

## **SAYING ‘NO’ IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: EFL LEARNERS’ ELICITED REFUSALS\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to shed light on the pragmatic development of EFL learners by investigating their uses of refusals. EFL learners aged between 20 and 29 were invited to take a video-mediated DCT. Although the EFL learners may express their refusals indirectly in general, they appear to alter their refusal strategies with regard to the communicative situation. In addition, the advanced EFL learners appear to perform refusal strategies by the use of refusal routines, while the intermediate EFL may find it difficult to do so. Moreover, the use of a video-mediated DCT seems to elicit interesting uses of adjunct strategies. It can be conjectured that the discrepancy between the advanced and the intermediate EFL learners in the performance of refusal strategies may reflect their interlanguage pragmatics and linguistic competence. Compared to the refusing strategies used by the L1 speakers of Mandarin Chinese, those used by the EFL learners may not entirely be an outcome of pragmatic transfer.

Key words: EFL refusals, pragmatic development, interlanguage pragmatics, DCT, foreign language learning

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\* This research is supported by a grant from the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan, R.O.C. (MOST 104-2410-H-305-081-). A part of this research was presented at the JSLS 2016 Annual International Conference. I would like to thank Professor Chiung-chih Huang of National Chengchi University for inspiring this research years ago. I am also deeply appreciative of the students participating in this research, particularly those at National Taipei University, and my research assistants—Chao-Guo Yang, Meng-Yu Chang, Shu-Wen Lin, and Hao-Yang Chen. Also, I am grateful to the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. I am solely responsible for this work, and all remaining errors are mine.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The development of communicative competence, particularly pragmatic competence, has generally been considered a life-long process and is an intricate field of study, whether it is about first language acquisition or second language acquisition (Bachman 1990). Despite the intricacy of the process in the development of pragmatic competence, second/foreign language learners should eventually develop the ability to use their target language appropriately in social contexts. This subject matter—studies of second/foreign language learners' pragmatic development—is usually considered interlanguage pragmatics.

Compared to other subfields of studies on second language acquisition, interlanguage pragmatics is a comparatively young, yet growing subfield (Jorda 2005). Studies in this respect are generally concerned with issues, such as the linguistic realizations of speech acts, the strategies of speech-act production, the social situations and factors in the context of the realization of a particular speech act, and cross-cultural comparisons (cf. Soler and Martinez-Flor 2008; Yu 2011). As pointed out by Jorda (2005:67), “[m]ost studies in interlanguage pragmatics to date have considered non-native speakers’ use of speech acts...,” for example, requests (Blum-Kulka 1991; Hassall 1997; Li 2000; Rose 2000), refusals (Farnia and Wu 2012; Felix-Brasdefer 2004; Liao and Bresnahan 1996; Hsieh 2010), apologies (Trosborg 1995), gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman 1993), compliments (Nelson, Al-batal, and Echols 1996; Yu 2011), and complaints (Murphy and Neu 1996). These studies by and large take a cross-cultural perspective on interlanguage pragmatics. They basically concur that learners’ pragmatic competence in the target language is influenced by transfer from their respective first languages and from the cultural norm associated with the first languages. However, rarely do studies in this respect systematically consider the influence of social contexts (Murphy and Neu 1996) and the interaction between grammatical development, which may as well affect the realization of speech acts, and pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig 1999). This study therefore aims to examine Taiwanese EFL learners’ interlanguage pragmatics by assessing their use of refusals, which is a relatively less-

researched speech act, and to consider their grammatical development at the same time.

A major thread of this study is the investigation into Taiwanese EFL learners' use of refusals when they receive a request, an offer, or an invitation. In this respect, learners' refusing strategies and linguistic realizations of refusals will be examined. Since the linguistic realizations of a particular speech act are highly relevant to learners' grammatical development, their linguistic proficiency level is also considered in the examination.

## **2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Kasper and Dahl (1991:216) defined interlanguage pragmatics as “non-native speakers' (NNS') comprehension and production of speech acts, and how their L2-related speech act knowledge is acquired.” As pointed out in a review by Jorda (2005), the subfield of interlanguage pragmatics is relatively younger than other subfields of second language acquisition. Studies concerning interlanguage pragmatics have majorly been concerned with learners' use of speech acts: how they perform a particular speech act with appropriate linguistic devices, how learners' linguistic realizations of some speech act differ from native speakers', and to what extent cultural or linguistic differences between L1 and L2 may affect such realizations (cf. Yu 2011).

Jorda (2005) also reported that studies on interlanguage pragmatics generally investigate learners' pragmatic competence cross-sectionally, for example, the grand project conducted by Blum-Kulka and her colleagues (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). Blum-Kulka et al.'s Cross-Cultural Speech Act Research Project provides insightful findings in interlanguage pragmatics by comparing learners' performance of requests and apologies to L1 speakers'. They found that the learners tended to verbosely circumvent their requests and apologies and to transfer the cultural norms of their first language into their second language. Many researchers have since followed the approach adopted by

Blum-Kulka et al. to explore other aspects of interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz 1990; Chen 1996; Liao and Bresnahan 1996).

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990:56) considered learners' inappropriate use of a certain speech act a deviation from a norm and termed this pragmatic transfer — "transfer of L1 sociocultural communicative competence in performing L2 speech acts or any other aspects of L2 conversation." To illustrate their proposal, they conducted a Discourse Completion Test/Task (hereafter DCT) to elicit Japanese English learners' performance of refusals and compared them to English native speakers'. They found that pragmatic transfer was evident in: (1) the order of semantic formulae in each refusal: how speakers and learners normally organized the sequence of their utterances in a refusal situation, (2) the frequency of semantic formulae in refusals: what elements of semantic formulae were likely to be transferred, and (3) the content of semantic formulae in refusals: what expressions or utterances were usually used and whether these expressions were similar to L1 uses or L2 uses. Their findings provide a positive support for pragmatic transfer.

Studies concerning other speech acts also point to pragmatic transfer in this regard. For example, Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) studied and compared how gratitude was expressed by native speakers and learners of American English. They analyzed their results in terms of two levels of interlanguage, namely the pragmalinguistic level and the sociopragmatic level. The pragmalinguistic level of interlanguage pragmatics refers to the linguistic realizations of a speech act with a focus on the use of particular linguistic formulae. The sociopragmatic level, on the other hand, focuses on the influence of social context or situations on the production and perception of a speech act (cf. Soler and Martinez-Flor 2008). They found that the learners appeared to struggle when they were required to adjust their linguistic expressions according to the social situations. Eisenstein and Bodman thus concluded that English learners' performance of the thanking speech act is highly affected by the cultural norms associated with their L1.

In addition, the findings of several previous studies on Chinese English learners also point to a cross-cultural transfer in interlanguage pragmatics. Liao and Bresnahan (1996) conducted a contrastive study of

how native American English speakers and Chinese English learners refuse a request. They elicited both learners' and native speakers' refusals by using a discourse completion test (DCT) which consists of six situations of requests. They found that Chinese English learners and American native English speakers appear to use different semantic formulaic expressions when refusing. American native English speakers are inclined to vary their excuses and feel free to give their addressees moral lessons — what should be done according to the cultural norm, while Chinese English learners tend to avoid specifying their excuses and giving any moral lessons.

Different from most studies concerning interlanguage pragmatics, Yu (2011) investigated Chinese EFL learners' complimenting speech act in naturally occurring contexts and compared their performance to that of English native speakers'. A breakthrough in Yu's study was the use of elicited data collected in naturally occurring interaction. He found that Chinese EFL learners, compared to English native speakers, are less likely to actively compliment their interlocutors, and that their linguistic realizations of complimenting speech act also appeared to be different. In accordance to most studies in interlanguage pragmatics, Yu noted that EFL learners' complimenting styles are subject to the socio-cultural factors that are associated with EFL learners' L1.

## **2.2 Pragmatic Development and Grammatical Development**

As suggested by Bardovi-Harlig (1999), studies exploring the connection between learners' grammatical development and their pragmatic development may start by looking at the proficiency level. Although learners' scores on a proficiency test may not fully reflect their grammatical competence, such scores can provide an index of his/her grammatical competence.

Chang (2009) carried out a large scale of study on how speakers and learners of different language backgrounds refused requests, advice, invitations, and offers. The participants in her study included Chinese native speakers, English language speakers, and Chinese English learners at two different proficiency levels. The results of her study showed that two groups of learners and two groups of native speakers differed in their

uses and frequencies of semantic formulae. However, no clear correlation was found between the extent of language transfer and learners' proficiency levels.

In addition, Chang (2011) further investigated Chinese EFL learners' oral production of refusals and their judgment of the appropriateness of the refusals that are made by English native speakers. She pointed out several problems in respect to Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics. One major problem pertained to the directness of Chinese EFL learners' refusals. They tended to refuse in a relatively more indirect way and gave more reasons and made more excuses, compared to English native speakers. Another problem concerned their grammatical development. Chang pointed out that Chinese EFL learners were inclined to cause confusion because of their insufficient grammatical competence in that they produced ungrammatical sentences and inappropriate vocabulary when refusing.

However, Lin (2014) argued that Chinese EFL learners' refusals may not necessarily be products of cross-cultural transfer, but some interlanguage of its own instead. Lin elicited three kinds of data with a DCT, including EFL learners' refusals, Chinese and English native speakers' refusals (NCS and NES respectively). Analyzing his data according to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) classification of refusals, he found that both NCS and NES appear to use indirect strategies more than direct ones. On the other hand, his findings also indicated that the EFL learners tended to draw much on adjunct strategies and a wider variety of semantic formulae to express their refusals.

As reviewed above, it is clear that there is a discrepancy in refusal strategies and attribution of EFL learners' refusals between studies conducted in two different time periods (Liao and Bresnahan 1990; Lin 2014). Liao and Bresnahan (1990) and Chang (2011) reported that NES and NCS used different strategies to express refusals while Lin (2014) noted a similar pattern in their refusing strategies. In addition, while Liao and Bresnahan and Chang indicated that EFL learners' refusing strategies are similar to those of NCS's, Lin found otherwise. Instead of attributing EFL learners' refusing strategies to cross-cultural transfer, Lin (2014) argued that EFL learners' refusals could be considered some interlanguage

in its own good. This discrepancy thus leaves EFL learners' refusals and pragmatic competence more to be desired.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate Taiwanese EFL learners' refusals to a request, an offer, and an invitation. In addition to the linguistic realizations of their refusals, this study incorporates EFL learners' linguistic competence, assessed on the basis of their proficiency levels, into the examination of their interlanguage pragmatics. The present study hopes to provide an in-depth understanding of interlanguage pragmatics.

The research questions of this study are: (1) What are the strategies that Taiwanese EFL learners tend to employ when they are refusing, (2) How may contextual information influence Taiwanese EFL learners refusing strategies and the linguistic constructions in their refusals, and (3) How may Taiwanese EFL learners' pragmatic development be related to their grammatical development?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 DCT as the Instrument**

The findings in most studies on interlanguage pragmatics are usually drawn from elicited data. One of the elicited techniques that has long been commonly utilized is discourse completion tests (a. k. a., DCT). With the facilitation of a DCT, a researcher studying speech acts can collect a large number of comparable data of a specific speech act within a short period of time. Because of its popularity, a DCT has been questioned as to how much the DCT data can truly reflect speakers' and learners' performance of a speech act; can DCT elicited data be nearly as authentic as spontaneous data (Beebe and Cummings 1996; Brown and Ahn 2011; Jordà 2005)? In a DCT, the participants are asked to read a brief description of a situation and then write down their response to that situation. They do not get to interact and negotiate with the other party over the issue at hand in the test, such that they do not really take turns as they do in spontaneous interactions (Billmyer and Varghese 2000; Ellis 1999).

In an attempt to improve DCT, Billmyer and Varghese (2000) proposed a modified DCT by enriching the brief descriptions of scenarios in it. In their modified DCT they specified some social and contextual information that is relevant to the situations, including time, place, name, and the background of an event, in addition to communicative goal, social distance, and social dominance. They found that the modified version of DCT can successfully elicit longer and more elaborate 'written' speech while the fundamental strategies and linguistic realizations remain comparable to the outcome of the original DCT. They thus suggested that it may be necessary for an instrument of this sort to better reflect and account for social variation and context.

Nevertheless, some relevant paralinguistic features, which are prevalent in the production and perception of speech acts, remain overlooked. According to Hymes (1972:59-65), information that 'context' should include are the gender and name of the interlocutors, the relationship, social distance, and social dominance, the length of acquaintanceship, the frequency of interaction, the significance of the relationship, a description of the place where the interaction takes place, the time of the day, and the emotional or psychological state. In Billmyer and Varghese's (2009) modified DCT, the emotional or psychological state of the interlocutor is not taken into consideration. Even if it is considered and described in the situation, words may not faithfully convey the true emotion, nor can they well reflect paralinguistic features of this sort.

In light of these weaknesses, the present study incorporated video-prompts into a DCT, which was thereby enriched with relevant interpersonal and background information, as suggested by Billmyer and Varghese (2000), to compensate for the lack of indications of interlocutors' emotional or psychological state.

In the video-mediated DCT, the participants were given extended descriptions of three refusal situations where all relevant social and contextual information was included, as suggested by Billmyer and Varghese (2000), with the addition of relevant information of nonverbal signals and psychological states through video clips. In addition, in the video-mediated DCT, the role-play technique was also incorporated. The participants were assigned a role at the end of each scenario. Moreover,



before reading the description of a particular scenario in the test, the participants were played a video clip where two interlocutors acted out a scripted conversation as if they were talking spontaneously, as what they read in the description of the scenario. In the video, the participants would know which role in the conversation they were playing while responding. By using the video clip, they received essential paralinguistic cues and nonverbal signals that would reveal the role's psychological and emotional states at that moment.

The video clips were brief excerpts adapted from one American sitcom. Each clip lasted for no more than two minutes. English, the learners' target language, was the main language in the video prompts. For the native Mandarin Chinese speaker participants, they watched the same video prompts, to ensure comparability of the data, but they were given Chinese subtitles while watching.

### **3.2 Scenarios in the Video-Mediated DCT**

The video-mediated DCT used in the study includes three different situations— the coffee situation, the payment situation, and the dating situation— where the participants were assigned a role to refuse a request, an offer, and an invitation respectively. In each situation, the participants were required to refuse someone who is of a different social status or at a different social distance. In the coffee situation, a friend who the participants have recently got to know offers coffee she makes while she is notorious for making bad coffee. In the payment situation, an inefficient employee is requesting the participants, playing a role as the boss, for an advance on her salary. And in the dating situation, a close friend is inviting the participants to go on a blind date with him. These three scenarios are realistic and are connected to the participants' daily life.

For the procedure in detail: First, the first video was played, and then each of the participants was given a description of the situation. They were given some time to read the description and then they wrote down their response. The process is repeated for the remaining two situations.

In the case of the EFL participants, the descriptions were given in English, as shown in Appendix A, and in the case of the Mandarin native

speaker participants, the descriptions were given in Mandarin, as shown in Appendix B.

### 3.3 Participants

Three groups of participants were recruited to take part in this study. Two of the groups were the target group, namely the intermediate and the advanced Taiwanese EFL learners. They were college students from different universities in Taiwan. They were at the age of between 20 and 29 when participating in the study. The EFL learners were further divided into two groups according to their English proficiency level. The other group were Mandarin native speakers (henceforth MNS) in Taiwan. They were all non-English majors from different universities in the same age range as the EFL participants to ensure the comparability of data. Thirty participants were recruited for the MNS and thirty-two for the EFL groups.

Furthermore, since the potential correlation between grammatical development and pragmatic development is a focus in this study, the EFL learners' proficiency levels were considered. Hence, the EFL participants were divided further into two groups, namely the intermediate group and the advanced group on the basis of their English proficiency test scores.<sup>1</sup> After the division, there were 18 intermediate EFL learners (hereafter the IEFL) and 14 advanced EFL learners (hereafter the AEFL).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

In line with certain previous studies, this study adopted the classification of EFL learners' refusals developed by Beebe et al. (1990). This classification is "the best-known and most frequently cited system for analyzing refusals (Gass and Houck 1999:12)," as summarized in the following table.

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated in their linguistic demography, the EFL learners participating in this study had taken various English proficiency tests and most of them had taken the TOEIC. As a result, they were divided into the IEFL and the AEFL according to the results of their performance on the TOEIC. As announced by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, those who score above 880 on the TOEIC are considered an AEFL while those who score between 750 and 879 are considered an IEFL.

Table 1. Classification of Refusal Strategies by Beebe et al. (1990:72-3)

Major Categories	Substrategies	Examples
Direct	A. Performative	e.g., "I refuse."
	B. Nonperformative statement	
Indirect	1. "No."	
	2. Negative willingness/ability	e.g., "I can't." "I won't." "I don't think so."
	A. Statement of regret	e.g., "I'm sorry..."; "I feel terrible..."
	B. Wish	e.g., "I wish I could help you..."
	C. Excuse, reason, explanation	e.g., "I have a headache."
	D. Statement of alternative	e.g., "I'd rather..."; "Why don't you ask someone else?"
	E. Set condition for acceptance	e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have..."
	F. Promise for future acceptance	e.g., "I'll do it next time."
	G. Statement of principle	e.g., "I never do business with friends."
	H. Statement of philosophy	e.g., "One can't be too careful."
Adjuncts to refusals	I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	e.g., "I won't be any fun tonight."
	A. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	e.g., "I'd love to..."
	B. Statement of empathy	e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation."
	C. Pause fillers	e.g., "uhh"; "well"
	D. Gratitude/appreciation	

As seen in the table, the classification contains three major categories, namely direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals, and each of the categories consists of a number of substrategies. This classification serves as the primary analytic criterion.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The results of the video-mediated DCT are presented below in two major parts. The first part presents a comparison of the EFL learners' use of refusal strategies to the MNS. The second part presents the differences in refusal strategies between the IEFL and the AEFL. All of the comparisons are primarily based on the frequencies of semantic formulae observed in the elicited refusals and are supplemented with qualitative analyses of the propositional contents of the observed semantic formulae.

##### **4.1 Mandarin Native Speakers' Refusal Strategies**

The bar chart below (Figure 1) presents the refusal strategies the MNS use to refuse in the video-mediated DCT. In terms of major categories of refusal strategies, the MNS appear to refuse primarily and disproportionately with indirect strategies, whose percentages triple the adjunct strategies' (68.34% vs. 22.98% on average) and are at least more than five times of direct strategies across the three refusal situations (68.34% vs. 8.68% on average). This pattern of distribution basically accords with the pattern that has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Chang 2011; Lin 2014).

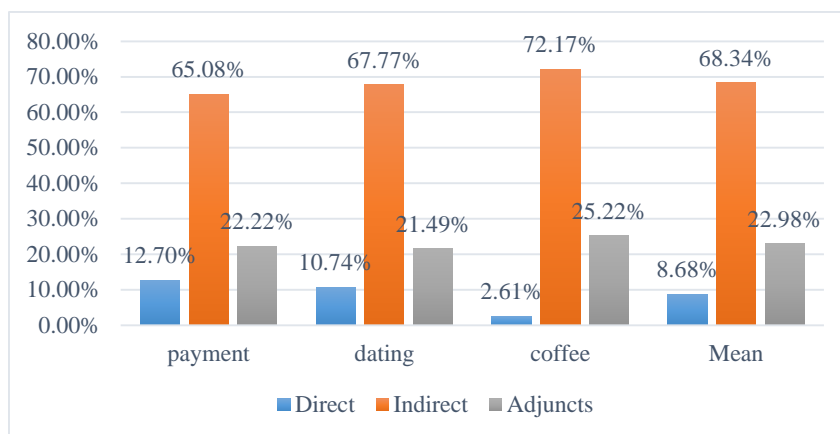


Figure 1. Mandarin native speakers' refusal strategies.

However, on a closer investigation, some subtle differences may be remarkable. Across the three situations, the MNS's adjunct strategies appear to be quite constant while a slight trade-off can be observed between their direct strategies and indirect ones, particularly in the payment situation and the dating situation. Compared to their refusal strategies in the coffee situation, the MNS appear to use slightly more direct refusal strategies in the payment and dating situations, and this is reflected in a slight reduction of indirect strategies in these two situations. Since in the coffee situation, the participants were asked to refuse an offer from a new friend, the MNS may have wished to maintain a good rapport with the new friend and have not wanted to make a refusal which might have adversely affected the new friendship.

Overall, the MNS generally tend to draw on indirect refusal strategies while their uses of strategies may to some extent be dependent on different refusal situations.

#### 4.2 EFL Learners' Refusal Strategies

Figure 2 below presents the major categories of the refusal strategies used by the AEFL across three refusal situations.

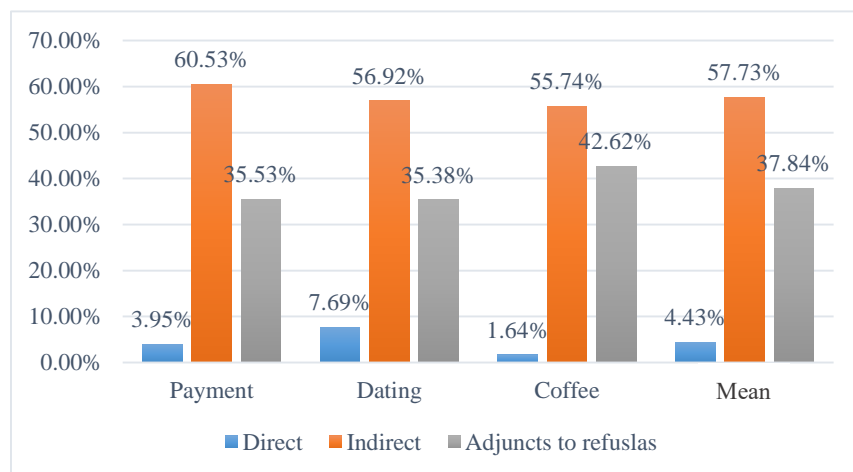


Figure 2. Advanced EFL learners' refusal strategies.

The AEFL generally refuse indirectly, similarly to the MNS. Different from the MNS's refusals that are presented previously, a trade-off relation is found between indirect refusal strategies and adjuncts. The AEFL appear to use more adjunct strategies, whose percentage on average almost doubles that of the MNS's (37.84% vs. 22.98%), although they by and large use indirect refusal strategies more frequently; the percentages of indirect refusals appear to be around 10% lower than those of the MNS's. On the other hand, the AEFL use few direct refusal strategies. Nonetheless, they use more direct strategies in both the payment and dating situation than in the coffee situation; this pattern of distribution is basically similar to that of the MNS.

In a nutshell, the AEFL tend to refuse indirectly and they draw on more adjunct strategies and slightly fewer indirect strategies, compared to the MNS.

The distribution of the IEFL's refusals largely demonstrate a similar pattern to that of the AEFL's. As seen in Figure 3, around one-third of the IEFL's refusals appear to be adjunct strategies, although around a half of their refusal strategies are found to be indirect ones. Compared to the AEFL, the IEFL use indirect refusal strategies to an extent that is similar

to that of the AEFL (57.63% vs. 57.73), while they use slightly fewer adjunct strategies and marginally more direct refusal strategies.

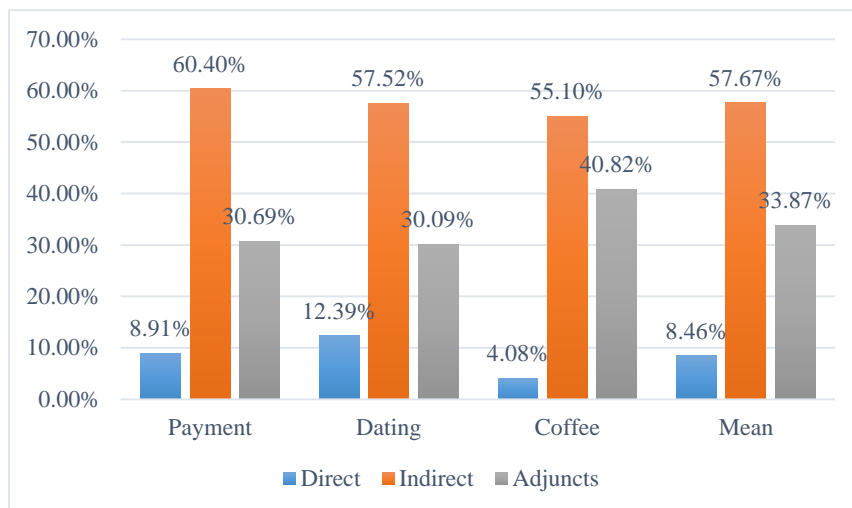


Figure 3. Intermediate EFL learners' refusal strategies.

A different distribution can be seen when the IEFL's refusals are compared to the MNS's. The IEFL appear to use direct refusal strategies nearly as frequently as the MNS, while they use more adjunct strategies and fewer indirect refusal strategies, even though such differences are merely marginal.

Like the MNS and the AEFL, the IEFL use direct strategies more in both the payment and dating situations and fewer in the coffee situations (8.91% and 12.39% vs. 4.08%). This may reveal that the participants subtly adjust their refusal strategies with respect to different refusal situations. This will be further discussed in Section 5.

### 4.3 Use of Semantic Formulae

#### 4.3.1 Mandarin native speakers

The bar graph in the following page (Figure 4) shows the semantic formulae the MNS use in each refusal situation. As mentioned above, the MNS appear to express their refusals primarily with indirect strategies. The bar graph shows that the MNS convey their refusals mostly with one particular semantic formula in each situation and that this semantic formula belongs to the indirect refusal strategy, according to Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification. In the payment situation, the MNS refuse the request mainly with statements of philosophy or principle (29.37%). For example,

(1) a. MNS-33-M-S1:

... *Zhiyu yuzhi xinshui de shi,*  
 ...As-to pay-in-advance salary DE matter  
*women dianli xianglaishi yigeyue yigeyue zhifu de...*  
 we shop always monthly monthly pay DE  
 '...As to the request to pay you in advance, the store policy states that payments are issued monthly...'

b. MNS-25-M-S1:

...*Yinwei ni gang kaishi xuexi duli,*  
 ...for you just-now start learn independent  
*gai xuexi ruhe chuxu yu licai.*  
 should learn how save and manage-finance  
*Touzhi, yuzhi xinshui dui xianzai de ni*  
 overdraft pay-in-advance salary to now DE you  
*bushi henhaode xuanze...*  
 not very-good choice  
 'Since you have just started to be independent, you should learn to manage your finances well. Overspending and asking for early payment are not good for you now...'

In the payment situation, the participants played the role of the boss of a shop and were requested by one of his female employee to pay her in advance. As illustrated in (1a), the participant refused to pay his employee in advance with a company policy, which is considered a statement of principle. In (2a), the participant drew on the same semantic formula and



refused this request by citing the principle or usefulness of understanding how to manage one's personal finance.

In the dating and the coffee situation, as indicated in the bar graph, the MNS appear to refuse the invitation and the offer largely by providing excuses, reasons, or explanations (34.71% and 37.39% respectively). For example:

(2) a. MNS-27-F-S2:

...*Wo jinwan han jiaren youyue le*  
 ...I tonight with family have-plan LE  
 '...I have plans with my family tonight...'

b. MNS-14-M-S2:

...*Buhaoyisi, wo ganghao natian you jishi*  
 ...Excuse-me I just that-day have urgent  
*yao mang...*  
 have-to busy...  
 'I'm sorry [that I won't be able to make it] since I am pre-occupied with some urgent business.'

(3) a. MNS-19-F-S3:

...*Wo zuijin changwei bu taihao, bu tai shihe*  
 ... I lately intestine-stomach not very good not too fit  
*he kafei...*  
 coffee...  
 'I've tended to have an upset stomach lately, so I'm afraid that it's a bad time for me to have any coffee...'

b. MNS-33-M-S3:

*Zuijin youdian bushufu ye, yisheng shuo wo kafei he*  
 Lately a bit unwell PART doctor say I coffee drink  
*tai duo...*  
 too much  
 'Lately, I have not been feeling very well and my doctor said that I have been drinking too much coffee...'

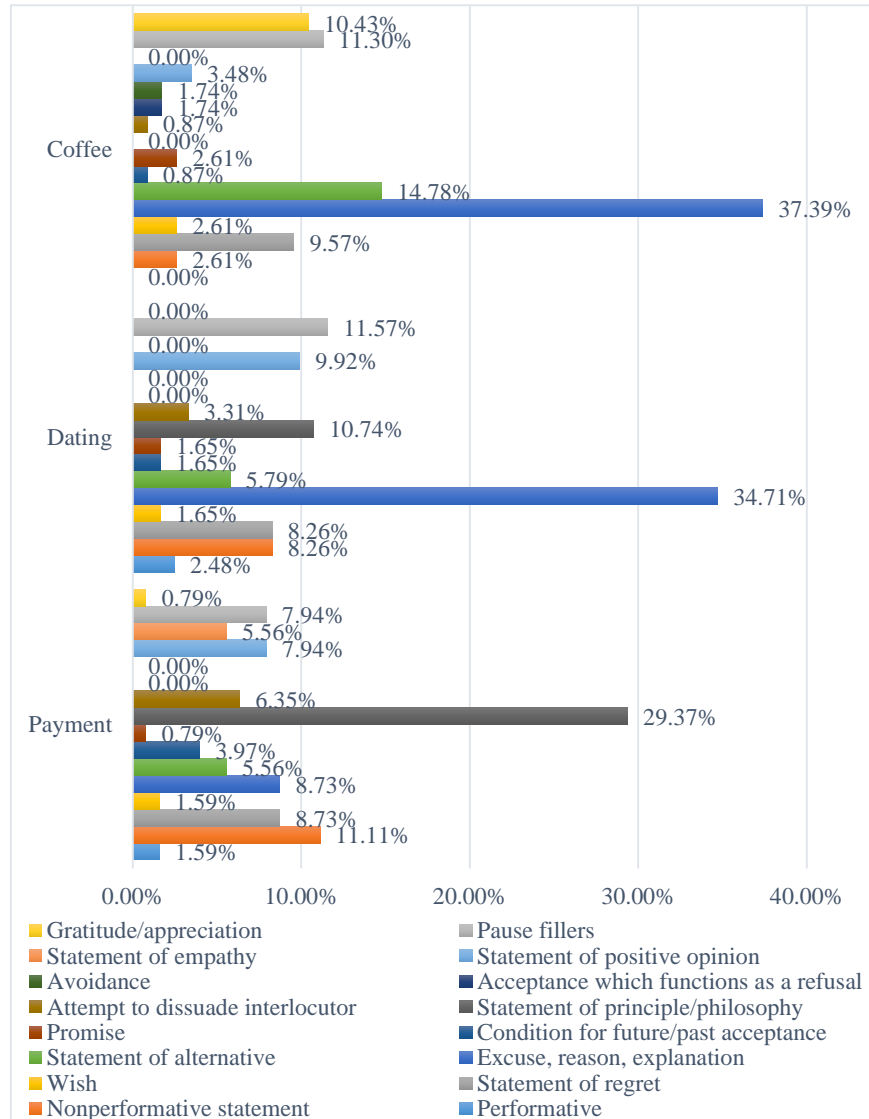


Figure 4. Mandarin native speakers' use of semantic formulae in three refusal situations.

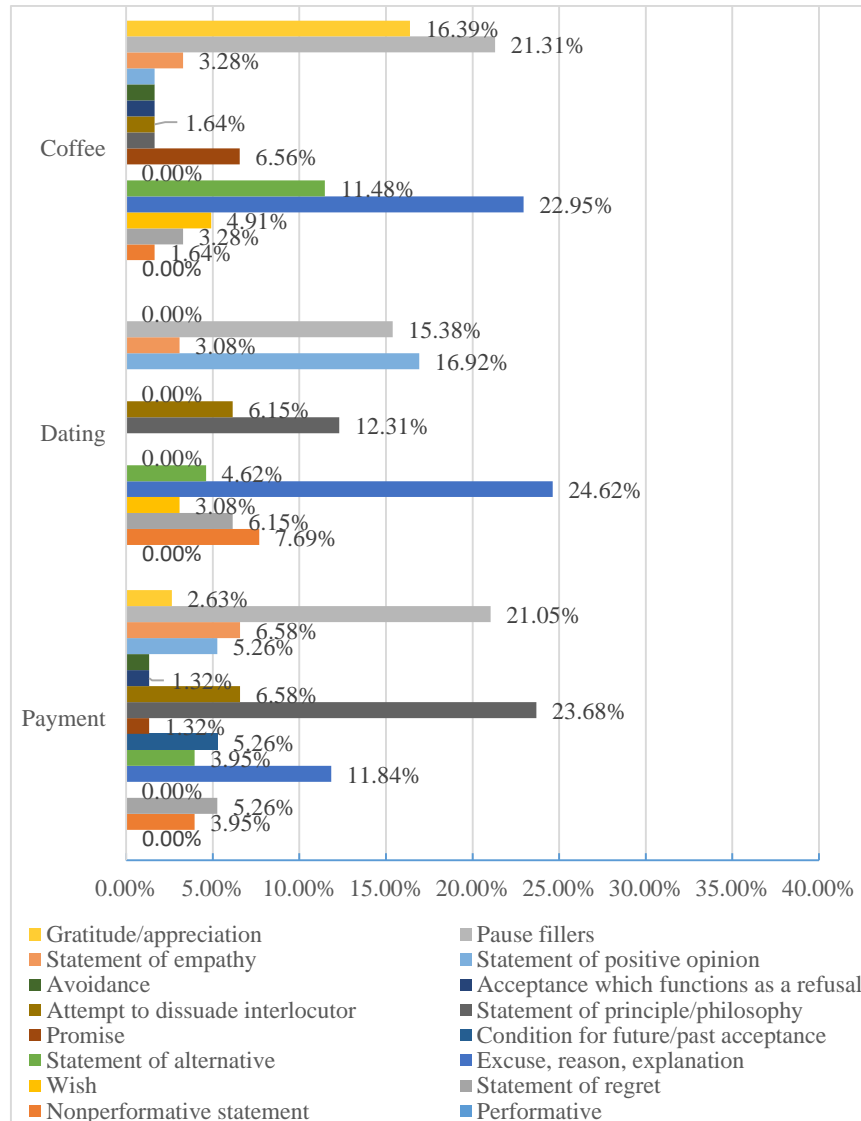


Figure 5. Advanced EFL learners' use of semantic formulae in three refusal situations.

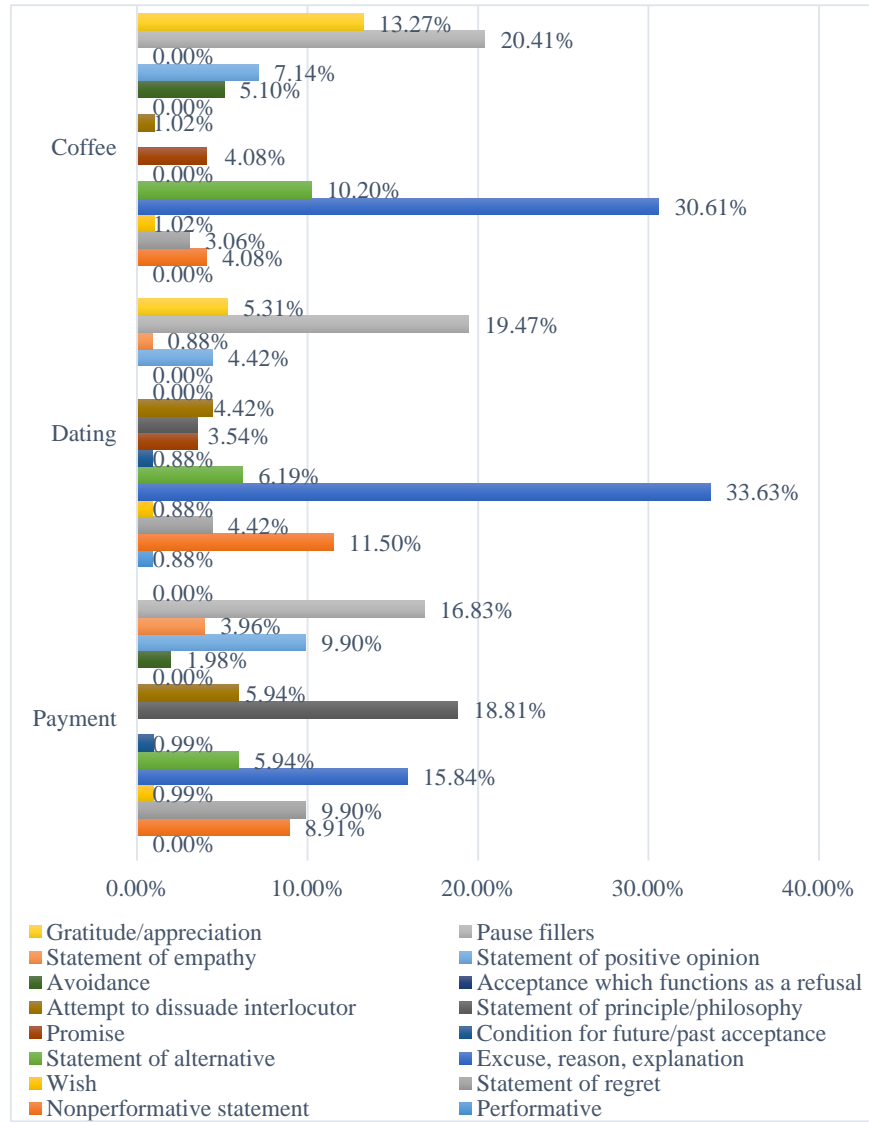


Figure 6. Intermediate EFL learners' use of semantic formulae in three refusal situations.

As illustrated by the excerpts in (2), the two participants declined the invitation to a blind date by stating that they were otherwise pre-occupied or have already had a plan with other people, in this case with her family. Such statements mostly express propositions of excuses or reasons why they are unable to accept the invitation. Likewise, the excerpts in (3) illustrate the use of a similar strategy of refusal. The participants were inclined to refuse to be offered coffee by referring to their own physical conditions. Such statements generally convey the semantic proposition that the participants have a reason as to why they have to turn down the offer.

In addition to the use of the primary semantic formula, other refusal strategies are also found in each situation, but not all of the uses are noteworthy. In the payment situation, the use of direct refusal strategies is not frequent, yet not rare. Around 12 % of the semantic formulae (more than one-third of the majorly-used semantic formulae) observed in this situation are conveyed with nonperformative statements. In the dating situation, direct refusal strategies are also used by the participants, but the frequency is not as high as those in the payment situation. In this situation, the second most frequently used semantic formula is found to be statements of principle or philosophy, accounting for around 11% of all semantic formulae, which is again around one-third of the primary semantic formulae observed in this situation. In the coffee situation, the use of statements of alternative appears quite frequent, accounting for nearly 15% of the semantic formulae in this situation, which is nearly half of the majorly-used semantic formulae in this situation. In addition to this semantic formula, the use of gratitude or appreciation is also frequent, at around one-third of the primary semantic formulae in this situation. Compared to the other two situations, the use of this semantic formulae in the coffee situation can be particular. After all, it is conventional to thank the person who is making an offer for his/her gesture.

Generally speaking, the MNS tend to draw on indirect semantic formulae. A further observation reveals that the MNS tend to fine-tune their uses of semantic formulae to their communicative goals in different situations. In other words, the MNS's refusal strategies appear to be contextually-sensitive, even in a video-mediated DCT test.

#### 4.3.2 Advanced English learners

Figure 5 presents the AEFL's use of semantic formulae in the three refusal situations. With the focus on the primary semantic formulae used in each situation, the AEFL's refusal strategies appear similar to the MNS's. Further examination of the distribution of semantic formulae in each refusal situation reveals remarkable differences in refusal strategies used by the MNS and the AEFL.

In the payment situation, the AEFL refuse primarily with statements of principle or philosophy, which is similar to the MNS. Their refusals, nonetheless, appear to be accompanied by excuses, reasons, or explanations (accounting for nearly half of the primary semantic formulae at around 12%) and adjuncted by a great number of pause-fillers (nearly as many as the primary semantic formulae). The frequent use of pause-fillers is particularly distinctive in the AEFL's refusals. For example,

(4) a. AEFL-P4:

*Well...I don't think it's proper to spend your 2[-]month salary on the holidays. It's not a smart way to use the money. You should also plan for the days after New Year holidays.*

b. AEFL-P2:

*Rachael, you see, I can't possibly do that. Because paying you two months in advance would imply that you would be spending your future money. Since pay day is only a week from now, I'd suggest you hang in there for just a little while.*

As illustrated above in (4), instances such as "well," "you see," and the name of the addressee (in this case Rachel) are considered to be pause-fillers, according to Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification.

The use of pause-fillers is also prevalent in the dating situation. In this situation, the AEFL refuse the invitation to a blind date mostly with excuses, reasons, and explanations (accounting for around 25% of all uses of semantic formulae in this situation). Another semantic formula, i.e., statements of principle or philosophy, is used by the AEFL to refuse the blind date invitation, but the use of this semantic formula is not as frequent

as the other two adjunct semantic formulae, namely statements of positive opinion (accounting for nearly 17% of all uses in this situation) and pause-fillers (around 15% of all uses in this situation). For example:

(5) AEFL-P02:

*Hey, I have a class-reunion tomorrow night. And I believe you can handle it well. Don't worry, just do it.*

As illustrated in (5), this AEFL participant introduced her main refusal semantic formula, namely the excuse that she already had a plan, with a pause-filler, and then she closed her refusal by using positive statements to give encouragement to the person giving the invitation.

The distribution of major semantic formulae in the coffee situation is not dissimilar to that in the other two situations. The AEFL primarily use excuses, reasons, and explanations to refuse the offer of a cup of coffee (nearly 23% of all of the uses of semantic formulae in this situation). This primary use of semantic formulae is accompanied by the frequent use of pause-fillers (at 21.31% of all of the uses in this situation) and gratitude or appreciation (nearly 16.5% of all of the uses in this situation). In addition, the use of statements of alternative is also remarkable, at around 12% of all semantic formulae observed in the coffee situation. In addition to the frequent use of pause-fillers, the use of statements of alternative and gratitude or appreciation are noteworthy, the latter in particular. Although statements of alternative are used in the other two situations, the number of the instances observed in the coffee situation at least double the numbers in the other two situations. Moreover, it is conventional and courteous to thank for an offer and thus the frequent uses of gratitude or appreciation are expected. For example:

(6) AEFL-P1

*I have no mood for coffee today. Maybe you can get me some other drinks. Thank you! Oh! By the way, next time let me make you some coffee in return!*

A comparison between the AEFL's refusal strategies and the MNS's reveals certain distinctive uses of semantic formulae which are found

mostly in the category of adjunct refusal strategies. When the focus is on the primary semantic formulae that are used by both groups, one may be led to conclude that the AEFL's refusal strategies are quite similar to the MNS's and hence a tendency of pragmatic transfer is observed. However, the accompanying semantic formulae can be meaningful as a refusal is ordinarily not a one-utterance exchange, but a multi-utterance discourse. A refusal can usually take a series of exchanges to complete. When the accompanying semantic formulae are considered, some interesting differences in the performance of semantic formulae of the AEFL and the MNS are thus revealed. Overall, the AEFL used adjunct semantic formulae more frequently than the MNS. In the payment situation, the AEFL's use of pause-fillers nearly triples the MNS's. In the dating situation, the AEFL's use of both pause-fillers and statements of positive opinion almost double the MNS's, and a similar difference can be seen in the coffee situation. These differences appear quite distinctive to the extent that the AEFL's refusal strategies may not simply be pragmatic transfer from their L1.

All in all, while both the AEFL and the MNS primarily use indirect semantic formulae in their refusal strategies, the refusal strategies used by the AEFL appear to be somewhat different from those used by the MNS.

#### 4.3.3 Intermediate English learners

The IEFL's uses of semantic formulae are shown in Figure 6 above. As can be seen in the figure, the distribution of the IEFL's semantic formulae in the dating situation appears to be similar to the MNS's, and their use of semantic formulae in the coffee situation seems to be in the form of an 'intermediate' distribution between the MNS's and the AEFL's. The IEFL's uses of semantic formulae in the payment situation, however, are quite different from the MNS's and the AEFL's.

In the dating situation, the IEFL are likely to refuse the invitation to a blind date by using some direct semantic formulae. As indicated in the figure (Figure 6), 11.5% of all of the refusal strategies used by the IEFL are nonperformative statements; the percentage of this semantic formulae not only is higher than that by the MNS's and that by the AEFL's, but also



accounts for around one-third of the primary semantic formulae in this situation.

In the coffee situation, the distribution of the IEFL's semantic formulae appear to be quite similar to both the MNS's and the AEFL's. The only difference can be seen in the frequency of the uses of both pause-fillers and gratitude or appreciation. As how the MSN and the AEFL express their refusals, the IEFL refuse mostly with excuses, reasons, or explanations, and they may sometimes provide alternatives to the intended offer. In addition, they also adjunct their refusals with pause-fillers and gratitude or appreciation quite frequently as the AEFL do; the frequency of these two adjunct semantic formulae is higher than that of MNS.

However, in the payment situation, the IEFL are not found to draw on primarily a particular semantic formula to express their refusals. Rather, they appear to use two indirect strategies and one adjunct strategy nearly equally frequently, namely excuses, reasons, or explanations (around 16%), statements of principle or philosophy (around 19%), and pause-fillers (around 17%). In addition to these three semantic formulae, the IEFL seem to use other semantic formulae as their secondary refusal strategies, though not very frequently, such as nonperformative statements (around 9%), statements of regret (around 10%), and statements of positive opinion (around 10%). Such a distribution of semantic formulae differs greatly not only from those in the other two situations, but also from the uses of the MNS and those of the AEFL.

Generally speaking, the IEFL's refusal strategies appear to be contextually variable, particularly in the payment situation where they are prompted to refuse a request for payment in advance. The distribution of the semantic formulae used among the three groups in the payment situation thus reveals that the IEFL's refusal strategies are peculiar to an extent and are different from the MSN's and the AEFL's.

## **5. GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that the MNS, the AEFL and the IEFL primarily refuse to a request, an invitation, and an offer by using indirect refusal strategies. In addition to the use of indirect refusal strategies, both

the AEFL and the IEFL appear to use adjunct strategies to accompany their indirect refusal strategies much more frequently than the MNS. When the primary refusal strategies are the focus, the findings here, which are elicited with a video-mediated DCT, by and large accord with most previous studies, whose findings were elicited by using a DCT or role-plays (e.g., Chen, Li and Rau 2013; Chang 2009; Chang 2011; Lin 2014). As pointed out in previous studies, the MNS tend to express their refusals indirectly, and so do the Mandarin-speaking EFL learners. The use of indirect refusal strategies by the Mandarin-speaking EFL learners can be attributed to pragmatic transfer from the EFL learners' L1. Based on the AEFL's and the IEFL's uses of refusal strategies in this study, it seems quite true that the Mandarin EFL learners transfer their L1 pragmatic competence to their foreign language. However, when the uses of adjunct refusal strategies and contextual differences are taken into consideration, it may be premature to attribute the Mandarin EFL learners' refusals to L1 pragmatic transfer. As shown in the figures (Figures 1~3), both the AEFL's and the IEFL's uses of adjunct strategies appear quite different from the MNS's. Their use of adjunct strategies apparently outnumbers the MNS's. Such frequent use of adjunct refusal strategies may not simply be the result of L1 pragmatic transfer. This can be a reflection of the EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic competence (cf. Lin 2014).

In addition, the examination of the semantic formulae used by the MNS and the EFL learners in the three refusal situations reveals that they seem not to draw on a fixed set of semantic formulae when they are prompted to express a refusal. In other words, their refusal strategies appear to be sensitive to context (cf., Li, Suleiman and Sazalie 2015). As reported in the previous section, in the payment situation, where they are prompted to refuse a request, the participants refuse primarily with statements of principle or philosophy, the AEFL and the MNS in particular. In both the coffee and dating situations, the participants mainly refuse with excuses, reasons, or explanations. This finding agrees with those findings in the previous studies only to an extent. While some previous studies reported that EFL learners of Mandarin background tend to refuse primarily with excuses (e.g., Chang 2011), the present study has found that they may use a different semantic formula when the context is appropriate. An explanation for this discrepancy may be attributed to the

difference in the eliciting instruments. This present study elicits participants' refusals by using a video-mediated DCT. Although this instrument is essentially a type of DCT, the description of each situation is enriched with interpersonal information and relevant background information. For example, in the payment situation, the refusal is between a boss (the participants' role) and an employee, who has been working for him for just more than three months and needs to improve the performance of her job. The interpersonal relation between the boss and the employee justifies the participants to refuse this imaginary employee's request with a different semantic formula other than excuses or reasons. Given the participants' higher status with respect to the employee, the participants believe that it is appropriate to refuse by advocating the adoption of a principle or life philosophy. In addition to the interpersonal relation, the non-verbal cues and paralinguistic features provided in the accompanying video may also have affected the participants' use of refusal strategy. By contrast, the interpersonal relation in the other two situations is set to be equal, as one of that between two friends. It is not proper for the participants to advocate the adoption of a principle of life philosophy to a friend, and thus they opt for excuses or reasons to express their refusals. Furthermore, in the video, both interlocutors' tone of delivery and facial expressions may suggest to the participants their psychological state, and so serves as another clue for the participants to decide on their use of refusal strategies. In a nutshell, it is likely that the participants fine-tune their refusal strategies with regard to the context, on account of the social factors and psychological states given in the scenario descriptions and the video clips.

The effect of the addition of video clips to the DCT can also be found in the participants' use of pause-fillers. As reported in the previous section, the EFL learners use pause-fillers quite frequently across the three situations, at least two times as frequently as the MNS. Pause-fillers are frequently found in spoken discourses, where they serve particular discursive functions. The frequent use of pause-fillers in a DCT-based test is noteworthy, since the responses in the test is basically written and all the participants were asked to write down their response in one single turn of interaction. The EFL participants' frequent use of pause-fillers may be attributed to the accompanying video clips in the DCT. The video clips in

this study not only provide visual stimuli to the participants, they also send to the interlocutors paralinguistic features and nonverbal cues that are relevant in the situations. In addition, such information may suggest to the participants that although they are writing out their responses, they are indeed conversing with a person with whom they are in a certain social relationship.

Finally, the findings of this study may suggest not only that EFL learners' refusal strategies are contextually fine-tuned, but also that EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics can be revealed in the refusal routines they use in each situation (cf. Campillo, Safont-Jorda and Codina-Espurz 2009). The results of the video-mediated DCT show that the AEFL learners seem to use a constant combination of semantic formulae, namely a refusal routine, in each situation, as revealed by the prominent combination of refusal strategies they use in that particular situation. Likewise, the MSN also appear to express their refusals on the basis of a refusal routine, since, of course, they respond in their first language. The IEFL learners, on the other hand, seem not to use a refusal routine in the payment situation, while a refusal routine seems to be observed in the other two situations. One possible explanation is that the IEFL's refusal to a request for payment in advance is subject to their comparatively limited linguistic ability in the target language. They may sense that in this situation they are refusing a subordinate's request, instead of a request from a friend of equal status, so they are supposed to draw on different refusal strategies. Despite this understanding, their linguistic ability may not suffice to manage such a communicative task. Another possible, yet less plausible, reason may be that the IEFL simply find it difficult to refuse a request for a financial aid, so they may try to use circumlocution, and thus their refusals appear to be realized in a wider variety of semantic formulae, compared to the AEFL's.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study investigates how Mandarin-speaking EFL learners refuse a request, an invitation, and an offer by using a video-mediated DCT. Conforming to most previous studies in this regard, the findings here

indicate that both the MNS and the EFL learners tend to refuse chiefly with indirect strategies. A further examination of their refusal routine reveal that their refusal routines appear to be sensitive to context; they seem to draw on different sets of semantic formulae when refusing to interlocutors of different interpersonal relation or social status in different situations. In addition, the examination of the use of refusal routine may also disclose EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics. The AEFL, similar to the MNS, appear to use a constant refusal routine in each refusal situation, while the IEFL seem to perform a different pattern of refusal routine when they are dealing with a request for money from a subordinate. This may be related to the IEFL's comparatively limited linguistic ability; even though they are aware of relevant contextual information, their linguistic ability may not be sufficient to allow them to fully demonstrate their pragmatic competence. Moreover, in this video-mediated study the EFL learners are found to use pause-fillers quite frequently in their refusals. This can be attributed to the addition of the accompanying video clips, which suggest to the EFL learners that there are engaged in a conversation even though they are asked to write down their responses. It seems that providing the participants in a DCT with paralinguistic and nonverbal cues via a video improves the results of the DCT.

The findings of this study have contributed to the understanding of EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics to a certain extent. The video-mediated DCT can not only elicit EFL learners' refusal routine and repertoire, but also reveal their awareness of relevant contextual factors. Future studies in this regard should consider the use of a video-mediated DCT if they intend to use DCT. Below are several other suggestions for future studies in this respect.

Although the DCT is video-mediated, and so can enhance the awareness of contextual factors, the inherent problem that participants have to reply in only one turn is undeniable. Future studies can triangulate the results with other instruments, such as role play, elicited spontaneous speech, or naturalistic data. Particular focuses can be on a rigorous and systematic comparison of DCT results with spontaneous speech results and on a comparison of the first attempt of a speech act with its reformulation when the first attempt fails. A relevant issue is how extended and elaborate a refusal usually is in spontaneous speech: do

people tend to deal with refusals in a restricted discourse or an extended one? In addition, the results of this study are based on three refusing scenarios where the interpersonal status of the participants and the types of refusal are considered and manipulated. Future studies can include other types of refusal that involve different social factors. In regard of the connection between L2 or EFL learners' grammatical development and their pragmatic development, further studies can include learners of different language backgrounds and of a wider range of proficiency levels to deepen the understanding of interlanguage pragmatics and its connection with learners' linguistic competence. Future studies in this regard can also investigate if Mandarin native speakers' English proficiency level may influence their Mandarin proficiency and if the language difference in video stimuli may affect the participants' responses. Moreover, further studies can also follow Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) suggestions and investigate how learners' pragmatic competence is related to a particular aspect of their grammatical competence — in their development of morphology, syntax, and semantics, such as tense, modality, and syntactic constructions. Potential threads of research, for example, can focus on the connection between the main semantic formulae of a speech act and the various syntactic constructions, the modality, or choices of personal deixis that are used to realize such semantic formulae.

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[Received 11 May 2017; revised 1 March 2018; accepted 10 June 2018]



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## APPENDIX A

Scenarios in the video-mediated DCT---for EFL learners.<sup>2</sup>

### The Payment Situation

You are the boss of a café. All of your employees consider that you are kind and considerate. It's almost New Year's Day and the next payday is only a week from now. When you are about to close for the night, one of the employees, Rachael, who has been working for you for three months, comes to you. She says that her family usually go skiing for the New Year holidays. Since she has decided to be independent, she does not want to count on her parents to pay for the trip. Therefore, she asks you to pay her two month's salary in advance, that is, NTD\$70,000 (seventy thousand New Taiwan dollars), so that she can go on the trip with her parents. However, you don't consider her a good employee although she works really hard. She sometimes breaks a cup, takes customers' orders wrong, or mis-delivers drinks. Even if she is anxious to go on the trip and you have the money, you still don't feel like paying her two month's salary in advance. What would you say to her?

**YOU:**

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### The Dating Situation

A good friend of yours, Joey, who lives in the same apartment building as you, just across the hall, is talking to you in your living room. You have known each other for more than three years, and you and other friends usually chat or have fun together in your apartment. One day Joey came across his ex-girlfriend at a café and he wanted to win her heart back. So, he asked her out for dinner the next evening. But when he came back to

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<sup>2</sup> The layout of the test is simplified here. In the original test, the participants were given an entire blank page to write down their responses and they were allowed to use the back of the page should they have needed more space to finish writing.

his apartment, he suddenly felt unable to go on the date alone, so he has asked you to go with him, and he has promised to ask the girl to bring someone she knows as a blind date for you. However, you don't know his ex-girlfriend very well and you don't want to get involved in this situation because you don't think that it has anything to do with you, and you are afraid that you may feel embarrassed. What would say to him?

**YOU:**

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**The Coffee Situation**

Your new friend, Rachael, whom you have known for only a week, volunteered to make coffee for you for breakfast last Thursday. But the coffee turned out to be so bad that you could not even take a sip of it. Thus, you secretly poured the coffee away somewhere. Currently, she works at the café where you and your other friends always go after work. It is 5.30 in the afternoon. You just got off work and now are at the café to relax and have some chat with your other friends as usual. While you are talking, she enthusiastically offers some coffee she just made, although she looks somewhat tired after working for a long day at the café. But with the bad coffee experience you had last Thursday morning, you dare not give the coffee a second try. What would you say to her?

**YOU:**

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## APPENDIX B

Scenarios in the video-mediated DCT---for Mandarin native speakers.

### 薪水篇

你經營一家咖啡廳，員工都認為你是個好老闆。年關將屆，下週又是發薪日了。一天晚上在準備打烊的時候，一個剛為你工作三個月的員工，瑞秋，有事找你。她說，春節假期時，她們一家人要去滑雪，因為她才剛經濟獨立，不想讓爸媽出錢，所以，她想問問你，看你可不可能先預支她七萬元的薪水。可是，你覺得她表現得不夠好，儘管她很認真，但有時候會打破杯子，點錯餐點，或把餐點送錯。儘管你瞭解她迫切地想與家人去度假的心情，你不想預支她兩個月的薪水，你會怎麼跟他說呢？

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### 約會篇

你的一個好朋友，喬伊，和你住在同一棟公寓，正在客廳和你聊天。你們認識三年多了，常常一起聊天玩樂。這天，喬伊遇到他前女友，有想與她復合的感覺，於是，他約她一起吃晚餐。回到家後，喬伊突然覺得他可能需要找個人幫腔，所以就想要找你一起去赴約，同時，他也答應你，他會請她前女友介紹一位朋友給你認識。可是，你跟她前女友又不是很熟，而且，你也不覺得這整件事跟你有任何關係，又很擔心到時候會很尷尬，你會怎麼跟他說？

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### 咖啡篇

你一位剛認識約一個禮拜的朋友，瑞秋，上星期四早上主動煮咖啡給你喝，結果，咖啡煮得實在不怎樣，讓你喝不下去，於是，你偷偷地把咖啡倒掉。她現在在一家咖啡廳工作，你其他朋友也常常去光顧。這個時候是下午五點半，你一下班就來到他工作的咖啡廳，和朋友一起聊天，放鬆放鬆。正當你們聊天的時候，瑞秋很熱情地招呼你們喝她煮的咖啡。可是，因為上週四的經驗，你實在不太敢再喝一次她煮的咖啡，你會怎麼跟她說？

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用外語說「不」  
英語外語學習者之誘答式拒絕

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本研究的目的，主要透過探討英語外語學習（EFL）者表達拒絕時的語言表現，以瞭解他們的語用發展（pragmatic development）。年屆二十至二十九歲之英語外語學習者受邀完成影音輔助之言談情境填充問卷（DCT）。結果指出，儘管英語外語學習者普遍使用間接策略表達拒絕，他們的拒絕語言表現與策略似乎也會因溝通情境而調整。此外，高階的英語外語學習者傾向利用慣用的語言模式來表達拒絕，而中階的學習者相對地較無此傾向。同時，他們普遍使用了不少的附屬性策略（adjunct strategies），這可能與影音輔助有關。整體而言，外語學習者之語用發展，不能完全歸因於第一語的語用遷移（pragmatic transfer）作用，而是他們的語法能力與語用能力所交織而成的語用能力之展現。

關鍵字：英語外語者的拒絕、語用發展、中介語語用、言談情境填充問卷、外語學習