

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a background about the research topic. It consists of five sections: background of the study, research questions, aim of the study, significance of the study, and limitations of the study.

1.1. Background:

Effective communication is regarded as the utmost purpose for language learners. Although grammar, vocabulary, and syntax are essential in language learning, these aspects of language do not grant learners the needed communicative competence to become proficient users of a language in real-life situations. While some expressions could be agreeable in a certain context, in other contexts they might be disturbing or annoying. Accordingly, EFL/ESL learners should gain pragmatic competence in order to avoid being misunderstood. Pragmatic competence refers to the understanding of how language could be used in different situations and contexts.

Thus, speech acts which are “the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication” (Searle, 1969a, p. 16) were widely investigated for better realization of how language is used and realized in different contexts and different cultures. A number of theories were introduced forming the theoretical framework of speech acts.

In addition to speech acts, politeness is another pragmatic element that plays a pivotal role in communication. Politeness is an essential part to be learnt and acquired by foreign/second language learners to improve their pragmatic competence. Among many approaches attempting to explain what “politeness” is, the approach that Brown and

Levinson developed is regarded quite influential. Since Brown and Levinson's theory was published, an increasing interest was given to politeness strategies.

Brown and Levinson (1987) in their approach about politeness, relied mainly on the notion of "face" that was introduced by Goffman (1967). Brown and Levinson made a distinction between "positive face" that refers to an individual's desire to be liked by others, and "negative face" that refers to an individual's desire to be free of imposition. Some speech acts including complaints, apologies, and refusals are classified as face threatening as they represent a threat to the face of either the speaker or the hearer.

In communication generally, the pragmatic competence of language users helps avoid misunderstanding that might occur due to using inadequate linguistic expressions. For instance, direct refusal could be acceptable in some cultures while it might be considered face-threatening or less polite in some other cultures.

In his seminal work "Logic and Conversation" (1975), philosopher H. Paul Grice formulated the principles of cooperative communication based on four maxims: First, Maxim of Quantity denotes that speakers should provide as much information as is necessary for the conversation, but no more. Second, Maxim of Quality necessitates that speakers should be truthful and provide information that is supported by evidence. Third, Maxim of Relevance that means speakers should provide information that is relevant to the conversation. Fourth, Maxim of Manner that refers to the importance of being clear, concise, and avoid ambiguity and obscurity.

According to Brown et al. (2001), subsequent researchers in the field of politeness theory have expanded upon the conflict avoidance rules originally proposed by Grice. These researchers have introduced additional maxims, such as the maxim of Tact, the maxim of Generosity, the maxim of Modesty, the maxim of Approbation, the maxim of

Agreement, and the maxim of Sympathy. These additional maxims or similar politeness rules are believed to be ways of minimizing face-loss and facilitating communicative interactions within social groups.

For shedding light on the importance of refusal and politeness strategies in communication, an example of multicultural dinner party will be given in the following lines. This dinner party comprises guests from various linguistic backgrounds and cultures. The event includes speakers of English, Spanish, Mandarin, and French.

The host, who primarily speaks English (L1), offers a traditional dish that might not suit everyone's taste, such as a spicy dish. Different strategies for refusal and maintaining politeness may be required based on the language level.

The English speaker may employ a direct approach in refusal, clearly stating the issue with the offered dish. Politeness is maintained through the use of "Thank you" and a polite request for an alternative. The straightforwardness is in line with the communication style often seen in English.

Spanish speakers often use indirect language to soften refusals. Expressing appreciation "I appreciate the offer" and providing a reason before suggesting an alternative dish aligns with the politeness norms in Spanish-speaking cultures. The focus is on maintaining harmony and avoiding direct confrontation.

In Mandarin, speakers may use a combination of indirect language and polite expressions. The fear of not enjoying the spiciness is expressed indirectly, and a polite request for an alternative is included. The politeness strategy involves using respectful particles and phrases commonly found in Mandarin communication.

French speakers tend to use more elaborate expressions and formal language. The refusal is framed in a polite and appreciative manner, expressing regret about the potential

mismatch with the spicy dish. The use of formal language and expressions like "C'est très aimable à vous" (It's very kind of you) adds an extra layer of politeness.

In this multicultural setting, understanding the nuances of refusal and politeness strategies in each language level is crucial for effective communication and creating a comfortable environment for all guests. This example highlights the importance of cultural and linguistic sensitivity in social interactions. This necessitates understanding different refusal and politeness strategies to avoid misunderstanding.

The investigation of politeness strategies in refusals has been the focus of many studies. A number of research papers focused on studying the topic in educational contexts. As an example, Chojimah (2015) studied politeness strategies used by Indonesian university students to perform refusals to suggestions, offers, and invitations. The study correlated refusal strategies and politeness strategies used to mitigate refusals with different social status relationships. Moving from students to teachers, another study conducted by Hartuti and Sutopo (2014) focused on politeness strategies used to express refusals among English language teachers in relevance to different social status relationships and genders.

Some other studies investigated the deployment of politeness strategies used to express refusals in movies, fiction, and TV shows. For instance, Anshari (2021); Charismawati (2013); Nasution and Lisetyo Ariyanti (2013) studied how politeness strategies were utilized to express refusals by characters in movies. Additionally, Farrokhi and Arghami (2017) investigated how different power relations impacted the use of politeness strategies in refusals as displayed in English and Farsi novels. More recently, Rovita and Gulo (2022) investigated how the guests in The Ellen Show used politeness strategies in refusal.

A number of studies, including the current one, investigated how EFL speakers use

politeness strategies in refusal. For instance, Jazaeri (2022) compared the politeness strategies in the production of refusals used by three groups: English native speakers, Persian native speakers, and Iranian EFL learners. Another study conducted by Kasih (2020) compared how EFL learners from three nationalities politely produce the speech act of refusal. The current study aims at investigating the refusal strategies as well as the politeness strategies used to mitigate refusals by Egyptians who speak English as a foreign language.

1.2. Research Questions:

- 1) What are the refusal strategies used by Egyptian EFL speakers for declining offers and requests?
- 2) What are the politeness strategies used by Egyptian EFL speakers for refusing offers and requests?

1.3. Aim of the Study:

The primary aim of this study is to investigate and analyze the politeness strategies employed by Egyptian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers when expressing refusals. The focus will be on understanding the linguistic and sociocultural aspects that influence the choice of polite language in the refusal context. By examining the specific strategies employed, the study aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of how linguistic politeness is manifested within the cultural context of Egypt and among individuals using English as a foreign language.

1.4. Significance of the Study:

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous studies investigated the politeness strategies that Egyptian EFL speakers use while refusing offers and requests.

This topic is particularly important since in several aspects. Firstly, it contributes to the field of intercultural communication and linguistics by shedding light on the politeness strategies utilized by Egyptian EFL speakers. Understanding these strategies provides valuable insights into the cultural nuances and linguistic intricacies that shape communication patterns in a multilingual context.

Moreover, the findings of this study may have practical implications for language educators and learners. Awareness of politeness strategies can enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching in Egypt and similar contexts, helping learners navigate real-life communication scenarios with cultural sensitivity. Additionally, it may facilitate the development of materials and teaching methods tailored to the specific needs of Egyptian EFL learners.

Furthermore, the study addresses a gap in the existing literature on politeness strategies, particularly in the context of refusal expressions among Egyptian EFL speakers. The exploration of this specific linguistic aspect contributes to the broader understanding of how politeness is achieved in cross-cultural communication, enriching the academic discourse on sociolinguistics and intercultural studies. Hence, the research on politeness strategies in refusals among Egyptian EFL speakers not only deepens our understanding of cultural and linguistic dynamics but also offers practical insights for language educators, learners, and researchers in the field of multilingual communication.

1.5. Definitions of Key Terms:

In this section, some key terms are defined to make the following chapter clearer and more comprehensible:

Speech Act: speech acts are the “actions performed via utterances” (Yule, 1996, p. 47).

Refusal: Cohen (1996) defines the speech act of refusal as the act that occurs when a

speaker directly or indirectly says “no” to a request, invitation, suggestion or offer.

Face: Face is the public self-image that every member of society wants to maintain (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Face-threatening Act (FTA): refers to a communicative behavior or utterance that poses a risk to an individual's positive social value or public image, potentially challenging his/her desired self-presentation or maintaining social harmony. This concept is integral to politeness theory and face negotiation theory in communication studies.

Pragmatic Competence: “the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes in the speaker’s utterance” (Fraser, 1983, p. 29).

Politeness: “the term we use to describe the extent to which actions, including the way things are said, match addressee’s perceptions of how they should be performed” (Grundy, 2013, p. 202).

Communicative Competence: refers to a language user's proficiency in grammatical aspects such as syntax, morphology, and phonology, in addition to their social awareness regarding the appropriate timing and context for using expressions (Hymes, 1962).