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## **PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF ADVANCED SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS: A STUDY OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES\*\***

The present study explores refusal strategies used by advanced Serbian EFL learners and compares them to refusal strategies produced by English and Serbian native speakers in a relevant study (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021). The aim is to identify potential pragmatic difficulties learners might have as well as the potential transfer of pragmatic norms from their native language. The participants completed a written Discourse Completion Test which introduced twelve everyday situations to which the participants were expected to respond by making refusals to requests. The situations were generated based on different combinations of two sociological variables: social distance and power. The results showed that while the frequency of direct and indirect refusals was similar for all three groups of participants, there were some differences in terms of the frequency and content of particular strategies. For instance, the EFL learners tended to overuse statements of regret/apology. They also provided more family-oriented excuses and used explanations that were less specific than the ones produced by the English native speakers. Furthermore, they produced fewer expressions of willingness and gratitude/appreciation. Apart from describing similarities and differences between the participants' refusal strategies, the results also highlight the importance of incorporating pragmatics in EFL classrooms and working on learners' pragmatic competence even when it comes to high-proficiency learners.

*Keywords:* refusal, social distance, power, pragmatic transfer, Serbian EFL learners, English, Serbian

### 1. Introduction

This study presents the results of an investigation of speech act realization patterns in English as a foreign language (EFL). In particular, the goal of the study is to explore refusal strategies produced by advanced Serbian EFL learners and compare the results to the ones obtained in a cross-cultural study by Živković (2021), which involved native speakers of English (NE) and native speakers of Serbian (NS). Comparing the results of the two investigations allows us to examine similarities and differences between the refusal strategies of these three groups of participants and identify potential pragmatic difficulties Serbian EFL learners might experience, which in turn can contribute to developing appropriate teaching methods when it comes to this speech act.

The term 'speech act' is defined as the basic or minimal unit of discourse (SEAR-

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LE 1969: 16). Speech acts, including refusals, are presumed to be universal since every language has a way of performing them, but not all languages refuse in the same way. In fact, research has shown that refusal strategies may vary across cultures and languages (e.g., BEEBE, TAKAHASHI et al. 1990; FÉLIX-BRASDEFER 2008; KWON 2004; NELSON, CARSON et al. 2002, among others). Since people tend to interpret the behavior of others based on their own values, failure to refuse appropriately can threaten the interpersonal relations of speakers in cross-cultural communication.

The knowledge of the socio-cultural rules that govern language use is referred to as pragmatic competence (MORKUS 2009: 28). It is reflected in how language learners produce and comprehend utterances in the target language with respect to a particular socio-cultural context. When EFL learners lack knowledge of English socio-cultural norms, as a result, they may transfer the rules and norms from their native language. This is referred to as pragmatic transfer, which can lead to failure in communication and may even end in misunderstanding or communication breakdown. This can result in EFL learners being labeled as ‘insensitive, rude, or inept’ (ALLAMI & NAEIMI 2011: 386). Therefore, pragmatic competence, which includes the way ELF learners produce and perceive refusals in different situations, represents an important issue that needs to be investigated.

The present study examines the types of refusal strategies that advanced Serbian EFL learners employ in request situations that require refusal using a written questionnaire taken from Živković (2021). The obtained results are compared to the ones reported in the mentioned study, which deals with refusals produced by NE and NS. This study is interested in addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the most common refusal strategies used by advanced Serbian EFL learners?
2. Are there any qualitative and quantitative differences between Serbian EFL learners and NE with regard to the refusal strategies they employ?
3. Are the refusal strategies used by Serbian EFL learners influenced by the following sociological variables: social distance between the interlocutors and power of the interlocutors?

The following section elaborates on the main theoretical concepts involved in the study and reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the conducted experiment and provides details on the participants, instrument, and procedure. The results obtained through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data are presented and discussed in relation to the initial research questions in Section 4. Section 5 discusses some implications for teaching the speech act of refusal in an EFL classroom. The last section presents the conclusions of the study.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Refusals

The speech act of refusal expresses a direct or indirect negative reply to an eliciting speech act, such as a request, an offer, an invitation, or a suggestion. It belongs to the category of commissives because it commits the refuser to (not) performing an action

(FÉLIX-BRASDEFER 2008: 42). Since refusals express a discrepancy between the communicative intentions of the interlocutors, they represent a linguistic challenge in a conversation (SIEBOLD & BUSCH 2015: 53).

Refusals have mostly been studied through the prism of the linguistic politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The central concept in their theory is *face*, which is defined as ‘the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself’ (BROWN & LEVINSON 1987: 61). Two aspects of face are claimed to be universal, according to the theory. The first one is *positive face*, which represents the interlocutor’s desire to be appreciated or approved of by using the strategies of solidarity and agreement. The second one is *negative face*, which represents freedom of action and freedom from imposition realized by being indirect, apologetic, and showing deference. Face is constantly at risk of being threatened by face-threatening acts in an interaction. According to Brown and Levinson, the seriousness of face-threatening acts can be calculated based on the following variables: the power of the interlocutors, the social distance between them, and the level of imposition of the act.

Refusal contradicts the interlocutor’s expectations and thus threatens their positive face, so it is considered to be a high-risk face-threatening act. To avoid offending the interlocutor, refusals usually include various strategies and ‘face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliance nature of the act’ (GASS & HOUCK 1999: 2). Most studies focusing on refusals have tried to describe the most commonly employed linguistic expressions used to perform this speech act in different languages and the way these expressions are acquired, perceived and produced by non-native speakers.

## 2.2. Previous research

Refusals can be studied from a cross-cultural perspective, where the performance of native speakers of one language is compared to that of native speakers of other languages. Interlanguage studies, on the other hand, compare language learners’ performance in the interlanguage to native speakers’ performance. However, when investigating speech act realization in a foreign language, what also needs to be taken into consideration is the influence of the learners’ native language and culture, which suggests that there is a strong link between interlanguage pragmatics studies and cross-cultural pragmatics research. The present study represents an example of the interlanguage approach since one of its goals is to compare the realization of refusals by EFL learners to the performance of NE, but it also takes into consideration the influence of the participants’ native language and culture, since the results will be compared to the ones obtained for NS as well.

A major examination of refusals was undertaken by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). They compared the refusal strategies produced by American English native speakers, Japanese native speakers, and Japanese EFL learners using a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The results of their study showed that the Japanese speakers’ refusals were similar in both Japanese and English but different from the ones used by the American speakers, which was a signal of pragmatic transfer. Moreover, the status of the interlocutor was an important factor in the selection of refusal strategies by the Japanese participants, whereas the American participants were mostly influenced by another variable – the social distance from the interlocutor. A major contribution of this study was a

list of semantic formulas, which has become and remained the most influential taxonomy used in the majority of the research involving refusals, including the present one.

In another study, Chen (1996) investigated similarities and differences in the refusal strategies employed by American English native speakers and Chinese speakers of English. They found that in general, both groups avoided using direct refusal strategies. However, the native speakers were shown to use more expressions of regret when making refusals compared to the Chinese participants.

A number of studies on Arabic made a further contribution to the interlanguage investigation of refusals. Al-Issa (2003) investigated the transfer of socio-cultural norms in the refusal strategies produced by Jordanian EFL learners. The data was compared to the refusal strategies employed by English native speakers and Arabic native speakers. The results indicated that the transfer was reflected in the learners' choice and content of refusal strategies. In another study, Al-Kahtani (2005) compared the realization patterns of refusals employed by English native speakers and Arabic and Japanese speakers of English. The findings showed that there were differences in the frequency and content of refusals between the native and non-native speakers. However, it was also shown that in situations where the participants were expected to refuse a request, all three groups performed in the same way.

A study aimed at investigating whether pragmatic transfer was present in the refusals of Iranian EFL learners at different levels of proficiency was conducted by Keshavarz, Eslami, and Ghahraman (2006). This study showed that even refusals produced by learners at an advanced proficiency level still contained non-native pragmatic features. Another recent study involving the production of refusals by Iranian EFL learners was conducted by Allami and Naeimi (2011). They explored the influence of learners' language proficiency, the status of interlocutors, and types of eliciting acts on the production of refusal strategies. The results indicated pragmatic transfer among the learners. Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between the learners' proficiency and pragmatic transfer. In other words, the higher-proficiency learners tended to transfer more socio-cultural norms from their native language to English and made more pragmatic errors than the lower-proficiency learners.

To our knowledge, there are only two interlanguage studies involving Serbian EFL/ESP learners which investigate refusal strategies. The first one was carried out by Savić (2014), who explored the issues of politeness in Serbian advanced EFL learners' production and perception of three types of speech acts: requests, apologies, and refusals. The data collection method used was the closed role play. Despite the learners' overall proficiency, Savić concluded that the speech act of refusal presented considerable pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic difficulties for the learners – far more than the other two speech acts examined. The second study was carried out by Halupka-Rešetar and Knežević (2016) and its goal was to determine the strategies that Serbian ESP learners used in the production of refusals depending on the social status of the interlocutors, as well as to investigate how different these strategies were from the ones used by English native speakers. The results showed that the learners used more direct refusal strategies than the native speakers. Furthermore, they did not employ as many expressions of gratitude or statements of positive opinion.

The present study aims to add to the current data on Serbian EFL learners' pragmatic competence by investigating the strategies employed by advanced Serbian EFL learners to carry out the complex speech act of refusal, with a focus on the sociological variables of distance and power. Responses of NE from a relevant cross-cultural study (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021) were also reviewed to establish a set of baseline responses. In order to identify any potential instances of pragmatic transfer from the participants' native language, responses of NS from the same study were taken into consideration, which represents a novel contribution to a small number of studies on Serbian EFL learners' production of refusals. Hopefully, the results of the study provide valuable feedback for teaching the speech act of refusal in EFL classrooms.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The study included twenty Serbian EFL learners (15 female and 5 male participants, age range = 22–25, average age = 23, SD = .93). The participants were 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-year students at the Department of English, Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, and they were at the advanced level of general linguistic competence in English - C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Twenty participants were selected to take part in this study in order to be able to compare the results with the ones obtained in the relevant cross-cultural investigation, which involved twenty native speakers of American English (14 female and 6 male participants, age range = 18–35, average age = 27.8, SD = 3.5) and twenty native speakers of Serbian (13 female and 7 male participants, age range = 18–29, average age = 23.4, SD = 2.6).

#### 3.2. Instrument and stimuli

A written DCT used in this study was taken from Živković (2021: 284). Using this instrument for gathering research data offers numerous advantages, as it can be quickly administered to a large number of participants, no transcription is needed, and it is easy to assess (ALLAMI & NAEIMI 2011: 389). It also allows the researcher to control various variables, such as social distance and power, thus providing insight into some social factors affecting speech act production.

The DCT<sup>3</sup> used in this study was in the form of a questionnaire introducing twelve situations to which the participants were expected to respond by making refusals. Each situation included a short description specifying the context, the social distance between the interlocutor and the participant, and the power that the interlocutor had over the participant, followed by an incomplete dialogue. In each dialogue, the interlocutor made a request and the participants' task was to complete the dialogue by providing a refusal of the request. A complete list of the test items, which were pseudorandomized, is given in Appendix A.

The two variables which were manipulated in the experiment were social distance and power. Social distance is described as the horizontal dimension of the social relation-

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3 The DCT was generated and administered using Google Forms, available at <https://www.google.com/forms/about/>.

ship between the interlocutors (SPENCER-OATEY 1996: 2). Distance is seen as the degree of familiarity based on the frequency of interaction with the interlocutor (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021: 275). A familiar interlocutor is the one with whom one talks frequently, such as one's mother or a friend, while an unfamiliar interlocutor is the one with whom one does not have frequent interactions, such as an acquaintance. The second variable manipulated was power, which is described as the vertical dimension of the social relationship between the interlocutors (SPENCER-OATEY 1996: 2). Its sources can be status or rank, seniority, etc. This variable had three levels: high (e.g., a boss), equal (e.g., a friend), and low (e.g., an employee). For the combinations of the two variables used in constructing the situations in the DCT, see Appendix A.

### 3.3. Procedure

Before completing the DCT, the participants were instructed to read the descriptions of twelve situations containing dialogues and write a response in the blank space after each situation. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers and they were encouraged to respond quickly and not to analyze their responses carefully.

Once all the responses were gathered, the data were coded according to the taxonomy of refusals presented in Živković (2021), which in turn was largely based on the taxonomies proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and Félix-Brasdefer (2008). The main units of analysis in the study were semantic formulas. A semantic formula is defined as 'a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy, any one or more of which can be used to perform the act in question' (COHEN 1996: 254). Semantic formulas were first divided into three major categories: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts. Examples of direct refusals identified in the data were negative propositions such as 'No', 'I can't', 'That is not possible', etc. Indirect refusals included semantic formulas such as excuse/reason/explanation (e.g., 'I don't have enough money'), statements of regret/apology (e.g., 'Sorry'), postponement (e.g., 'You could come by my office tomorrow'), etc. The data also included adjuncts to refusals, defined as strategies that cannot function as refusals on their own, but contribute to mitigating refusals and can be considered supporting moves to the refusal head acts (BEEBE, TAKAHASHI et al. 1990: 57). These were, for instance, expressions of willingness (e.g., 'I would love to'), pause fillers/hesitators (e.g., 'Oh', 'Uh', 'Well'), etc. The participants usually produced several strategies within one response, which were then coded as separate semantic formulas.

## 4. Results and discussion

In order to answer the research questions set at the beginning of the study, the data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis relied on using SPSS Statistics 21.0. The qualitative analysis focused on examining the content of the refusal strategies provided by the participants. Overall, the EFL learners produced a similar number of strategies, i.e., semantic formulas, as the NE and the NS: 604 strategies were produced by the EFL learners, 636 by the NE, and 589 by the NS. The average number of strategies used by the EFL learners was 2.52 per item – only slightly lower than the average number of strategies produced by the NE: 2.65.

The first research question was concerned with the most common refusal strategies used by the participants. The frequencies of the three main types of strategies (direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts) were calculated. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the counted strategies. As expected, the EFL learners predominantly produced indirect refusals, just like the NE and the NS. The z-test for two proportions showed that the difference in the frequency of occurrence of direct and indirect refusals was significant for the EFL learners ( $z = -21.67, p < .000^4$ ). The same was already confirmed for the NE ( $z = -21.14, p < .000$ ) and the NS ( $z = -18.81, p < .000$ ) (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021: 277).

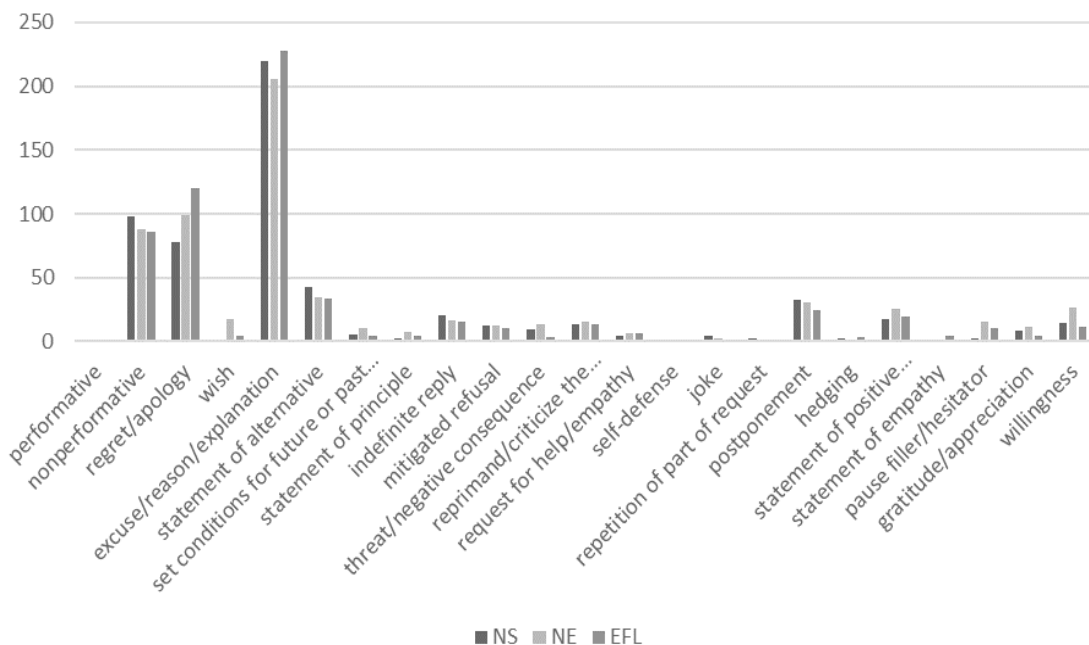
**Table 1.** *Frequency and percentage of refusal strategies for the three groups of participants*

|                          | NE        |            | NS        |            | EFL learners |            |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|--------------|------------|
|                          | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency    | Percentage |
| <b>Direct refusals</b>   | 88        | 13.8       | 100       | 17.0       | 87           | 14.4       |
| <b>Indirect refusals</b> | 471       | 74.1       | 448       | 76.0       | 471          | 78.0       |
| <b>Adjuncts</b>          | 77        | 12.1       | 41        | 7.0        | 46           | 7.6        |
| <b>Total</b>             | 636       | 100.0      | 589       | 100.0      | 604          | 100.0      |

To answer the second research question regarding potential overall differences in the way the ELF learners and the native speakers employed refusal strategies, they were examined in more detail. The participants typically combined direct and indirect strategies in their responses, while adjuncts were used less frequently. As seen in Figure 1, the most popular indirect strategy used by the EFL learners was excuse/reason/explanation (228 semantic formulas in total). The same was already confirmed for the NE and the NS (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021: 277). Since the function of this strategy is to reassure the interlocutor that they are still approved of but that there are some necessary reasons for the refusal (ALLAMI & NAEIMI 2011: 399), these results were expected. This semantic formula was used more frequently in contexts with interlocutors of higher and equal power than in contexts with interlocutors of lower power, which suggests that the refusal act was perceived as more face-threatening in those situations, so the participants mitigated its effect by providing more excuses. In several cases, this was the only strategy used by the EFL learners. For example, in (1), a participant refused a classmate’s request to lend them their textbook (Item 4 in Appendix A). In (2), a participant refused a roommate’s request to lend them some money to pay rent (Item 3 in Appendix A). In (3), a participant refused a student’s request to further explain lecture points (Item 5 in Appendix A).

- (1) EFL learner #1: I need the textbook to study.
- (2) EFL learner #2: I don’t have enough money.
- (3) EFL learner #3: I have a meeting in five minutes.

4 Statistical significance is achieved for  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 1.** Frequency of the refusal strategies used by the three groups of participants

A closer inspection of the content of this strategy showed that the EFL learners, just like the NS, used more family-oriented reasons to mitigate their refusals than the NE. Some examples are given below in (4) and (5). This difference can be seen as a reflection of two different cultures. Namely, the US is regarded as a highly individualistic culture, where people are typically focused on individual goals, so it was expected that the NE would use more self-oriented reasons when mitigating their refusals. On the other hand, as Savić (2014: 241) notes, Serbia leans toward the collectivistic end of the continuum, so it can be assumed that the EFL learners relied on Serbian culture norms when employing refusal strategies and, as a result, more other-oriented reasons were identified in the EFL data.

(4) EFL learner #4: I promised my mother I will be home by midnight.

EFL learner #5: I already have plans with my family.

EFL learner #6: My father from Australia is coming and I need to pick him up at the airport.

(5) NS #1: Moram da žurim kući zbog deteta.

(I have to go home because of my child)

NS #2: Nadao sam se slobodnom vremenu koje bih proveo sa porodicom.

(I was hoping to spend some free time with my family)

NS #3: Kasnim na godišnjicu braka.

(I'm late for my anniversary)

Regarding the content of the excuse/reason/explanation refusal strategy, it should also be noted that the EFL learners were less specific and clear than the NE. Namely, the excuses provided by the NS were found to be generally clear, concrete, and specific, as in (6). On the other hand, excuses produced by the EFL learners were in general not very



elaborate and were often vague, as in (7). Similar observations were found in other studies dealing with the production of refusal by English native speakers and EFL learners (ALLAMI & NAEIMI 2011; BEEBE, TAKAHASHI et al. 1990; NELSON, CARSON et al. 2002), where differences in the quality of explanations and reasons were also identified.

(6) NE #1: I'm rushing right now for the 11:20 Amtrak train to Boston.

NE #2: This afternoon I'm having serious eye surgery and my eyes will be bandaged for a month.

NE #3: I have to buy a gift tomorrow, clean the house, and prepare food.

(7) EFL learner #7: I have other engagements right now.

EFL learner #8: I already have something arranged for today.

EFL learner #9: I already have some plans for tomorrow.

The second most frequently used strategy was an expression of regret/apology. The z-test for two proportions showed that the frequency of this semantic formula in the EFL data was significantly higher than in the NE data ( $z = 1.98, p = .047$ ) and in the NS data ( $z = 3.07, p = .002$ ). It can be assumed that the higher frequency of this strategy in the EFL data is a result of the overgeneralization of pragmatic norms due to a lack of pragmatic competence. Namely, the EFL learners might have been instructed that NE are very polite, which is why they might tend to overuse mitigating strategies such as regret/apology. This assumption can further be supported by the fact that the ELF learners used this strategy more frequently in situations where the interlocutor was of higher or equal power, i.e., in situations where the seriousness of the refusal act, in general, is perceived as higher.

While the frequency of indirect refusals was similar for all three groups of participants, there were still some differences that should be highlighted. For instance, the NE showed positive supportive facework by expressing a wish to comply with the interlocutor's request before refusing to do so significantly more frequently than the EFL learners ( $z = 2.47, p = .006$ ). Given that the NS used this strategy only once, this could represent an example of the ELF learners' pragmatic transfer in target language use.

A similar observation can be made regarding adjuncts: the frequency of this strategy was significantly higher for the NE than the EFL learners ( $z = 2.64, p = .008$ ). Figure 1 shows that this difference is especially reflected in the use of expressions of willingness. Namely, the NE used expressions such as *I would be happy to*, *I would love to*, etc., more frequently than the EFL learners. Again, it was shown that the NS used this strategy somewhat less frequently than the NE. Therefore, the EFL learners using this strategy less frequently than the NE could potentially be an occurrence of transferring pragmatic norms from their native language. A slightly bigger difference in the frequency of adjuncts is also observed in the use of statements of gratitude/appreciation: the EFL learners tended to use this strategy less frequently than the NE, which is in line with the results presented by Halupka-Rešetar and Knežević (2016). These differences could point to a lack of pragmatic competence. Serbian EFL learners may be perceived as potentially bad-mannered or rude when communicating with native speakers for not adhering to the pragmatic norms of English when performing refusals and failing to employ the expected face-saving strategies such as gratitude/appreciation or willingness to carry out the interlocutor's request.

The final research question referred to the influence of the sociological variables

of social distance and power on the participants' responses. The chi-square test for independence was conducted in order to answer this question. Social distance was first set as the independent variable with two levels: familiar and unfamiliar. The dependent variable was the frequency of the following refusal strategies: direct refusal, indirect refusal, and adjunct (see Table 2). The test showed that there was no significant association between the two variables in the EFL data ( $X^2(2, 604) = 4.62, p = .099$ ), i.e., the EFL learners were not sensitive to the social distance between them and the interlocutor, as there were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of strategies they used based on this variable. The same was observed for the NE and the NS - there were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of refusal strategies they used based on this factor (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021: 279).

**Table 2.** *Frequency of the refusal strategies produced by the EFL learners depending on the social distance variable*

|                 |            | Refusal strategies recorded in the EFL data |                  |         | Total |
|-----------------|------------|---|------------------|---------|-------|
|                 |            | Direct refusal                              | Indirect refusal | Adjunct |       |
| Social distance | Familiar   | 44  | 229              | 32      | 305   |
|                 | Unfamiliar | 43  | 242              | 14      | 299   |
|                 | Total      | 87  | 471              | 46      | 604   |

Power was then set as the independent variable with three levels: high, equal, and low. The dependent variable was the frequency of the type of refusal strategies employed by the participants (see Table 3). The test again showed that there was no significant association between the two variables in the EFL data ( $X^2(4, 604) = 6.36, p = .173$ ), which means the EFL learners were not sensitive to the power of the interlocutor. An interesting observation can be made here. While the results showed that the NE were not sensitive to the power of the interlocutor (in line with Allami and Naeimi (2011)), for the NS power was a conditioning factor in the selection of refusal strategies (ŽIVKOVIĆ 2021: 280). Namely, a considerably bigger number of the NS opted for a direct refusal in contexts that included a subordinate interlocutor than in contexts where the interlocutor was of higher and equal power. The NS, therefore, perceived the situations with an interlocutor of lower power as less face-threatening and chose more direct strategies. However, given that there were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of refusal strategies for the EFL learners, it can be concluded that they took into account the differences in socio-cultural perceptions and expectations with respect to this sociological variable. This is reflected in the fact that they used more tentative and polite strategies as opposed to straightforward refusals when addressing a person of lower power in English in order to avoid the possibility of offending the interlocutor.

**Table 3.** *Frequency of the refusal strategies produced by the EFL learners depending on the power variable*

|       |       | Refusal strategies recorded in the EFL data |                  |         | Total |
|-------|-------|---|------------------|---------|-------|
|       |       | Direct refusal                              | Indirect refusal | Adjunct |       |
| Power | High  | 28  | 152              | 12      | 192   |
|       | Equal | 21  | 158              | 20      | 199   |
|       | Low   | 38  | 161              | 14      | 213   |
|       | Total | 87  | 471              | 46      | 604   |

### 5. Implications for teaching

In order to communicate successfully with native speakers, ELF learners need more than just grammar knowledge. The ability to employ language appropriately and select suitable linguistic forms in certain socio-cultural contexts, i.e., pragmatic competence, is very important. One significant indicator of EFL learners' pragmatic competence is performing speech acts appropriately with respect to the given contextual factors. While it has been shown that high-proficiency learners, in general, tend to perform better than low-proficiency learners when it comes to speech acts (e.g., DALMAU & GOTOR 2007; MAESHIBA, YOSHINAGA et al. 1996; TROSBORG 1995), it is not necessarily the case that a learner of high grammatical proficiency will possess pragmatic competence at the same level of proficiency (BARDOVI-HARLIG 2001). In fact, some studies, including this one, have shown that even EFL learners who are at higher proficiency levels in terms of grammar show differences from English pragmatic norms (ALLAMI & NAEIMI 2011; KESHAVARZ, ESLAMI et al. 2006; TAKAHASHI 1996).

In the same situation, advanced EFL learners may use different speech acts from native speakers, or when the same speech acts are used, as in the present study, these may differ in other aspects, such as semantic formulas or content (BARDOVI-HARLIG 2001). For instance, while the ELF learners in this study opted mostly for indirect refusals, like the NE, the two groups differed in the frequency of some refusal strategies they employed. The EFL learners tended to overuse expressions of regret/apology while semantic formulas such as expressing a wish to comply with the interlocutor's request as well as expressions of gratitude/appreciation and expressions of willingness were underrepresented in the EFL data. Furthermore, the EFL learners and the NE differed in the content of their contribution. For example, when giving excuses and explanations, the NE provided more details and were specific, while the EFL learners' explanations and excuses were vague by the American norm. The EFL learners also tended to use more family-oriented reasons to support their refusal, seen as a reflection of Serbian culture. Such differences in expressing refusals might lead to pragmatic failure and misunderstanding or even conflicts of interaction with native speakers. Pragmatic errors can often be less tolerated by native speakers than grammatical errors and they may be perceived as bad manners rather than lack of pragmatic competence. To avoid this, it is crucial for EFL teachers to help learners enhance their ability to use the speech act of refusal appropriately in English in order to be pragmatically competent.

First of all, it is necessary to increase speech act input by providing authentic,

representative language to learners, especially given the fact that textbooks can often fail to provide realistic input (BARDOVI-HARLIG 2001: 25). For instance, it has been suggested that using authentic speech act data collected from movies and television programs provides learners with a wealth of information that can be analyzed for content and socio-cultural features (FERNÁNDEZ-GUERRA 2013; SHERMAN 2003; TANAKA 1997). What is great about authentic materials is that they provide context for teaching speech acts such as refusals, which is essential given that speech acts are context sensitive. Bardovi-Harlig also highlights the difficulty of providing relevant pragmatic input in academic encounters given the fact that teacher-student talk is an unequal status encounter, where the teacher is the higher-status speaker and in many situations does not provide a pragmatically appropriate model for the learners (2001: 24). Therefore, when teaching speech acts, it is often necessary to supplement teacher-fronted talk with student-student interaction to provide a broader range of models.

However, simple exposure to input is often insufficient for learners to develop pragmatic competence (ROSE 2005) and therefore, instruction in speech acts is necessary in order to develop EFL learners' ability to express more native-like speech acts (ISHIHARA 2004; KASPER 2001; TAKAHASHI 2001, 2010; USÓ-JUAN 2013). For instance, when it comes to refusals, teachers could point their EFL learners toward the more successful semantic formula and those which seem to be underrepresented according to the relevant research, as expressions of gratitude/appreciation and expressions of willingness in the present study. Teachers need to be aware, however, that sometimes instructional emphasis on one semantic formula over others may encourage overuse of the formula, as in the case of expressions of regret/apology in this study. Building awareness of speech acts should begin in the earliest days of learning English when learners are performing simple speech acts such as greeting and thanking and move towards more complex ones such as performing refusals with learners of higher levels.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study contributes to the existing literature on speech act research by investigating the ways that Serbian EFL learners produce refusals and comparing them to native English and Serbian production reported in Živković (2021), with a focus on variables such as social distance and power. The main goal was to answer the research questions set at the beginning of the study in order to explore where advanced Serbian EFL learners are likely to have pragmatic difficulties in the production of refusals. A summary of the analyzed data and findings is given below.

The first research question was concerned with the most common refusal strategies used by Serbian EFL learners. An analysis of the frequencies of the refusal strategies showed that the EFL learners used similar strategies with similar frequencies when making refusals compared to the NE and the NS. As expected, the results indicated that the participants reported significantly more indirect refusal strategies than direct ones, as they are considered to be less face-threatening. The two most frequently used indirect refusal strategies were excuse/reason/explanation and regret/apology.

The second question was related to the differences between EFL learners and NE in employing refusal strategies. It was shown that the EFL learners in this study tended to

use expressions of regret/apology more frequently and expressions of wishing to comply with the request less frequently than their American counterparts. A qualitative analysis also showed differences in the content of the excuse/reason/explanation strategies: the EFL learners tended to provide more family-oriented reasons and use less specific explanations. All of this suggests that, despite their overall proficiency, the learners still experienced some pragmatic difficulties regarding the production of refusals. After further comparing the participants' answers in terms of the frequency of semantic formulas, it was concluded that there were also some differences with respect to the use of adjuncts. Namely, this strategy was employed less frequently by the EFL learners than the NE, indicating a potential for pragmatic failure.

The final research question addressed the influence of social distance and power of the interlocutor on the participants' responses. The NE and EFL learners' refusal strategies were consistent in terms of frequency regardless of these two variables, while the NS were sensitive to the power variable, which is seen in the significantly higher percentage of direct refusals used when addressing an interlocutor of power than when addressing an interlocutor of equal or higher power. This suggests that the ELF learners took into account the differences in socio-cultural perceptions and expectations and used more tentative and polite strategies when addressing a subordinate interlocutor in English. Further investigation can show whether the two mentioned variables have any effects on the content and form of EFL learners' refusal strategies.

This paper also discussed the importance of including refusals as part of learners' pragmatic competence development in EFL classrooms. It is important to remember that in order to communicate successfully in another language, acquiring only grammatical knowledge is not enough. Learners also need to acquire different pragmatic and socio-linguistic rules by learning what is considered appropriate in English, which can reduce the potential for misunderstandings between speakers of different cultures. Therefore, it is up to EFL teachers to implement instruction in pragmatics and make contextualized, pragmatically appropriate input available to learners from the early stages of acquisition onward. In order to develop appropriate EFL teaching methods, however, more research is needed, focusing on determining the pragmatic competence of Serbian EFL learners with varied proficiency levels with regard to refusals.

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#### Appendix A

Below is the DCT taken from Živković (2021: 284). The situations were generated based on different combinations of two variables: social distance between the interlocutor and the refuser, and power of the interlocutor. The social distance variable had two levels: familiar and unfamiliar. The power variable had three levels (relative to the interlocutor): high, equal, and low. The test items were pseudorandomized in the DCT.

*Distance: unfamiliar; Power: high*

1. You are a mid-level manager working for a large firm. One day, the CEO, who you have only met a couple of times, calls you into her office and asks you to organize the annual corporate dinner.

CEO: As you know, next month we're supposed to host the corporate dinner. I would like to take it up a notch this year and have a big event for all our international clients and partners and I would like you to organize everything. What do you say?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

CEO: Don't say 'no' immediately, take a few days to think about it.

2. You have been working in a bookstore for a few weeks. It has been a very busy week since it is the beginning of the school year. Tomorrow is your day off. Your boss asks to speak to you.

Boss: I know tomorrow's your day off, but you know how busy it gets these days

and I need several people to cover the morning shift. Can you come to work tomorrow?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Boss: Well, I guess I'll have to find someone else.

*Distance: unfamiliar; Power: equal*

3. You are a college student and you have just moved into a new flat. Your roommate, who you do not know very well, cannot pay rent and wants to borrow money from you. However, you just feel that you cannot lend her money.

Roommate: Hey, I need to ask you for a favor. I don't think I can make rent this month. Can you lend me some money and I promise I'll pay you back as soon as I can?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Roommate: No problem, I'll ask someone else then.

4. You are a college student and you have your first exam next week. One of your classmates, who you have not interacted with outside the class and who has frequently missed the class, asks to borrow your textbook. You feel that you cannot lend it to him.

Classmate: I can't find my textbook. I think I lost it somewhere. Can I borrow yours for a few days until I buy a new one?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Classmate: OK, never mind.

*Distance: unfamiliar; Power: low*

5. You are a math professor at university. Some of the points you have made in your new class are unclear to one of your students. She approaches you after class and asks you for help, but you have prior engagements.

Student: Excuse me, but I'm afraid I didn't quite understand everything in today's lecture. Do you have time to explain it to me a bit more right now?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Student: Oh, OK. No problem.

6. You are a manager of a restaurant. One day, one of the waiters, who you recently hired, asks to speak with you in private.

Waiter: I know I've only been working here for a couple of weeks, but I wanted to ask you if I could get a week off this month. I'm planning on travelling to Mexico with my girlfriend.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Waiter: Well, I guess I'll have to postpone my vacation.

*Distance: familiar; Power: high*

7. You are a PhD student at university. Your supervisor, with whom you have close a relationship, asks you to help with moving her office after the class. However, you already have prior engagements.

Supervisor: Do you have some time today? I'm moving to a new office and it would be great if you could help.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor: Too bad. I was hoping you could help me.



8. You are having a surprise birthday party for your mother tomorrow. Almost everything is ready for the party, when your father calls you to ask you something.

Father: I have a busy day tomorrow and I don't think I'll have time to pick up the cake from the bakery. Can you do it?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Father: Then I'll try to finish work early and pick it up myself.

*Distance: familiar; Power: equal*

9. You are at your friend's birthday party. It is getting quite late, when your friend asks you for a favor.

Friend: Can you stay after the party and help me clean up?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Friend: Too bad. It'll take me hours to clean up this mess by myself.

10. You are having lunch with your friend, who is a writer. She has recently finished writing her new novel and she would like you to read it before she sends it to the editor.

Friend: You have such good taste in books and I really appreciate your opinion, so could you take a look at this manuscript I've just finished writing? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Friend: Oh, OK. Then I'll have someone else read it before I send it to my editor.

*Distance: familiar; Power: low*

11. You are the vice president of a law firm. Your secretary, who you have been working with for the past 3 years, enters your office and asks to speak to you.

Secretary: As you know, I've been in the firm for three years. I really enjoy working here and no one has ever had any complaints about my work. I honestly feel that it's time I got an increase in pay.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Secretary: Well, I'm afraid I'll have to look for another job then.

12. You are getting ready for your friend's birthday party and you are late. Your younger brother walks over. He has a homework assignment due tomorrow and he needs a favor. However, you cannot help him out.

Brother: I don't have a lot of time and I need to finish this assignment for tomorrow's class. I tried doing it on my own but it's useless. Can you help me?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Brother: If you don't help me finish it, I'm telling Mom on you.

Appendix B

Below is presented the classification of refusals used in the study, taken from Živković (2021: 287) and largely based on the taxonomy developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and Félix-Brasdefer (2008).

| Type                      | Semantic formula                            | Example  |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Direct refusal</b>     | Performative                                | <i>I refuse.</i>   |
|                           | Nonperformative statement                   | 1. <i>No</i><br><br>2. Negative willingness/ability: <i>I can't. I don't think so.</i><br><i>I'm sorry...; I apologize...; I feel terrible...</i>  |
| <b>Indirect refusal</b>   | Statement of regret/apology                 | <i>I wish I could help you, but...</i>   |
|                           | Wish  | <i>I have prior engagements already.</i>   |
|                           | Excuse/reason/explanation                   | <i>I need my book to study.</i><br><i>Ask Mom or Dad for help.</i>   |
|                           | Statement of alternative                    | <i>Perhaps another student could loan you their notes.</i><br><i>If you told me yesterday, then I might have had time to help you.</i>   |
|                           | Set condition for future or past acceptance | <i>I don't lend money to people.</i>   |
|                           | Statement of principle                      | <i>Unfortunately, ...; Sadly,...</i>   |
|                           | Mitigated refusal                           | 1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester: <i>You do that and you can forget about coming back.</i><br><br>2. Reprimand or criticize the requester: <i>You should have started working on it sooner.</i><br><br>3. Request for help, empathy or assistance by dropping or holding the request: <i>Dad, I really need you to get that.</i> |
|                           | Attempt to dissuade the interlocutor        | 4. Self-defense: <i>I've done everything else.</i><br><i>I need to check my calendar and see my availability.</i>  |
|                           | Unspecific/indefinite reply                 | 1. <i>Joke</i><br><br>2. Postponement: <i>Next time I got you. I am free next week if you can postpone it until then.</i>  |
|                           | Avoidance                                   | 3. Hedging: <i>I'm not sure...!</i><br><i>All I want is you to succeed!</i>  |
| <b>Adjunct to refusal</b> | Statement of positive opinion/agreement     | <i>Sounds like a nice idea, but...!</i><br><i>I realize you are in a difficult situation.</i>  |
|                           | Statement of empathy                        | <i>uhh / well / oh / uhm</i>   |
|                           | Pause fillers/hesitators                    | <i>I appreciate you asking me to do this.</i>  |
|                           | Gratitude/appreciation                      | <i>I'd love to, but...</i>   |
| Willingness               |   |  |

Ema Živković

## **PRAGMATIČKA KOMPETENCIJA STUDENATA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA NA NAPREDNOM NIVOU: PRODUKCIJA GOVORNOG ČINA ODBIJANJA**

Rad se bavi produkcijom govornog čina odbijanja u stranom jeziku. Naime, u radu istražujemo strategije za odbijanje koje koriste srpski studenti engleskog jezika na naprednom nivou i upoređujemo ih sa strategijama za odbijanje izvornih govornika engleskog i srpskog koje je istraživala Živković (2021). Cilj rada je identifikacija potencijalnog transfera pragmatičkih normi iz maternjeg jezika pri upotrebi ovih strategija. Dvadeset ispitanika popunilo je test nadopunjavanja diskursa sa dvanaest zadataka u kojima se od ispitanika očekivalo da odbiju neki zahtev. U testu smo varirali varijablu društvene distance i varijablu društvene moći. Rezultati su pokazali da su sve tri grupe ispitanika u sličnoj meri koristile direktne i indirektne strategije za odbijanje, ali da postoje razlike u pogledu učestalosti i sadržaja pojedinih strategija. Na primer, pokazalo se da se studenti engleskog mnogo više izvinjavaju od izvornih govornika engleskog. Zatim, njihovi razlozi za odbijanje uglavnom su manje konkretni i jasni, a mnogo češće su i bazirani na porodičnim obavezama, što verovatno predstavlja pragmatički transfer iz maternjeg jezika. Takođe, studenti mnogo ređe koriste izraze zahvalnosti i uvažavanja. Osim što opisuju sličnosti i razlike između strategija ispitanika, rezultati ovog istraživanja takođe pokazuju koliko je važno raditi na pragmatičkoj kompetenciji učenika engleskog jezika, čak i kada su u pitanju studenti engleskog na visokom nivou znanja jezika.

*Ključne reči:* govorni čin odbijanja, društvena distanca, moć, pragmatički transfer, srpski studenti engleskog jezika, srpski jezik, engleski jezik