A Developmental Study of Pragmatic Strategies of Refusals by Chinese English Majors

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic development of the refusal strategies to the four different eliciting types (1 request, 1 suggestion, 1 invitation, and 1 offer) by Chinese English major students with low-intermediate language proficiency. The data was collected through written discourse completion tasks, and coded based on the modified taxonomy by Beebe et al. (1990). Refusal strategies were analyzed in terms of frequency and contents of the semantic formulas. The results suggested on the whole a downward pattern was observed but statistically there was no significant development towards the learners' refusal strategies (directness, indirectness and adjuncts). The findings also revealed that the Chinese English major students relied heavily on the indirectness and adjuncts to realize their refusals. Learners' data displayed the tendency of being verbose and were also found with ungrammatical forms.

Keywords: pragmatic strategy, refusals, development, English Majors

1. Introduction

Refusal is "a responding act in which the speaker denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen et al., 1995, p. 121). Refusal has received much attention among researchers mainly due to the fact that it is a both complex and interesting speech act to investigate. Refusal strategies are mediated by types of initiating speech acts and social cultural factors (Chen et al., 1995, p. 149). Culturally embedded, to understand and interpret refusals often requires cultural- and linguistic-specific and contextual knowledge. Dual face threatening nature tends to risk either the speaker's or the hearer's positive or negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Refusal can be even difficult to recognize in one's mother tongue (Rubin, 1983; Lyuh, 1992), not to say in a foreign language. Being a major cultural "sticking point", "the inability to say 'no' clearly and politely…has led many nonnative speakers to offend their interlocutors" (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, p. 133). Unlike acceptance, to say "no" requires a high level of pragmatic competence both in native and cross-cultural occasions (Cohen, 1996; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004). To avoid face threatening, the interlocutor often adopts various strategies to mitigate refusal, and "face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act" (Gass & Houck, 1999, p. 2).

Yet, refusals are frequent occurrence in daily interaction. Different scholars from various cultural backgrounds have made attempts to investigate them from different perspectives. A considerable amount of existing literature follows the practice of Beebe et al. (1990), investigating the refusals based on the four types of eliciting speech acts (request, suggestion, invitation, and offer). Among them, majority of studies look into the refusals from the cross cultural or cross linguistic perspective. Earlier studies focus more on the interpretation of the L2 learners' pragmatic behavior by comparing L2 learners' pragmatic strategies with those of native speakers. Nevertheless, a limited number of researches have been conducted onto the developmental aspect of refusals (e.g. Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Bardovi-Harling and Hartford, 1993; Barron, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003; Takahashi and Beebe, 1987). More recently, more and more attention is directed to the developmental aspect of L2 pragmatics. Given that developmental studies have received more and more attention (Bardovi-Harling, 2013), more samples in this line are required to provide more implications and understanding for the L2 instructors and practitioners. More investigation is needed to look into the pragmatic development in Chinese context to offer more information on L2 acquisition. This paper begins with the literature review of the refusals, meanwhile setting its focus on the L2

developmental perspective. Then it proceeds to the methodological issue (Section 3). The research findings are displayed and discussed in section 4 and 5 respectively. The final section presents the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Previous Studies on Refusals

Beebe et al. (1990) is one of the earliest investigations on the refusal speech acts. In their study, they divided the refusal initiating speech acts into four types: request, suggestion, offer, and invitation. Since their work, most of the following empirical studies on refusals have been conducted onto these four eliciting types, either on one or two, or all four types. On the whole, studies on refusal speech acts fall into three lines: L1 studies, cross-cultural and/or cross-linguistic comparative studies, and L2 studies.

Refusal studies in monolingual or mono-cultural settings are mainly intra-lingual, that is to study certain speech acts within one language. The focus of the studies are the pragmatic strategies in different languages or varieties and meanwhile interpretation of the underlying social cultural constraints for the participants in a particular language. The important studies include Chinese (Chen et al., 1995), English (Beebe and Cummings, 1996), Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2006), and Persian (Shishavan, 2016). Those studies indicate employment of refusal strategies is culturally constrained and the contents of refusal strategies may vary from culture to culture.

Many of the pragmatic studies on refusals fall into the category of the cross-cultural and L2 pragmatics. Investigations in these perspectives involve the different participants of different cultural backgrounds including Japanese (e.g. Beebe et al., 1990), Chinese (e.g. Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Ren, 2013, 2014), Korean (e.g. Kwon, 2004; Lyuh,1992), Arabic (e.g. Al-Gahtani & Rover, 2018; Al-Issa, 2003), German (e.g. Beckers, 1999), Persian (e.g. Allami & Naeimi, 2011), Spanish (e.g. Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004), Vietnamese (e.g. Nguyen, 2006), Thai (e.g. Wannaruk, 2008), and Greek (e.g. Bella, 2011, 2014). In line with the L2 pragmatics, researches mainly concern with learners' production and perception of refusal speech acts by comparing the learners' data with those of native speakers of target languages, mainly English, to discover the similarities and discrepancies between the two or more groups of participants. Many of these studies also have an objective to look for the evidence of the pragmatic transfer (e.g. Al-Issa, 1998; Kwon, 2003; Wannaruk, 2008). Moreover, in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparative studies, the focus is to seek the social-cultural constraints, primarily with regard to politeness and 'face' notion to account for the realization patterns of refusals in different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Kwon, 2004; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Nelson et al., 2002).

2.2 Developmental Studies on the L2 Refusals

L2 acquisitional pragmatics studies how L2 learners develop their pragmalinguistic and sociopramatic knowledge, and the factors affecting the process of development (Beebe & Waring, 2005; Taguchi, 2019; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Researches on this perspective mainly focus on the exploration and interpretation of developmental patterns and the instructional effect on learner's pragmatic knowledge development (Beebe and Waring, 2005, p. 56). There exhibit two trends in the exploration of pragmatic development: one is cross-sectional and the other is longitudinal. With respect to the developmental patterns, most of the existing literatures address to two research objectives simultaneously—learners' employment of L2 pragmatic strategies and the relationship between L2 proficiency and learners' pragmatic performance. For the latter perspective, pragmatic transfer remains one of the main focuses. Altogether, two different results are attested: positive correlation (e.g. Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2018; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Takahashi and Beebe, 1987), and negative correlation (e.g. Wannaruk, 2008). While the correlation between L2 proficiency and L1 transfer remains controversial, studies reveal the L1 transfer commonly exists in the L2 learners' linguistic behaviors. In answering these two questions, the L2 learners' pragmatic behaviors are typically coded and described with the framework or modified framework of Beebe et al. (1990), namely, direct strategies, indirect strategies and adjunct strategies.

With regard to the cross-sectional perspective, some of the L2 developmental studies on pragmatic competence are Takahashi and Beebe (1987), Félix-Brasdefer (2004), Bella (2014), and Al-Gahtani & Roever (2018). Takahashi and Beebe (1987) examined the pragmatic development of L2 refusals by the 40 Japanese learners of English with the research focus on the pragmatic transfer. Participants were further divided into four groups based on the learning contexts (EFL vs. ESL) and the L2 language proficiency (Lower vs. Higher). In regard to pragmatic development, no significant changes were found between the EFL learners with lower and higher proficiency. Different situation was attested in ESL groups. Directness decreased as the L2 proficiency increased, with lower proficiency level ESL learners being found employing more direct strategies than the higher proficiency ones. Takahashi and Beebe argued that the latter group seemed to avail to more linguistic resources and allow themselves more flexibility to adjust their level of directness according to the situation. Pragmatic transfers were evidenced in both EFL and ESL groups.

Félix-Brasdefer (2004) analyzed the effect of length of stay in target language community on the pragmatic development of the L2 refusals by 24 learners of Spanish. The findings indicated that pragmatic ability developed in learners' greater employment of lexical and syntactical modification and more attempts to negotiate their refusals as their residence time increased. Besides, more appropriating native like norms of the L2 Spanish learners' employment of indirectness and solidarity were observed with the increasing of length of residence in the target community.

Drawing on data from role-plays and verbal reports, Bella (2014) conducted a cross-sectional study on the Greek FL learners' refusals with three L2 proficiency at lower intermediate, intermediate and advanced levels. The results reflected that with the increasing proficiency there was significant development in participants' employment of pragmatic strategies and modification strategies. Participants with more advanced level employed a wider range of semantic formulas and were able to negotiate their refusals more successfully. But as compared with the Greek native speakers, all the three groups lagged behind in their refusing ability.

While existing literatures mainly focus on the developmental issues in terms of learners' refusal strategies (directness, indirectness and adjuncts) and modifications (modified vs. not modified), the proficiency effect on the development of different aspects of refusals has also been investigated, e.g. on the appropriateness ratings, speech fluency and employment of linguistic strategies, speech sequence, and the multidialectal practices, etc. (e.g. Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018; Al-Masaeed et al., 2020; Taguchi, 2013). Generally, the positive relationship has been attested, but even the advanced learners' group still displayed the differences in their linguistic performance of refusals with those of native speakers.

From the longitudinal perspective, studies on the refusal development include Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993), Barron (2003) and Ren (2013). Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) looked into the nonnative speakers' pragmatic development as compared with the native speakers in academic advising session over one semester. Results indicated there was considerable development of pragmatic competence in terms of nonnative speakers' frequency and contents of refusals. They learned to refuse more directly and explicitly. For example, they were able to provide what the researchers called more acceptable and "credible" refusals than before. On the other hand, they changed less in their ability to employ appropriate refusals. They were observed to continue to employ fewer mitigators than the native speakers, and furthermore, unlike native speakers, they also used aggravators. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford explained with regard to pragmatic competence some changes at micro-level apparently took more time to acquire than at macro-level, thus requiring more efforts to do "fine-tuning" work (1993, p. 302).

Barron (2003) used the free discourse completion test (DCT) to investigate the pragmatic development of refusals, requests and offers by 33 Irish German learners during their stay in Germany for 10 months. The findings indicated that on the whole there was important changes of learners' L2 pragmatic competence. Altogether many of these changes in L2 pragmatic development moved towards L2 like norms, but not all changes in the learners' pragmatic ability represented development towards the L2 norms.

Ren (2013) studied the pragmatic development of 40 Chinese learners of English in their employment of internal modifications of refusals by comparing two groups of learners—studying at home group (SH=20) and studying abroad group (SA=20). Findings suggested that with regard to the range and frequency of modifications, there was no significant difference between the two learners' groups, but there displayed different developmental patterns in their employment of internal modification strategies of "address term" and "downtoner". Ren attributed this to the unique contribution of study abroad experience facilitating fine-tune stage (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Nevertheless, the developmental aspect in the L2 studies has been markedly neglected in the 1980s and 1990s (Bardovi-Harling, 2013). Over the last decade, although such trend has been improved, there are still few studies in the L2 developmental perspective (Ren, 2018). Even for a growing number of literatures, the L2 developmental study has still fallen behind its orientation, because cross-linguistic and cross-sectional studies over this period "focused on describing pragmatic language use rather than its development" (Taguchi, 2019, p. 4). In Chinese context, a similar situation is observed in that cross-linguistic and cross-sectional L2 refusal studies are highlighted (e.g. Liao & Bresnahan, 1996). More samples from different cultural backgrounds are needed to provide more understanding of how the L2 learners develop their pragmatic competence. Therefore, the present study aims to add to the body of the literature by looking into the Chinese EFL learners' development in their refusal strategies through the following two research questions:

1) How do Chinese English major undergraduates with lower intermediate language proficiency develop their L2 refusals in terms of direct, indirect and adjuncts strategies across the duration of data collection?

2) What are the features of the pragmatic strategies with regard to learners' employment of refusals (direct, indirect and adjuncts strategies) over the duration of data collection?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Participants

The participants in the current research were 26 Chinese English major undergraduates of a natural class from a university in China. They were 24 female students and 2 male students with an average of 18.5 years old. Their length of prior formal English learning ranged from 11 to 13 years. Prior to this research, in their freshmen year, they had taken the specialty basic courses of English reading, speaking, listening and writing. In the second and third data collection, all of the participants passed CET 4 (College English Test Band 4—a national English proficiency test). Participants' English language proficiency were at their low-intermediate level. None of them had received the explicit instruction on the pragmatics or the speech acts or had lived in an English speaking country before this study. Their English language ability mainly develops from classroom interaction, teaching materials and self-study after class.

3.2 Research Instrument

The research instrument adopted is written discourse completion test (DCT) which has been widely applied in the data collection of the L2 pragmatic studies (e.g. Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Barron, 2003; Kwon, 2004; Nelson et al., 2002). While all methods of data collection have certain advantages and disadvantages (for overviews, see Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Nguyen, 2019). DCT's intensive application in the L2 acqusitional pragmatics mainly attributes to its controllability of social variables and efficiency in data collection for it can be administered to a large number of subjects to elicit data in a short period of time (Beebe and Cummings, 1985). Additionally, DCT is easy to administer (Varghese and Bullmyer, 1996), and useful when studying the realization patterns of a particular type of speech acts (Yuan, 2011). The situations in DCT in the current study is appended (in Appendix B).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, 4 different situations were designed to elicit the refusal responses to four different eliciting types (1 request, 1 suggestion, 1 invitation, and 1 offer). The social variables of distance (D) and relative power (R) are considered. The questionnaire had been validated by three experts in applied linguistics and 12 other sophomore English major students. Based on their responses, the questionnaire was further revised to improve its validity. Data collection took place at three different points in 2020 from the end of term 2 of 2019/2020 academic year to the end of term 1 in 2020/2021 academic year. A total of 26 participants took all three tests. Partly out of consideration of convenience sampling, the three data collection was administered respectively at three different phases. The time interval lasts approximately 7 months. The first one was at the middle May 2020 (the end of the freshman year). The second took place at the beginning of November, 2020 (week 10 in the academic term 1 of sophomore year). The third occurred at the end of December, 2020 (week 16 at the end of academic term 1 of sophomore year).

Data was classified with a modified taxonomy of the refusal strategies (direct strategy, indirect strategy and adjunct strategy) by Beebe et al. (1990) (see the Appendix A for the classification). It was coded by the researcher for three times and verified by a trained former colleague in linguistics. The two raters agreed on the 92.6% of the coding results. In the cases, where the discrepancy arose, the researcher discussed with the colleague until the final agreement reached. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted to examine the data. Statistically, the data was analyzed by using a version of the 21 Statistical Product and Service Solutions. The statistical test used to examine the data was one-way ANOVA with the alpha level being set at .05. Moreover, the descriptive statistics was used to tabulate and compute the frequency of each individual type of refusal strategy. Additionally, the descriptive content analysis was also carried out to look into details of the learners' pragmatic strategies.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Strategies

Table 1 presents the distribution of the different refusal strategies across the three phases of data elicitation. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of direct strategies, indirect strategies and adjuncts over three

periods of data collection. No significant development was attested based on the results of the statistical tests: direct refusal strategies ($F_{(2,75)} =0.412$ $p>0.05$), indirect refusal strategies ($F_{(2,75)} =0.397$ $p>0.05$), and adjuncts ($F_{(2,75)} =2.150$ $p>0.05$).

Table 1. The distribution of different types of refusal strategies over the duration of data collection

Strategies	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Performative "No"	2	0.6	0	0.0	2	0.6
Non-performative "No"	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Negative willingness/ability	39	11.2	35	10.8	34	11.0
Total directness	**41**	**11.8**	**35**	**10.8**	**36**	**11.7**
Reason/ explanation/excuse	91	26.1	88	27.2	94	30.4
Statement of regret	44	12.6	48	14.9	46	14.9
Statement of alternative	26	7.5	18	5.6	16	5.2
Condition for future or past acceptance	8	2.3	6	1.9	3	1.0
Wish	1	0.3	1	0.3	0	0.0
Promise of future acceptance	10	2.9	12	3.7	14	4.5
Statement of principle	10	2.9	11	3.4	7	2.3
Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	9	2.6	13	4.0	7	2.3
Compensation for refusal	3	0.9	2	0.6	4	1.3
Avoidance	5	1.4	9	2.8	8	2.6
Total indirectness	**207**	**59.5**	**208**	**64.4**	**199**	**64.4**
Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	50	14.4	42	13.0	36	11.7
Gratitude/appreciation	26	7.5	28	8.7	24	7.8
Pause fillers	23	6.6	10	3.1	14	4.5
Statement of empathy	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total adjuncts	**100**	**28.7**	**80**	**24.8**	**74**	**23.9**
Total strategies	**348**	100	**323**	100	**309**	100

Table 2. Means and standard deviations in the employment of direct strategies, indirect strategies and adjuncts across three phases of data collection

Strategies	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Direct strategies	1.58	0.987	1.35	0.80	1.38	1.13
Indirect strategies	7.96	1.280	8.00	1.77	7.65	1.52
Adjuncts	3.85	1.848	3.08	1.67	2.85	1.93

While for the statistically insignificant development, two features were identified with the participants' data concerning the frequency and contents of the refusal strategies.

Firstly, the total number of refusal strategies (directness, indirectness, and adjuncts) was decreasing slightly from the phase one to phase three. Participants were observed to employ fewer strategies to negotiate their refusals in the phase three than they were at the phase one and two. Similarly, on the whole, there exhibited a downward trend in terms of participants' respective employment of the total direct, indirect and adjuncts strategies, but the declining trend mainly attributed to the adjuncts strategies forming a total of 100 (28.7%) in phase one, to 80 (24.8%) in phase two then to 74 (23.9%) in phase three.

Secondly, while for decreasing trend, participants employed a considerable number of refusal strategies. The average number of refusal strategies used in each situation over the three stages was respectively 3.34, 3.10 and

2.97. Within all three phases of data collection, participants relied a lot on the indirectness and adjuncts to realize their refusals accounting for a frequency of 307 (88.2%) in the first phase, 288 (89.2%) in the second phase, and 273 (88.3%) in the third phase. Moreover, among mostly employed strategies, reason and regret, negative willingness, positive opinion, and gratitude remained the top five strategies, and also ranked the most frequently adopted ones within each respective major category in each stage of data collection. Participants of English major students were found to be verbose by applying overwhelmingly large portion of indirectness and meanwhile providing supportive moves over the duration of data collection. Specifically, verbosity is characterized in two ways: overlapping use of major types of refusal strategies, e.g. using both direct and indirect refusal simultaneously supported by adjuncts; and repetitive use of refusal strategies within a major category, e.g. overlapping use of supportive moves.

Example 1 In the situation of overwork request by the boss from a part-time workplace (+P, +D):

Participant #11: *Of course I really want to work extra hours for you if I could, my dear boss, however, I have something important to do that I can not be absent from it. So, please, forgive me, and thank you for taking care of me for these days. I hope I can work for you in the future.*   (from phase 1)

Participant #14: *Sorry. I really want to stay here and help you for working more extra hours. But sadly I have something to do right now. I'm afraid that I can't work more hours. I'm very sorry.*   (from phase 1)

Both of the data above displayed the tendency to be verbose in their overlapping employment of the refusal strategies. Data by participant No. 11 is characterized with the overlapping use of both each individual type of refusal strategies within major categories, and the overlapping use of major categories. Participant No. 11 adopted three indirect strategies and two adjuncts to refuse. These strategies are, in turn, positive opinion, reason resulted from conflict schedule, attempt to dissuade asking for understanding, gratitude, and future acceptance. Data by participant No. 14 exhibits the same tendency. The pragmatic strategies used by participant No. 14 include the direct refusal of negative willingness, indirectness of regrets (twice) and reason suggesting the conflict schedule, and adjunct of agreement. Participants tended to be very reinforcing in realizing their illocutionary goal, e.g. using regret twice in the above data by participant No. 14.

In general, in accordance with the statistical analysis, there was no significant development of learners' refusal strategies, meanwhile, descriptive statistics also supported that there was certain development, but it was not obvious enough to display the statistical significance. In the light of descriptive content analysis, learners' data exhibited the tendency of verbosity.

4.2 Direct Strategies

In terms of frequency and percentage of the direct strategy, a downward trend was observed, but the changes were not significant across the three phases. Among three types of direct refusals, the participants relied mostly on the strategy of negative willingness or ability to express their directness in the three points of data collection. Negative willingness or ability kept ranking the number three most adopted strategy in participants' data taking up 11.8% in phase one, 10.7% in phase two and 11.7% in phase three. Performative "*No*" (e.g. I will refuse you.) appeared sporadically in the participants' data: twice in the phase one and three respectively. No participant employed the strategy of non-performative "No", e.g. "*No, it is impossible.*" The following are sample examples of the original data of performative "No".

Example 2 In the situation of overwork request by the boss from a part-time workplace (+P, +D):

Participant #8: *Thank you for your offering, my boss. But I'm sorry that I have to __refuse__ your kindness, for that I am about to come back school to continue my study.*   (from phase 1)

Participant #13: *I'm so sorry, although I also want to work one or two extra hours, I have a lot homework to do and other arrangements. So, I have to __refuse__ you.*   (from phase 1)

Participant #3: *Sorry, I __mind__ actually. I've finished all my work.*   (from phase 3)

Participant #24: *I'm so sorry boss, I have something __must be finished__* [I have something to be finished] *today, so forgive my __refuse__* [refusal].   (from phase 3)

The performative "No" was mitigated with the syntactic mean of "*have to*" in the data by participants #8 and #13, in contrast, it was not mitigated with any lexical or syntactic downgraders by participant #3 and #24. Moreover, data by participant #24 has shown two grammatical errors highlighted with underlined parts followed by the correct grammatical forms in the square brackets.

Content analysis showed that learners depended on the negative willingness or ability to extend their direct refusals. When direct refusals were conveyed, they were usually mitigated with the explanations and supportive means.

Example 3 In a situation of being offered a piece of cake when you are very full (+P, +D):

Participant #24: *Thanks, these are so delicious. But I couldn't eat too much since I will feel sick on the bus if I am too full. Shall I bring some cakes when I leave?* (from phase 2)

Participant #7: *Thank you very much, but I am really full. The cake looks really nice, but I can't eat anything now.* (from phase 3)

In the above data, participants #24 mitigated his/her negative willingness by indirectness of explanation and alternative, and the supportive means of appreciation and positive opinion. Besides the direct strategy of negative ability, participant #7 also employed the strategies of appreciation, reason and positive opinion.

To summarize, among three different types of strategies, participants seldom employed the direct strategy as "*No*" or "*I refuse*" since these expressions carry strong locutionary force of non-compliance, therefore hurting refusees' positive face. Participants mainly relied on the negative willingness or ability to convey their direct refusals. Based on the frequency and percentage, there was no significant development of the direct strategies over the period of data collection.

4.3 Indirect Strategies

Table 3 displays the sequence of the rankings of the different types of refusal strategies over the duration of data collection. In regard to the indirect refusal strategies, there was no significant change over the duration of data collection. A slight decrease in the total number of the indirect strategies was observed, but meanwhile, the percentage of the indirect refusal strategies went up a little in the phase two and three than in the phase one. While the overall strategies showing a downward trend, the occurrence of indirect refusal strategies increased slightly.

Table 3. The sequence of the number of the indirect refusal strategies across three phases of data collection

Strategies	*P1*			*P2*			*P3*		
	n	*%*	*r*	*n*	*%*	*r*	*n*	*%*	*r*
Reason/ explanation/excuse	91	26.1	**1**	88	27.2	**1**	94	30.4	**1**
Statement of regret	44	12.6	**2**	48	14.9	**2**	46	14.9	**2**
Statement of alternative	26	7.5	**3**	18	5.6	**3**	16	5.2	**3**
Condition for future or past acceptance	8	2.3	**7**	6	1.9	**8**	3	1.0	**9**
Wish	1	0.3	**10**	1	0.3	**10**	0	0.0	**10**
Promise of future acceptance	10	2.9	**4**	12	3.7	**5**	14	4.5	**4**
Statement of principle	10	2.9	**4**	11	3.4	**6**	7	2.3	**6**
Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	9	2.6	**6**	13	4.0	**4**	7	2.3	**6**
Compensation for refusal	3	0.9	**9**	2	0.6	**9**	4	1.3	**8**
Avoidance	5	1.4	**8**	9	2.8	**7**	8	2.6	**5**
Total indirectness	**207**	**59.5**		**208**	**64.4**		**199**	**64.4**	

Generally, regarding the rankings, the indirect refusal strategies can be further categorized into the most adopted (ranking 1 to 3), less adopted (ranking 4 to 6) and rarely adopted ones (ranking 7 to 10). There was no significant change among the participants' employment of the most commonly employed indirect strategies—the reason, regret and alternative were the top three indirect refusal strategies over the three phases of data collection. Meanwhile minor variations could be found with the less and rarely adopted indirect refusal strategies. In the first two periods, future acceptance, principle and dissuasion remained to be the less adopted strategies (totalizing 8.4% and 11.1% respectively); meanwhile, condition for future or past acceptance, avoidance, compensation and wish kept to be the rarely adopted strategies (totalizing 4.9% and 5.6% respectively). In the third period, the situation is slightly different. The total number of the strategy of promise of future acceptance went up a little bit from 10 in stage one to 14 at stage three. Strategies of principle and dissuasion went through small variation: increasing very slightly in second phase and decreasing to the less number in the third phase than in the first phase. The strategy of condition for future or past acceptance showed a downward trend with its

total number decreasing from 8 in first phase to 6 in the second point, and then to 3 in the third point, suggesting that less students adopted such strategy. Similarly, no significant change was found with the participants' use of indirect strategies of compensation. Avoidance increased a bit from total number of 5 in phase one to 9 in phase two and then to 8 in phase three, indicating several more students were adopting the strategy in the third stage than in the first stage. The strategies of compensation and wish were even less employed, and they only sporadically appeared with the students' data. Meanwhile, the strategy of wish disappeared from the participants' data in the third phase. Across the duration of data collection, it only appeared twice in the participants' data (See the following example).

Example 4 In a situation of being offered a piece of cake when you are very full (+P, +D):

Participant #1: *How I **wish** I can eat another cake but I'm really full, and I can not eat any more.* (from phase 1)

In the situation of overwork request by the boss from a part-time workplace (+P, +D):

Participant #2: *I'm so sorry. I really **wish** I could help you. However, I have an appointment with my friend. As we know, I have worked **there** [here for] two weeks and I hardly have time to play with my friends. This is a rare opportunity. Besides, it's important for us to be **honesty** [honest]. So I can't break the **contrast** [contract]. Thank you for your care. If there is anything I can do in the future, I'll do my best.* (from phase 2)

Although wish occasionally occurred with the students' data. In the above raw data, participant #1 appeared to be more appropriate in his/her refusal. In contrast, the data by participant #2 sounded both verbose with excessive strategies, e.g. regret, wish, explanation, attempt to dissuade, appreciation, promise for future acceptance) and inappropriate e.g. "*I can't break the contrast*". Moreover, the data was also found with grammatical errors, e.g. "*it's important for us to be honesty*". This seemed to indicate that less and rarely adopted strategies appeared to be difficult for the students to develop.

Meanwhile, descriptive content analysis showed that repetitive use of indirectness appeared in quite a lot of participants' data.

Example 5 In a refusal to a movie invitation from a close friend (-P, -D):

Participant #8: *I'm sorry, dear. I have already had another arrangement and it's impolite if I don't come. Maybe we can go and see it another day.* (from phase 2)

Participant #13: *Sorry, dear. I have another arrangement before you calling me. It's impolite to refuse because I've promised to attend. I will go to the cinema with you tomorrow and treat you as a compensation, ok?*

(from phase 2)

In an invitation from close friend, the learners' data also displayed the feature of verbosity, using more than enough strategies to justify their refusals, which were furthermore mitigated with emotional support. Respectively participant No. 8 adopted the strategies of apology, explanation and attempt to dissuade, and alterative to perform the refusal. The pragmatic strategies adopted by participant No. 13 involve apology, explanation, alternative and compensation for the refusal. Repetitive employment of the indirectness made the learners' data appeared to be verbose.

To sum up, except for slight variations, there was no significant development of indirect refusal strategies in terms of number, percentage and rankings. Overlapping use of the indirectness made the learners' data appeared to be verbose, and meanwhile some of the data contained the grammatical errors.

4.4 Adjuncts

In general, a declining pattern was shown concerning both the totality and the number of each individual type of adjuncts. Students used averagely one less number of refusal strategy in the phase three than they were in phase one. Within four types of adjuncts, students employed the positive option or feeling or agreement most, but the total number of which declined all the way from the stage one to stage three. Gratitude and pause fillers showed no obvious change over the three periods with its total number rising or falling slightly as indicated in table 4. Though decreasing, the total number of adjuncts still took up considerable portion: 28.7% in phase one to 24.8% in phase 2 and 23.9% in phase three. This indicated that students employed quite a few of supportive moves to mitigate the face-threatening force in refusals. A large portion of direct and indirect refusals had been mitigated by either positive opinion/feelings, gratitude/appreciation, or pause fillers. To sum up, though for obvious changes in the frequency of students' employment of adjuncts, the development of adjuncts displayed no statistical significance. In other words, students still depended a lot on the supportive moves to refuse, meanwhile, they were not as "effortful" as before.

Table 4. The distribution of the adjuncts over the duration of data collection

Strategies	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	50	14.4	42	13.0	36	11.7
Gratitude/appreciation	26	7.5	28	8.7	24	7.8
Pause fillers	23	6.6	10	3.1	14	4.5
Statement of empathy	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total adjuncts	**100**	**28.7**	**80**	**24.8**	**74**	**23.9**
Total strategies	**348**	100	**323**	100	**309**	100

In addition to the results from the statistical analysis, descriptive content analysis also revealed that different types of the strategies in the category of adjuncts were frequently repetitively employed (See the following sample data).

Example 6 In a situation of being offered a piece of cake when you are very full (+P, +D):

Participant #14: *What a lovely cake! You treat me a big meal. All food is so delicious, I'm too full to eat more. Thank you for your **treating** [hospitality]. I have never **aten** [eaten] so much like this time. The food is awesome. And I really have fun here.* (from phase 1)

Participant #5: *Dear aunt/uncle. **I have already ate finish** [I have been full enough]. I **have not spare** [I am full]to eat more. Thanks to your dinner.* (from phase 3)

The refusal strategies by participant No. 14 accordingly encompassed positive opinion, gratitude, positive opinion, negative ability, appreciation, positive feeling, positive opinion, and positive opinion. Except for one direct refusal strategy of negative ability, participant supported his/her refusal with 7 adjuncts. Averagely learners at the phase three adopted less number of the emotional support in refusing than they were at first and second phases. Being added by the simultaneous use of indirectness (possibly more than 1 indirect strategy in a refusal turn) and directness would make the learners' data appear to be verbose. Besides, the above data by both participants were found with grammatical errors e.g. "*have never aten*" and "*already ate finish*".

In brief, statistically, there was no significant development of Chinese learners of English majors in their employment of refusal strategies (directness, indirectness and adjuncts). But obvious change had been found particularly with the participants' using of adjuncts. A downward pattern and considerable decrease in the total amount of the adjuncts strategy seem to indicate that change started to occur, but it was not distinctive enough to display statistical significance. Two features were identified with the content analysis: participants relied much on the indirectness and adjuncts to realize their refusals; and their data displayed the tendency of verbosity and also had grammatical errors.

5. Discussion

The research findings suggested that pragmatic competence for the L2 learners with the low-intermediate proficiency didn't develop on a short term basis in an EFL context where the explicit instruction was absent. Development of pragmatic competence is rather a challenging task, and it is an interactive results of different aspects involving multi-dimensional factors. To be pragmatically competent, learners at least need to have a variety of linguistic resources at their disposal, the ability to assess the contextual situation and to select the appropriate linguistic expressions based on their assessment of all the contextual factors available, and apply them appropriately in actual language communication. This finding supports the view that pragmatic competence does not occur without certain amount of linguistic knowledge (see e.g. Taguchi, 2019). It has been documented that the grammatical competence does not necessarily suggest the concurrent pragmatic competence (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Barron, 2003). Grammatical competence and pragmatic competence are interdependent (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Kasper & Rose, 2002), but linguistic knowledge may largely restrict learners' pragmatic development (Hassall, 1997, p. 286). Furthermore, a threshold of grammatical competence is needed to the development of pragmatic competence (Taguchi, 2019, p. 2). The occurrence of the grammatical errors in the participants' data suggests learners' limited level of linguistic competence. Refusals are high demanding and intrinsically face-threatening speech act. Therefore, it could be difficult for L2 learners with limited pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge to develop on a short term under the context where no explicit instruction is given.

Regarding the distribution and the contents of the semantic formulas, participants adopted an overwhelming large portion of the indirect strategies and adjuncts to realize their refusals in the all four situations. This partly

contributed to their linguistic tendency of being verbose. Verbosity in current study is mainly manifested in two ways: one is that the repetitive use of one major category of refusal strategies; and the other is overlapping use of pragmatic strategies within one major category. Literature has identified the verbosity as a feature of production data by L2 learners at intermediate level (e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Faerch & Kasper, 1989). Verbosity in the intermediate level learners may suggest the learners' desire to distinguish themselves from the beginners or a lack of confidence (Hassall, 1997). It is suggested that the verbosity helps to realize two functions: for one it helps to provide more information explicitly adding to the transparency of communicative goal (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986, p. 177); second it indicates these learners' efforts to attain the maxim politeness effect (Bella, 2014, p. 57). The finding in current study is in consistent with Bella (2011, 2014), suggesting that with limited linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge, L2 learners do not seem to be capable of performing refusal strategically.

Motivated by the communicative goal of refusing, and more important refusing politely, Chinese English major students employed a great number of indirect strategies to perform their refusals, besides they relied largely on the supportive moves to mitigate refusals. Learners wanted to express their refusals both grammatical correct and pragmatically appropriate. The overuse of pragmatic strategies reinforced their illocutionary goals. By applying more pragmatic strategies and supportive moves, they probably felt that their communitive purpose had been "securely" conveyed without hurting others' face. The insecurity resulted from the lack of access to formulaic expressions partly motivates the interlanguage phenomena of verbosity in which learners tend to use longer expressions and more words than the native speakers in corresponding scenarios (Edmondson & House, 1991). The mitigation efforts speak for the Chinese English major students' pragmatic efforts of being polite. Similar result was also found with the studies in other linguistic and cultural background, e.g. in L2 Greek (Bella, 2014, p. 57) –verbosity partly reflecting learners' efforts to achieve the maximal politeness. The inclination of L2 learners to use more indirectness than the native speakers in the comparative situations has been repeatedly reported in other cultural and linguistic backgrounds in L2 studies (e.g. Kwon, 2004; Wannaruk, 2008).

6. Conclusion

This research investigated the pragmatic development of the Chinese English major undergraduates' employment of the refusal strategies over three phase of data collection. Based on the both statistical and descriptive content analysis, the research found that learners' adopted fewer strategies in their third test than in the first two tests. But the change wasn't distinctive enough to display statistical significance. The results supply two pedagogical implications: the need of explicit instruction, and the time of instruction. Explicit pedagogical intervention of both the pragmalinguistic knowledge and the sociopragmatic knowledge is needed to develop pragmatic competence in EFL context. Certain level of linguistic competence serves both as the pre-requisite and the means of the pragmatic performance. The insignificant development and the linguistic behavior of the verbosity and grammatical errors offer some implications for the time of teaching intervention. Explicit teaching intervention is suggested to be conducted when the learners' L2 proficiency approximates the threshold where the pragmatic development could possibly occur. In the end, the time interval between the tests was limited and the samples were also limited in number. In the future study more participants' data in a long term is to be collected, so that it is able to examine more closely to trace how the L2 learners develop their pragmatic competence.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Modified Taxonomy of Refusal Strategies by Beebe et al. (1990)

a. Direct

  1) Performative "No" (e.g. "I have to refuse')

  2) Non-performative ''no'' (e.g. "No.')

  3) Negative willingness/ability (e.g. "I can't.'')

b. Indirect

  1) Reason/explanation/excuse (e.g. "I have made an arrangement')

  2) Expression of regret (e.g. "I am really sorry.")

  3) Statement of alternative (e.g. "Shall we watch the movie tomorrow?")

  4) Condition for past/future acceptance (e.g. "If you have asked me earlier, I…")

  5) Wish (e.g. 'I wish I could.')

  6) Promise of future acceptance (e.g. "Next time, I will be there.")

  7) Statement of principle (e.g. "I never work overtime.")

  8) Compensation for refusal (e.g. "It is my treat next time.")

  9) Avoidance (e.g. "I will think about it.")

c. Adjuncts to refusals

  1) Positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g. "Your suggestion is very good, but…')

  2) Gratitude/appreciation (e.g. "It is very nice of you.")

  3) Pause fillers (e.g. "Err….")

  4) Empathy (e.g. "I understand your situation, but….")

Appendix B

Discourse Completion Tests

Directions: *Please read the following 4 situations (1 request, 1 suggestion, 1 invitation, and 1 offer). In each situation, there are two parts, description of the scenarios and the dialogues. The first part of the dialogue has been given, and the second part is a blank. Write your response in the blank after "you will refuse by saying". Respond as if you were in the situations, using the words you think you would actually use in these situations. This is no time limit. Please respond to the situations as authentic as possible.*

Situation 1

You take a part time job in summer vocation. You just work here for two weeks. It is almost the end of the day. You are ready to go off work. Your boss comes up to you asking if you could work more hours. But you can't do it.

Boss: *The work at hand is really important. If you don't mind, I wonder if you could work one or two extra hours, so that we can finish it today.*

You: _____

_____

Situation 2

You don't know what to choose when deciding on the topic for the final assignment paper. You ask your professor for advice. The professor suggests that you write the topic related to your own study and part time job experience. You want to write something different.

Professor: *I think you can consider some topic related to your life experience so that you will have much to write about. What do you think?*

You: _____

_____

Situation 3

This is Friday. Your bestie invites you a movie, but you have some other arrangement, how do you refuse?

Your bestie: *I have expected this movie quite a while. Let's go to movie tonight, shall we?*

You: _____

_____

Situation 4

During the Chinese New Year, you are invited to your school classmate's home. Your classmate's parents prepare you a big meal. At the end of the meal, you feel really very full, but your classmate parent offers you some cake, and insists that you should eat it. This is the first time that you have been to your classmate's house and met your classmate's parents. How do you refuse?

Your classmate's parent: *Here, child, you must have a piece of cake. It's made by a famous shop, and very popular here. I had to queue early in the morning to buy it.*

You: _____

_____