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INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the language forms of refusals produced by two groups of English as a Foreign Language students: native Turkish speakers and native Macedonian speakers. Refusals are complex speech acts that have a large impact on the communication between EFL speakers. These acts can threaten interpersonal relationships and require the ability to use a range of pragmatic strategies to maintain politeness and social harmony. The analyzed data were gathered through an online discourse completion task that included multiple situations with various contexts and different social relations between the interlocutors. The participants of the study are specifically first-year university students who are learning English as a foreign language. The responses are analyzed following the framework of Beebe, L.M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). The main aim of the paper is to explore the pragmatic strategies used to convey refusals and to examine the role of social variables in shaping refusals. The initial findings show slight shifts in the refusal forms and strategies used due to shifts in social factors. The research highlights the complexity of refusals as communicative acts and contributes to the field of interlanguage pragmatics by offering insights into how cultural background and contextual factors shape refusal behavior among EFL learners.

KEYWORDS: refusals; speech acts; EFL

1. Introduction

Refusals are complex and inherently face-threatening speech acts, which require not only linguistic competence but also social and cultural appropriateness. Therefore, it is a topic that has attracted considerable research, especially with a focus on speakers and learners of English as a foreign language. However, regardless of the numerous studies on speech act theory and some types of speech acts, there is no research in North Macedonia that specifically examines how learners of English in this country perform the act of refusal as an independent speech act. This absence represents a significant gap in the literature, particularly due to the well-documented influence of the first or native language pragmatic norms on second or foreign language speech production. Hence, the present study analyses and compares the refusal strategies employed by two groups of EFL learners with distinct native languages, in order to determine the similarities and differences in their pragmatic choices. The main aim of the study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural pragmatics and second language acquisition, especially in the contexts where maintaining politeness and face are paramount. This study investigates two main research questions: (1) What pragmatic strategies do Turkish and Macedonian EFL learners use when performing refusals in English? and (2) Do social variables and contextual factors influence the linguistic forms and strategies of refusals? Drawing on previous research on speech acts that include Turkish and Macedonian EFL speakers (Kusevska et al., 2016; Tuncer, 2016), the lead hypothesis is that the differences in the learners' native languages will lead to variations in the English refusal strategies. The paper is organized as follows: it begins with a review of the relevant literature on speech acts and refusals, followed by a description of the methodological framework, then it presents the results alongside a discussion, and concludes with the study's implications for EFL learners.

2. Literature review

2.1. The speech act of refusal

Speech act theory, established by J.L. Austin (1962) and developed by J. Searle (1969), represents the foundational framework for analyzing refusals. According to this framework, language is not only used to convey information, but also to perform action. Hence, refusals as a type of speech acts, simultaneously convey information and perform a social action, i.e., they are performative and

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functionally purposeful; therefore, they are classified as "clear instances of illocutionary acts" (Caponetto, 2023, p.186). Furthermore, they are responsive or reactive acts that function as negative replies to preceding utterances, such as invitations, offers, suggestions, requests, or commands; effectively rejecting the propositional content or intended action of the initial speech act. Searle (1969) considered them commissive acts, since the speaker commits not to perform a requested action; then, expressive acts, because regret or discomfort is conveyed; and also aligned them with directive acts, as they often involve influencing the behavior of others by declining a request or a suggestion.

In accordance with politeness theory, refusals are also recognized as face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), since they have the potential to threaten both the speaker's and the hearer's positive or negative face, depending on how they are expressed and received. Due to the face-threatening elements of refusals, speakers are often required to balance honesty with politeness. Speakers are expected to decline proposals, requests, offers, etc., without disrupting social harmony, which means respecting social norms, safeguarding the interlocutor's face, and maintaining politeness. Furthermore, Brown & Levinson (1987) developed the concept of politeness strategies and identified how refusals often involve balancing the desire to reject a request with the need to maintain politeness and avoid direct confrontation. Their work highlights the importance of mitigating language strategies like indirectness, hedging, and offering alternative solutions. Hence, refusals can be noted as complex speech acts that often include the possibility of face-threatening outcomes. In conversation analysis, refusals are described as dispreferred responses (Eslami, 2010, p.217), which are typically marked by indirectness, delays, hedging, or mitigation strategies, in order to maintain politeness and avoid face-threatening consequences (Levinson, 1983). Structurally, refusals are rarely expressed with only one simple sentence; instead, they are frequently organized as a sequence of acts that includes one main central act that can be preceded and/or followed by adjunct acts. The central act is the main statement that rejects a request, invitation, offer, or suggestion. There are multiple strategies that interlocutors use to express a refusal, which are classified in two categories: direct refusals and indirect refusals (Beebe et al., 1990, pp. 72-73). Direct refusals represent explicit and clear expressions of a refusal without any attempt to soften or mitigate the impact of the refusal. Therefore, they are often used when there is a close relation between the interlocutors and the concern for politeness is low. They are conveyed through performative verbs and non-performative statements expressing negative willingness or ability to do the act. On the other hand, the category of indirect refusals includes strategies that imply a refusal without stating it directly. They often soften the impact of the refusal by offering explanations, excuses, or other politeness strategies. The list of types and subtypes of indirect strategies is very long. They can appear in the form of: regret, wish, excuse, reason, explanation, giving an alternative, a promise of future acceptance, statement of philosophy, statement of principle, an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor, acceptance that functions as a refusal, and different forms of avoidance (Beebe et al., 1990, p.73). Furthermore, adjuncts are the utterances that accompany a refusal and support it, but do not function as refusals on their own. In accordance with Beebe et al (1990), adjuncts represent "preliminary remarks that could not stand alone and function as refusals" (p.57). and appear in the form of statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement, statements of empathy, pause fillers, or expressions of gratitude and appreciation (p. 73). These utterances, labeled as adjuncts to refusals, often precede or follow a refusal and make it sound more polite or emotionally appropriate. The act of pre-refusal includes supporting moves that appear before the main refusal, and their main role is to prepare the interlocutor for the forthcoming refusal and reduce the refusal's negative impact. Post-refusal acts occur after the central act, in order to justify or soften the refusal act, or to repair the possible damage to the social relationship between the interlocutors.

Examples:

No, I refuse. [direct refusal]

Sorry, I won't. [pre-adjunct + direct refusal]

I can't. I have work. [direct refusal + post-adjunct]

I already have plans. [indirect refusal]

Thanks for asking, but I have other obligations. [preadjunct + indirect refusal]

I have an exam tomorrow, so I have to study. [indirect refusal + post-adjunct]

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Hence, as presented with the example, refusals tend to follow a three-part sequence: a pre-refusal, the central refusal itself, and a post-refusal explanation or alternative.

2.2. Refusal Speech Acts Across Cultures: Native Norms and Interlanguage Development

The way individuals perform refusals, what strategies they use, how direct or indirect they are, and how they mitigate potential offense, can vary widely across cultures and languages. Moreover, the linguistic form and the appropriateness of refusals are highly dependent on the specific communicative context in which they occur. Their significance extends beyond the action of rejection, reflecting a speaker's pragmatic competence, sensitivity to social norms, and awareness of interpersonal dynamics. The variability of refusals combined with their frequency in everyday speech has resulted in numerous research studies that analyze this speech act and its usage by native speakers of English, learners of English as a second or foreign language, and also their use and form in other languages.

In native English usage, politeness and indirectness are essential features of refusals as inherently face-threatening acts, which typically invoke negative politeness strategies, such as indirectness, hedging, and mitigation, to avoid offending the interlocutor or appearing uncooperative. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) examined refusal strategies in English and found that speakers frequently employ indirect elements, such as expressions of regret, excuses, alternative suggestions, reasons, and hedging; rather than issuing blunt refusals like "no" or "I refuse". These strategies reflect a broader conversational goal of preserving the interlocutor's face and conforming to social norms (Beebe et al., 1990). However, differences appear even between British and American English due to cultural differences and differences in system values (Dziubińska, 2016). In British English, giving a reason is probably central to refusals, as shown by the research of Kitao (1996), who highlights that the most frequent refusal patterns are expressions of regret paired with excuses or reasons in a few slightly different combinations. The analysis of refusals in British movies by Kasih (2018) confirms the tendency of native British English speakers to deliver refusals through giving a reason or an explanation of why the speaker cannot fulfill the interlocutor's demands. On the other hand, American movies include frequent mitigated refusals usually hedged to make the refusal act sound more polite (Kasih, 2018). In general, native English speech is characterized by indirect structure, regrets and justifications, and softening of wording. Comparative and cross-cultural research also supports the idea that the most common refusals used by native English speakers are indirect and reason-oriented; the frequent use of indirect strategies by native British speakers was confirmed in the study by Alajmi (2008), while the tendency to use hedged excuses by native American English speakers was shown in the study of Sadler & Eröz (2002).

Refusals are complex communicative acts shaped by context, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural expectations (Rimtahi Marbun & Damanik, 2025, p.98). Since refusals cause significant pragmatic challenges for language learners, particularly when navigating sociocultural norms that diverge from those in the speakers' native language, they are a frequent topic of analysis in interlanguage studies. As Boonsuk & Ambele (2019) emphasize, "distinct cultures, based on their own contextual experiences, have a very special and distinct way of stating no in English" (p.221). Research on EFL pragmatics consistently shows a preference for indirect refusal strategies among learners from different linguistic backgrounds. Studies show that Serbian (Živković, 2022), Chinese (Chunli & Mohd Nor, 2016), Thai (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019), Arabic (Khalil & Abdely, 2025), and Saudi (Qadi, 2021) EFL learners tend to use indirect refusals more frequently than direct ones, due to the notion that such strategies are perceived to be less face-threatening and more polite. Furthermore, research (Halupka Rešetar & Knežević, 2016; Abidi & Zaid, 2026) shows that there is often a discrepancy between the speech of native speakers and EFL speakers in the expression of refusals. Specifically, the realization of the refusal act is influenced by sociocultural motives such as social status (Abidi & Zaid, 2026), and it is an act sensitive to contextual variables (Hariri & Moini, 2020, p.1312). Interlanguage studies, including Turkish learners of EFL, have consistently demonstrated that refusals are realized through a variety of indirect strategies, often shaped by cultural perceptions of politeness, native language transfer, and interlanguage pragmatic development. Tekyıldız (2006) and Rençberler & Akyol (2015) highlight the substantial differences in linguistic and socio-pragmatic quality between native English speakers and Turkish EFL learners. Also, the cross-cultural comparison by Şahin (2011) shows that Turkish learners, while often producing pragmatically appropriate refusals similar to native English speakers, still exhibit signs of L1 influence in the frequency and sequencing of their semantic formulas.

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These studies confirm that the indirectness commonly observed among Turkish learners is deeply rooted in cultural norms and not solely a reflection of linguistic deficiency. The refusals produced by Turkish EFL speakers usually favor excuse, reason, or regret strategies to manage face-threatening acts (Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016). Çiftçi (2016) also observed the inclusion of more detailed and specific explanations compared to the refusals by native English speakers, reflecting a pragmatic style that seeks to justify the refusal more thoroughly. In line with this, Tuncer (2016) emphasized that Turkish speakers associate direct refusals with rudeness, reinforcing the prevalence of explanation/reason/excuse strategies as a means of polite mitigation. Mixed-method studies (Satıç & Çiftçi, 2018) have traced how refusal strategies develop over time with increased exposure to English and focused instruction. These studies suggest that although learners begin to adopt more target-like pragmatic behaviors, their refusals often retain traces of culturally embedded communicative norms, indicating a dynamic interplay between L1 and L2 development. One of the key socio-pragmatic tendencies among Turkish speakers is the perception of direct refusals as impolite or even rude, which leads to a strong preference for indirectness (Leontik & Minova, 2019). Among these, the most frequently employed refusal strategy is offering explanation/excuse/reason; a choice motivated by the cultural imperative to maintain positive interpersonal relations (Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016). Herein, it can be concluded based on numerous studies that Turkish EFL learners demonstrate a consistent preference for indirect refusal strategies, primarily through the use of excuses, explanations, and expressions of regret. This pattern reflects a culturally informed orientation toward politeness and face-saving acts, with learners often providing more elaborated and explicit responses than native speakers. These findings underscore the need for pragmatic instruction that not only raises awareness of the target language forms but also addresses deeper sociocultural assumptions that shape learners' communicative choices. Although refusal strategies among Turkish EFL learners have received great scholarly attention, EFL speakers in North Macedonia remain largely under-researched. There is general research on speech act theory (Kusevska, Trajkova, Neskovska & Smickovska, 2014), and some of the most frequent speech acts, such as requests (Daskalovska, Ivanovska & Kusevska, 2017), complaints (Kusevska, 2019), and apologies (Koceva & Kostadinova, 2021). However, published research on refusals in North Macedonia is very limited and focuses on other foreign languages, such as German (Ivanovska, 2019) and Turkish (Leontik & Minova, 2021), while there are no individual studies specifically on refusals in EFL speech. This research gap emphasizes the need for further research into how refusals are realized by Macedonians through English as a foreign language. Therefore, a comparative study involving both groups of EFL learners and their speech will offer valuable and novel insights into how sociocultural norms shape pragmatic behavior across different language backgrounds.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed method of analysis in examining the refusal strategies used by learners of English as a foreign language. The data was collected through a Discourse completion task that includes hypothetical situations designed to elicit refusals in different social contexts involving varying degrees of social relations between the interlocutors. Participants were asked to provide written responses to each scenario, simulating real-life language use in controlled conditions. Then, the data was analyzed using a combination of descriptive, qualitative, and contrastive approaches. Therefore, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the types of refusal strategies used and also the reasons why learners employed them in specific interpersonal situations. The participants in the study are first-year students at the University "Goce Delcev" in Stip, North Macedonia. The total number of participants is 80, and the age range is between 19 and 21. They are divided into two sample groups based on their native language and the faculty that they are attending. Hence, the first sample consists of 40 university students attending the Faculty of Educational Sciences, who are native speakers of Macedonian. The second group is 40 native speakers of Turkish, who are students at the Faculty of Law. Both groups are first-year students and study English as a foreign language at a B1 level as part of their study programs.

The instrument for the data collection was a Discourse Completion Task (see Appendix 1), which was administered anonymously. The DCT includes a total of 8 scenarios involving invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions. Across the scenarios, the interlocutors varied and included friends, neighbors, and colleagues. In the description of each scenario, the participants were indirectly encouraged to refuse or decline the presented invitation, request, offer, or suggestion, due to a specific problem that prevents

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them from complying. A summarized description of the tasks within the DCT is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summarized version of the DCT

Speech situation	interlocutor	Context
invitation	friend	A friend invites you to go on a weekend trip, but you are struggling with faculty work deadlines.
	colleague	A colleague invites you to a party that falls on the same day as your sister's/brother's birthday party.
request	neighbour	A neighbor asks you to watch their dog while they go on vacation, but you are allergic to pets.
	friend	A friend asks you to help them move to a new apartment, but you have a prior commitment.
offer	stranger	Someone offers to buy you a drink at a bar, but you don't drink alcohol.
	colleague	A colleague offers to give you a ride home, but you prefer to walk for some personal time.
suggestion	friend	A friend suggests that you should try a new restaurant for dinner, but you've already made plans to cook at home.
	colleague	A colleague suggests you take on an additional project, but you are already overloaded with work.

The DCT was chosen as the main instrument because it is an efficient tool that enables eliciting specific speech acts in a controlled and replicable manner. It also enables researchers to target a specific group of people and to decrease the number of social and contextual variations. Although it may not fully capture the spontaneity of real-time spoken interaction, it remains a reliable method for assessing pragmatic competence, particularly for foreign language learners. The DCT was administered online via Microsoft Teams Forms. Participants were asked to respond to eight situational prompts representing real-life refusal contexts. The DCTs were completed by the students before one of their lessons in Contemporary English, so that it was ensured that everyone added their responses on their own without any interference. The collected data was analyzed in three phases. In the first phase, a descriptive analysis was conducted to categorize participants' responses according to the framework proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990), and the frequency of each strategy type was calculated to identify common patterns among the participants. The Beebe et al. (1990) taxonomy distinguishes refusal strategies in accordance with the degree of politeness and face-threatening nature of the responses. It includes direct and indirect refusals and adjunct strategies. Then, in the second phase, a qualitative thematic analysis was performed to explore how contextual factors, such as social distance, influenced the choice of refusal strategies. In the study, refusals are analyzed in interactions that include interlocutors with varying degrees of social distance, including strangers, friends, neighbors, and fellow student colleagues. Strangers represent high social distance, friends show low social distance, while neighbors and colleagues are treated as intermediate categories. In addition, social dominance or the power status between the interlocutors was also taken into consideration. The power relations among friends, neighbors, and fellow student colleagues were treated as having equal status, while strangers were considered neutral. Although distance and dominance may vary across individuals and cultures, these categories are used as analytical indicators of interpersonal relations in the present study. These indicators provide a framework for understanding how both interpersonal closeness and perceived dominance influence the selection of refusal strategies. Finally, in the third phase, a comparative analysis was conducted between the two participant groups, each with a different native language and culture, to examine cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variations in the use of refusal strategies.

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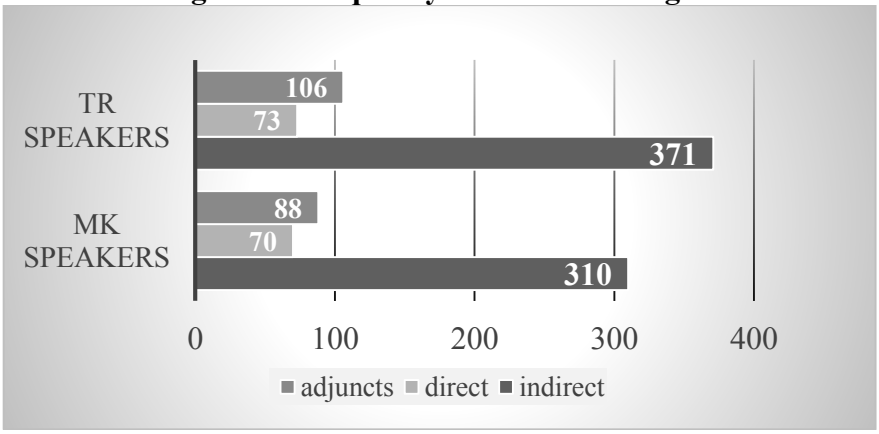
4. Results & Analysis

In the descriptive analysis, basic patterns and distributions of refusals were identified across the dataset, which provided a total of 1018 refusal strategies produced by the participants. The strategies were categorized as direct, indirect, and adjuncts, following the previously mentioned framework (see section 3). The initial analysis provides a foundational understanding of the general tendencies in strategy use among the respondents, serving as a basis for more detailed, context-specific analysis in the subsequent sections. The uses of refusal strategies (direct and indirect) and adjuncts to refusals by Turkish and Macedonian respondents are summarized in Figure 1. The dataset consists of 320 responses, derived from 40 participants who responded to eight refusal situations each. However, the frequency counts exceed the number of responses because individual responses often contained more than one refusal strategy. In particular, indirect strategies often occurred as a combination, as well as the adjuncts. Therefore, the frequencies presented below represent the total number of strategy occurrences rather than the number of responses. Hence, Turkish speakers used direct refusals more frequently (106 occurrences) than indirect refusals (73 occurrences), suggesting a preference for straightforward communication. Similarly, Macedonian speakers also used direct refusals more often (88 occurrences) than indirect ones (70 occurrences), though the margin is slightly narrower compared to their Turkish counterparts.

Figure 1: Frequency of refusal strategies



In addition to the main refusal strategies, both groups employed adjuncts to refusals extensively. Turkish respondents produced a total of 371 adjuncts, while Macedonian respondents used 310. These adjuncts often accompanied the main refusal and served to mitigate the force of the refusal, enhance politeness, or maintain social harmony. The notably high frequency of adjuncts in both groups indicates that refusal speech acts are often softened or supported by additional linguistic elements, regardless of whether the refusal itself is direct or indirect. Turkish respondents used adjuncts more frequently overall, which may suggest a stronger emphasis on politeness strategies or social sensitivity in refusal situations. Although the initial results provided an overview of general tendencies in the refusal strategies employed by both respondent groups, a more detailed analysis was conducted to examine their preferences within specific speech situations. This closer examination aimed to identify the types and frequencies of refusal strategies in relation to the social and contextual factors present in each scenario. Herein, the qualitative analysis revealed that Macedonian native speakers consistently preferred indirect refusal strategies across all speech situations, regardless of the degree of social distance or the nature of the relation between the interlocutors.

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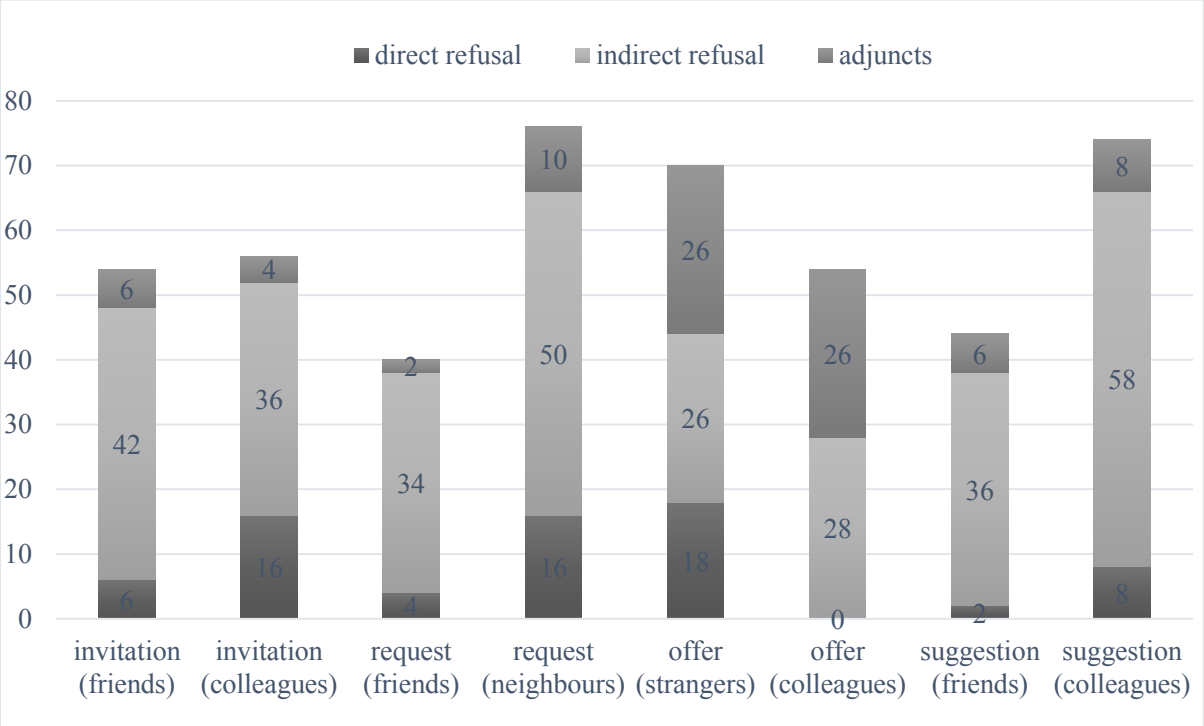

Figure 2: Strategies applied by Macedonian respondents

As shown in Figure 2, indirect strategies accounted for the majority of the responses in each scenario. Direct refusals were used far less frequently and appeared more commonly in situations involving greater social distance or higher power differentials. Adjuncts to refusals, such as expressions of apology, gratitude, or explanation, were also present in varying degrees, with a particularly noticeable increase in their use in refusals following offers. This suggests that respondents were more likely to include additional mitigating language when declining offers compared to other types of speech acts. Hence, the overall pattern in the data indicates that Macedonian respondents consistently employed indirect strategies as the dominant form of refusal, supplemented by adjuncts that varied depending on the situational context. These findings provide insight into the pragmatic choices made by speakers in managing the act of refusal in socially sensitive interactions. The responses from Turkish participants show a comparable pattern to those of the Macedonian group, with a clear preference for indirect refusal strategies across all scenarios. Indirect refusals constitute the majority of the responses, while direct strategies appeared far less frequently. Notably, the data indicate a consistent use of adjuncts, especially in refusals following offers. This mirrors the pattern observed among Macedonian respondents, where adjuncts also appeared more prominently in the same context. Although direct refusals were not absent, they were employed more frequently in situations characterized by greater social distance or formality, though still less often than indirect strategies. The overall trend in the Turkish data confirms a dominant reliance on indirectness, with adjuncts serving as a recurring element to moderate the impact of the refusal. These findings, as presented in Figure 3, highlight a consistent strategy used within the group, which aligns with the trends observed in the Macedonian data and suggests similar pragmatic preferences in the context of refusals.

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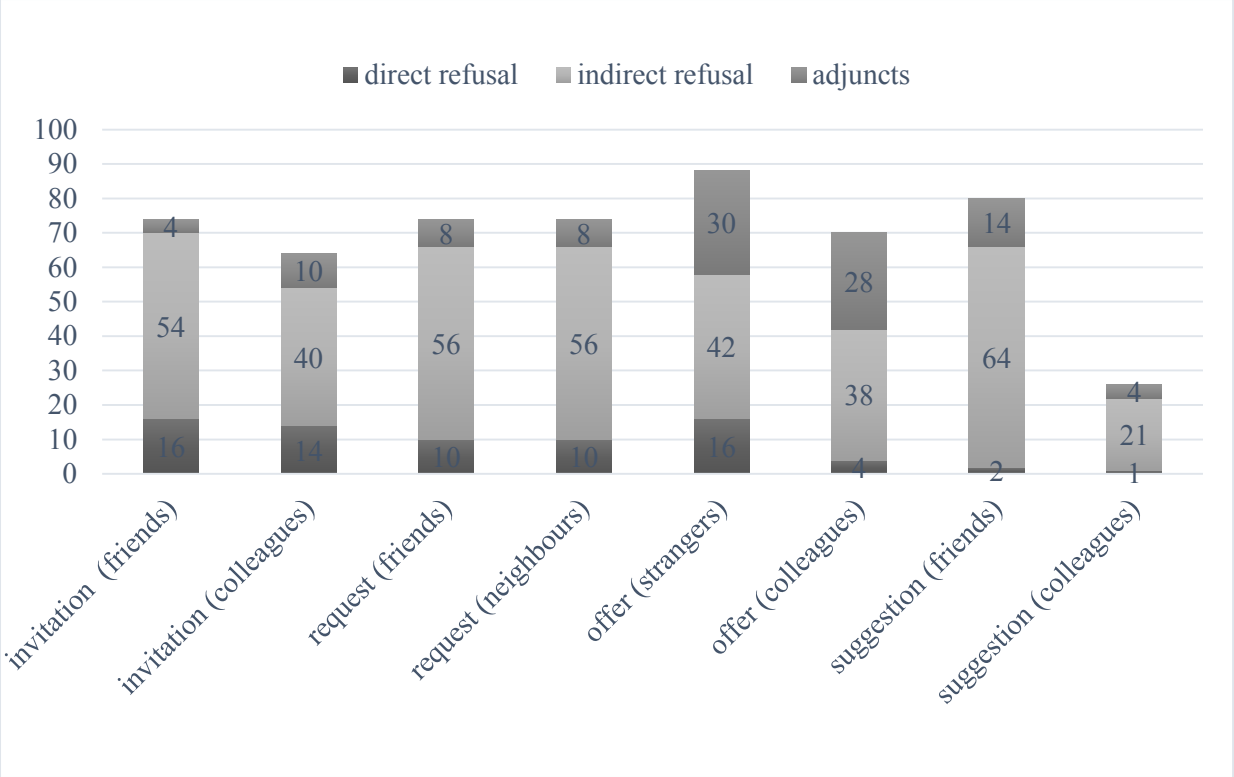

Figure 3: Strategies applied by Turkish respondents

The contrastive analysis of the refusal components reveals significant patterns in the linguistic strategies employed by both Turkish and Macedonian respondents across different speech situations and interlocutor relations. As summarized in Table 2, which lists the most frequent strategy in each situation, it clearly shows that the linguistic pattern of a refusal in the speech of both groups represents a combination of one central refusal strategy with pre-refusal and/or post-refusal adjuncts. The results show that indirect refusals are expressed through an explanation, a regret, or a promise of future acceptance, while direct refusals are in the form of expressing negative ability. Also, pre-refusal and post-refusal adjuncts are present in the form of expression of gratitude.

Table 2: Identified Refusal Patterns

Situation	*Interlocutor*	*Turkish respondents*	*Macedonian respondents*
Invitation	friend	Explanation + promise of future acceptance	regret + explanation
	colleague	regret + explanation + gratitude	negative ability + explanation
Request	neighbour	Explanation + negative ability	regret + explanation
	friend	Explanation + promise of future acceptance	Explanation + promise of future acceptance
Offer	stranger	explanation + gratitude	gratitude + explanation
	colleague	gratitude + explanation	gratitude + explanation
Suggestion	friend	Explanation + promise of future acceptance	regret + explanation
	colleague	explanation + regret	regret + explanation

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A key finding is the pervasive use of explanations as a core component of refusals across all speech acts (requests, invitations, offers, suggestions) and all interlocutor categories (friends, neighbors, colleagues). The two groups of respondents predominantly include justifications or reasoning in their refusals, showing a shared communicative goal: to make the refusal appear reasonable and socially acceptable. This strategy serves to mitigate the potential negative impact of the refusals by framing them as situationally necessary rather than personally motivated. The expression of regret is another prominent feature, specifically in Macedonian responses. Regret often appears alongside explanations, especially in interactions with friends, neighbors, and colleagues. This pattern underscores an emotional sensitivity to the relational implications of refusing, indicating a cultural emphasis on empathy and maintaining social harmony. The frequency and positioning of the expressions of regret in the speech by Turkish respondents show more noticeable variation, possibly reflecting different cultural norms around emotional expression and politeness management. In refusals directed toward friends, both groups frequently include a promise of future acceptance, such as a commitment to participate or comply at another time. This component functions to preserve social bonds, signaling that the current refusal does not imply a permanent rejection of the relationship or future interaction. The use of this strategy demonstrates the importance placed on relational continuity in both cultural contexts. A combination of gratitude and explanation is often employed when responding to offers, both by Turkish and Macedonian speakers. This formulaic pairing acknowledges the goodwill of the interlocutor while simultaneously justifying the refusal, thus softening the impact. This strategy reflects an acute awareness of the social delicacy involved in declining offers, particularly when they are seen as acts of generosity. Finally, the use of negative ability, or the statement indicating the speaker's inability to fulfill the request, appears most frequently in refusals to colleagues and neighbors, with a notably higher frequency among Macedonian respondents. This approach emphasized external or situational constraints over personal unwillingness, aligning with politeness strategies that aim to respect social distance and reduce the threat to the interlocutor's face. In general, the analysis emphasizes the adaptability of refusal strategies depending on the speech act and the social relationship between interlocutors. Refusals to close interlocutors tend to be softened through regret and promises of future acceptance, whereas refusals to more formal or distant interlocutors prioritize explanations and gratitude. Hence, the two groups of respondents share the core refusal strategies, but show subtle differences in frequency, sequencing, and emphasis.

5. Discussion

5.1. Most common patterns of refusals

This study explored the refusal strategies employed by Macedonian and Turkish speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), focusing on their linguistic patterns across different social contexts. Contrary to the main hypothesis, the findings indicate notable similarities between the two groups, as well as a few culturally influenced differences. The findings of this study highlight that refusal is a complex speech act typically realized through a combination of strategies rather than a single move. The most frequent refusal patterns identified among both Macedonian and Turkish EFL speakers involve indirect strategies that combine explanations with other politeness markers such as regret, gratitude, and expressions of inability. Below are representative examples illustrating these common patterns in each group. The examples are arranged according to their occurrence, starting with the most frequent patterns and moving toward the least frequent.

Example responses by Macedonian speakers of EFL:

(1) Regret + Explanation:
"I'm really sorry, but I don't drink alcohol."
(2) Gratitude + Explanation:
"Thank you for the offer, but I prefer to walk today."
(3) Negative Ability + Explanation:
"I can't go this weekend, I am busy."

Example responses by Turkish speakers of EFL:

(1) Gratitude + Explanation:
"Thank you for offering, but I'd prefer to walk today to get some fresh air."
(2) Explanation + Promise of future acceptance

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"I have some other plans, but we can go together next time."
(3) Negative Ability + Explanation:
"I can't go out, I have important exams."
(4) Explanation + Regret:
"It's my sister's birthday, I'm sorry."

Although slight variations in refusal forms emerged due to social variables, the overall patterns of politeness and face-threat mitigation were consistent across both groups. Notably, social distance between interlocutors did not significantly influence refusal strategies, indicating a shared pragmatic approach to managing refusals in English. Herein, the similarities in refusal patterns between Macedonian and Turkish speakers of EFL outweigh the differences, reflecting comparable pragmatic sensitivities within these EFL contexts.

5.2. Similarities vs. differences in the refusal pattern

One of the key findings in this study is the shared preference among both groups of speakers for indirect refusal strategies, which serve to mitigate the potentially face-threatening nature of refusals. This pattern indicates a mutual concern for politeness and social harmony, as indirect strategies help make refusals less confrontational and more socially acceptable. Notably, the strategy of explanation emerged as the most frequently employed refusal strategy across all situational contexts by both groups. This consistent preference mirrors findings from previous studies (Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016; Çiftçi, 2016, etc.). Moreover, it suggests a shared pragmatic awareness of the need to justify refusals in order to preserve interpersonal relationships and minimize offense. The use of such strategies reflects a sensitivity to social norms that prioritize relational harmony and the maintenance of positive interaction. These results support the claims of Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which argues that speakers often use indirectness to protect the listener's negative face and the desire to act freely without imposition. These results align with previous research (Tekyıldız, 2006; Şahin, 2011). Furthermore, according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, both Macedonian and Turkish cultures are considered relatively collectivistic, which means that group harmony and indirect communication are often prioritized. Therefore, the constant use of indirect strategies, regardless of the contexts, shows that both Macedonian and Turkish EFL speakers are guided by similar politeness conventions in English communication, especially when navigating potentially sensitive or negative responses. Another noteworthy pattern observed in the data is the increased use of adjuncts, specifically the application of expressions of gratitude and appreciation. In both groups of respondents, adjuncts were more commonly applied in refusals following requests, invitations, and suggestions. This trend reflects a heightened level of social sensitivity associated with declining an offer, where a refusal may risk appearing ungrateful or discourteous. In this case, adjuncts function as pragmatic softeners, which allow speakers to maintain a positive interpersonal dynamic while delivering a negative response. The frequent use of these supportive moves indicates that both groups exhibit pragmatic awareness and adapt their refusal strategies based on the illocutionary force of the speech act and the perceived social implications of the interaction. These findings are consistent with patterns of strategic politeness typical of high-context cultures, where indirectness and the preservation of social harmony are foregrounded. In particular, the use of gratitude and appreciation as adjuncts in both groups serves to mitigate the imposition of the refusal and convey mutual respect, further reinforcing the shared emphasis on politeness and face-saving strategies in cross-cultural communication. In addition, both groups also rarely used direct refusals, which points to their inclination toward politeness and indirectness in mitigating face-threatening acts. The direct refusals appear in both groups through the strategy of negative willingness or inability, such as expressions that one would like to comply but is unable to; thereby still maintaining a degree of empathy and consideration for the interlocutor. This again highlights a shared politeness orientation aimed at showing empathy and consideration for the interlocutor. Also, it reinforces earlier observations that direct refusals are often perceived as rude (Tuncer, 2016; Leontik & Minova, 2019).

Despite the overall similarities, some cross-cultural differences were also observed, specifically in the use of pre-refusal and post-refusal strategies. Macedonian EFL speakers demonstrated a strong preference for statements of regret as part of their pre-refusal strategies, whereas Turkish EFL speakers showed more frequent use of promises of future acceptance. This variation may reflect cultural differences in how each group manages interpersonal obligations and social harmony. Moreover, Macedonian EFL speakers tend to structure their refusals in a clear sequence, typically beginning with

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a pre-refusal strategy (such as regret or an expression of gratitude), followed by the main refusal. In contrast, Turkish EFL speakers showed a more balanced use of pre-refusal and post-refusal strategies, sometimes beginning or ending with a supportive move, depending on the context. Interestingly, while both groups employed statements of gratitude, Macedonian respondents consistently placed these adjuncts before the refusal, whereas Turkish respondents used them more flexibly, either before or after the main act of refusal. This suggests a slight variation in the rhetorical structuring of politeness strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the refusal strategies employed by Macedonian and Turkish speakers of English as a foreign language, offering important and novel insights into their pragmatic competence. The findings demonstrate that refusals, as inherently face-threatening and socially sensitive speech acts, are approached with considerable strategic complexity by both groups of EFL students. Refusals were rarely expressed through a single, isolated move; instead, speakers relied on a combination of strategies to soften the impact of their rejection and to convey respect for the interlocutor. Hence, refusals emerge as complex speech acts favoring indirectness and explanatory support to reduce the potential for offense and uphold politeness. The dominance of indirectness, especially through the use of explanations, represents a shared feature across both Macedonian and Turkish speakers of English as a foreign language. This preference highlights their awareness of the politeness norms typically associated with English refusals. The overall similarities in refusal strategies suggest that learners from different cultural backgrounds can exhibit comparable levels of pragmatic competence in a foreign language. This challenges assumptions that cultural differences necessarily lead to divergent pragmatic behavior in EFL contexts. Instead, the data support the view that learners can internalize and apply target-language norms in socially appropriate ways. Although minor differences were observed, such as variations in the sequencing and selection of supportive moves, these distinctions appear to reflect cultural preferences rather than significant differences in linguistic proficiency or pragmatic awareness. The influence of cultural background was evident in how each group structured their refusals, but both groups demonstrated a shared commitment to maintaining politeness in line with English-speaking norms. Social distance between the interlocutors did not substantially alter the refusal patterns of either group. Therefore, it can be concluded that both Macedonian and Turkish EFL learners behave and express themselves within a similar pragmatic framework when using English, regardless of the relational context. Their consistent use of politeness-preserving strategies points to a high level of pragmatic sensitivity and an ability to adapt to the social expectations embedded in English-language interactions.

Appendix I

DCT form available on MS Teams

1.I am a student at: _____ (add faculty).

2.I am _____ years old. (add a number)

3.A friend invites you to go on a weekend trip, but you are struggling with faculty work deadlines. What do you say:

4.A colleague invites you to a party that falls on the same day as your sister's/brother's birthday party. What do you say:

5.A colleague invites you to a party that falls on the same day as your sister's/brother's birthday party. What do you say:

6.A neighbor asks you to watch their dog while they go on vacation, but you are allergic to pets. You say:

7.A friend asks you to help them move to a new apartment, but you have a prior commitment. You say:

8.Someone offers to buy you a drink at a bar, but you don't drink alcohol. You say:

9.A colleague offers to give you a ride home, but you prefer to walk for some personal time. You say:

10. A friend suggests that you should try a new restaurant for dinner, but you've already made plans to cook at home. You say:

11. A colleague suggests you take on an additional project, but you are already overloaded with work. You say:

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