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REFUSAL STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

This paper analyzes refusal strategies used in emails written by students at the tertiary level of education. Participants were divided into two groups containing fifteen members each. One group received a lecture on pragmatic competence and email writing, while the other group did not receive any explicit teaching. Emails were collected and analyzed in terms of the head acts used in refusal strategies that were classified according to the taxonomy created by Beebe et al. (1990). Results of the research showed that explicit teaching had a positive influence on students since the students who were explicitly taught and prepared for the task showed a higher level of pragmatic competence through the use of indirect refusal strategies and structures that were more appropriate for the specific task they were given.

Keywords: refusal strategies, semantic formulas, pragmatic competence, explicit teaching

1. Introduction

This paper presents small-scale research on the use of refusals in emails written by ESP students at the tertiary level of education. The goal of the author is to determine the similarities and differences in emails of refusal between two groups of students – one which received instructions on email writing, register and pragmatic competence, and one which did not receive any of these instructions. The ultimate goal of the author is to conclude whether explicit teaching contributes to the level of students' pragmatic competence. The analysis is mostly qualitative. Its pedagogical implications may be applied to ESP classes in general.

Communicative competence presents speakers' general ability to use language. In order to achieve it, learners need to have knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures, together with the *pragmatic knowledge* (BACHMAN 1990, SAVIGNON 2002). Pragmatic knowledge refers to the knowledge about what linguistic behavior is adequate in a certain situation, bearing in mind the communicative goal interlocutors want to achieve (ELLIS 1994). It is necessary for learners to adapt their linguistic behavior to the situation, interlocutor and the communicative goal. Communicative competence includes *pragmatic competence* – the ability of a person learning a foreign language to use that language in accordance with the pragmatic rules that apply to adult native speakers of the same language (NUREDIN 2008: 280).

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Thomas (1983: 22) defines *pragmatic failure* as the inability of a non-native speaker to use language appropriately in a specific context, as well as misunderstanding the interlocutor's intention. Tang (2013) believes that the study of pragmatic failures is an important topic for intercultural communication. He explains that this phenomenon arises due to the speaker's inability to adapt the use of language to the various factors of the communicative context. An important notion for this paper is that, according to Tang (2013), teachers of English as a foreign language are focused on grammar and vocabulary, while the use of language that is adapted to the situation and the interlocutors remains neglected.

2. Speech Act of Refusals

Refusals are a speech act which responds to another speech act, such as requests, suggestions, invitations or offers (BEEBE et al. 1990). Refusals express a negative response to an initiating speech act. A negative reply expressed by a refusal may be a direct or an indirect one. As a speech act, refusal belongs to the category of commissives since it commits the interlocutor to (not) performing an action (FELIX-BRASDEFER 2008: 42). On the other hand, Gass and Houck (1999) emphasize that there are three possible refusal approaches – rejection, postponement, and proposal of an alternative. Refusals are delicate speech acts since positive responses are preferred in communication. For this reason, refusals often include various indirect strategies that would maintain good interpersonal relationships. These indirect strategies require a higher level of pragmatic competence which may represent a difficulty for non-native speakers.

Refusals are mostly studied within the linguistic *Politeness theory* proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The central term within this theory is *face*. It is defined as 'the public self-image that every member (of a society) wants to claim for himself.' (BROWN and LEVINSON 1987: 61). The *positive face* refers to the interlocutor's desire to be accepted and appreciated by a certain group, while *negative face* refers to the interlocutor's desire to be autonomous and have freedom. Certain speech acts, such as refusals, are face-threatening and they involve 'face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act' (GASS and HOUCK 1999: 2). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face threatening acts are analyzed in terms of the following variables: the power of the interlocutors, the social distance existing between them, and the level of the imposition of the act.

2.1. Taxonomy of Refusals

Probably the most famous taxonomy for semantic formulas of refusals, which we are going to use in this research, was created by Beebe et al. (1990). These authors stated that refusal strategies belong to categories of *Semantic formulas* or *Adjuncts*. According to Cohen (1996), semantic formulas, or strategies, represent a set of expressions which could be words, phrases or sentences representing a refusal.

In the taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990), semantic formulas are further divided into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include performative (e.g. *I promise*) and non-performative strategies (e.g. *No; I can't...*).

Indirect strategies are more complex and they include semantic formulas used to mitigate or avoid direct refusals. These strategies include the following ones: (1) expres-

sion of regret (e. g. *I'm sorry...*), (2) wish (e.g. *I wish I could help you*), (3) explanation or excuse (e.g. *I have a headache*), (4) offering an alternative (e.g. *Why don't you ask someone else?*), (5) setting conditions for acceptance in the future or past (e.g. *If you had asked me earlier, I would have*), (6) promise of future acceptance (e.g. *I'll do it next time*), (7) statement of principle (e.g. *I never do business with friends*), (8) philosophical statement (e.g. *One can't be too careful*), (9) negative opinion or talking partner out (e.g. *That's a terrible idea*), (10) acceptance that functions as a refusal or an indefinite answer and (11) evasion or postponement.

Adjuncts accompany the semantic formula, i.e. they do not perform a refusal speech act on their own. They may appear before or after semantic formulas. According to Beebe et al. (1990), adjuncts may represent: (1) statement of positive opinion (e.g. *That's a good idea*), (2) statement of empathy (e.g. *I realize you are in a difficult situation*), (3) pause fillers (e.g. *well, oh, uhm*), and (4) gratitude/appreciation.

3. Previous Research

Up to the present moment, refusals have been studied mostly within cross-cultural research aiming at comparison of refusal strategies used by native speakers of a certain language (usually English) and speakers learning the same language as a second or a foreign one. When it comes to Serbian learners of English, there are only a few papers dealing with refusals produced by native speakers of the Serbian language in comparison with the refusals produced by native speakers of English. Speech acts have also been analyzed within email communication, however, majority of these papers are interested in the speech act of request.

Beebe et al. (1990) authored an influential paper which compared refusals made by native speakers of Japanese, Japanese learners of English as a second language, and native speakers of American English. The data were collected via discourse completion tests (DCTs) representing various situations with interlocutors of different status. The focus of the research was pragmatic transfer. Significant differences among these groups of speakers were recorded in terms of order, frequency and content of semantic formulas. Namely, Japanese excuses were less specific than those given by American speakers. Besides, Japanese reacted differently to interlocutors of different social status (higher vs. lower).

Felix-Brasdefer (2008) compared refusals made by Mexican Spanish speakers and American English speakers. He concluded that Mexicans used vague structures, while American realization of refuses was clearly communicated. When refusing a person of a higher status, Mexicans showed more indirectness, formality and respect than Americans. Similar findings were revealed in the study authored by Allami and Naeimi (2011) who considered refusals of Persian and American English speakers. These authors concluded that 'refusing in an L2 is a complex task as it requires the acquisition of the socio-cultural values on the target culture' (2011: 385). Umale (2011) researched refusals made by British and Omani speakers and found differences referring to the directness which were related to the social status of speakers. Chang (2009, 2011) made a comparison of refusal strategies of Taiwanese learners and native speakers of American English. He found that Taiwanese had a tendency to use indirect refusals rather frequently, their reasons were more explicit and their sensitivity to social power was higher.

When it comes to Serbian learners of English as a foreign language, there have only been a few studies considering refusal strategies. Savić (2014) investigated three speech acts – requests, apologies, and refusals among Serbian advanced EFL learners. Although participants, university students majoring in English, had a high level of English language proficiency, the speech act of refusal presented a difficulty for these learners. It caused considerably more pragmatic failures than the other two speech acts. Živković (2022) authored a study of refusal strategies among advanced Serbian EFL learners, Serbian native speakers and English native speakers. The results showed differences referring to the frequency and content of the strategies employed. For instance, EFL learners had a tendency to overuse expressions of apology and regret, use excuses that were more family-oriented and not as specific as the ones given by native speakers.

To our knowledge, there is only one study conducted on the refusals of Serbian learners within ESP context. Halupka-Rešetar and Knežević (2016) aimed at determining the strategies employed by Serbian ESP learners and compared them to the ones used by English native speakers. One of the variables was the social status of the interlocutors. The final conclusion was that Serbian learners used more direct strategies and did not use as many expressions of gratitude and statements of positive opinion as native speakers did.

Numerous studies have been concerned with speech acts within email communication. Email communication is fast, efficient and most frequently used, especially in business communication. Most of these studies consider requests (e.g. ECONOMIDOU-KOGETSIDIS 2011, ZHU 2012, CHEN 2015, BURGUCU-TAZEGUL et al. 2016, OKTARINA et al. 2020, OANDASAN 2021).

Refusals within email communication have not been analyzed frequently. Merdin (2013) compared emails of refusal written by Turkish L1 speakers and American L1 speakers. The results showed many similarities, while the differences were language-specific and culturally shaped. Moaveni (2014) analyzed refusal strategies in emails written by American and international students. These refusals were studied in terms of frequency, order, and content of semantic formulas. The final conclusion was that both groups showed preference for a direct refusal. International students used a greater variety of semantic formulas, while American students used positive opinions and alternatives more frequently. Li (2018, 2022) studied email refusals of Chinese EFL learners. Li (2018) examined email refusals written by Chinese EFL learners of low and high proficiency level focusing on pragmatic transfer and development. The same author conducted a research (2022) whose goal was to examine the differences between Mandarin Chinese and Australian English in email refusals. The conclusion reached was that Chinese participants were more indirect. They also tended to use more supportive moves and were more sensitive to social status in comparison to Australian participants.

4. Research Context and Methodology

Emails of refusal throughout this paper were analyzed, primarily, at the utterance level; namely, the head act was identified and examined in terms of directness or indirectness. The head act represents a minimal unit to realize a refusal, a core of the refusal sequence. Specific direct or indirect strategies were also identified. Keeping in mind that refusals typically represent complex constructions, pre-refusal and post-refusal strategies also need to be considered in addition to the head act. Pre-refusal strategies prepare the

addressee for the upcoming refusal, while post-refusal strategies function as an emphasis, justification, mitigation or conclusion of the refusal expressed in the head act (HALUPKA-REŠETAR and KNEŽEVIĆ 2016).

Two groups of students, each consisting of fifteen members, participated in this research. Both groups of students are at the second year of their Bachelor Studies, majoring in Engineering Management. All students are native speakers of the Serbian language. The estimated level of participants' English language proficiency is B2 according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) scale.

The first group, labeled as group A, was the one who had a 90-minute lecture about email writing and pragmatic competence. Students were informed about the features of neutral/standard register² typically used for email communication with people who are our superiors or not our close friends. It is, actually, a register used in business communication. Group A students were given a few examples of emails written by native speakers in order to get acquainted with the conventions of email correspondence in English. These emails were written in neutral/standard register, representing different examples of refusals (refusals of requests, invitations and suggestions).

The other group, labeled as group B, did not receive the above mentioned lecture. The latter group was completely unprepared for the task, so its members had to rely on their previous knowledge.

Both groups were given the same task – write an email of refusal. Although previous studies usually used DCTs to collect the data, the author opted for email writing. Writing complete emails does not constrain participants; therefore, they can phrase their refusals without any limitations imposed by the lack of space and the rest of the text given in DCTs. The email students were supposed to write was a negative reply (a refusal) to the following email of request written by someone's superior:

Dear Mr/Mrs,

I hope this email finds you well. Certain problems have come up so it is necessary for us to have a meeting on Saturday at 1 p.m. I am aware that Saturday is your day off, but I hope you will be available.

Best regards,

.....

The request contained in the email is written by a person having a higher level of power. There is also a high level of imposition in this email since an employee is asked to attend the meeting on his/her day off. Participants were explicitly told that the email was written by their superior and given fifteen minutes to complete the task. The researcher collected the papers and analyzed them.

Due to the fact that this is small-scale research, the analysis of the data is mostly qualitative, with certain quantitative data presented as well. Semantic formulas were identified and classified as direct or indirect ones. Indirect strategies were named and illustrated per each group. It is important to emphasize that we are focusing on the head acts and the classification is made according to them. Semantic formulas used after or before the

2 Register is a variety of language used for a particular purpose or particular communicative situation.

head acts are briefly mentioned, but the combinations are not analyzed in detail. Adjuncts used were also described. Finally, after describing semantic formulas per each group, the results were compared in order to determine which group was more successful in terms of pragmatic competence and what differences occurred between them.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Head Acts in Group A

When it comes to group A, all fifteen participants chose to use indirect strategies of a refusal. We may assume that this is the result of explicit teaching they were exposed to, as well as sample emails they read during the lecture. However, the indirect strategies used among participants varied to a certain extent.

In ten out of fifteen emails, we found indirect strategy number 3 – *explanation or excuse* as the one used in the head act. In order to illustrate this strategy, we are listing a few examples taken from the data:

AIE1³ – I have already booked a flight for Saturday.

AIE2 – Unfortunately, my prior commitments prevent me from being available this weekend.

AIE3 – I need to inform you that I have a doctor's appointment which I must not cancel.

Besides the dominant strategy of *explanation or excuse*, in the head act of emails we have also found two strategies of *regret*, two strategies of *offering an alternative* and one strategy of *setting conditions for acceptance in the future or the past*. These strategies may be illustrated as follows:

AIR4 – I apologize for not being able to help you.

AIA5 – I would gladly attend the meeting online if you approve it.

AISC6 – If I had been informed about this, I would have changed my plans.

As we have previously mentioned, refusals are rather complex speech acts. Therefore, there is not only one strategy used per email. For example, an *explanation* can be followed by *offering an alternative* – *I have already booked a flight for Saturday. Can we postpone it till Monday?* We are not going to discuss these combinations in detail, just mention the most frequent ones in the section referring to the comparison of the groups. When it comes to adjuncts, they were used in seven examples. Four adjuncts presented *statement of empathy* (e.g. *I realize how difficult the situation is*), while three of them presented *gratitude/appreciation* (e.g. *I really appreciate your invitation to the meeting*). All adjuncts were used prior to the head act.

5.1.1. Head Acts in Group B

When it comes to group B, five direct strategies were identified in the head act. All of these belong to the category of non-performative direct strategies. These may be illustrated by the following examples:

BDNP7 – I'm sorry, but I can't come on Saturday.

BDNP8 – I think I will not be able to attend the meeting.

3 The author is using the following coding – group of participants (A), type of the strategy (Indirect), an abbreviation of the strategy (E stands for an explanation or excuse), number of the example (the first one).

The rest of the emails in group B contained indirect strategies. We found four examples of *explanations*, two of *regrets*, three *alternatives*, and one *statement of principle*. We are going to illustrate some of these:

BIE9 – I have to go to the dentist.

BIR10 – I feel sorry because I cannot help you.

BIA11 – Is it possible to postpone the meeting? Monday sounds great for me.

BISP12 – I never work on Saturday.

Four adjuncts were identified among emails written by group B participants. One of them expressed *positive opinion* (e.g. *It is very smart to react quickly*), one of them expressed *statement of empathy* (e.g. *I can see that there are some new problems*), while two adjuncts expressed *gratitude/appreciation* (e.g. *Thank you for inviting me*). *Gratitude/appreciation* adjuncts were used after the head act, while the other adjuncts were used before it.

5.2. Group A vs. group B

The following table presents the strategies used within the head acts in both of the groups.

Table 1. *Refusal strategies – group A vs. group B*

Strategy	Group A	Group B
Performative (D)	0	0
Non-performative (D)	0	5 (33%)
Expression of regret (I)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)
Wish (I)	0	0
Explanation or excuse (I)	10 (66%)	4 (26%)
Offering an alternative (I)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)
Setting conditions for acceptance in the future or past (I)	1 (6%)	0
Promise of future acceptance (I)	0	0
Statement of principle (I)	0	1 (6%)
Philosophical statement (I)	0	0
Negative opinion or talking partner out (I)	0	0
Acceptance that functions as a refusal or an indefinite answer (I)	0	0
Evasion or postponement (I)	0	0

Judging by the table, participants of group A used only indirect strategies of refusal. These strategies are highly recommendable in this particular context since the refusal is directed towards someone's superior, a person whose power is on a higher level. In this case, the refusal should be indirect and as polite as possible. Using direct refusals may seem somewhat impolite. If we compare these findings to the ones of Halupka-Rešetar and Knežević (2016), we may draw similarities between our group A and a group of native speakers from their research as they used more indirect strategies.

High percentage of B group participants (approximately 33%) used direct refusal strategies. Although a direct strategy was employed in five emails, it is obvious that it was softened to a certain extent, which made it less of a pragmatic failure. To be more specific,

a direct refusal strategy was combined with hedges (e.g. *I think*) and expressions of regret (e.g. *I'm sorry*). We should add that all direct refusal strategies in group B were followed by another, indirect, strategy which was used as a post-refusal strategy. It was, in all five examples, an *explanation or excuse* (e.g. *I'm sorry, but I can't come on Saturday. I need to go to a wedding reception*). These post-refusal strategies justified all direct refusals used in the head acts.

Only five types of indirect strategies were used in both of the groups. In our opinion, all the strategies that were completely omitted are not appropriate in this particular situation. The dominant indirect strategy in group A was an *explanation or excuse*, which was also used in group B to a smaller extent. Group A participants found polite ways to explain, give reason for the fact that they are not going to attend the meeting. All these reasons were given without an explicit refusal. Explanations found in group A were more detailed than the ones found in group B. Živković (2022) reached a conclusion that native speakers used more specific reasons than non-native speakers, which is similar to the difference found between our groups – group A which was prepared for the task, and group B which was unprepared for it.

Participants of group A used more formal vocabulary to express what prevents them from coming to the meeting and why. On the other hand, participants of group B used shorter and more direct statements (e.g. *I do not feel very well these days*). By using this type of explanations, B group participants tend to make themselves less polite when replying to their superior.

The same difference between these groups is noticed when using the strategy of *regret*. It was used twice in both groups. However, samples in group A contained phrases such as *I apologize* and *please accept my apology*, while samples in group B contained *I'm sorry* which is a less formal option.

Offering an alternative appeared as a strategy in both groups. Both examples of this semantic formula in group A referred to the option of organizing an online meeting and willingness to attend the meeting in this format. We found three examples of *offering an alternative* in the head acts of group B emails. Two examples were related to the postponement of a meeting, while one example was a suggestion to organize an online meeting. In terms of the language, there are similarities between the groups. There is only one example in group B (listed as BIA11) which seems to be too informal for this occasion.

Setting conditions for acceptance in the future or past was used in group A only once (example AISC6). We assume that this type of grammatical construction, the third conditional, is a complex one and the participants avoided using it for that reason.

Statement of principle strategy was used once in group B. We believe that this type of strategy (example listed as BISP12) is utterly inappropriate in this context. Despite not being a direct refusal strategy, this statement can be interpreted as disrespectful towards the author of the request. It can be seen as a pragmatic failure in the given context.

Adjuncts, as elements which are combined with the semantic formulas, were used more frequently in group A. The most significant difference between adjuncts used in these groups is the fact that, in order to express *appreciation/gratitude*, group A members used terms such as *appreciate* and *I am grateful/honored*, while group B members chose to use a more simple and less formal option – *thank you*.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this small-scale research was to determine what kind of influence explicit teaching of pragmatics would have on the speech act of refusal. Students, learners of ESP, who did receive a lecture on email writing and pragmatic competence, wrote emails that were more appropriate in terms of pragmatic competence than emails written by the students who were not prepared for the task.

The main difference which may be attributed to the positive influence of explicit teaching is the avoidance of direct refusals which is evident in group A. One third of group B participants used direct refusal strategies which were made less direct to a certain extent. Making these refusals less direct shows a certain level of pragmatic competence, but a complete avoidance of direct refusals would present a more suitable option in this context.

Generally speaking, members of group B used vocabulary items which were slightly less formal. Therefore, their emails seemed to be not as polite as the emails written by the members of group A. It may be assumed that the reason for this lies in the fact that group B members were not prepared for the task. They were not aware of the features of formal/neutral register, so their writing was more direct and less formal. This type of writing may threaten someone's *face* in communication and is not recommended especially when communicating to someone's superior.

This type of research certainly has a lot of limitations. In order to gain more reliable results, it is to be extended to larger groups of participants with different majors and other speech acts.

Teachers and students focus mostly on grammatical awareness, which means that general awareness of pragmatic failures is not at a high level. Judging by the results of this study, explicit pragmatics teaching has a positive influence on students since it raises their pragmatic awareness and saves their *face* in communication. It is of vital importance for students to realize that successful communication requires not only linguistic knowledge, but an understanding of social factors and relations.

The main pedagogical implication of this study is that it is necessary to teach pragmatics within ESP courses, especially when teaching email writing which is a must nowadays. Therefore, students need to learn how to write emails properly so as not to make pragmatic failures.

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STRATEGIJE ODBIJANJA KOD STUDENATA NA TERCIJARNOM NIVOU OBRAZOVANJA

Rezime

U ovom radu se analizira govorni čin odbijanja na korpusu mejlova koje su napisali studenti na tercijarnom nivou obrazovanja. Učesnici istraživanja su bili podeljeni u dve grupe od po petnaest članova. Članovi prve grupe su prisustvovali lekciji o pisanju mejlova na engleskom jeziku, sa naglaskom na pragmatičku kompetenciju i odgovarajući registar. Za razliku od njih, članovi druge grupe nisu bili pripremljeni za zadatak koji su dobili – pisanje mejla kojim odbijaju poziv nadređenog da prisustvuju sastanku. Mejlovi su analizirani u smislu semantičkih formula, to jest strategija koje su korišćene za odbijanje. Upotrebljena je taksonomija semantičkih formula čiji autori su Beebe et al. (1990). Rezultati su pokazali da su članovi prve grupe koristili isključivo indirektne strategije odbijanja, formalniji vokabular i detaljnija objašnjenja. U drugoj grupi su bile prisutne i direktne strategije odbijanja, kao i manje formalan registar, što ove mejlove čini manje ljubaznim i više direktnim. Smatramo da je ovaj rezultat posledica činjenice da članovi druge grupe nisu imali eksplicitno podučavanje. U radu se zaključuje da je ovakvo podučavanje neophodno na časovima pisanja u okviru engleskog jezika za posebne namene kako bi učenici naučili kako da učestvuju u komunikaciji na odgovarajući način, uz što manje pragmatičkih grešaka.

Ključne reči: strategije odbijanja, semantičke formule, pragmatička kompetencija, eksplicitno podučavanje