

An Interlanguage Pragmatic Study on Chinese EFL Learners' Refusal: Perception and Performance

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Abstract—Refusals have been widely examined across languages in the literature. However, few attempts have been made to elicit both perception and performance data for method-triangulation. In addition, Chinese EFL learners' refusals are relatively less investigated. The present study aims to bridge this gap and has two major purposes. One is to examine the cross-cultural differences between Chinese and English refusals. The other is to study how Chinese EFL learners perceive and perform the speech act of refusal. The data were recruited from three participant groups: 30 native speakers of Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan (NSC), 30 Chinese EFL learners in Taiwan (EFL), and 30 native speakers of American English in America (NSE). The research instrument was a questionnaire with two major parts: Scaled Response Questionnaire (SRQ) and Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Elicited data were analyzed in terms of three perspectives: perception of face-threat, overall strategy use, and strategy patterns. The results showed the similarities and differences between Chinese and English refusals. As for EFL learners, they tended to perceive the face-threat greater, and used more strategies and softening devices than Chinese and Americans. In addition, some L2 native expressions were never used by learners. Further instructions are needed to help learners refuse others appropriately.

Index Terms—speech act, interlanguage refusal, Chinese-English, cross-cultural

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence plays an important part in interpersonal and intercultural communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). When people do not have sufficient competence, they are likely to encounter pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983) or communicative breakdown (Jia, 2007).

Chinese and Americans are frequently considered to exhibit different communication styles (Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hong, 2011; Triandis, 1995; Yu, 2011; Zheng & Huang, 2010). Chinese, deeply influenced by the legacy of Confucian political philosophy and the tradition of feudal hierarchy and order, prefer to use the indirect mode of communication to maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship. Thus, Chinese culture is collectivism oriented and focuses on positive politeness. On the other hand, Americans favor "outcome-oriented communication to actualize independence and self-fulfillment in communication and thus emphasize the direct communication mode" (Hong, 2011, p. 133).

Chinese culture differs greatly from that of Americans. When Chinese EFL learners interact with English native speakers, most learners not with sufficient pragmatic knowledge of the target language often transfer their L1 norms of speaking into L2. Previous studies have shown Chinese EFL/ESL learners pragmatic transfer in the speech act of refusals (e.g., Chang, 2009, 2011), correction (e.g., Lin, 2008), compliment (e.g., Yu, 2004, 2005, 2011; Chen & Rau, 2011), compliment responses (e.g., An, 2013; Cheng, 2011; Chen & Rau, 2011), complaint (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2010), request (e.g., Lee, 2011), apology (e.g., Chang, 2010; Su, 2012), suggestion (e.g., Bu, 2011), and others. Among them, refusals often receive researchers' attentions for they usually result in great face-threat. However, Chinese EFL learners' refusals are relatively less investigated. In addition, most previous studies often employ a single instrument to elicit learners' perception or performance. Few attempts have been made to elicit both perception and performance data for method-triangulation. To fill this gap, the present study aims to explore how the speech act of refusal is perceived and performed by Chinese and Americans, with a focus on Chinese EFL learners' performance.

To be more specific, the research questions in this study are as follows. First, *what are the similarities and differences between Chinese and American refusals in terms of perception of face-threat, overall strategy use, and strategy patterns?* Second, *how do Chinese EFL learners in Taiwan perceive and perform the speech act of refusal in terms of perception of face-threat, overall strategy use, and strategy patterns?*

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Speech act theory was initiated by Austin (1962), who suggested that people use languages not only to say things but also to do things. He differentiated three kinds of acts when one produces an utterance: locutionary act (i.e., act of saying), illocutionary act (i.e., act in saying), and perlocutionary act (i.e., act by saying). Based on Austin's work, Searle

(1969) divided speech acts into five major categories: representatives (e.g., assertion, reports), directives (e.g., request, suggestion, correction), expressives (e.g., complaints, thanking, refusal, apology), commissives (e.g., promise) and declaratives (e.g., naming). Furthermore, Searle (1975) proposed the notion of indirectness in speech acts. An indirect speech act is performed whereby “the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer” (Searle, 1975, p.60-61).

A. *The Speech Act of Refusal*

A refusal is a speech act by which a speaker refuses “to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor” (Chen, Ye, & Zhang, 1995, p.121). Facing the threat of refusing, a person would compute the weightiness of the offense based on three criteria: social distance (D), relative power (P), and the rank of imposition (R) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, people of different cultural backgrounds perceive the face-threat differently, and then may use different strategies to refuse others. As Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) pointed out, the speech act of refusal is “a major cross-cultural ‘sticking point’ for many nonnative speakers, and for that reason they are important for second language educators and others involved in cross-cultural communication” (p. 56). Thus, the study of refusal plays an important role in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics.

B. *Refusals across Languages*

Many studies have been conducted on refusals across languages, e.g., Mexican Spanish and American English (Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2010), Egyptian Arabic and American English (Nelson, Carson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002), Jordanian EFL learners (Al-Issa, 2003), Japanese and American English (Beebe et al., 1990; Gass & Houck, 1999), and Thai and American English (Wannaruk, 2008). Among them, Beebe et al.’s work (1990) is often cited and replicated. The main purpose of Beebe et al. (1990) was to provide the preliminary evidence for Japanese ESL learners’ pragmatic transfer. A discourse completion task (hereafter, DCT) was utilized to elicit participants’ refusals to 12 scenarios of four stimulus types, i.e., request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. Elicited data were coded according to a coding scheme and analyzed in terms of the order of semantic formula, frequency of formula, and content of formula. The result exhibited Japanese ESL learners’ pragmatic transfer. Despite the limited size of participants, Beebe et al.’s study provides the analytic tools, direction of data analyses, and a DCT for further studies on cross-cultural comparisons. This well-designed methodological part may be the reason why it is often cited and replicated in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics.

C. *Refusals between Chinese and American English*

Compared with studies between English and other languages, studies on refusals between Mandarin Chinese and American English are relatively less investigated. Previous studies have shown that Americans tended to use more direct refusal strategies than Chinese (Chang, 2001, 2009, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hong, 2011; Liao, 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Lin, 2006). In addition, Chinese used fewer refusal tokens than Americans due to the politeness theory of *dian-dao-wei-zhi* (point-to-is-end—marginally touch the point) (Liao & Bresnahan, 1996). As for content of excuses, Chinese tended to provide more reasons/excuses with specific and important details than Americans (Chang, 2009, 2011; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996). When Chinese EFL learners performed the speech act of refusals, they tended to transfer their L1 norms into L2 refusals (Chang, 2001, 2009, 2011; Lin, 2006).

Among the above studies, most of them elicited participants’ refusals from a single source, i.e., DCT, except for the oral DCT and metapragmatic assessment questionnaire in Chang (2011). However, scanty studies use scaled response questionnaire (hereafter, SRQ) to investigate how participants perceive the face-threat of the DCT scenarios, and then relate the perception to participants’ realizations of refusals. To fill this gap, the present study aims to explore the speech act of refusals between Mandarin Chinese and American English by collecting both performance and perception data for method-triangulation.

III. METHOD

A. *Participants*

There were three participant groups in the study: 30 native speakers of Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan (NSC), 30 Chinese EFL learners in Taiwan (EFL), and 30 native speakers of American English in the United States (NSE). The two groups of native speakers, NSC and NSE, provided the baseline data for cross-cultural and interlanguage comparisons. In order to make the baseline data representative, the study recruited participants from those with less exposure to foreign language learning (Chen, 2007; Cook, 2003). NSC group consisted of 30 college freshmen of non-English majors from a northern university in Taiwan. NSE group was composed of 30 native speakers of American college students who were not eastern language majors. To avoid the effect of length of residence (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Lin, 2006; Matsumura, 2001), American natives who had stayed in Chinese speaking countries over three months were excluded. EFL learners were undergraduates and graduates of English majors who had passed tests of B2 level of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEF), within the preceding three years by the time of our experiment. The ratios of male to female in the participant groups were: 16: 14

(NSC), 15: 15 (EFL), and 15: 15 (NSE). The mean age of the three participant groups was 20.4 (NSC), 23.9 (EFL-H), and 23.9 (NSE). The grouping of participants can be summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
GROUPING OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE PRESENT STUDY

Group	Participants	Gender (M: F)	Mean age	N
NSC	Chinese college freshmen of non-English majors in Taiwan	16: 14	20.4	30
EFL	Graduates and undergraduates of English majors (B2 level of CEF) in Taiwan	15: 15	23.9	30
NSE	American college students of non-eastern language majors in America	15: 15	23.9	30

B. Instruments

The instrument used in the present study was a questionnaire with two major parts: DCT, and SRQ (cf. Appendix A). The reason to include the two instrument is for method triangulation (Chang, 2009, 2011; Chen et al., 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013; Lee, 2011; Yu, 2011).

A DCT is an instrument widely employed in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Although DCTs are criticized for not eliciting on-line spoken production data and not allowing for negotiation between interlocutors (Chen, 2007; Yuan, 2001), previous studies have indicated that the data elicited through DCTs, open-ended role play, and field notes of naturally occurring expressions are similar and yield the same words and expressions (Bodman & Eisenstein, 1988; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). In addition, DCTs are effective ways of collecting plenty of data within a short period of time (Chang, 2009; Chen, 2007; Lee, 2011; Tang & Zhang, 2009) and variables of situations in DCTs can be easily controlled for the comparisons among different languages (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper., 1989; Chen, 2007; Cenoz, 2003). Thus, DCT was chosen as one of the research instrument. The DCT in the present study included three situations of refusals. The design of DCT situations was based on the contextual factor of social status, which is a vital factor governing variation in speech acts (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Chen et al., 2011; Lee, 2011). A detailed distribution of the contextual factor and a brief description of each situation were given in Table 2.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTION OF THE DCT SITUATIONS

situation	brief description	status
1	A professor refuses a student's request for dismissing the class earlier.	H→L
2	A person refuses a friend's request for borrowing a new car.	equal
3	An employee refuses a boss's invitation to a party.	L→H

As for SRQ, it can be an additional resource to obtain participants' sociopragmatic values which influence their speech act performance, and the results can help researchers interpret participants' choice of strategy use (Chen, 2006; Chen, 2007). Thus, SRQ was also employed in the present study and was embedded in each DCT situation. The perception of degree of face-threat was based on Likert's five point scale: number one is the least face-threatening and number five is the most face-threatening.

C. Procedure

Two versions of DCT were created: English version and Chinese version. The Chinese version was translated from the English version. To ensure the equivalence of the illocutionary force in the two versions, they were discussed, modified, and confirmed by three bilingual experts in applied linguistics. Before participants' filling in the questionnaire, they were asked to fill out a consent form for participation in this study and were required to read the instruction and an example of the questionnaire. NSE and EFL groups filled out the English DCT in English, and NSC filled out the Chinese version in Chinese. The Chinese baseline data and the interlanguage data were collected by the researcher, and the English baseline data were collected by a research assistant in America. All participants were required to finish the questionnaire within 30 minutes.

D. Coding

The coding of the present study was based on a coding scheme (see Appendix B), which was first developed by Beebe et al. (1990) and then was modified according to the corpora of the study. The modifications of the scheme were discussed as follows. First, the direct strategy *performative* in Beebe et al. was deleted because it was not used by our participants. Second, *the statement of principle* and *the statement of philosophy* were used to explain why the participants refused the interlocutor, and then they were integrated into *the strategy of excuse, reason, and explanation* (Chang, 2009, 2011). Third, *the strategy of compensation*, e.g., "Let me treat you a meal on another day" in refusing the boss' invitation, was used by our participants to compensate for their refusal and then was added in the coding scheme. This coding scheme included three macro strategies (i.e., direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts) and 15 micro strategies. Twenty percent of the data were randomly selected and coded by a second researcher (Cohen, 1960; Yu,

2005, 2006, 2011). The interrater reliability was 96% agreement for macro strategies and 92% for micro strategies.

E. Data Analyses

The present study aimed to investigate the speech act of refusal by Chinese, Americans, and EFL learners in terms of perception of face-threat, overall strategy use, and strategy patterns. As for the perception in SRQ, one-way ANOVA was used to examine the means among groups. If significant differences were detected, post-hoc comparisons of Scheffé tests were employed to examine the differences between each pair of groups. As for the overall strategy use, the non-parametric Chi-square test was used to examine the frequency of participant groups' strategy use. In addition, further in-depth qualitative analyses were conducted to examine the content and linguistic forms of strategy use. As for the strategy pattern, the frequency of order of refusal strategies was examined.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Perception of Face-threat from SRQ

The overall means of perception of face-threat from SRQ by the three groups were shown in Table 3. The results from one-way ANOVA showed that there were significant differences among groups ($F=10.563$, $df=2$, $p=.000***$). Post-hoc comparisons of Scheffé tests revealed that EFL learners scaled the face-threat significantly higher than NSC ($p=.01**$) and NSE ($p=.000***$). However, the means of NSC did not differ significantly from NSE ($p=.365$). That is, both Chinese and Americans had similar perception of face-threat toward refusals. Therefore, the two baseline groups were predicted to use refusal strategies of similar directness level. On the other hand, EFL learners, scaling the face-threat significantly higher than the two baseline groups, were predicted to use less direct strategies and more adjuncts to downtone the face-threat.

TABLE 3
OVERALL MEANS OF PERCEPTION OF FACE-THREAT FROM SRQ

NSC		EFL		NSE		<i>F</i> (<i>p</i>) & post-hoc comparisons
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
2.11	.89	2.76	.82	1.81	.73	$F = 10.563$, $df=2$, $p = .000***$ NSC & NSE (.365) EFL & NSC (.01**) EFL & NSE (.000***)

Note. *** $p < .001$

B. Overall Strategy Use

The results of overall strategy use by the three groups were shown in Table 4. All the three groups used indirect strategies most, direct strategies second, and adjuncts least. This indicated the three participant groups' payoff consideration (Chen et al., 2011; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). That is, facing an offense, a speaker can choose not to perform the speech act (i.e., adjuncts) or to perform the act (i.e., direct and indirect strategies). When s/he chooses not to perform the act, s/he would remain frustrated by the offense. On the other hand, refusing the interlocutor, s/he can express the censure clearly but may destroy the interpersonal relationship. Thus, they tried to strike the balance and performed the act indirectly by using indirect strategies more frequently.

TABLE 4
OVERALL STRATEGY USE BY THE THREE GROUPS

group \ strategy	NSC	EFL	NSE	χ^2 , <i>df</i> , <i>p</i>
Direct	27 (17%)	29 (14%)	27 (16%)	$\chi^2 = .333$, $df = 2$, $p = .564$
Indirect	133 (81%)	152 (75%)	128 (78%)	$\chi^2 = 2.329$, $df = 2$, $p = .312$
Adjunct	4 (2%)	23 (11%)	10 (6%)	$\chi^2 = 15.297$, $df = 2$, $p = .000***$
Total	164 (100%)	204 (100%)	165 (100%)	

As predicted by their perception of face-threat from SRQ, NSC and NSE preferred to use refusal strategies of similar directness level. They chose indirect strategies most to refuse others, and there were no major differences in their overall strategy use. This contradicted the results of previous studies which suggested that Americans tended to use more direct refusal strategies than Chinese (Chang, 2001, 2009, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hong, 2011; Liao, 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Lin, 2006). The discrepancy may be due to the effect of social change that western culture through mass media and language contact influenced the language use of Chinese younger generation (Chen & Yang, 2010; Cheng, 2011).

As for EFL learners, they used more refusal strategies to a marginally significant extent than the two baseline groups (NSC: 164, EFL: 204, NSE: 165, $\chi^2 = 5.857$, $df = 2$, $p = .053$). Learners' verbose behavior demonstrated their interlanguage development, the waffle phenomenon, which is defined as "excessive use of linguistic forms to fill a specific discourse 'slot' or 'move', i.e., to achieve a specific pragmatic goal" (Edmondson & House, 1991, p.273-274). Learners' waffling may be due to the fact that they felt insecure in using an unfamiliar language and perceived the

face-threat greater than native speakers, as shown in the result of SRQ in Section 4.1. Thus, they used more strategies to ensure that their illocutionary meaning was successfully gotten across (Bataller, 2010; Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Bu, 2011; Chen, 2007; Lin, 2006, 2008; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Yu, 2011). However, learners' saying too much than required can be a kind of pragmatic failure (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Bu, 2011). Instructions are needed to help learners refuse other appropriately.

The results of each individual strategy by the three groups were shown in Table 5. Further analyses of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts were discussed in Section 4.2.1 to Section 4.2.3.

TABLE 5
INDIVIDUAL STRATEGY USE BY THE THREE GROUPS

group \ Strategy	NSC	EFL	NSE
DIRECT	27 (17%)	29 (14%)	27 (16%)
“No”	5 (3%)	0 (0%)	7 (4%)
Negative willingness/ability	22 (13%)	29 (14%)	20 (12%)
INDIRECT	133 (81%)	152 (75%)	128 (78%)
regret	27 (17%)	42 (21%)	44 (27%)
wish	0 (0%)	2 (1%)	0 (0%)
excuse, reason, explanation	63 (38%)	79 (39%)	54 (33%)
alternative	3 (2%)	9 (4%)	1 (1%)
condition	8 (5%)	5 (3%)	7 (4%)
dissuade	17 (10%)	10 (5%)	16 (10%)
accept	6 (4%)	2 (1%)	3 (2%)
compensation	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)
avoidance	8 (5%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)
ADJUNCT	4 (2%)	23 (11%)	10 (6%)
Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	1 (1%)	15 (7%)	3 (2%)
empathy	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	1 (1%)
Pause fillers	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
appreciate	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	5 (3%)
Total	164 (100%)	204 (100%)	165 (100%)

1. Direct strategies

There were no significant differences in the use of direct strategies among groups (cf. Table 4, NSC: 27, EFL: 29, NSE: 27, $\chi^2 = .333$, $df = 2$, $p = .564$). As shown in Table 5, participants tended to use more strategies of negative willingness/ability than “No”. This tendency was more prominent in EFL learners' sole use of negative willingness/ability. Participants' preference in the use of negative willingness/ability rather than “No” in direct strategies may be due to the fact that “No” is more face-threatening than negative willingness/ability (Chang, 2009). Thus, participants tended to avoid using “No.”

In spite of the tendency in the use of negative willingness/ability, the three groups used different softening devices for mitigation. NSC favored the use of modal 可能 ‘may’ (e.g., 可能沒辦法去了 ‘I may not be able to go’ in situation 3; 可能不方便借你 ‘It may be inconvenient for me to lend you (my car)’ in situation 2). Americans tended to use modals (e.g., *I won't make it* in situation 3) and subjectivizers (e.g., *I don't think I can make it* in situation 3, *I don't feel comfortable lending my car to you* and *I don't feel comfortable having you drive my car!* in situation 3). EFL learners, similar to Americans, also preferred to use modals (e.g., *I might not be able to attend the party* in situation 3) and subjectivizers (e.g., *I'm afraid I can't go to your party* in situation 3, and *I am afraid I cannot lend the car to you* in situation 2). However, it is interesting to note that NSE's frequent use of the subjectivizer ‘*I don't feel comfortable*’ was never used by learners. This finding confirms Chang's (2011) claim that American native speakers had a wider range of expressions to convey negative willingness/ability than Chinese EFL learners. Thus, authentic examples should be given to learners to expand their repertoire of refusal strategies.

2. Indirect strategies

There were no significant differences among groups in the use of indirect strategies (cf. Table 4, NSC: 133, EFL: 152, NSE: 128, $\chi^2 = 2.329$, $df = 2$, $p = .312$). As shown in Table 5, participant groups used the strategy of excuse/reason/explanation most among the 15 strategies. This implies that Chinese and Americans regarded the strategy of excuse/reason/explanation as the most useful one in refusing others. Further analyses of the content of excuses would be insightful.

The content of excuses can be divided into two types: specified excuses and unspecified excuses (Chang, 2009, 2011). Specified excuses refer to the excuses in which the speaker explicitly points out the exact date, person, engagement or plan to refuse the interlocutor; unspecified excuses are the excuses that the speaker does not mention the details. The distribution of excuse types by the three groups was shown in Table 6. NSC and NSE tended to provide unspecified excuses, whereas EFL learners had similar preference in the use of both types of excuses. This seems to contradict the

results of previous studies which suggested that Chinese and Chinese EFL learners provided more specified excuses than Americans (Chang, 2009, 2011; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996). However, an in-depth analysis revealed that participants' use of specified excuses was influenced by the factor of social status (Chang, 2009, 2011; Lin, 2006). As shown in Table 7, 82% of Chinese specified excuses were used in refusing a boss' invitation. This indicates that Chinese concerned the relationship with people of higher social status most and perceived the need to provide specified excuses to convince the interlocutor. On the other hand, EFL learners, similar to Americans, tended to provide specified excuses not only in refusing a boss' invitation but also in refusing a friend's request. This suggests that Americans and EFL learners concerned their relationship with people of equal and higher social status. Thus, the three groups' use of specified excuses exhibits the cross-cultural differences between Chinese and Americans. Chinese emphasis on the relationship with people of higher social status may be due to the fact that "the hierarchical nature of the Chinese society predisposes a complex social network of unique hierarchical interpersonal relationships." (Jia, 2007, p. 40). Nevertheless, Americans, influenced by their value of equal rights, also attended to their relationship with peers.

TABLE 6
EXCUSE TYPES BY THE THREE GROUPS

group \ Excuses	NSC	EFL	NSE
Specified	11 (17%)	40 (51%)	18 (33%)
Unspecified	52 (83%)	39 (49%)	36 (67%)
Total	63 (100%)	79 (100%)	54 (100%)

TABLE 7
SPECIFIED EXCUSES BY SPEAKERS OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL STATUS AMONG GROUPS

situation	NSC	EFL	NSE
Refusing a student's request (High to Low)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	3 (17%)
Refusing a friend's request (Equal status)	2 (18%)	20 (50%)	8 (44%)
Refusing a boss' invitation (Low to High)	9 (82%)	18 (45%)	7 (39%)
Total	11 (100%)	40 (100%)	18 (100%)

Although EFL learners' use of specified excuses showed similar tendency to that of Americans, the content of EFL's specified excuses was influenced by their L1 culture. To be more specific, both NSC and EFL preferred to use the excuses of family matters (e.g., *那天是我老婆的預產期* 'That day will be the estimated date of my wife's delivery' by NSC in situation 3; *My girlfriend just feels uncomfortable recently, I'm afraid she is pregnant. I need to take care of her.; I have to take care of my mother that day* by EFL in situation 3) or problems of health (e.g., *我不太舒服* 'I feel sick' by NSC in situation 3; *I feel uncomfortable* by EFL in situation 3). Only an American offered this kind of excuse (e.g., *My mom is sick* by NSE in situation 3). This finding is in accordance with previous studies which suggested that excuses of family matters and health problems are considered most persuasive in Chinese (Chang, 2009; Lin, 2006).

Aside from the content of excuses, there were some expressions of indirect strategies that were never used by EFL learners. For example, in refusing a student's request, Americans would express their attempts to dissuade the interlocutors by saying "Two words: Time management", "You need to prioritize", "As the army rangers say, 'sleep shows a lack of motivation'", and "Learn to manage your time". In refusing a friend's request for borrowing a new car, Americans set the condition for future acceptance by saying "not unless you give me the cost in collateral." American expressions, like *time management*, *prioritize*, and *the cost in collateral*, demonstrate their concise use of language, which is the part that EFL learners have to master.

3. Adjuncts

Adjuncts are the supportive moves (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) or positive remarks (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993) used to mitigate the offense of head acts. The results of the overall use of adjuncts showed that there were significant differences among groups (cf. Table 4, NSC: 4, EFL: 23, NSE: 10, $\chi^2 = 15.297$, $df = 2$, $p = .000^{***}$). EFL group used more adjuncts to a significant extent than the two baseline groups. This may be due to the fact that EFL group perceived the offense most face-threatening and also used more refusal strategies. Thus, they noticed the need to employ more adjuncts to downtone the impositions.

Among the use of each individual adjunct, as shown in Table 5, EFL groups preferred to use statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement for mitigation (e.g., *I'd love to, but I really can't* in situation 3, *I'd love to, but I need to visit a client later* in situation 2, and *I'd really like to go, but I have to take care of my mother that day.* in situation 3). EFL learners seemed to have no problems in the use of adjuncts for they had similar expressions to NSE in the statement of empathy (eg., *I understand that you were up preparing for another exam; however, this is going to effect my teaching schedule if I let class out early today.* by NSE in situation 1; *I know you are tired, but I have to keep going.* by EFL in situation 1), the use of pause fillers (e.g., *Yeah right. Two words: Time management.* by NSE in situation 1; *Well, but I am going to use it in another hour.* by EFL in situation 2), and the use of gratitude (e.g., *Thank you, but I*

won't be able to make it. by NSE in situation 3; *Thank you for your invitation, but I have to take care of my mom on that day.* by EFL in situation 3).

As for the distribution of adjuncts in relation to other strategies, Table 8 shows that 78% of adjuncts were expressed before direct or indirect strategies. This finding was in accordance with previous studies which suggested that adjuncts or positive remarks tended to be used before head acts to downtone the upcoming offense (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Lin, 2008). Further discussions of the patterns of adjuncts were presented in Section 4.3.

TABLE 8
DISTRIBUTION OF ADJUNCTS BY THE THREE GROUPS

pattern	NSC	EFL	NSE	Total
Adjunct + D/ID	2 (50%)	21 (91%)	6 (60)	29 (78%)
D/ID + Adjunct	1 (25%)	1 (4.5%)	3 (30%)	5 (14%)
D/ID + Adjunct + D/ID	1 (25%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (10%)	3 (8%)
Total	4 (100%)	23 (100%)	10 (100%)	37 (100%)

Note. D is for direct strategies, and ID for indirect strategies.

C. Strategy Patterns

The distribution of strategy patterns by the three groups was shown in Table 9. Only 27% of participants used one-strategy patterns to refuse others. Most participants tended to use multi-strategy patterns to realize the act. Thus, an analysis of the preceding two strategies of multi-strategy patterns would be insightful for our understanding of participants' refusals. The results of patterns of the starting two strategies among groups, as shown in Table 10, indicated that participants tended to start the multi-strategy patterns with adjuncts or indirect strategies for they were less face-threatening than direct strategies.

TABLE 9
DISTRIBUTION OF STRATEGY PATTERNS BY THE THREE GROUPS

group \ Pattern	NSC	EFL	NSE	Total
One-strategy pattern	33 (37%)	14 (16%)	27 (30%)	74 (27%)
Two-strategy pattern	38 (42%)	33 (37%)	40 (44%)	111 (41%)
Three-strategy pattern	16 (18%)	34 (38%)	19 (21%)	69 (26%)
Four-strategy pattern	3 (3%)	7 (8%)	3 (3%)	13 (5%)
Five-strategy pattern	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	3 (1%)
Total	90 (100%)	90 (100%)	90 (100%)	270 (100%)

TABLE 10
PATTERNS OF THE STARTING TWO STRATEGIES BY THE THREE GROUPS

group \ Pattern	NSC	EFL	NSE
AD-but-D(negative)	0 (0%)	4 (5%)	1 (2%)
AD-but-ID(excuse)	2 (4%)	16 (21%)	2 (3%)
AD-ID(dissuade)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
AD-ID(excuse)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
D-excuse/other	4 (7%)	4 (5%)	9 (5%)
ID(accept)-ID(dissuade)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
ID(condition)-others	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
ID(dissuade)-others	8 (14%)	5 (7%)	2 (3%)
ID(excuse)-negative/regret/others	22 (39%)	6 (8%)	7 (11%)
ID(regret)-AD	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
ID(regret)-ID(excuse)	15 (26%)	30 (40%)	31 (49%)
ID(regret)-negative/others	0 (0%)	10 (13%)	9 (14%)
Total	57 (100%)	76 (100%)	63 (100%)

Note. D is for direct strategies, ID for indirect strategies, and AD for adjuncts.

Summarizing Table 10, we can have a clearer picture of the typical pattern of each group illustrated in Table 11. NSC tended to express their excuses before the statement of negative unwillingness/ability (e.g., *我另有其他事要做, 無空前往* 'I have something important to do. Thus I have no time to go there.' in situation 3) or before the statement of regret (e.g., *我等會需要用車, 不好意思喔!* 'I will use my car later. Sorry' in situation 2). On the other hand, NSE tended to provide statement of regret before their excuses (e.g., *Sorry, I have a lot to cover today!* in situation 1; *Sorry, there's another engagement I must attend to.* in situation 3) or statement of negative willingness/ability (e.g., *Sorry, I don't feel comfortable lending my car to you.* in situation 2; *I'm so sorry, I will not be able to attend.* In situation 3). As for EFL group, their pattern was similar to that of Americans. They also expressed their regret before their explanation (e.g., *Sorry, I still have to finish all of the lessons today.* in situation 1) or statement of negative willingness/ability (e.g., *Sorry, I'm afraid I cannot come.* in situation 3).

An interesting finding was that the pattern of "Adjunct + but + Direct/Indirect" was used more frequently by EFL

group (e.g., *I know you are tired, but I have to keep going.* in situation 1; *I really want to help you on this, but I have to use it in a minute.* in situation 2; *Thanks for your inviting, but I have already had another appointment.* in situation 3) than by Americans (e.g., *I would love to go, but I have other plans.* in situation 3) or Chinese (e.g., 我知道考試期間大家都很忙,但是我的課程進度已經落後很多,所以可能沒辦法 ‘I know you are busy during mid-term week, but the schedule has been delayed. Therefore, I can’t make it.’ in situation 1). Although previous studies (e.g., Chang, 2011; Lin, 2008; Pomerantz, 1984) have indicated that Americans tended to provide a positive move followed by the contrastive marker *but* before their realization of a face-threatening act, i.e., “positive opinion + but + head act”, EFL group seemed to overuse this pattern (NSC: 4%, EFL: 26%, NSE: 5%). EFL group’s overuse of this pattern may be due to the fact that they were advanced learners and knew how to employ this acquired formulaic expression to downtone the face-threat when refusing others.

TABLE 11
TYPICAL PATTERN BY THE THREE GROUPS

Group	Typical pattern	Count (%)
NSC	ID(excuse)-negative/regret/others	22/57 (39%)
EFL	ID(regret)-excuse/negative/others	40/76 (53%)
NSE	ID(regret)-excuse/negative/others	40/63 (64%)

Note. ID is for indirect strategies.

V. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to examine Chinese and American refusals with a focus on Chinese EFL learners’ interlanguage performance. Three groups participated in this study. The research instrument was a questionnaire with two major parts: SRQ and DCT. Collected data were coded according to a revised coding scheme, and were analyzed in terms of perception of face-threat, overall strategy use, and the strategy patterns. The results were shown as follows.

As for participants’ perception from SRQ, EFL learners perceived the face-threat significantly greater than the two baseline groups. Thus learners were predicted to use more indirect strategies and adjuncts for downtoning the offense.

As for the overall strategy use, all participants tended to use indirect strategies most for the payoff consideration (Chen et al., 2011; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). An insightful finding is that EFL learners exhibited the waffling phenomenon, using more strategies than the two baseline groups (Bataller, 2010; Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Bu, 2011; Chen, 2007; Lin, 2006, 2008; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Yu, 2011). “The seemingly verbose behavior appears to serve a metalingual or metacommunicative function to help learners clarify their intended pragmatic or semantic meaning” (Yu, 2011, p.1143). However, this verbose behavior can be a pragmatic failure (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Bu, 2011). In the use of direct strategies, Chinese and Americans tended to use direct strategies least. This seemed to contradict the claim that Americans were more direct than Chinese (Chang, 2001, 2009, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hong, 2011; Liao, 1995; Lia & Bresnahan, 1996; Lin, 2006). This discrepancy may be due to social change (Chen & Yang, 2010; Cheng, 2011), and further studies are needed to verify this claim. In the use of indirect strategies, EFL learners seemed to approximate American norm. Nevertheless, the indepth analyses revealed that EFL learners were influenced by their L1 culture in their content of excuses. Besides, there were some native expressions that were never used by learners. In the use of adjuncts, learners tended to overuse adjuncts to a significant extent. Thus, further instructions are needed to help learners to refuse others more concisely with native formulaic expressions.

As for the refusal patterns, Chinese often provided their excuses before the expression of regret or negative willingness, whereas Americans tended to express their regret and then uttered their excuses or negative willingness. EFL learners appeared to have no problems in the use of most refusal patterns except for their overuse of the acquired formulaic expression “adjunct + but + head act.”

There are some limitations in the study. First, there are only three situations of refusal based on the variable of social status. Future studies can incorporate other variables (e.g., social distance, rank of imposition, and gender) into the design of DCT scenarios. Second, the present study only recruited interlanguage data from learners of intermediate-high level. Further studies can include more levels (e.g., basic, intermediate, and advanced levels) to depict the whole picture of interlanguage development in the speech act of refusal. Third, future studies can use other research methods for triangulation, e.g., oral DCT (Chang, 2011; Wei, 2012), role play (Cheng, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004, 2008; Nguyen, 2013), metapragmatic judgement task questionnaire (Chang, 2011), field observation of naturally occurring data (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013; Razmjoo, Barabadi, & Arfa, 2013; Yu, 2011), retrospective verbal report (Cheng, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004, 2008; Woodfield, 2010), and cognitive sociolinguistic approaches (Chen, Li, & Rau, 2013).

Despite the above limitations, the present study has filled the gap of previous studies by collecting both perception and production data to examine the less investigated Chinese and American refusals. The results have contributed to our understanding of EFL learners’ interlanguage performance and the debate of language universality and specificity.

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APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE

Situation 1

You are a professor at a university. Today most students are tired because they prepared for the examination of another subject and stayed up last night. Thus a student asks you to dismiss your class earlier. However, you have to carry on for the delayed schedule.

In this situation, if you refuse the student, how seriously would it embarrass the student? Please circle a number.

very slightlyvery seriously

1 2 3 4 5

If you are the teacher, what would you say to the student? (Please choose 1 or 2.)

1. () I would say, "....."

2. () I would say nothing because

Situation 2

Your friend wants to borrow your new car to take his girl friend for outing. However, you are afraid that your friend will not use your new car carefully and you will also use it in an hour.

In this situation, if you refuse your friend, how seriously would it embarrass him? Please circle a number.

very slightlyvery seriously

1 2 3 4 5

If your friend wants to borrow your new car in this situation, what would you say to him? (Please choose 1 or 2.)

1. () I would say, "....."

2. () I would say nothing because

Situation 3

Your boss is inviting you to his party at his home. However, you found that one of your colleagues who is your ex-lover will attend the party as well. To avoid embarrassment, you do not like to go to the party.

In this situation, if you refuse your boss, how seriously would it embarrass him? Please circle a number.

very slightlyvery seriously

1 2 3 4 5

If you are being invited in this situation, what would you say to the boss? (Please choose 1 or 2.)

1. () I would say, "....."

2. () I would say nothing because

APPENDIX B. CODING SCHEME

Strategy	English examples	Chinese examples
I. DIRECT		
1 Nonperformative statement		
1.1. "No"	"No." by NSE in S1; "Not tonight" by NSE in S2	"沒辦法" in S1 "不行!" in S1
1.2. Negative willingness/ability	"I can't make it." by NSE in S3; "I won't be able to make it." by NSE in S3	"我不想去" in S3
II. INDIRECT		
2.1 Statement of regret	"I'm sorry" by NSE in S2	"不好意思" in S2
2.2 Wish	"I hope you don't mind." by EFL in S3. "I hope I can" by EFL in S1.	NA
2.3 Excuse, reason, explanation	"I have other plans." by NSE in S3.	"我自己要用" in S2. "老闆我有隱情阿,有苦難說" in S3.
2.4 Statement of alternative	"You'll have to try someone else." in S2	"你可以考慮和別人借" in S2.
2.5 Set condition for past/future acceptance	"Maybe next time." by NSE in S3; "You can borrow it tomorrow" by NSE in S2	"如果你能一小時內回來,我很樂意借你" in S2
2.6 Attempt to dissuade interlocutor		
a. Threat or Statement of negative consequences to the requester	"If you break it, you buy it." by NSE in S2.	"不如我們下禮拜也來考試吧", "如果今天提早下課,下次就會更晚下課" in S1
b. Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack)	"You're not the teacher" by NSE in S1. "You need to prioritize." by NSE in S1.	"平時就要燒香,不要考前熬夜抱佛腳" in S1
c. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request	"Learn to manage your time." by NSE in S1.	"要考的部份沒上到課的地方要自己回去讀" in S1.
d. Let interlocutor off the hook	"Sit down and learn something." by NSE in S1.	"同學我們還是照樣上課吧" in S1
e. Self-defense	NA	(e.g., "我盡量吧" in S1)
2.7 Acceptance that functions as a refusal		
a. Unspecific or indefinite reply	"Go ahead" in S1	"不需介意" in S3.
b. Lack of enthusiasm	"I won't make you stay" in S1)	"這位同學你先走沒關係" in S1.
2.8 Compensation for the refusal	"Let me treat you a meal on another day." in S3	"不必對同學有太多要求" in S1.
2.9 Avoidance		
a. Nonverbal	participants' choice of opting out	participants' choice of opting out
b. Verbal (topic switch, joke, repetition of part of request, postponement, hedging)		
III. ADJUNCTS		
3.1 Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	"I would love to go" by NSE in S3.	"我很想參加" in S1
3.2 Statement of empathy	"I understand that you were up preparing for another exam" by NSE in S1.	"我知道考試期間大家都很忙" in S1
3.3 Pause fillers	"uhh"; "well"; "yeah"; "uhm"	NA
3.4 Gratitude/appreciation	"I appreciate you asking" by NSE in S1 "Thank you" by NSE in S3	"謝謝你的邀請" in S3

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