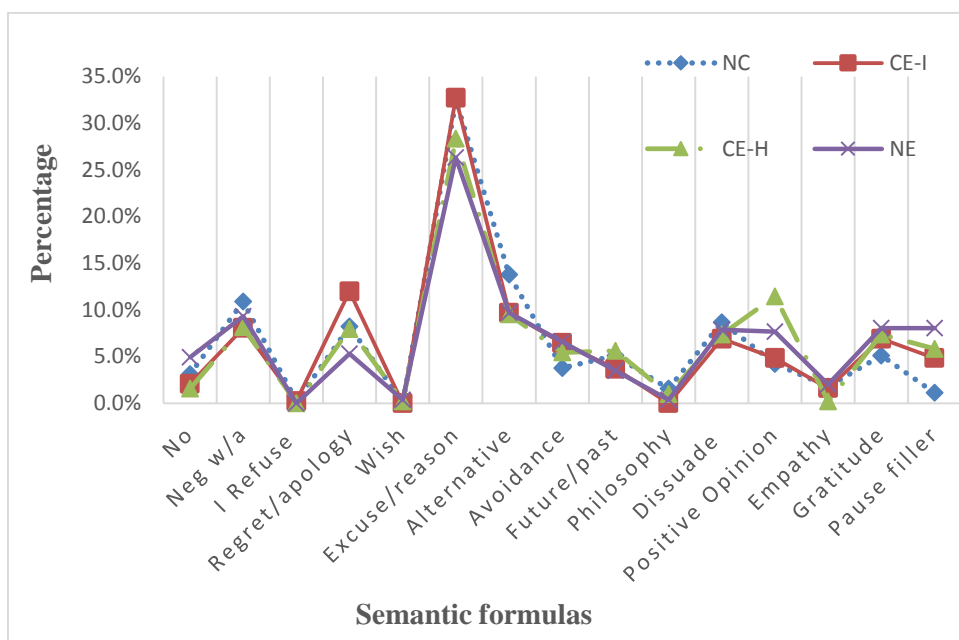
Semantic formula	Number of semantic formula	NC (%)	CE-I (%)	CE-H (%)	NE (%)				
<b>Direct</b>	<b>(237)</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>(64)</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>(45)</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>(50)</b>	<b>14.3</b>	<b>(78)</b>
No	(58)	3.1	(14)	2.1	(9)	1.6	(8)	4.9	(27)
Neg. w/a	(177)	10.9	(49)	8.1	(35)	8.2	(42)	9.3	(51)
I Refuse	(2)	0.2	(1)	0.2	(1)	0.0	(0)	0.0	(0)
<b>Indirect</b>	<b>(1306)</b>	<b>73.6</b>	<b>(331)</b>	<b>71.4</b>	<b>(310)</b>	<b>65.4</b>	<b>(337)</b>	<b>60.0</b>	<b>(328)</b>
Regret/Apology	(159)	8.2	(37)	12.0	(52)	8.0	(41)	5.3	(29)
Wish	(3)	0.0	(0)	0.0	(0)	0.2	(1)	0.4	(2)
Excuse, reason	(578)	32.4	(146)	32.7	(142)	28.3	(146)	26.3	(144)
Alternative	(206)	13.8	(62)	9.7	(42)	9.5	(49)	9.7	(53)
Avoidance	(109)	3.8	(17)	6.5	(28)	5.4	(28)	6.6	(36)
Future/past	(87)	5.1	(23)	3.7	(16)	5.6	(29)	3.5	(19)
Philosophy	(14)	1.6	(7)	0.0	(0)	1.0	(5)	0.4	(2)
Dissuade	(150)	8.7	(39)	6.9	(30)	7.4	(38)	7.9	(43)
<b>Adjunct</b>	<b>(403)</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>(55)</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>(79)</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>(128)</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>(141)</b>
Positive opinion	(141)	4.2	(19)	4.8	(21)	11.5	(59)	7.7	(42)

Empathy	(27)	1.8	(8)	1.6	(7)	0.2	(1)	2.0	(11)
Gratitude	(135)	5.1	(23)	6.9	(30)	7.4	(38)	8.0	(44)
Pause filler	(100)	1.1	(5)	4.8	(21)	5.8	(30)	8.0	(44)
<b>Total</b>	<b>(1946)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>(450)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>(434)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>(515)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>(547)</b>

As shown in Figure 1, the most common semantic formula for refusals was excuse/reason for both the English native speakers and EFL learners. However, the actual portion of this formula differed among the groups. Similar to NC's data (32.4%), it constituted 32.7% in the CE-I's data, which are higher than both CE-H (28.3%) and NE's data (26.3%).

Also, the learners and native English speakers differed in the use of regret/apology and positive opinion strategies. CE-Is utilized the regret/apology formula most frequently with 12%, followed by NCs (8.2%) and CE-Hs (8.0%), which were all higher than the native English speakers (5.3%). With regard to positive opinions, CE-Hs (11.5%) and NEs (7.7%) used them more frequently than CE-Is (4.8%) and NCs (4.2%). Besides, the native English group used pause fillers (8.0%) more than the other three groups.

**Figure 1 Semantic formulas for four cultural groups**



#### 4.1.2 Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusing Higher Status Interlocutors

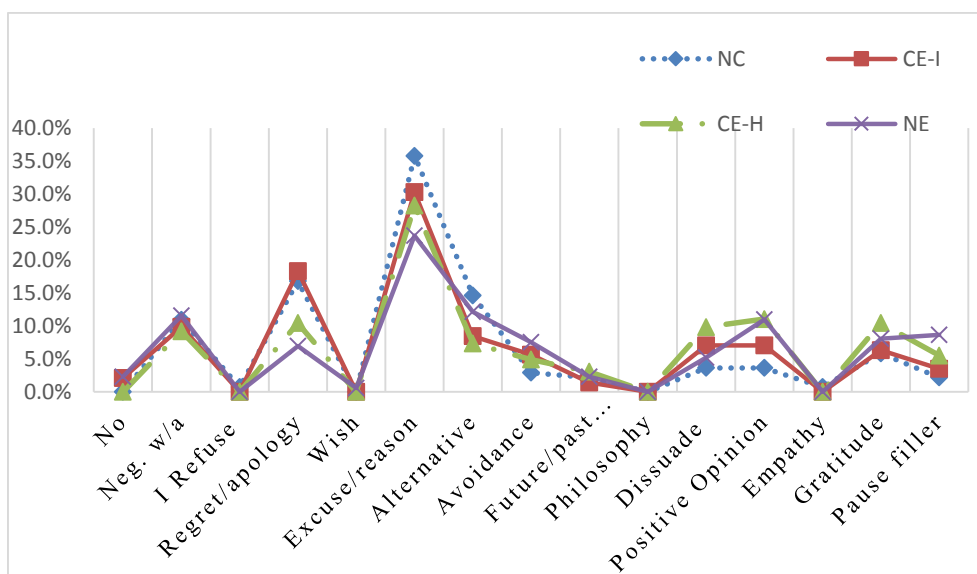
Table 5 presents the distribution of semantic formulas when refusing higher status interlocutors (including situations 5, 9, 10, 12). The results indicated that native Chinese speakers as well as Chinese EFL learners with higher and intermediate proficiency levels preferred to use more indirect refusal strategies than native English speakers while the native English speakers used more direct and adjunct strategies than native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners. Regarding EFL learners' groups, CE-Is' data (71.1% and 16.9%) were closer to NCs' (75.9% and 12.4%) while CE-Hs' data (63.8% and 27.0%) were closer to NEs' (58.4% and 27.7%) in both indirect and adjunct strategies.

**Table 5 Frequency of semantic formulas in refusing higher status interlocutors**

Semantic formula	Number of Semantic formulas	NC (%)	CE-I (%)	CE-H (%)	NE (%)				
Direct	(72)	11.7	(16)	12.0	(17)	9.2	(15)	13.9	(24)
No	(7)	0	(0)	2.1	(3)	0	(0)	2.3	(4)
Neg. w/a	(64)	10.9	(15)	9.9	(14)	9.2	(15)	11.6	(20)
I Refuse	(1)	0.7	(1)	0	(0)	0.0	(0)	0	(0)
Indirect	(410)	75.9	(104)	71.1	(101)	63.8	(104)	58.4	(101)
Regret/apology	(78)	16.8	(23)	18.3	(26)	10.4	(17)	6.9	(12)
Wish	(1)	0.0	(0)	0.0	(0)	0.0	(0)	0.6	(1)
Excuse/reason	(179)	35.8	(49)	30.3	(43)	28.2	(46)	23.7	(41)
Alternative	(65)	14.6	(20)	8.5	(12)	7.4	(12)	12.1	(21)
Avoidance	(33)	2.9	(4)	5.6	(8)	4.9	(8)	7.5	(13)
Future/past	(14)	2.2	(3)	1.4	(2)	3.1	(5)	2.3	(4)
Philosophy	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0.0	(0)	0	(0)
Dissuade	(40)	3.6	(5)	7.0	(10)	9.8	(16)	5.2	(9)
Adjunct	(133)	12.4	(17)	16.9	(24)	27.0	(44)	27.7	(48)
Positive opinion	(52)	3.6	(5)	7.0	(10)	11.0	(18)	11.0	(19)
Empathy	(1)	0.7	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Gratitude	(48)	5.8	(8)	6.3	(9)	10.4	(17)	8.1	(14)
Pause filler	(32)	2.2	(3)	3.5	(5)	5.5	(9)	8.7	(15)
Total	(615)	100	(137)	100	(142)	100	(163)	100	(173)

Among indirect refusals, the most common semantic formula was *reason* for all of the four groups. However, the distribution of this formula showed group differences. Both of CE-Is (30.3%) and CE-Hs' data (28.2%) were much higher than NEs' (23.7%), which may be due to L1 influence as NCs used this formula with a percentage of 35.8%.

**Figure 2 The frequency of semantic formulas in refusing higher status interlocutors**



In addition, when refusing higher status interlocutors, CE-Is (18.3%) as well as CE-Hs (10.4%) chose regret/apology strategies more frequently than did NEs (6.9%), which is a pattern observed with native Chinese speakers (16.8%). This tendency might be due to the cultural roots of the Chinese society. Classified as a high-context and collectivistic culture, social hierarchy plays an important role in the Chinese culture of interaction. The emphasis on humbleness made Chinese EFL learners and native Chinese speakers to use more apologies to alleviate the face-threatening power of refusals. Native English speakers, on the other hand, pursue equality in relationships and thus are less sensitive to social status than the Chinese groups. The following examples are regret/apology strategies used by NC and CE groups and typical NE's data without using regret/apology formula in situation 5 (refusing a boss's request to work extra hours) and situation 10 (refusing a boss's invitation for a housewarming party).

(1) *I am sorry*, boss. My sister is in hospital now, so I have to take care of her.

(NC, in situation 5)

(2) *I am so sorry*. I have got serious toothache. I think I can help you another

day. (CE-I, in situation 5)

(3) I would love to go, but I have already made other plans, *sorry*. I can't go this time, but congratulations and enjoy your party. (CE-H, in situation 10)

(4) Another time yes but not today. I have prior engagement. (NE, in situation 5)

(5) I have to check my schedule and check my wife's first, but thank you for your invitation. I will let you know. (NE, in situation 10)

By contrast, native English speakers (11.0%) as well as Chinese EFL learners with higher proficiency level (11.0%) chose positive opinions (e.g., refusing a boss's offer for promotion in situation 12, "*This offer sounds really attractive...*", "*I am very happy you have thought about me for this position*", etc.) more frequently than did native Chinese speakers (3.6%) and Chinese EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level (7.0%), and besides, the native English speakers (7.5%) used avoidances (e.g., in situation 12, "*Is there a way I could think about it?*") more frequently than the CE-Hs (4.9%), CE-Is (5.6%), and NCs (2.9%). With regard to pause fillers such as "*well*" and "*um*", native English speakers (8.7%) as well as CE-Hs (5.5%) used them more frequently than did CE-Is (3.5%) and NCs (2.2%).

### **4.1.3 Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusing Equal Status Interlocutors**

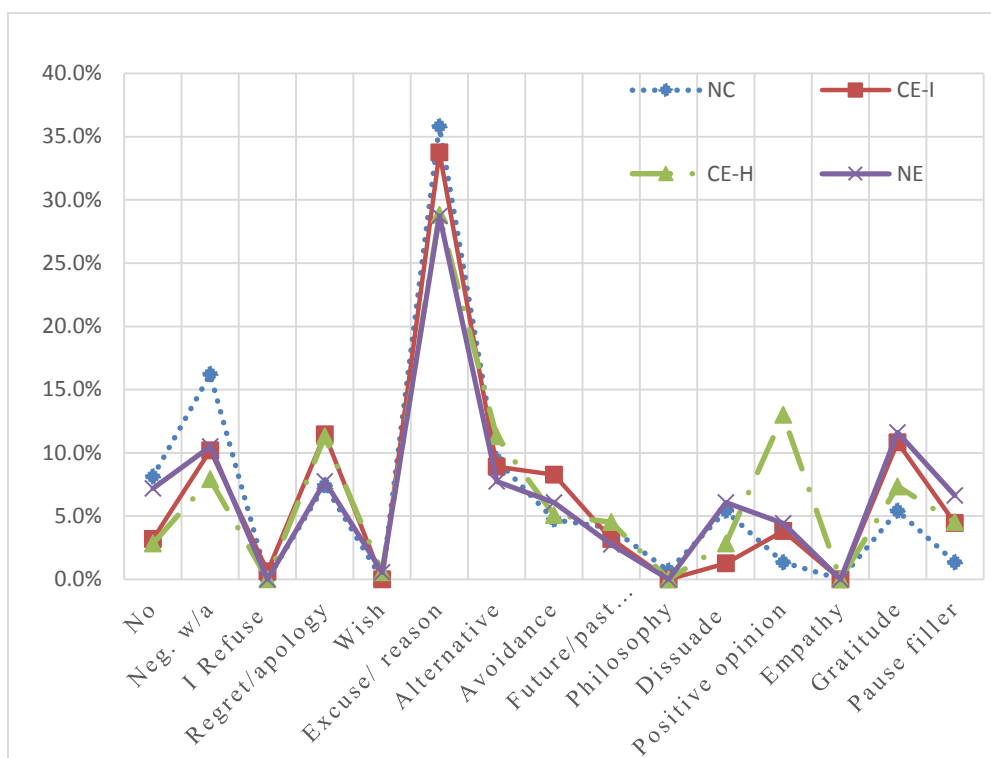
Table 6 demonstrates the frequency of semantic formulas when refusing equal status interlocutors (including situations 1, 2, 3, 6). According to the data, the frequency of direct strategies used by the four groups were all higher compared to the frequency of semantic formulas in refusing higher status interlocutors. Native Chinese speakers (24.3%) chose direct strategies even more frequently than did native English speakers (17.7%), while both of CE-Hs (10.7%) and CE-Is (14.0%) used them less frequently than the native English speakers did. Indirect semantic

formulas were still the most common refusals strategies used by the four groups and CE-Hs chose adjunct strategies more frequently than the other three groups in refusing equal status interlocutors.

**Table 6 Frequency of semantic formulas in refusing equal status interlocutors**

Semantic formula	Number of semantic formulas	NC (%)		CE-I (%)		CE-H (%)		NE (%)	
<b>Direct</b>	<b>(109)</b>	<b>24.3</b>	<b>(36)</b>	<b>14.0</b>	<b>(22)</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>(19)</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>(32)</b>
No	(30)	8.1	(12)	3.2	(5)	2.8	(5)	7.2	(13)
Neg. w/a	(73)	16.2	(24)	10.2	(16)	7.9	(14)	10.5	(19)
I Refuse	(1)	0	(0)	0.6	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
<b>Indirect</b>	<b>(427)</b>	<b>67.6</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>66.9</b>	<b>(105)</b>	<b>64.4</b>	<b>(114)</b>	<b>59.7</b>	<b>(108)</b>
Regret/Apology	(63)	7.4	(11)	11.5	(18)	11.3	(20)	7.7	(14)
Wish	(2)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0.6	(1)	0.6	(1)
Excuse/reason	(209)	35.8	(53)	33.8	(53)	28.8	(51)	28.7	(52)
Alternative	(62)	9.5	(14)	8.9	(14)	11.3	(20)	7.7	(14)
Avoidance	(40)	4.7	(7)	8.3	(13)	5.1	(9)	6.1	(11)
Future/past	(24)	4.1	(6)	3.2	(5)	4.5	(8)	2.8	(5)
Philosophy	(1)	0.7	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Dissuade	(26)	5.4	(8)	1.3	(2)	2.8	(5)	6.1	(11)
<b>Adjunct</b>	<b>(127)</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>(12)</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>(30)</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>(44)</b>	<b>22.7</b>	<b>(41)</b>
Positive opinion	(39)	1.4	(2)	3.8	(6)	13.0	(23)	4.4	(8)
Empathy	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Gratitude	(59)	5.4	(8)	10.8	(17)	7.3	(13)	11.6	(21)
Pause filler	(29)	1.4	(2)	4.5	(7)	4.5	(8)	6.6	(12)
<b>Total</b>	<b>(663)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(148)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(157)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(177)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(181)</b>

**Figure 3 Frequency of semantic formulas in refusing equal status interlocutors**



As with the findings in refusing higher status interlocutors, reasons were still most frequently used by the four groups. Evidence for pragmatic transfer can be seen in the regret/apology strategies chosen by CE-Is. Compared with refusing higher status interlocutors, CE-Is as well as native Chinese speakers decreased in the number of apology/regret strategies (from 18.3% to 11.5% and from 16.8% to 7.4%, respectively) while the same strategies chosen by CE-Hs and native English speakers were increased (from 10.4% to 11.3% and from 6.9% to 7.7%, respectively). Decrease in the number of apology/regret strategies used by the NC and CE-I groups seems reasonable since Chinese people are more sensitive to social hierarchy, thus they apologize more frequently when refusing higher status interlocutors than equal or lower status interlocutors. Increase in frequency of regret/apology strategies produced by the NE group, however, may result from the social distance factor which seems more important to the native English speakers than the equality (Wolfson,

1981; Beebe *et al.*, 1990). According to Chang (1995). American may use more indirect strategies with familiar interlocutors. In the present study, equal status refusals were between familiar interlocutors (e.g., friends) while higher status refusals were between people who were at considerable distance (e.g., between a boss and an employee). Thus, native English speakers probably used the regret/apology strategies more frequently with more familiar interlocutors. In addition, the native English speakers also chose more gratitude strategies (11.6%) than native Chinese speakers (5.4%) as well as Chinese EFL learners with higher (7.3%) and intermediate (10.8%) proficiency levels.

In contrast, similar to native Chinese speakers (9.5%), CE-Hs (11.3%) and CE-Is (8.9%) seemed more inclined to use alternative strategies than native English speakers (7.7%) in refusing equal status interlocutors. Bardovi-Harling and Hartford (1991) mentioned that alternative strategies can alleviate the face-threatening power of refusals and in their study, the native English group used alternatives along with explanations as the second most favored refusal strategies. However, having been classified as collectivists, Chinese EFL learners as well as native Chinese speakers value the preservation of harmony among group members more than the native English speakers who value individualism and give priority to personal interest over the interest of others (Triandis, 1988, 1995). Therefore, in the present study, the NC and CE groups showed higher frequencies in the use of alternative strategies than NEs, in order to mitigate the face-threatening power of refusals and to preserve harmony among group members. Also, native Chinese speakers (4.1%) as well as CE-Hs (4.5%) and CE-Is (3.2%) chose slightly more future / past acceptance strategies than the native English speakers (2.8%). Regarding pause fillers, the native speakers of English (6.6%) chose them more frequently than the other three groups. The following examples are alternative strategies used by each group in situation 2 (refusing a friend's request for borrowing class notes).

- (6) The exam is approaching and I need to prepare it too. So, I can't lend you my notes. *What about we study together?* [Alternative suggestion] I can teach you if you have any problem. (NC, in situation 2)
- (7) I am glad to help you, but I think I will not lend you my notes. You know, as a student, you missed a lot of classes and I think you should pay for it. If you want to pass this exam *I can help you study. We can study together.* [Alternative suggestion] (CE-H, in situation 2)
- (8) No, I'm afraid I can't lend you my notes. Since you pay much attention on the exam, you should have taken the notes by yourself. *Maybe you can come to my house and we can study together.* [Alternative suggestion] (CE-I, in situation 2)
- (9) Why did you miss class? *I think you should talk to the professor instead* [Alternative suggestion]. He has the original notes. I am sorry, but no. (CE-I, in situation 2)
- (10) You should take notes by yourself, man. I help you this time, you are just going to ask next time, so no. (NE, without using alternative strategy, in situation 2)

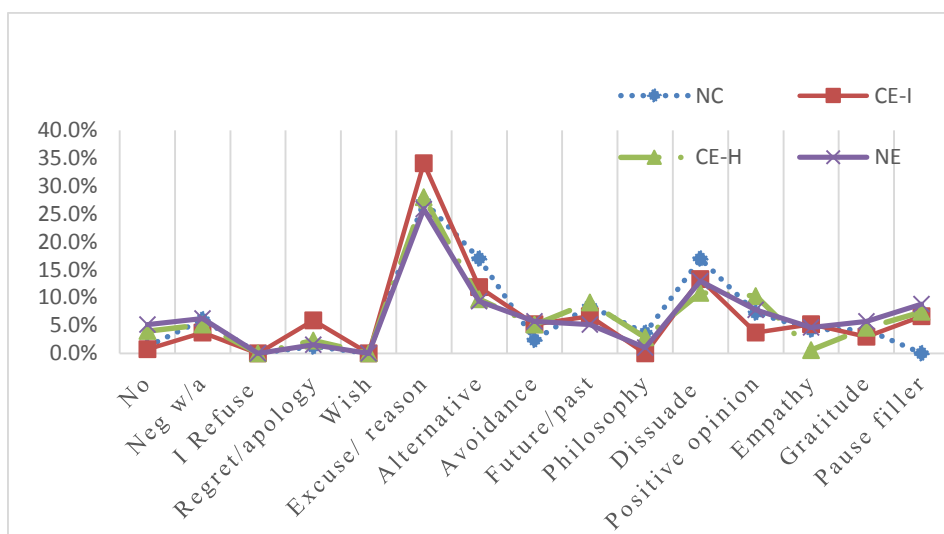
#### **4.1.4 Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusing Lower Status Interlocutors**

Table 7 presents the frequency of refusal strategies used to refuse lower status interlocutors. Consistent with the semantic formulas used in refusing higher and equal status interlocutors, indirect refusals were still the most frequent refusal strategies chosen by all of the four groups. Native English speakers tended to use direct refusal strategies and adjuncts to refusals more frequently than the other three groups.

**Table 7 Frequency of semantic formulas in refusing lower status interlocutors**

Semantic formula	Number of semantic formulas	NC (%)		CE-I (%)		CE-H (%)		NE (%)	
<b>Direct</b>	<b>(56)</b>	7.3	(12)	4.4	(6)	9.1	(16)	11.4	(22)
No	(20)	1.2	(2)	0.7	(1)	4.0	(7)	5.2	(10)
Neg w/a	(36)	6.1	(10)	3.7	(5)	5.1	(9)	6.2	(12)
I Refuse	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
<b>Indirect</b>	<b>(469)</b>	<b>77.0</b>	<b>(127)</b>	<b>77.0</b>	<b>(104)</b>	<b>68.0</b>	<b>(119)</b>	<b>61.7</b>	<b>(119)</b>
Regret/apology	(17)	1.2	(2)	5.9	(8)	2.3	(4)	1.6	(3)
Wish	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0.0	(0)
Excuse/ reason	(190)	27.3	(45)	34.1	(46)	28.0	(49)	25.9	(50)
Alternative	(79)	17.0	(28)	11.9	(16)	9.7	(17)	9.3	(18)
Avoidance	(31)	2.4	(4)	5.2	(7)	5.1	(9)	5.7	(11)
Future/past	(49)	8.5	(14)	6.7	(9)	9.1	(16)	5.2	(10)
Philosophy	(13)	3.6	(6)	0	(0)	2.9	(5)	1.0	(2)
Dissuade	(90)	17.0	(28)	13.3	(18)	10.9	(19)	13.0	(25)
<b>Adjunct</b>	<b>(143)</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>(26)</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>(25)</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>(40)</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>(52)</b>
Positive opinion	(50)	7.3	(12)	3.7	(5)	10.3	(18)	7.8	(15)
Empathy	(24)	4.2	(7)	5.2	(7)	0.6	(1)	4.7	(9)
Gratitude	(30)	4.2	(7)	3.0	(4)	4.6	(8)	5.7	(11)
Pause filler	(39)	0	(0)	6.7	(9)	7.4	(13)	8.8	(17)
<b>Total</b>	<b>(668)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(165)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(135)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(175)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(193)</b>

**Figure 4 Frequency of semantic formulas in refusing lower status interlocutors**



In general, semantic formulas used in refusing lower status interlocutors shared lots of similarities with those in refusing equal status interlocutors. Among indirect refusals, reason/excuse strategies still occurred most frequently in the four groups' data and evidence of L1 influence can be seen from the alternative and future/past acceptance strategies chosen by the CE-I group. As an important strategy to mitigate the face-threatening power of refusals, CE-Is (11.9%) provided alternative strategies more frequently than native English speakers (9.3%), as their native Chinese counterparts did (17%). However, CE-Hs' data (9.7%) seemed closer to those of NEs. In addition, both of CE-Hs (9.1%) and CE-Is (6.7%) used more future/past acceptance strategies than the native English speakers (5.2%), as native Chinese speakers did (8.5%). Yet, interestingly, the frequency of avoidance strategies used by both of CE-Hs (5.1%) and CE-Is (5.2%) were more similar to those of native English speakers (5.7%) rather than those of native Chinese speakers (2.4%). Native English speakers also used pause fillers (8.8%) more frequently than the other three groups.

The following examples are some typical answers in situation 11(refusing an employee's request for a salary increase) provided by each group.

(11) You are an excellent worker, but recently, we don't have good sales.

- Although I can't increase your salary right now, *I will make it in near future if things turn better* [Future acceptance]. (NC, in situation 11)
- (12) As you know, our bookstore doesn't have good sales now, but I will consider about it, and will *provide you some bonus according to your work* [Alternative suggestion]. (CE-I, in situation 11)
- (13) You are my best employee and I really want to increase your salary, but as you know, our bookstore is not going well right now. *So, if it turns better, I will definitely increase your salary* [Set condition for future acceptance]. (CE-H, in situation 11)
- (14) You are a good employee, and I appreciate your work. As you know, our company is planning to develop the market, so if you still work very hard as you are doing now, then *I will provide you a better position in another chain store, for example, manager* [Alternative suggestion]. (CE-H, in situation 11)
- (15) Well, you know, *the economy is tough right now and we don't have very good sales. So, right now is not a good time to be asking for a raise* [reason]. (NE, in situation 11)
- (16) OK, *it's typically not our protocol to give a raise within first year* [reason], but *thanks* for raising concern [Gratitude]. (NE, in situation 11)

## 4.2 Content of Semantic Formulas

Evidence of L1 influence was not only found in the Chinese EFL learners' frequency of the semantic formulas but also in the content of the responses. Whereas participants from different groups shared some similarities in certain types of the semantic formulas, there were differences in the actual content of the NC and NE responses. The content of the CE refusals, however, seemed to be influenced by their mother tongue, showing evidence of pragmatic transfer.

Reason/excuse was the semantic formula most frequently used by all participants. Yet, Chinese and Chinese EFL learners' reason/excuse seemed to be more specific,

family-oriented and objective than the American responses. For example, in refusing a boss's invitation to a house-warming party (Table 8), the majority of NCs and CEs responded "father/mother/grandmother/husband is sick and I should take care of him/her", "plan for a trip and already booked tickets", "wedding anniversary" and "birthday of the parents/grandmother/children". Besides, both the NCs and CEs frequently apologized (I am so sorry) when refusing a higher status interlocutor. By contrast, native speakers of English gave more vague and unspecific reasons such as *"This is really a short notice and I already have other plans. I can't make it this week but maybe in the future"*, *"I already have plans so not be able to come"* or *"I can't make it actually, sorry. I just can't come"*. Also, NEs apologized or expressed their regrets less than the NCs and CEs. Very similar responses were also found in refusing a boss's request of working extra hours (Table 9). For examples, NCs and CEs said *"My children are waiting for me"*, *"Today is my wedding anniversary"* or *"I have to take care of my sister who is in hospital now"*. Native speakers of English, however, used *"Another time yes but not today. I have prior engagement"* or *"I have a lot of stuff to do, can we do it another day?"* as reasons.

**Table 8 Content of semantic formulas in refusing situation 10 (boss's party)**

Content	Refuser status (S < H)	Group			
		NC	CE-I	CE-H	NE
		(N=12)	(N=12)	(N=12)	(N=12)
<u>Specific reasons</u>					
<i>(family-oriented:</i>					
need to take care of the sick parents, grandparents, children, etc.; birthday of parents/grandparents/children; planning for a trip with husband/wife; visit family, wedding anniversary)		66.7	58.3	50.0	8.3
<u>Unspecific reasons</u> (other plans, previous engagement, unsureness)					
		16.7	33.3	16.7	58.3
Apology/regret (I'm sorry)		66.7	75.0	33.3	25.0

**Table 9 Content of semantic formulas in refusing situation 5 (working extra hours)**

Content	Refuser status (S < H)	Group			
		NC (N=12)	CE-I (N=12)	CE-H (N=12)	NE (N=12)
<u>Specific reasons</u>					
<i>(family-oriented:</i>					
need to take care of the (sick)					
parents, grandparents, children, etc.;					
birthday of		41.7	33.3	25.0	25.0
parents/grandparents/children;					
wedding anniversary, need to spend					
time with family)					
<u>Unspecific reasons</u>					
(other plans, previous engagement)		16.7	16.7	25.0	58.3
Apology/regret (I'm sorry)		83.3	66.7	41.7	33.3

This revealed cultural differences between the Chinese and American society. In the Chinese society, social hierarchy plays an important role in guiding individual's speech behavior. To act appropriately, thus, means to act based on one's social status and social hierarchy. Hence, when it comes to refusing a higher status person, such as a boss, the Chinese seemed to carefully choose excuses that are more urgent than the invitation or obligations beyond the refuser's control instead of stating their subjective negative willingness. These reasons, then, could alleviate the face threatening power of refusals. For Chinese people, mentioning family affairs might be one of the best reasons that could be used to refuse someone without threatening his/her face. As traditional moral standards in Chinese society, the philosophy of Confucius mentioned that there should be closeness between parents and children. In all familial relations, respect for parents and grandparents has supreme value. In turn, the elders are supposed to treat the younger generation with affection. They are allowed to be strict but not cruel (Confucius, 1983). Hence, not only the native speakers of Chinese but also the Chinese EFL learners, consciously

or unconsciously, considered mentioning matters related to family such as taking care of children and parents or celebrating the birthday of a family member as the most appropriate reason/excuse in refusing a higher status interlocutor without running the risk of threatening the face on either side.

By contrast, native speakers of English, who values individualism and privacy, usually express their feeling and thoughts openly. They pursue equality in relationships and are less status-sensitive than Chinese. Besides, they do not think their own business or personal interests need to be mentioned or revealed. Hence, they seldom use specific or detailed reasons even when refusing a higher status person. This makes the typical responses of NE refusals (e.g., “I already have plans so maybe next time” or “I can’t make it actually, sorry”), which are very different from NC and CE excuses or reasons.

Another evidence of pragmatic transfer in CE content is the degree of directness and the use of alternatives. In refusing an interlocutor of equal status, such as refusing a friend’s request to borrow class notes (Table 10), native Chinese speakers and Chinese EFL learners usually conveyed their inability instead of unwillingness, and refused the interlocutor in an indirect way. A typical example was “*Someone else has already borrowed my notes*” and some others said “*My notes are not clear/ perfect enough*”. A few of NC and CE participants expressed their subjective unwillingness to lend notes to the classmate by saying “*You don’t take notes because I lend you my notes so often. So, this time, I will not lend you my notes. I do it for your sake. Maybe we can study together*”, “*We can study together, and I can help you instead of lending you my notes. Merely lending you my notes is not good for you*” or “*Sorry, it’s really hard for me to refuse you, but you always borrow my notes, which is harmful to you. So, I think you should take notes by yourself*”. These refusals are very interesting. It means that the speaker had to refuse the interlocutor because always borrowing others’ notes is a bad habit and it is very harmful to the interlocutor. Hence, the refusal is for the interlocutor’s sake. Besides, the Chinese groups usually combined

some practical alternative suggestions with refusals, for example, “*The exam is approaching and I need to prepare it too. What about studying together? I can teach you if you have any problem*”, “*Sorry, I want to use my notes too. Could you take photo of my notes so that you can review them?*” or “*Another classmate has already borrowed them, but I have the PPT of this class, so how about you reviewing them first and ask me questions if you have any problem?*”

**Table 10 Frequency of content of semantic formulas in refusing situation 2 (borrow class notes)**

Content	Refuser status (S=H)	Group			
		NC (N=12)	CE-I (N=12)	CE-H (N=12)	NE (N=12)
Someone else has already borrowed the notes (or leave the notes at home)		33.3	33.3	33.3	8.3
My notes are not clear (or not perfect enough)		16.7	8.3	0	0
Merely lending you my notes is not good for you/ harmful to you (or I hope you could learn lessons )		41.7	16.7	16.7	0
Alternative suggestions (study together, lend PPT, take photo of my notes, etc.)		41.7	41.7	33.3	0
Alternative suggestion (ask professor)		0	0	0	25.0
I can't/ I won't be able to...(inability)		33.3	25.0	16.7	8.3
Direct "no"/ I don't think I can help you / I don't feel comfortable...(unwillingness)		8.3	8.3	16.7	58.3

Such responses can be partially explained by the cultural roots of the Chinese society. The Chinese society has been generally accepted as a collectivist one, in

which in-group interests are considered more important than individual interests and the preservation of balances and harmony among group members is highly valued (Triandis, 1988, 1995; Chang, 2009). With such beliefs, native speakers of Chinese and Chinese EFL learners indicated the intent to be amiable and performed their speech act of refusals in an indirect way in order to maintain the interlocutor's positive face, so that they can keep the harmonious relationships with group members.

On the other hand, American responses are more direct and subjective. They are not hesitant to directly say "no". In refusing a friend's request to borrow class notes, native English speakers said *"Well, you keep asking for them but I am going to say no this time, because you need to do your own work. So, no"*, *"Well, I worked hard on this and I don't think I can help you this time. You should have come to class."*, *"Why did you miss class? I think you should talk to the professor instead. He has the original notes. I am sorry but no."* or *"You miss a lot of classes and I don't feel comfortable actually, I think you use my notes so often, so maybe you can ask someone else"*. Unlike NCs and CE who consider more whether the refusals may cause face risk or embarrassment, NEs are more likely to focus on their own willingness and to express feelings and thoughts directly. Although they also provide alternative suggestions like "ask someone else" or "talk to the professor", these alternatives are quite different from the suggestions provided by Chinese groups. This is because NE alternative suggestions reveal the speaker's strong unwillingness to help the interlocutor by himself/herself, whereas NC and CE alternatives such as "study together", "take photo of my notes" or "lend PPT of the class instead" show the refuser still wants to help the interlocutor in certain respects.

Yet, when it comes to refusing a lower status interlocutor, such as when a president of a printing machine company refuse a salesman's invitation to talk about a contract at an expensive restaurant (Table 11), NCs and CE tended to express their thoughts and feelings more freely. For instance, NCs and CE used *"No, thanks, I think we'd better talk about the contract in the office"*, *"I don't think the contract*

*should be discussed in a restaurant”, “I am sorry, I don’t like that restaurant. Shall we try another place?” or “Thank you for the invitation, but I don’t think it is a good idea”. NEs who were less sensitive to social status, however, used more avoidance than the Chinese groups. For example, “I might have to reschedule. I will give you a call back”, “I’m not sure I’m very comfortable with that contract, maybe we need to revisit them” or “Possibly, can I think about it?”*

**Table 11 Content of semantic formulas in refusing situation 7 (expensive restaurant)**

Content	Refuser status (S > H)	Group			
		NC (N=12)	CE-I (N=12)	CE-H (N=12)	NE (N=12)
Direct "no", I don't have time (I'm not available), I don't think it is a good idea, I can't, etc.		66.7	33.3	41.6	33.3
I am not sure..., I might have to reschedule, I will think about it, etc. (avoidance)		0	8.3	0	41.6

### 4.3 EFL Learners’ L2 Proficiency and Their Realization of the Act of Refusal

In order to examine the relationship between EFL learners’ L2 proficiency and their realization of the speech act of refusal, differences in the amount of L1 influence on the Chinese EFL learners’ frequency and content of semantic formulas were further observed. CE-Hs’ and CE-Is’ data from Table 4 to Table 11 were revisited based on the evidence of pragmatic transfer.

Concerning the group differences in choosing the “direct refusals”, “indirect refusals” and “adjuncts to refusals”, CE-Hs and NEs were similar to each other in their use of “indirect refusals” (65.4% and 60.0%, respectively) and “adjuncts to refusals” (24.9% and 25.8%, respectively). CE-Is’ data, however, were more similar

to those of native Chinese speakers in their frequency of choosing “indirect refusals” (71.4% and 73.6%, respectively) and “adjuncts to refusals” (18.2% and 12.2%, respectively). It indicates that the EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level seemed more likely to transfer their L1 strategies than the higher proficiency learners.

In addition, Table 12 presents evidence of pragmatic transfer occurred in EFL learners’ frequency of semantic formulas when they refuse different interlocutors of social status (Tables 5, 6, and 7). The data indicated that pragmatic transfer was more likely to occur in CE-Is’ data while CE-Hs data tended to resemble those of their native English counterparts’.

**Table 12 L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer in the frequency of semantic formulas**

Semantic formula	Status	NC (%)	CE-I (%)	CE-H (%)	NE (%)
Indirect	S < H	75.9	71.1	63.8	58.4
Regret/apology	S < H	16.8	18.3	10.4	6.9
Excuse/reason	S < H	35.8	30.3	28.2	23.7
Adjunct	S < H	12.4	16.9	27.0	27.7
Positive opinion	S < H	3.6	7.0	11.0	11.0
Excuse/reason	S = H	35.8	33.8	28.8	28.7
Adjunct	S > H	15.8	18.5	22.9	26.9

As shown from Table 12, when refusing higher status interlocutors, both NC and CE groups chose indirect strategies more frequently than the native English speakers. However, while CE-Is’ data (71.1%) were much higher than those of NEs (58.4%), similar to the native Chinese did (75.9%), CE-Hs’ frequency of indirect strategies (63.8%) were closer to NEs’ data rather than those of NCs’. Also, influenced by their mother tongue, Chinese EFL learners tended to produce regret/apology and excuse/reason strategies more frequently than native English speakers. Yet, compared to CE-Is who displayed apparent evidence of pragmatic transfer, CE-Hs’ data were more similar to those of NEs’ in their use of regret (10.4%) and excuse

(28.2%) strategies. Furthermore, EFL learners' with higher proficiency level resembled native speakers of English in their use of adjuncts (27.0%) and positive opinions (11.0%), while the frequency of CE-Is' data were lower than that of NEs, which were closer to native Chinese data.

There was not much evidence of pragmatic transfer in refusing equal and lower status interlocutors. For example, closer to NC's data (35.8%), CE-Is used 33.8% of excuse/reason strategy when refusing equal status interlocutors. CE-Hs, however, produced 28.8% of this formula, which resembled NEs' data (28.7%). Besides, adjunct strategies used by EFL learners were all less frequent than NEs' data. CE-Is, similar to native Chinese speakers (15.8%), produced this formula with the percentage of 18.5% while CE-Hs' frequency of adjunct formula (22.9%) were closer to that of native English speakers (26.9%) rather than that of native Chinese speakers.

Based on the data mentioned above, it seems that Chinese EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level tended to produce more pragmatic transfer than the higher proficiency learners. In contrast, EFL learners with a higher language proficiency could produce more target-like patterns, which were similar to native English speakers' frequency of semantic formulas.

In addition, it seems that L2 proficiency also affected the amount of pragmatic transfer occurred in EFL learners' refusal content.

**Table 13 L2 proficiency and EFL learners' refusal content**

Situation	Content	Group			
		NC (N=12)	CE-I (N=12)	CE-H (N=12)	NE (N=12)
Situation 10 (S < H)	<u>Specific reasons</u> <i>(family-oriented:</i>	66.7	58.3	50.0	8.3

	need to take care of the sick parents, grandparents, children, etc.; birthday of parents/grandparents/children; planning for a trip with husband/wife; visit family, wedding anniversary)				
Situation 10 (S < H)	<u>Unspecific reasons</u> (other plans, previous engagement, unsureness)	16.7	33.3	16.7	58.3
Situation 10 (S < H)	Apology/regret (I'm sorry)	66.7	75.0	33.3	25.0
	<u>Specific reasons</u> <i>(family-oriented:</i>				
Situation 5 (S < H)	need to take care of the (sick) parents, grandparents, children, etc.; birthday of parents/grandparents/children; wedding anniversary, need to spend time with family)	41.7	33.3	25.0	25.0
Situation 5 (S < H)	<u>Unspecific reasons</u> (other plans, previous engagement)	16.7	16.7	25.0	58.3
Situation 5 (S < H)	Apology/regret (I'm sorry)	83.3	66.7	41.7	33.3
Situation 2 (S = H)	Someone else has already borrowed the notes (or leave the notes at home)	33.3	33.3	33.3	8.3
Situation 2 (S = H)	My notes are not clear (or not perfect enough)	16.7	8.3	0.0	0.0
Situation 2 (S = H)	Merely lending you my notes is not good for you/ harmful to you (or I hope you could learn lessons )	41.7	16.7	16.7	0.0
Situation 2 (S = H)	Alternative suggestions (study together, lend PPT, take photo of my notes, etc.)	41.7	41.7	33.3	0.0
Situation 2 (S = H)	Alternative suggestion (ask professor)	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0
Situation 7 (S > H)	I can't/ I won't be able to...(inability)	33.3	25.0	16.7	8.3

Situation 7 (S < H)	Direct "no"/ I don't think I can help you / I don't feel comfortable...(unwillingness)	8.3	8.3	16.7	58.3
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According to Table 13, CE-Is tended to be more affected by L1, when they used family-oriented specific reasons and apology/regret strategies in refusing higher status interlocutors (Situations 10 and 5). For instance, similar to native Chinese speakers (66.7% and 41.7%, respectively), CE-Is used specific reasons (58.3% and 33.3%, respectively) more frequently than CE-Hs (50.0% and 25.0%, respectively) and native speakers of English (8.3% and 25.0%, respectively) when they refuse a boss's invitation to a house-warming party and a request to work overtime. In addition, the CE-Is also apologized (75.0% and 66.7%, respectively) more frequently than CE-Hs (33.3% and 41.7%, respectively) as their native Chinese counterparts did (66.7% and 83.3%). CE-Hs' data, however, were closer to those of native English speakers (25.0% and 33.3%, respectively) rather than those of NCs. Interestingly, when EFL learners employed unspecific reasons, CE-Hs chose 16.7% in situation 10, while CE-Is produced 16.7% in situation 5, which were identical to native speakers of Chinese, respectively.

When it comes to refusing equal status interlocutors (e.g., refusing a classmate's request to borrow notes, in situation 2), the frequency of content were identical when CE-Hs and CE-Is chose "*someone else has borrowed the notes*" and "*Merely lending you my notes is harmful to you*" as excuses. However, while both NE-Is (8.3%) as well as NCs (16.7%) used "*My notes are not clear*" as an excuse, there was no such excuse in CE-Hs and NEs' data. Besides, CE-Is (41.7%), identical to NCs (41.7%) used "alternative suggestions (e.g., study together, lend PPT) more frequently than CE-Hs (33.3%).

Lastly, when it comes to refusing lower status interlocutors, frequencies of strategies such as "inability" and "unwillingness" chosen by CE-Is were closer to

native Chinese data, compared to the same strategies used by the CE-H group.

As frequency of semantic formulas, the data indicated that Chinese EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level tended to be affected more by their native language's refusal style than the higher proficiency EFL learners in terms of the content of semantic formulas.

With higher L2 proficiency, it seemed that CE-Hs were able to have more in-depth communications with foreigners and better understanding about English movies and books (casual interview data after the experiments), which may consciously or unconsciously raise their awareness on social norms and cultural conventions of English-speaking countries including pragmatic practices and devices in the target language than the CE-Is.

Nonetheless, limited data provided in the present study make it difficult to make a strong generalizable claim on the relationship between L2 proficiency and the amount of pragmatic transfer. Therefore, further research is needed.

#### **4.4 Linguistic Forms Varied in Chinese EFL Learners and Native English speakers**

A pragmalinguistic analysis was conducted to investigate linguistic forms employed by native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. As reported in some previous research on the speech act of requests or complaints (Kasper, 1981; Moon, 1996), the findings in the present study also indicated that EFL learners' deviations from the native English speakers were revealed in the frequencies of using certain downgraders.

**Table 14 Frequencies of Downgraders (raw scores)**

Hesitators	<i>Could</i>	Downtoner	Cajoler	Minus Committer
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NE	44	20	58	25	40
CE-H	30	5	22	34	72
CE-I	21	1	10	28	48

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Firstly, one of distinguished variations between native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners were the use of hesitators. Functioning as downgraders which mitigate the impositive force of the head act, hesitators are deliberately employed to impress on the addressee that the speaker has qualms about his ensuing act (Kasper, 1981). At the same time, hesitators such as ‘*well*’ are also used to delay dispreferred situations (Levinson, 1983). According to the data, even though both native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners employed the hesitators, the frequencies of NEs’ data (44) were higher than those of CE-Hs (30) and CE-Is (21).

(17) Well, you keep asking for them but I am going to say no this time, because you need to do your own work. (NE, Situation 2)

(18) Um, sorry, I don’t think I can do it this time. Well, I worked hard on this, I don’t think I can help you this time. (NE, Situation 2)

(19) Um, yeah, I don’t think so. Well, I already have plans this weekend, sorry. (NE, Situation 3)

(20) Oh, I would love to, but I have an appointment during that time. I am sorry about that. (NE, Situation 10)

(21) Oh, sorry. I have my own schedule. I am a teacher. Could you tell me why you don’t like the grammar class? (CE-I, Situation 4)

(22) Um, sorry. I caught a cold. I really need a rest tonight. (CE-I, Situation 5)

(23) Um, about the pay? I have been thinking about it several times. I think it is not appropriate to increase your salary now, but I will

think about it later. (CE-H, Situation 11)

- (24) Well, I will consider about increasing your salary, but why don't we just wait for another one year. (CE-H, Situation 11)

Secondly, the present study indicated that native English speakers (20) seemed more likely to use the modal verb '*could*' than Chinese EFL learners with higher (5) and intermediate (1) proficiency levels. This finding is consistent with Yu's (2002) assertion that native English speakers are able to mitigate the imposing force of their speech acts by using modal verbs such as '*Could I...*'. However, without such a parallel verbal device in the mother tongue, Chinese EFL learners tend to use this pattern with lower frequencies (Yu, 2002). Furthermore, native English speakers also combined the durative aspect marker '*I was wondering if*' or the syntactical device '*Is there a way*' with '*could*' to further 'tone down the perlocutionary effect of an utterance which is likely to have on the addressee' (Kasper, 1981). However, none of such devices were found in data from the Chinese EFL learners.

- (25) Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun, but you know, we already have a plan for this Friday night. I am sorry. Could we take a rain check? (NE, Situation, 1)

- (26) That's really a short notice. I was wondering if I could make it, because I might have other plans. (NE, Situation 10)

- (27) Could I have the same position here? The position is very attractive and I would love to go. But I already have a family here and my kids are starting school, so I can't move. (NE, Situation 12)

- (28) I am very happy you have thought about me for this position. But, moving, that's going to be very hard. Is there a way I could think about it? (NE, Situation 12)

- (29) That is really a great offer, but I really want to stay here. Couldn't I do it

in here? I really appreciate you choosing me, but moving is a big deal for me. I have to think about that (NE, Situation 12).

(30) You know, I have been working for the whole day and I am very tired now. Could you ask another person or could I bring it to home? (CE-H, Situation 5)

(31) Oh, sorry. I have my own schedule. I am a teacher. Could you tell me why you don't like the grammar class? (CE-I, Situation 4)

Thirdly, the native English participants and Chinese EFL learners also varied in using downtoners such as '*just*', '*perhaps*' and '*possibly*', etc. According to Kasper (1981), downtoners can also be used to modulate the impact of a speaker's utterance which is likely to have on the interlocutor. The results revealed that native English speakers (58) employed the downtoners more frequently than those of CE-Hs (22) and CE-Is (10) to alleviate the threatening power of their speech act. In addition, the native English speakers tended to use a wider range of downtoners such as '*just*', '*perhaps*' and '*possibly*' while '*perhaps*' and '*possibly*' never appeared in the EFL learners' data.

(32) I left them in my room actually. I worked really hard on these notes, so I think I just keep my work (NE, Situation 2)

(33) No, don't worry about it. It's just a piece of pottery, no problem. These things happen and it's just an accident (NE, Situation 8)

(34) Um, thanks for your suggestion. I will definitely keep them in mind. I think probably the way the class designed right now is to give you more emphasis on grammar. But thanks for the suggestion (NE, Situation 4).

(35) Wow, I was planning to leave, so I can't help you today. Perhaps, I could help you in another day (NE, Situation 5).

(36) Well, I will consider about increasing your salary, but why don't we just

wait for another one year. (CE-H, Situation 11)

- (37) It will be in Shanghai...It's really attractive, but my parents are all living in this city and I just have a baby, so I should take care of them. (CE-I, Situation 12)

Lastly, compared to native English speakers, both CE-Hs and CE-Is used the cajoler 'you know' and the minus committer 'I think' or 'I mean' more frequently. Data revealed that native English speakers preferred to use the token 'you know' for the purpose of enhancing harmony between the interlocutors. The intended meaning of cajolers such as 'you know' and 'you see' is generally interpreted as "please be in agreement with my speech act" (Edmondson, 1977). However, it seemed that Chinese EFL learners overgeneralized the use of such tokens and were not able to use them appropriately under some circumstances.

- (38) Oh, okay, well, you know, I was told that we need to spend a lot of time on grammar. This is a grammar class, so I need to stay with that. (NE, Situation 4)

- (39) You know, I am sorry, but I really have to go home. I promised my kids that I would spend some time with them tonight and they really expect me to be there. (NE, Situation 5)

- (40) Well, you know, the economy is tough right now and we don't have very good sales, so right now is not a good time to be asking for a raise. (NE, Situation 11)

- (41) We have an exam tomorrow, so I can't lend you my notes. You know, I am sorry. (CE-I, Situation 2)

- (42) I am just too full. But you know, your cakes are really delicious. (CE-H, Situation 1).

As seen from the above data, native English speakers usually employed the cajoler ‘*you know*’ before a common sympathetic reason to explain an undesirable situation or their inability to accept a request or an offer. Chinese EFL learners, however, seemed to use such a token too casually. For instance, in (41), a Chinese EFL learner explained a reason first and used the cajoler ‘*you know*’ before an apology. In addition, in (42), a Chinese EFL learner from the higher proficiency group also mentioned a reason first and used the cajoler ‘*you know*’ followed by a compliment. Similar examples were never found in native English speakers’ responses. It indicated that even though Chinese EFL learners frequently employed the downgrader ‘*you know*’, they might not be able to use it appropriately in some situations.

The minus committer was another prevalent downgrader that CE-Hs (72) and CE-Is (48) used more frequently than native English speakers (40). It is said that sentence modifiers such as *I think, I believe, I guess, in my opinion* etc., are used to alleviate the degree to which a speaker commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition (Kasper, 1981). Hence, the speaker explicitly characterizes his utterance as his individual opinion (Kasper, 1981). It seemed that the Chinese EFL learners particularly tended to use this downgrader to demonstrate their politeness to the interlocutors.

- (43) I left them in my room actually. I worked really hard on these notes, so, I think I just keep my work. (NE, Situation 2)
- (44) Well, thank you for your input, but I think it is more important for us to focus on grammar. (NE, Situation 4)
- (45) Maybe you are right, but I think my system usually works well on its own, just this time, something went wrong. (NE, Situation 10)
- (46) Yes, I think your advice is really appropriate, but I think the grammar is the basic knowledge. (CE-H, Situation 4)

- (47) Thanks for your suggestion but *I think* I just prefer to my own style. *I mean*, that's real me. (CE-H, Situation 6)
- (48) I can come, of course, I really like to come, but my husband has to work on that day. Because his boss let him finish a new project. So, *I think* he might not be able to come. But if you strongly insist, I will come alone. (CE-H, Situation 10)
- (49) *I think* you'd better study by yourself. What's more, the most important thing is that I hope you can draw lesson from it. (CE-I, Situation 2)
- (50) Colorful clothes are beautiful but *I think* it's not my style. (CE-I, Situation 6)
- (51) Thank you for your trust. But *I think* salary and the position are not my priority. My family are living in this city and I need to take care of them. (CE-I, Situation 12)

One of the interesting findings revealed in the analysis of downgraders was that both native and non-native English speakers mainly used lexical and phrasal downgraders (e.g., hesitators, downtoners, minus-committers, etc.) instead of syntactic downgraders such as subjunctives, aspects, agent avoiders. The durative aspect marker like '*I was wondering if*' only appeared four times in NEs' data and there was rare evidence of using other syntactic downgraders in both native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners' data. This was contrary to my expectation that native English speakers may use both lexical-phrasal downgraders and syntactic downgraders frequently. This unexpected result may be possibly drawn from the effect of the data collection methods used for each studies. The written DCT questionnaire was employed in most of previous research while the present study used the open role play to elicit natural and spontaneous responses.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion**

### **5.1 Summary**

This study investigated Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusal and intended to figure out whether or not the refusal strategies used by the EFL learners differed from those of native English speakers. In addition, the relationship between L2 proficiency and their realization of the act of refusal was examined in terms of frequency and content of semantic formulas used by the Chinese EFL learners with higher and intermediate proficiency levels. The present study also conducted a pragmalinguistic analysis to investigate linguistic forms employed by different participant groups, which was rarely reported in previous studies on the speech act of refusal. The results indicated that due to L1 influence, Chinese EFL learners produced a culturally-colored way of English refusals which were quite different from those produced by the native English speakers.

Concerning the frequency of semantic formulas, data showed that similar to native Chinese speakers, Chinese EFL learners with intermediate proficiency level chose significantly more indirect refusal strategies than do native English speakers while there were no significant differences between Chinese EFL learners with higher proficiency level and native English speakers. With regard to the adjuncts to refusals, both native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners with higher level of proficiency used them more frequently than the native Chinese speakers as well as the Chinese EFL learners with an intermediate level of proficiency.

When it comes to refusing higher status interlocutors, Chinese EFL learners as well native Chinese speakers chose apology/regret strategies more frequently than native English speakers to show their humbleness and modesty. Native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners with a higher proficiency level, however, used more positive opinions than the other two groups and the native English group also chose avoidance strategies more frequently than the native Chinese and Chinese EFL

learners. When refusing equal status interlocutors, NC and CE-I groups used less regret/apology strategies while these strategies were more frequently used in NE and CE-H's data compared to when refusing higher status interlocutors. Besides, native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners used alternative and future/past acceptance strategies more frequently than the native English speakers when refusing equal and lower status interlocutors.

The content of the semantic formulas was another area where Chinese EFL learners with both of higher and lower proficiency levels showed great differences from the native English speakers. Data indicated that Chinese EFL learners, as native speakers of Chinese, were more status-sensitive than native English speakers, and hence, provided more specific and family-oriented reasons to mitigate the risk of threatening the face when they refuse a higher status interlocutor. In addition, influenced by a high context and collectivistic culture, native speakers of Chinese and Chinese EFL learners valued group harmony and were more concerned about other-face maintenance than their native English counterparts who were influenced by a low context and individualist culture, pursued equality in relationships and valued more individual orientation. With equal status interlocutors, therefore, native speakers of Chinese and Chinese EFL learners tended to use more indirect and objective reasons to show their inability (e.g., another classmate has already borrowed my notes, in situation 2) while native speakers of English preferred to express their subjective unwillingness (e.g., I worked hard on taking class notes and I don't think I can help you this time, in situation 2). Besides, native English speakers preferred to use avoidance more frequently than native Chinese and Chinese EFL learners while the Chinese groups tended to choose more direct reasons when refusing lower status interlocutors.

Due to L1 influence, Chinese EFL learners with both higher and intermediate proficiency levels seemed to be affected by their native language's refusal style in

terms of frequency and the content of semantic formulas. However, the hypothesis of Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) positive correlation was not supported in this study as the data indicated negative correlation between the pragmatic transfer and the EFL learners' L2 proficiency level (i.e., transfer is greater among lower proficiency learners than among higher proficiency learners). The result is consistent with several previous studies (e.g., Maeshiba et al., 1996; Robinson, 1992; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989).

Regarding the linguistic forms of the participants, there were variations between native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. Firstly, native English speakers tended to use hesitators (e.g., *well*, *um* and *oh*) more frequently than Chinese EFL learners when demonstrating their qualms about the ensuing act and delaying undesirable situations. Secondly, without a parallel verbal device in their native language, Chinese EFL learners rarely used the modal verb '*could*' to soften the imposing force of their face-threatening speech acts. This finding was in line with the Yu's (2002) assertion. Thirdly, the Chinese EFL learners also employed the downtoners less frequently than native English speakers. Data also indicated that the native English speakers tended to use a wider range of downtoners than those of Chinese EFL learners. Lastly, compared to native English speakers, both CE-Hs and CE-Is used the cajoler '*you know*' and the minus committer '*I think*' or '*I mean*' more frequently. However, it seemed that Chinese EFL learners sometimes overgeneralize the use of cajoler '*you know*' and might not be able to use it appropriately.

## **5.2 Pedagogical Implications for Foreign Language Teaching**

Two important pedagogical implications can be drawn from the present study. First, since EFL learners with a higher L2 proficiency level tend to transfer less L1 strategies in their speech act of refusal, in foreign language teaching, more attention should be paid to improve EFL learners' grammatical competence which forms a

basis for high competence in cross-cultural communication.

Second, in order to avoid potential pragmatic hazards, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic instruction should be integrated into the foreign language curriculum at the earliest levels. The goal of instruction is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic conventions in the target language (Bardovi-harling & Mahan-Taylor). Hence, with such instruction and teachers' feedback on specific features of target language use, learners will gradually maintain their own culture identities and participate more fully in target language communication with more control over both the intended force and the outcome of their contributions (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

### **5.3 Limitations**

As with most experimental studies, the present research also has some limitations. First, with a relatively small sample size (only twelve participants in each group), it is difficult to generalize the findings and make a strong claim on the interlanguage features of Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusal and differences between refusal strategies produced by the native English speakers. Second, this study intended to use an elicitation method of open role plays to investigate the naturalistic and spontaneous speech act of refusal provided by native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. However, even though participants were asked to imagine themselves in the actual situations and to provide as natural responses as possible, these data may not reflect the perfect authentic data in real life. For instance, college student participants had to imagine themselves as a boss and refuse to pay an increase requested by an employee. Without real life experience, participants may find it difficult to the participant to provide naturalistic data in this situation. Third, some variables such as social distance between interlocutors may not be controlled

in the present study. According to Wolfson (1981), the familiarity or the social distance factor is important to Americans. However, the present study only focuses on social status, which may bias the results.

In spite of limitations, this study still has enough evidence to help EFL learners raise awareness of pragmatic practices and devices in the target language and also to help native English speakers become familiar with EFL learners' distinctive interlanguage features of certain speech acts. With investigation in an under-researched area, the Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusals, this study would provide some insights for further research in cross-cultural communication.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

Instructions: please imagine yourself in the following 12 situations and **make a refusal** (with proper and adequate reasons) to your interlocutor. Respond as if you were in the actual situation.

**Scenario 1:** You are at a friend's house for lunch. Your friend offers you another piece of cake.

**Scenario 2:** You are a hard-working college student. You attend class regularly and take good notes. But your classmate often misses class and wants to borrow your lecture notes before the examination.

**Scenario 3:** A friend invites you to dinner, but you really can't stand this friend's husband.

**Scenario 4:** You are an English teacher. It is about the middle of the term now and one of your students tells you that some of students were talking after class recently and they feel that the class would be better if you could give them more practice in conversation and less on grammar.

**Scenario 5:** You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave work. However, your boss asks you whether or not you can spend extra hours to help him finish up with the project.

**Scenario 6:** You have a fashionable friend. She suggests you that you should try more colorful clothes.

**Scenario 7:** You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a printing machine company invites you to one of the most expensive restaurants in the city.

**Scenario 8:** You arrive home and notice that your cleaning lady is extremely upset. She tells you that while she was cleaning she bumped into the table and your china vase fell and broke. She feels terrible about it and she wants to pay for it.

**Scenario 9:** You're at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you're searching through the mess on your desk, your boss tells you that maybe you should try and organize yourself better. He suggests that maybe you should write yourself little notes to remind you of things.

**Scenario 10:** Your boss has just moved into a new house and invites you for a housewarming party.

**Situation 11:** You are the owner of a bookstore and one of your best workers asks you to increase his salary.

**Scenario 12:** You've been working in an advertising company for 2 years. Now, the boss offers you an increase in salary and a better position, but it involves moving.

## Appendix B

本实验为“拒绝”言语行为现象做研究。下面有12个不同的情景，请根据实际情况用充分，合理的理由拒绝以下情况。

1. 你在一位朋友家吃午饭，你的朋友问要不要再来一块蛋糕？
2. 你是一个勤奋的大学生，上课认真并且做好笔记。马上要考试了，你一个经常逃课的同学又要跟你借笔记了。
3. 你的一位朋友邀请你一起吃饭，但你实在不想忍受他的妻子。
4. 你是一名英语老师。马上要到期中了，有一个学生向你说起同学们对你上课的一些建议。他说最近一些同学课后谈起了这门课，他们觉得如果老师能让他们多做一些对话练习，少做些语法会更好一些。
5. 你在办公室与老板开会，快到下班时间了，老板问你可不可以加班把项目做完？
6. 你有一个非常时尚的朋友。她建议你该多穿些花哨靓丽的衣服。
7. 你是一家印刷公司的经理，一位印刷设备公司的业务员邀请你到市内最高级的饭店吃饭。
8. 你回到家发现来打扫卫生的钟点女工非常失落。她说今天打扫卫生时，她不小心撞到了桌子，花瓶掉下来了。她觉得很抱歉，她想做赔偿。
9. 你在办公桌的文件堆里翻找一份老板刚才跟你要的报告，老板看着你凌乱的桌子给了你一些建议，他说或许你应该试试把东西整理好一些，他通常

是写一些备忘录提醒自己，或许你也可以试试。

10. 你的老板刚搬进新居，想办派对庆祝，问你能不能跟丈夫/妻子一起参加。
11. 你是一家书店的老板，有一位非常能干的员工跟你提出要求加薪。
12. 你已经在一家广告公司工作了近2年了。现在你的老板给你提供升值加薪的机会。但是要到别的城市去。

## Appendix C

### Interviewer version

**Scenario 1:** You are at a friend's house for lunch. Your friend offers you another piece of cake. (Offer: refuser status is equal)

**Friend:** How about another piece of cake? 要不要再来一块蛋糕呀?

**Scenario 2:** You are a hard-working college student. You attend class regularly and take good notes. But your classmate often misses class and wants to borrow your lecture notes before the examination. (Request: refuser status is equal)

**Classmate:** Oh! We have an exam tomorrow but I don't have notes from last week.

I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?

明天要考试了，但是从上周开始我就没有做笔记，你能不能再借我一次笔记呀，不好意思。。

**Scenario 3:** A friend invites you to dinner, but you really can't stand this friend's husband. (Invitation: refuser status is equal)

**Friend:** How about coming over for dinner Friday night? We're having a small dinner party.

下周五晚上我们办一个小派对，你能不能过来参加呀?

**Scenario 4:** You are an English teacher. It is about the middle of the term now and one of your students tells you that some of students were talking after class recently and they feel that the class would be better if you could give them more practice in conversation and less on grammar. (Suggestion: refuser status is higher)

**Student:** Excuse me, some of the students were talking after class recently and we kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in conversation and less on grammar.

老师，最近下课后我们几个同学讨论了下您的课，我们觉得如果您能

让我们多做一些口语练习，少一点语法练习会更好一些。

**Scenario 5:** You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave work. However, your boss asks you whether or not you can spend extra hours to help him finish up with the project. (Request: refuser status is lower)

**Boss:** If you don't mind, I'd like you to spend an extra hour tonight so that we can finish up with this work.

如果可以的话，你能不能加班一个小时帮我完成一下这个项目啊？

**Scenario 6:** You have a fashionable friend. She suggests you that you should try more colorful clothes. (Suggestion: refuser status is equal)

**Friend:** Hey, I think you should try more colorful clothes.

我觉得你应该多穿些花哨靓丽点的衣服。

**Scenario 7:** You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a printing machine company invites you to one of the most expensive restaurants in the city. (Invitation: refuser status is higher)

**Salesman:** We have met several times to discuss your purchase of my company's products. I was wondering if you would like to be my guest at Hilton in order to firm up a contract.

我们已经谈论了很久您购买我们公司产品的的事情，不知道我能不能请您在希尔顿酒店吃顿饭并且签一下购买合同？

**Scenario 8:** You arrive home and notice that your cleaning lady is extremely upset. She tells you that while she was cleaning she bumped into the table and your china vase fell and broke. She feels terrible about it and she wants to pay for it. (Offer: refuser status is higher.)

**Cleaning lady:** Oh God, I'm so sorry! I had an awful accident. While I was cleaning I bumped into the table and your china vase fell and broke. I feel just terrible about it. I'll pay for it.

先生，真的很抱歉，我今天打扫屋子的时候不小心把您的花瓶打碎了，我想做赔偿。

**Scenario 9:** You're at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you're searching through the mess on your desk, your boss tells you that maybe you should try and organize yourself better. He suggests that maybe you should write yourself little notes to remind you of things. (Suggestion: refuser status is lower)

**Boss:** You Know, maybe you should try and organize yourself better. I always write myself little notes to remind me of things. Perhaps you should give it a try!  
或许你应该把东西整理的好一些，我通常是写一些备忘录提醒自己，你不妨也试试。

**Scenario 10:** Your boss has just moved into a new house and invites you for a housewarming party. (Invitation: refuser status is lower)

**Boss:** Next Friday my wife and I are having a housewarming party. I know it's short notice but I am hoping you will be there with your wife/husband. What would you say?

下周五我跟我太太想举办一个小派对，我知道这个通知太突然，但我真的希望你可以跟你太太/丈夫一起参加。

**Situation 11:** You are the owner of a bookstore and one of your best workers asks you to increase his salary. (Request: refuser status is higher)

**Worker:** As you know, I've been here just a little over a year now, and I know you've been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be honest, I really need an increase in pay.

我已经在这干了一年多了，而且你对我的工作比较满意，我的确很喜欢在这里工作，但说心里话，我希望能涨些工资。

**Scenario 12:** You've been working in an advertising company for 2 years. Now, the boss offers you an increase in salary and a better position, but it involves moving. (Offer: refuser status is lower)

**Boss:** I'd like to offer you an executive position in our new office in Shanghai. It's a great city-only 2 hours from here by plane. And, there will be an increase in your salary.

我希望你能去我们上海的分公司做总经理。你也知道上海是国内最繁华的城市，从这坐飞机才2个小时。而且你的工资也会涨不少。

## **Appendix D**

### **Questionnaire**

1. Major: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: male                      / female
3. English proficiency: CET-4              / TEM-4                      / TEM-8
4. First language: Chinese                      / Korean                      / Other language
5. Have you ever been to English speaking countries? No                      / Yes (how long?)
6. Have you ever learnt how to perform the appropriate speech acts (e.g., compliant, apology, request, refusals, etc.) in the college? No                      / Yes (How to speak English refusal appropriately?)
7. How often do you speak English or watch English movies (dramas)?

## **Appendix E**

### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusals and Pragmatic Transfer in Different Proficiency Levels**

You are invited to participate in a research study about Chinese EFL learners' speech act of refusals. This study is being conducted by Ms. Meizi Piao. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a Chinese university student who has studied English or a native speaker of Chinese or English. Please read the following consent form carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

#### **Purpose of the study**

The present study aims to identify and analyze interlanguage features of Chinese EFL learners, focusing on the ways in which they make refusals in English. The researcher intends to figure out how the refusal strategies used by Chinese EFL learners vary from those of native speakers of English and to see whether or not these variances can be related to features of their native language.

#### **Procedure**

The experiment is an open role play. You will be asked to imagine yourself in the 12 situations and make a refusal (with proper and adequate reasons) to your interlocutor.

#### **Time required**

The time required for participation is about 10 minutes.

#### **Risks and benefits**

You will be audio recorded during the tests. Therefore, there is a small risk

that someone else other than the researcher or the research assistant might hear the recordings. However, this is very unlikely to happen, since the files will be kept under a secured folder and they will be destroyed once the research is finished. The recordings will not be used for purposes other than this research study.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this experiment.

### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will be kept confidential as your name or any other information that could possibly indicate your identity will be excluded from the final report of this research study.

### **Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate in this study, this will have no effect on the services or benefits you are currently receiving. You may choose to stop participating in the study at any time. This will have no effect on your current or future relations with Seoul National University.

### **Contact information**

If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher at:

Ms. Meizi Piao      e-mail: mjp0206@163.com

I have read and understood the information stated above and consent to participate in this study.

I am a native speaker of English\_\_\_\_\_, Chinese\_\_\_\_\_, Chinese EFL learners\_\_\_\_\_ (Circle ○)

Participant:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## 국문 초록

### 중국인 영어학습자 거절화행의 중간언어적 특징

본 논문의 목적은 중국인 영어학습자 거절화행의 중간언어적 특징을 분석하는 것이다. 특히 중국인 영어학습자의 거절 전략 및 언어 형태가 영어 원어민 화자와 어떤 차이점이 있으며 이런 차이점이 중국인 영어학습자의 모어 영향으로 인한 것인지를 살펴보고자 하였다. 또한 영어학습자의 L2 능력과 거절화행 실현 사이에 어떤 상관관계가 있는지도 분석하고자 하였다. 중국어 모어 화자 12명 (NC), 영어 원어민 화자 12명 (NE), 중국인 영어학습자 (중급) (CE-I) 12명, 중국인 영어학습자 (고급) (CE-H) 12명이 실험에 참여하였고 역할극을 (role-play) 사용하여 피험자들의 거절화행을 수집하였다.

실험 결과, 영어학습자들은 L2 사용에 있어 영어 원어민 화자들과 차이를 보였다. 중국어 모어 화자와 중국인 영어학습자는 영어 원어민 화자에 비해 대화 상대자의 사회적 지위에 민감성을 보였는데, 이들이 거절 화행 중 사용한 사과/유감 전략은 대화 상대자의 사회적 지위가 본인과 같거나 낮을 때보다 상대자의 지위가 본인보다 높을 때 더 높은 비율로 나타났다. 뿐만 아니라 중국어 모어 화자와 중국인 영어학습자는 영어 원어민 화자에 비해 대안 및 미래수락 전략을 더 높은 빈도로 사용하였다. 거절한 사유의 측면에서도 중국어 모어 화자와 중국인 영어학습자는 (영어 원어민 화자 보다) 더 구체적이고 가족 중심적인 이유를 선택하여 청자의 체면 손상을 완화시키려는 양상을 보인 반면, 영어 원어

민 화자는 모호한 이유를 선호하는 경향이 관찰되었다. 본 논문에서는 낮은 수준의 L2 능력을 가진 중국인 영어 학습자들이 영어 수준이 높은 학습자에 비해 거절 전략의 사용 빈도와 내용면에서 화용전이가 더 빈번하게 일어나는 양상을 보였는데, 이는 선행 연구 결과들과 (e.g., Maeshiba et al., 1996; Robinson, 1992; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989) 일치하는 것이며 Takahashi and Beebe (1987) 의 가설과는 상반되었다. 거절 화행 중 사용된 언어적 표현을 분석한 결과, 영어 원어민 화자는 중국인 영어 학습자에 비하여 hesitators, modal verb 'could' 와 downtoners 사용 빈도가 높았으며, 중국인 영어 학습자는 영어 원어민 화자에 비하여 cajoler 'you know' 와 minus committers 사용 빈도가 두드러졌다.

이러한 본 연구 결과는 영어 교과과정에서 언어적 화용 및 사회적 화용 지식에 대한 교육이 필요한 것을 확인시켜주는 것으로서 이를 통해 EFL 영어 학습자들이 목적 언어의 적절한 화용 실현과 그 관습을 이해하는데 큰 도움이 될 것임을 고찰할 수 있다.

주요어: 중간언어 화용론, 화용전이, L2 숙달도, 중국인 영어학습자

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