

A Sociolinguistic Study of the Realization of Refusals Among Yemeni EFL Learners

Yasser Alrefae¹, Naimah Alghamdi² & Najeeb Almansoob³

¹ Al-Baydha University, Yemen

² Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, KSA

³ Al-Andalus University for Science and Technology, Yemen

Correspondence: Yasser Alrefae, English Department, Faculty of Education, Rada'a, Al-Baydha University, Yemen. E-mail: Yasser.alrefae@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study the realization of refusal responses to invitations and requests among Yemen EFL learners in equal, higher and lower social status. It also aims to find out the pragmatic failure resulted from negative pragmatic transfer. In order to do so, refusals of 40 Yemeni EFL (20 high and 20 low proficient) learners were compared with refusals of 20 native speakers of English (ENS) and 20 native speakers of Arabic (ANS). Data were collected using a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) consisting of six refusals to invitations and requests in higher, equal and lower social status. This study finds out that Yemenis and Americans used different refusal strategies when refusing persons of equal and lower social status. ANS also used the adjunct of invoking the name of God which is religiously rooted and culturally specific to assert their excuses. Interestingly, Yemeni EFL learners showed a tendency toward the L1 pragmatic norms in the use of invoking the name of God and also in the use of more Direct strategies when refusing someone equal or lower in status. With respect to the content of refusals, Yemenis used general and vague excuses when refusing someone equal or lower in social status whereas Americans, on the other hand, were found to use detailed and clear excuses with persons of different social status.

Keywords: refusals, social status, speech acts, semantic formulas, Yemeni EFL learners

1. Introduction

The realization of speech acts has extensively been investigated in the context of EFL in recent years in order to find out how far EFL learners are pragmatically competent (Morkus, 2018). This comes as a result of the emphasis on the importance of pragmatic competence in the overall competencies of a language learner. Bachman (1990) has really made a turning point in the focus of ELT research pertaining to the competencies required for successful communication. Prior to Bachman (1990) model, in which he introduced pragmatic competence as an essential component in the overall language competence, the focus was on the linguistic competence of a language learner, emphasizing that a language learner should be able to speak like native speakers in terms of correct grammar and pronunciation, ignoring the language learner's ability to use language appropriately in a social context.

In this study, the realization of Yemeni EFL learners of the speech act of refusal to requests and invitation is investigated. The social status of the interlocutor has been given special attention to find out how it plays a role in choosing refusal strategies. To achieve this, six situations are thoroughly investigated, a request and an invitation of equal, higher and lower status. This is to find out the norms of Arabic and English speakers of producing such acts with regard to social power. It will also give a picture of how Yemeni EFL learners tend to realized refusal speech act.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Speaking like native speakers is being given the highest priorities in teaching the English language in the Yemeni context (Almansoob, Patil, & Alrefae, 2019; AL-Sanhani, 2007). Teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers have emphasized the importance of bringing about students who are able to speak like native speakers in terms of correct pronunciation and grammatical structure. However, for successful communication, it

is not enough for a language learner to be able to speak like a native speaker but it is also important to have the ability to use the language appropriately in a social context to fulfill social needs. A language learner should know the social and cultural norms of L2 in order to be able to communicate effectively. Lacking knowledge of the social and the cultural norms will lead to communication breakdown, pragmatic failure, and misunderstanding of the intended meaning.

According to Morkus (2018), the pragmatic failure of EFL learners is believed to be more harmful than a linguistic error. Nelson, Carson, Al Bata, and El Bakary (2002) reported that “While native speakers often forgive the phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors made by L2 speakers, they are less likely to forgive pragmatic errors. Native speakers typically interpret pragmatic errors negatively as arrogance, impatience, rudeness, and so forth” (p. 164). Unlike a linguistic error, Pragmatic failure leads to a misunderstanding in the overall intended meaning of the message/utterance. In contrast, committing a linguistic mistake, the meaning will be understood and the speaker will be perceived as less proficient one unlike a pragmatic error which will lead to communication breakdown and the speaker will be looked at as rude and impolite (Nelson et al., 2002).

In the context of Yemeni EFL, there is a lack of studies investigating the pragmatic competence among Yemeni EFL learners. There are some studies that focus on the speech act performance within Arabic native speakers (Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009; Qanber, 2012; Al-gamal, 2017; Al-Marrani, 2018). The present study tries to fill this lack by investigating the pragmatic competence of Yemeni EFL learners through their realization of the speech act of refusal compared with L1 and L2 norms. It also will examine whether their performance is toward or away from the native speaker of the target language where their proficiency increases.

This study tries to bring a clear picture of how Yemenis realized the speech act of refusal to requests and invitations and it finds out how Yemen EFL learners refuse requests and invitations with regard to the social status of interlocutors. One of the objectives of this study was to explore whether Yemeni EFL learners were aware of the social status of their interlocutor when issuing refusals to invitations and requests.

1.2 Study Questions

- 1) Is there a negative pragmatic transfer in the realization of speech act of refusal among Yemeni EFL learners?
- 2) Are Yemeni EFL learners pragmatically competent in the production of refusals?

1.3 Literature Review

The notion of pragmatic competence in the overall framework of communicative language competence was first coined by Bachman (1990). Since then, pragmatic competence has gained importance in the field of SLA and there were many studies investigating the production of EFL learners. The majority of such studies investigating pragmatic competence among EFL learners were through their realization of the speech acts. Speech acts theory was first produced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). The notion of speech acts simply means that saying something is actually doing an action.

After Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) produced certain taxonomies of speech acts, several pragmatic studies were conducted. Some studies looked at the speech act in a single language only, intralingual pragmatic studies (Al-marrani & Sazalie, 2010; Qanbar, 2012; Algamal, 2017). Another type of pragmatic studies research has compared speech act realization within two communities, cross-cultural studies (Almansoob et al., 2019; Morkus, 2014). In the context of SLA, in interlanguage pragmatic studies, researchers investigated speech act realization of EFL/ESL and compared them with the norms of L2 and L1 in order to find out the level of pragmatic competence and whether their performance is toward their L2 pragmatic norms or similar to their L1 norms (Morkus, 2018; Al-Eryani, 2007).

With respect to the Yemeni context, there were many intralingual studies of speech acts realization in connection to the Yemeni Arabic speech community (Al-gamal, 2017; Al-marrani & Sazalie, 2010; Qanbar, 2012; Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009). There is a lack of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies. In cross-cultural studies, only Almansoob et al. (2019) conducted a study that investigated and compared the speech act of compliments between Yemenis and Americans. For interlanguage pragmatic studies where Yemeni EFL learners' speech acts are investigated and compared with native speakers of both L1 and L2, only two studies examined the performance of Yemeni EFL learners' realization of speech acts of refusal (Al-Eryani, 2007) and apologies (Al-Zumor, 2011). These two studies compared the performance of Yemeni EFL learners with both native speakers of Yemeni Arabic and native speakers of English.

This study tries to fill the gap by examining refusal to requests and invitations of Yemeni EFL learners with special focus on the relation of pragmatic competence and proficiency. It also finds out the awareness of Yemeni EFL learners of the social status of interlocutors when refusing persons of equal, higher and lower social status.

What distinguishes it from other studies, it examines the realization of refusal of invitation and request among Yemeni EFL learners with regards to their overall proficiency level and interlocutor social status.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants of this study fall into three categories, 20 native speakers of English, 20 native speakers of Arabic and 40 Yemeni EFL learners of English. Native speakers of English and Arabic are used as baseline data through which Yemeni EFL learners' performance was compared. The Yemeni EFL participants were recruited from senior students, English Department, Education College, Sana'a University. They were chosen randomly, twenty-two females and eighteen males.

2.2 Instrument

A Discourse-Completion Task (DCT) is a tool used to collect data for this study. It is widely utilized in linguistics and pragmatics to elicit particular speech acts. A DCT consists of a one-sided role play containing a situational prompt which a participant will read to elicit the responses of another participant (Almansoob et al., 2019). According to Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), this instrument was originally developed by Shoshana Blum-Kulka for studying speech act realization comparatively between native and non-native Hebrew speakers, based on the work of Levenston. DCTs are used in pragmatics research to study speech acts and find the medium between naturally occurring speech and scripted speech acts. DCT is used extensively in refusal speech acts studies (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016; Al-Eryani, 2007; Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Kwon, 2004; Nurani, 2009; Alrefaee, 2014).

DCT of this study consisted of six scenarios requiring participants to supply a written refusal to three requests and three invitations (see appendix A). Each of the six scenarios sought a refusal to a person of different status, i.e., equal, lower or higher social status. The DCT was designed by the researchers and is based on the work of Beebe et al. (1990). It is further developed by El-Eryani (2007). A proficiency test developed by the researchers was also administered to Yemeni EFL learners. They were divided into two proficiency groups, higher and lower.

Table 1. A description of DCTs situations

Stimulus Type	No	Situation	Status
Invitations	1	A friend's invitation for dinner	Equal
	2	A salesman's invitation to his client, president of an advertising company	Higher
	3	A senior manager's invitation to his/wife's birthday party	Lower
Requests	4	A friend's request to borrow money	Equal
	5	A worker asks for an increase in pay from his boss	Higher
	6	A boss' request from his employee to stay for extra hours to do some work	Lower

2.3 Data Analysis

After gathering the relevant data from 80 participants, the response utterances of each group were coded into semantic formulas respectively. Semantic Formula (refusal strategies) refers to "a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question" (Cohen, 1996, p. 265). For example, if a participant replied as "I am sorry, I can't come to the party because I am busy in my work, I promise you next time" it is coded into four semantic formulas e.g., regret, negative willingness, excuse and promise of future acceptance. In order to answer the research questions, the researchers calculated the frequency use of these semantic formulas (refusal strategies) and compared the frequency use of these formulas among the group participants as shown in Table 2 below. The number of the frequency is written between two brackets next to the semantic formulas used.

Table 2. Model table of the order of the semantic formula analysis

Group	Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula (refusal strategies)			
	1	2	3	4
ANSs	regret (6)	Excuse (5)	Offer of alternative (7)	Wish (2)
HP				
LP				
ENSs				

The order of these semantic formulas is also analysed to find out how Yemeni EFL Learners initiate their refusals compared with native speakers of English and Arabic. The sample table above shows the four positions of refusals semantic formulas used. If a participant initiated his refusal with regret, it will be written in the first position and so on.

To find out how Yemeni EFL reply to refusal, also the content of the semantic formulas, the types of reasons and the mitigating formulas used were examined and then compared with native speakers of English and Arabic in order to know what pragmatic norms are used. For example, 'I'm busy' and 'We'll visit our parents on Sunday evening.' are both categorized as reasons. However, they are different in terms of description and persuasiveness.

As for the types of mitigating formulas used by the two language groups, it can be seen that the ways in which refusals are mitigated have a major impact on the overall tone of the refusals. For example, one might refuse directly by using negative willingness, but the refusal effect can be greatly softened by providing various mitigations such as a statement of positive opinion (e.g., I'd love to, but...), a regret (e.g., I'm sorry) or a statement of alternative (e.g., Why don't we get together next Saturday?).

3. Results

In order to answer the research questions, refusals of Yemeni EFL learners are presented in tables in the 6 situations.

Situation one (refusing an invitation of someone equal in status)

In this situation, the participant was asked to refuse a friend's invitation to his wife's party. This is a situation where the interlocutor is asked to refuse an invitation from someone equal in status. Table 3 displays the frequency and order of refusal semantic formulas in this situation.

Table 3. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S1

Group	Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total	
	1	2	3	4		
YLE	HP	Regrets (8)	Excuses (8)	Excuses (5)	Excuses (1)	50
		Wish (5)	Gratitude (1)	Negative		
		Pause filler (2)	Negative	Willingness (2)		
		Gratitude (4)	Willingness (6)	Postponement (1)		
		Positive feeling (1)	Regrets (1)	Invoking the name of God (4)		
	LP	Regrets (10)	Negative	Excuses (9)	52	
		Excuses (2)	Willingness (7)	Negative		
		Negative Willingness (3)	Regrets (4)	Willingness (1)		
		Pause filler (4)	Excuses (4)	Postponement (1)		
		Wish (1)	Wish (2)	Invoking the name of God (1)		
ANS	Regrets (9)	Excuses (16)	Promise of future acceptance (1)	45		
	Wish (6)	Negative Willingness (2)	Postponement (1)			
	Negative Willingness (4)	Promise of future acceptance (1)	Invoking the name of God (3)			
	Pause filler (1)	Gratitude (1)				
		Positive feeling (1)				
ENS	Regrets (11)	Positive feeling (1)	Excuses (2)	50		
	Gratitude (9)	Regrets (1)	Negative			
		Excuses (14)	Willingness (1)			
			Gratitude (6)			
			Alternative (4)			

Table 3 shows that ANSs and YLEs clearly use the same frequency and order of the semantic formulas when refusing invitations by their peers. For instance, YLEs showed a shift toward their L1 pragmatic norms in the employment of wish and postponement indirect strategies as well as invoking the name of God adjunct. Though these strategies were never employed by ENS participants, Yemeni EFL learners utilized them in different positions in a way similar to their L1 participants. When they are in equal status, Yemeni EFL learners tend to use their native speech community norms. This might be justified as the social status is equal which does not threaten the face of the interlocutor. The utilization of these strategies by Yemeni EFL learners provides good evidence of pragmatic failure as they restore to their first language pragmatic norms.

Promise of future acceptance was employed by ANS in after regrets and excuses to mitigate the illocutionary act of refusal and to save face. This strategy was never employed by ENS who, instead, used gratitude strategy to show respect. YLE showed a tendency toward L2 pragmatic norms. They never used promise of future acceptance strategy.

Another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer was evident in the frequency and order of negative willingness strategy. According to Table 3 above, it was found that 40% of HP participants and 55% of LP participants employed this strategy in the first and second positions in a way similar to their ANS counterparts, whereas ENS participants did not favor this strategy, especially in the first position. Instead, Americans politely initiated their refusal only with regrets or gratitude to soften the illocutionary force of their refusal followed by excuses (e.g., "I am sorry, I am busy; my friends are visiting me Sunday night, thanks for your invitation."). In contrast, Yemeni EFL learners began their refusal with the direct strategy of negative willingness, wish and pause filler adjunct followed by excuses (e.g., "I can't come, I am busy, thanks for your invitation") resembling their native speakers of Arabic.

75% of Americans use gratitude strategy in the first and third positions to show respect and save face. ANS and YLE never employed this strategy. When in equal status, ANS initiated their refusal with direct strategies.

In light of the content of excuses, it was found that Yemeni participants' excuses are vague as they give general reasons, whereas the Americans give specific reasons and excuses. Through analysis of excuses, it was found that Yemeni EFL learners transferred this tendency from the L1, as Yemeni were found to produce vague excuses without specifically mentioning the exact reasons for their refusals. For example, "I am busy.", "I have something to do on Sunday." Unlikely, Americans used a specific and clear reason and excuse as "I have a meeting on Sunday, I have an appointment with a doctor".

Situation two (refusing an invitation from someone lower in status)

In this situation, the participant, a president of a printing company, was asked to refuse his client's, a salesman, invitation to an expensive restaurant. So, this is a situation where the participant is asked to refuse an invitation from someone lower in status. Table 4 displays the frequency and order of the refusal strategies in this situation.

Table 4. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S2

Group	Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total	
	1	2	3	4		
YLE	HP	Regrets (4) positive feeling (7) wish (3) empathy (3) Negative Willingness (3)	Regrets (4) Excuses (9) Negative Willingness (1)	Excuses (5) Promise of future acceptance (3) Postponement (2)	Gratitude (1)	45
	LP	Regrets (9) Excuses (4) Wish (4) Positive feeling (1) Gratitude (2)	Negative Willingness (6) Excuses (9) Unspecific (1) Positive feeling (1)	Excuses (4) Postponement (2)	Gratitude (1)	44
ANS		Regrets (5) Excuses (7) Wish (2) Negative Willingness (3) positive feeling (2) Gratitude (1)	Excuses (9) Regrets (2) Of the hook (2) Negative Willingness (2) Invoking the name of God (2)	Promise of future acceptance (4) Regrets (2) Postponement (8) Negative Willingness (1)	Excuses (1)	53

ENS	Positive opinion (5) regret (6) Gratitude (3) “no” (4) empathy (2)	excuse (10) regret (4) Negative Willingness (1) Wish (1)	excuse (4) regret (3)	alternative (2)	45
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In this situation, Yemeni EFL learners showed a good level of pragmatic competence. As shown in Table 4, Yemeni EFL learners resembled ENSs in the frequency and order of statement of indirect regret strategy and both positive feeling and gratitude adjuncts. However, there were a few evidences of negative pragmatic transfer. For example, YLEs resembled their ANSs counterparts in the preference of negative willingness strategy. Furthermore, YLEs' utilization of postponement and promise of future acceptance indirect strategies, which were never employed by their ENSs counterparts, provide another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. Moreover, pragmatic transfer was evident in the order of the semantic formula of excuse. Just like their ANSs counterparts, 20% of LP learners initiated their refusal with the indirect strategy of excuse followed by a statement of regret strategy or direct negative willingness strategy (e.g., “Really, I am very busy, I can't come.”). In contrast, Americans never start their refusal with this strategy. Instead, they began refusal with statements of regret, positive opinion or gratitude to mitigate the illocutionary force of the refusal followed by excuses (for example, “thanks for your invitation, but I have an important meeting today”). Correspondingly, HP learners utilized the L2 pragmatic pattern. Pragmatic transfer was evident in the utilization of the intensifier “really” before the excuse strategy and statement of wish strategy. YLEs utilized this intensifier just right before excuses and regrets in a way similar to their ANSs. The use of “really” might be to show a surprise as a person who invites is someone lower in social status.

Situation three (refusing an invitation from someone higher in status)

In this situation, the participant was asked to refuse a senior manager's invitation to his/wife's birthday party. This situation is similar to situation 3 in that the participant is asked to refuse an invitation, but this situation is different from S2 in that the interlocutor is interacting with someone higher in status. Table 5 below displays the frequency and order of the semantic formulas of refusals in this situation.

Table 5. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S3

Group		Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total
		1	2	3	4	
YLES	HP	Regrets (7)	Excuses (7)	Regrets (1)		40
		Excuses (3)	Wish (3)	Excuses (4)		
		Pause filler (3)	Negative			
		Wish (1)	Willingness (2)			
		Empathy (1)	Regrets (2)			
		Gratitude (2)	Future acceptance (1)			
		Positive feeling (3)				
	LP	Regrets (5)	Excuses (14)	Regrets (1)		41
		Excuses (1)	Negative	Excuses (1)		
		Wish (1)	Willingness (2)			
		Negative	Off the hook (1)			
		Willingness (4)	Wish (1)			
		Positive feeling (5)	Hedging (1)			
		Promise for future accept (1)				
ANS		Regrets (5)	Excuses (14)	Regrets (1)	Positive feeling (1)	45
		Excuses (2)	Regrets (2)	Negative	Excuses (1)	
		Wish (3)	Negative	Willingness (1)		
		Negative	Willingness (1)	Excuses (2)		
		Willingness (2)	Invoking the name of	Wish (1)		
		positive feeling (3)	God (1)			
		Pause filler (2)				
		Gratitude (2)				
		Unspecific (1)				

ENS	Regrets (5) Excuses (6) Pause filler (3) Wish (4) Positive feeling (2)	Positive feeling (3) Excuses (3) Negative Willingness (1) Condition for future acceptance (1) Regrets (3)	Regrets (3) Wish (2) Gratitude (4)	Excuse (2)	42
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However, both learner groups showed a good level of pragmatic competence, there was evidence of pragmatic transfer. YLEs of both proficiency levels utilized their L1 pragmatic patterns. They employed the statement of wish strategy that was not found in the ENSs. Additionally, LP learner participants employed the direct strategy of negative willingness in the first position in a way similar to their ANSs followed by excuse or regret strategies (e.g., I cannot come, I am busy with my work, sorry), providing a good evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. In contrast, HP learners, like their ENSs counterparts, never initiated their refusal with this strategy. Instead, they began their refusal with regret or excuse to mitigate the illocutionary act before expressing their inability (e.g., I am sorry; I cannot come because I have an important meeting with the executive director). A similar finding was found in situation one above when refusing an invitation from someone of equal status.

Interestingly, when refusing someone higher in status, ANS used gratitude strategy, which was never employed in situation one and two when refusing someone equal or lower. Americans employed this strategy more when refusing someone equal and lower as shown in.

Through examining the content of excuses, YLEs' excuses were vaguer and more general. For example, (I have something to do, I am busy today), whereas the American participants provided more specific details in their excuses for example (I have an important appointment with the doctor, I promised my wife to go with her for a walk today). It was found that YLEs are influenced by their L1 pragmatic pattern as similar content was observed in the refusals of ANSs.

When refusing someone higher in status, YLEs begin their excuses with title honorific "Sir" in their refusals to show respect and. This word was frequently used by ANSs participants as a way to mitigate the illocutionary force of the speech act and to show more politeness, especially when refusing someone higher in status.

Situation four (refusing a request from someone equal in status)

In this situation, the participant was asked to refuse a friend's request borrowing money. The interlocutor is interacting with someone equal in status. Table 6 below displays the frequency and order of the semantic formula of refusals in this situation.

Table 6. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S4

Group	Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total
	1	2	3	4	
YLE	HP	Regrets (10)	Wish (1)	Excuses (3)	42
		Excuses (3)	Excuses (4)	Pause filler (1)	
		Pause filler (2)	Criticism (2)		
		Wish (3)	No empathy (3)		
		Lack of empathy (2)	Regrets (3)		
	LP	Regrets (6)	Excuses (11)	Alternative (2)	42
		Excuses (2)	Negative Willingness (3)	Negative Willingness (3)	
		Negative Willingness (3)	Lack of empathy (1)	Hedging (1)	
		Flat no (2)	Alternative (1)		
		Wish (2)			
ANS		Regrets (9)	Excuses (3)	Excuses (2)	41
		Excuses (4)	No empathy (1)	Negative Willingness (3)	
		Wish (1)	Wish (2)	Regret (1)	
		Negative Willingness (4)	Negative Willingness (6)		
		of the hook (1)	Self-defense (2)		
		name of God (1)	Criticism (1)		

ENS	Regrets (7)	Excuses (3)	Negative Willingness (2)	Alternative (3)	40
	Self-defense (2)	Regrets (4)	Condition for acceptance (1)		
	Negative Willingness (3)	Condition (3)			
	Lack of empathy (3)	Gratitude (1)			
	Criticism (5)	Negative Willingness (3)			

As Table 6 shows, YLEs showed a lack of pragmatic competence as they divert from the L2 pragmatic norms in the utilization of criticism and condition of future acceptance strategies. As illustrated in Table 6 above, 25% of the American participants initiated their refusals with the indirect strategy of criticism that aggravates rather than mitigates the illocutionary force and 20% of ENSs utilized the indirect strategy condition of future acceptance in the second and third positions. Just like their ANSs, YLES, however, never employed these two strategies. When in equal status, Americans seem to be strict and tough, as to offer a kind of advice for their peers.

Negative pragmatic transfer was also evident in the order and frequency of excuses strategy. ANSs use higher frequency counts of excuse strategy, 45% of the participants employed this strategy in the first, second and third positions. Correspondingly, Yemeni EFL learners of both proficiency levels showed a preference toward the use of this strategy. The results revealed that 65% of HP and 50% of LP participants employed this strategy in the first and second positions. However, the frequency of this strategy was relatively low for ENS participants as it occurred 3 times in the second position.

Another example of negative pragmatic transfer that resulted in pragmatic failure was in the employment of the statement of wish strategy. Table 6 shows that Yemeni EFL learners resembled their ANS participants. They both employed this strategy in the first and second positions, whereas this strategy was not used by NES participants. The American participants seem not to be in favor of using this strategy as a similar finding was also found in S2 above.

When they are in equal status, Yemeni EFL learners tend to use their native speech community norms of refusal. This finding could best be attributed to the vertical culture of Yemenis.

Situation 5 (refusing a request from someone lower in status)

For this situation, the participant, a boss, was asked to refuse a worker's request asking an increase in pay. The interlocutor is interacting with someone lower in status. Table 7 below displays the frequency and order of refusals in this situation.

Table 7. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S5

Group	Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total	
	1	2	3	4		
YLE	HP	Regrets (5)	Negative Willingness (5)	Excuses (2)	Excuses (1) Performative (1)	43
		Pause filler (3)	Excuses (6)	Negative Willingness (3)		
		Negative Willingness (5)	Postponement (1)	Postponement (1)		
		Gratitude (4)	Regrets (2)			
		Positive feeling (2)				
	LP	Attention (2)				45
		Regrets (5)	Excuses (9)	Excuses (5)		
		Negative Willingness (5)	Alternative (1)	Negative Willingness (4)		
		Pause filler (3)	Promise of future acceptance (2)			
		Positive feeling (4)	Negative Willingness (2)			
ANS		Getting attention (3)	Regrets (1)			43
			Postponement (1)			
		Regrets (3)	Excuses (8)	Excuses (5)		
		Excuses (2)	Wish (1)			
		Wish (4)	Promise of future acceptance (3)			
		Negative Willingness (8)	performative (1)			
ENS		Positive feeling (2)	Negative Willingness (4)			39
		Flat No (1)	Alternative (1)			
		Wish (1)	Excuses (7)	Excuses (2)	Negative Willingness (1)	
		Positive feeling (5)	Postponement (1)			
		Gratitude (2)	Negative Willingness (5)			
		Excuses (2)	Regret (2)			
	regret (10)	Positive feeling (1)				

When refusing a request from someone lower in status, YLEs of both proficiency levels showed pragmatic patterns similar to those of ENSs. Despite the good level of pragmatic competence shown in this situation, both learner groups show evidence of negative pragmatic transfer in the frequency and order of direct strategy of negative willingness. It was found that 60% of HP group participants and 55% of LP group participants employed this strategy in the first, second and third positions (e.g., I can't increase your salary, because I have a financial problem this year). In contrast, ENSs never began their refusal with the direct strategy of negative willingness. Instead, they initiated their refusals with gratitude or positive feeling adjuncts (e.g., that is ok, but I am sorry this year as I have already made the plan).

In equal status situations, Americans used more gratitude and regrets to mitigate refusals. Unlike Americans, Yemenis initiated refusal with negative willingness strategy as their face is not a threat when refusing equal social status.

Another example of pragmatic transfer was in the employment of promise of future acceptance strategy. Though this strategy was never employed by the American participants, 20% of LP learners utilized this strategy in a way similar to their L1 participants.

Situation six (refusing a request from someone higher in status)

In this situation, the participant, an employee, was asked to refuse his boss's request to stay for extra hours to do some work. This situation is similar to situation four in that the participants are asked to refuse a request, but this situation is different from situation four in that the interlocutor is interacting with someone higher in status. Table 8 below displays the frequency and order of the semantic formula of refusals in this situation.

Table 8. Frequency and order of semantic formulas S6

Group		Frequency and Order of Semantic Formula				Total
		1	2	3	4	
YLE	HP	Regrets (14) Wish (2) Pause Filler (2) Positive Feeling (1) Postponement (1)	Excuses (15) Wish (4) Positive Feeling (1)	Excuses (3) Postponement (4)		47
	LP	Regrets (11) Negative Willingness (2) Wish (3) Positive Feeling (1) No, (2) Excuses (1)	Excuses (15) Negative Willingness (4)	Promise Of F Accept (1) Excuses (1)		41
ANS		Regrets (10) Excuses (2) Wish (2) Negative Willingness (4) Pause Filler (1) Promise Of Future Acceptance (1)	Excuses (15) Negative Willingness (4)	Excuses (3)		42
ENS		Regret (13) Positive Opinion (2) Excuse (2) Empathy (2) Condition, Past (1)	Excuse (8) Alternative (4) Postponement (4)	Alternative (4) Negative willingness (1)		41

Surprisingly, 40% of ANS used negative willingness strategy to refuse someone higher in status. HP learners resembled ENS as they never employed this strategy, unlike LP learners who were in favor of initiating their refusal with it just like ANS.

Americans widely used the alternative strategy to offer other options as they are refusing a boss, someone higher in social status. 40% of Americans used this strategy in the second and third positions. Both ANS and Yemeni EFL learners never employed this strategy.

According to Table 8, the YLEs showed a mixture of pragmatic transfer and pragmatic competence. However, LP learners showed evidence of pragmatic transfer in the frequency and order of negative ability. It was revealed

that 30% of LP participants used this strategy in the first and second positions. This strategy was not used by HP participants at all and it was used only once in the second position in the data of ENSs group.

It is noteworthy that Yemeni EFL learners of both proficiency levels showed a lack of pragmatic competence as they never employed the statement of alternative strategy and empathy which were widely used by some ENSs. This finding was also found in S1 and 2.

Another evidence of pragmatic transfer was in the utilization of statement of wish strategy by YLEs. This strategy was never employed by ENSs.

4. Discussion

It is important to note that in all situations Americans use less direct strategies and more regrets and gratitude strategies. This finding is similar to that of Abed (2011) who found that Iraqi native speakers of Arabic use more direct strategies than native speakers of American English. It also supports the finding of Al-Momani (2012) who found that Arabs are more direct than Americans. However, this finding is inconsistent with that of Morkus' (2018) who found that Americans use a higher percentage of direct strategies than Arabic speakers. This also contradicts the findings from the literature that Arabic communication style tends towards verbosity (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Shalawi, 1997). Moreover, the finding that Arabs use less adjuncts to refusal than Americans comes in congruence with that of Abed (2011) who found that Americans tend to use more adjuncts than Arabic native speakers do.

Results revealed the YLEs' tendency toward their L1 pragmatic patterns and their deviation from the L2 ones in the frequency count of some refusal strategies. For instance, in the frequency use of wish strategy, YLEs generally followed their native speakers of Arabic pragmatic norm, deviating from that of L2. That is clearly shown in Tables 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 which show their preference of this strategy which is not commonly used in the L2. This finding is consistent with that of Abed (2011) who found that Iraqi learners of English used a higher frequency of this strategy similar to their native speakers of Arabic.

The frequency count of the statement of regret strategy also provided another good evidence of pragmatic failure. Only LP learners utilized this strategy less frequently resembling L1. It seems that this strategy is commonly preferred by Americans who were found to use this strategy in equal status relationships. To show their concern, Americans usually initiate their refusals with regrets. A similar finding was provided by Morkus (2018) and Kim and Kwon (2010). However, this finding contradicts the findings of Al-Shalawi (1997) and Abed (2011) who found that Saudis and Iraqis used more expressions of regrets than American participants. This demonstrates that Arabs realize this speech act differently which entails the needs for more interlanguage studies investigating the realization of the speech acts in different Arab countries.

Unlike ANS, in equal and lower situations, Americans heavily employed alternative strategy. Both Yemeni learner groups exhibited a pattern similar to native speakers of Arabic. This finding is very important as it reveals that Americans commonly used this strategy which is used to mitigate in illocutionary force of the refusal and to show respect and solidarity. It is important to note that even Yemeni advanced learners of English lack the knowledge of the appropriate use of this strategy. This entails the necessity for the insertion of the pragmatic component into language instruction and future curricula. This finding is consistent with that of Abed (2011) who was found that Americans use offer of alternative strategy more commonly than their native Arabic speaker counterparts.

Furthermore, Negative pragmatic transfer was evident in the frequency use of adjuncts. For example, though the gratitude and the positive feeling adjuncts were commonly used by ENSs, Yemeni EFL learners followed L1 pragmatic norms utilizing these adjuncts less frequently.

It is worth mentioning that evidence of pragmatic transfer was also present with regard to the strategy selection. The findings showed that there were some refusal strategies that occurred only in the refusal responses given by the ANS group and were never utilized by the ENS group. For example, the adjunct of invoking the name of God was commonly used by the ANS participants and never found in the data of ENSs. However, YLEs of both proficiency levels have utilized this strategy, providing another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. The use of this formula was found to imply and reflect an Arabic cultural-specific norm or value.

Another refusal strategy that was only utilized by ANSs and never found in the data of ENSs is the indirect strategy of promise of future acceptance. When refusing someone higher, YLEs of both proficiency levels utilize this strategy in a way similar to their L1, providing another evidence of pragmatic failure. Transfer of this strategy by both learner groups reveals that this strategy is cultural-specific. Yemenis use this strategy to show respect and politeness to their interlocutors, especially when refusing someone of a higher status. By using this

strategy, Yemenis showed their willingness to comply if the situation was different and in the future events they will certainly accept.

Interestingly, as Yemenis tended to modify the illocutionary force of their refusal with promise of acceptance, Americans appeared to be more specific than Yemenis. They specify certain conditions under which they would accept requests or invitations. Instead of promising without clearly stating the future context, they specifically mention conditions under which they would accept the request or offer if the situation was different. For example, I would increase your salary if you worked harder (situation 5), I will give you money if I have got the scholarship (situation 4). In contrast, Yemenis directly give their promise without mentioning any future condition, for example "I don't have money right now, but I will give you next time" (Situation 4) or "I wish I could come to your wife's party today, but I am very busy, Inshallah (God willing) next time" (Situation 1). Yemeni learners of English never utilized condition for future acceptance strategy at all in a way identical to their native speakers of Arabic. This finding refutes the claim of Morkus (2018) who attributed the absence of this strategy to the low proficiency level because, according to him, it is very difficult for low proficient learners to construct conditionals. Here, in this study, the absence of this strategy was found to be related to cultural norms rather than language proficiency because even HP learners who have the ability to construct such complex strategies tended to follow their L1 norms.

Another striking evidence of negative pragmatic transfer regarding the order of the refusal strategy is the placement of reason/excuse strategy. Unlike Americans, Yemeni native speakers gave reasons for their refusal right at the beginning like in situation 4 of request and 2 of invitation. Americans initiated their refusal with statement of regret strategy or gratitude adjunct before stating an excuse or giving an explanation. It can be concluded that Americans start with strategies that would soften the illocutionary force to show their unwillingness to refuse if situations were different. To them, it seems impolite to start just with stating reasons. YLEs of both proficiency levels resemble their L1 by using the strategy of excuse right at the beginning of their refusal, providing a good evidence of negative pragmatic transfer.

As demonstrated above, pragmatic transfer was evident in terms of the overall strategy use, frequency and order of refusal strategies. Interestingly enough, it was also evident with regard to the content of some refusal strategies. Though certain strategies like excuses/reasons are widely used by both Yemenis and Americans, the ways they are constructed differ. Yemeni's excuses/reasons were more general and less specific. Yemenis just state the excuses of their inability without specifically mentioning the exact reasons. Americans, on the other hand, give more direct, plain and specific reasons. YLEs transferred this tendency of vague general reasons when interacting in English. That was found when they refuse a colleague's invitation to his wife's party (situation 1) and when refusing a dinner invitation from his senior manager (situation 3).

This finding comes in congruence with the findings of that of Al-Issa (1998), Al-Shalawi (1997), Abed (2011) who found that Jordanian, Saudi and Iraqi Arabs give general excuses/reasons while Americans provide specific excuses. Other interlanguage studies conducted in other languages have also come to such a conclusion; Beebe et al. (1990) in Japanese language, Kim and Kwon (2010) in Korean also found that Americans' reasons are specific. However, when Yemeni participants were in similar situations that involved refusing an invitation from someone higher in status than their own, their excuses were slightly more concrete than the ones used for refugees in a lower or equal status. Kim and Kwon (2010) observed a very similar finding in their study of Korean refusals.

YLEs of both proficiency levels resembled their L1 in the utilization of the intensifier really just before their excuses, especially in situation 4. It seems that Yemenis are inclined to use this expression when they need to confirm what they have heard from the interlocutors and/or they need some time to think about how they might answer. In addition, due to the fact that this statement is considered informal, Yemenis tend to use 'really' when they are engaged in conversation with someone who is close to them as it appears in situation 4.

The overuse of the honorific title Sir showed also another evidence of pragmatic transfer. YLEs of both proficiency levels started their refusal in situation 3 with this title when refusing someone higher in status. It seems that Arabic participants use the honorific title 'Sir' to show respect to the interlocutor.

With respect to the relation between pragmatic transfer and proficiency, there were cases where pragmatic transfer was evident only by one learner group. For example, in the frequency use of flat no strategy, HP learners resembled L1, whereas LP learners utilized L2 pragmatic patterns. This supports the claim of the positive correlation hypothesis (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987).

These findings provide support for the negative Correlation Hypothesis (Takahashi & Dufon, 1989) which posits that there is a negative correlation between the degree of pragmatic transfer and proficiency level. This finding

has also been corroborated in the literature by other refusal studies (Hashemian, 2012; Kim & Kwon 2010; Maeshiba et al., 1996).

5. Conclusion

The present study provides evidence of negative pragmatic transfer from L1 among Yemeni learners of English when refusing persons of equal and lower social status. Negative pragmatic transfer was observed to varying degrees in the use of Direct and Indirect strategies, strategy use relative to interlocutor's status, preference for individual strategies and content of excuses. It is also important to note that this study provides support for the negative correlation hypothesis, which posits negative correlation between language proficiency and negative pragmatic transfer from L1. The present paper has made a significant contribution to the literature by investigating negative pragmatic transfer among a group of learners never previously investigated in ILP research.

This study is limited to refusals of requests and invitations. To generalize, other face threatening speech acts need to be investigated. Also, the sample of future studies should be recruited from a larger pool of participants in order to use a statistically comparable method. Another limitation of the study is that there was no control for gender variable. Gender has also been found to be a particularly important variable in speech act research (Morkus, 2014). Another limitation is that the study did not include follow-up interviews with the participants.

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Appendix A

Discourse Completion Task/English Version

Dear Participant:

The purpose of this study is to investigate L1 pragmatic transfer in speech acts behaviors. This is not a test; there is no right or wrong answer. There are 12 situations in this questionnaire. Please read each situation carefully, and imagine that you are in the same situation. Then, respond naturally using the same language you would use in your daily interaction as if you are talking to a person in front of you.

If you have any questions about any of the situations, please don't hesitate to ask.

Thank you for your time.

Situation 1

Your friend invites you to dinner, but you really can't stand his/her husband/wife and you don't want to go.

Your friend: How about coming over for dinner Saturday night? We're having a small dinner party.

You: _____

Your friend: That is too bad, I wish you come.

Situation 2

You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a printing machine company invites you to one of the most expensive restaurants in Sana'a. But you are busy to do important work on the same day.

Salesman: we have met several times to discuss your purchase of my company's product. I was wondering if you would like to be my guest at Eagle restaurant in order to firm up a contract.

You: _____

Salesman: Perhaps another time.

Situation 3

You are an employee of an insurance company. You have a close relationship with a senior manager. The senior manager calls you to invite you to a party, but you have to visit a close friend on the same day.

Your senior manager: Hi. Tomorrow is my wife/husband's birthday. So, we are going to have a party. Could you come?

You: _____

Senior manager: That's too bad. I hope you would come.

Situation 4

You have a friend who sometimes borrows money from you. But your friend does not pay you back before you ask him/her to do so. Now, he needs money to buy books. He wants you to lend him money.

Your friend: Hey, it is the end of the month and I have gone broke. I need to buy some books from the college bookstore. You know the bookstore needs in cash.

Could you lend me two thousand, please?

You: _____

Your friend: I see, and then I will ask other people.

Situation 5

You are the owner of a bookstore. One of your best workers asks to speak to you in private. He needs an increase in pay, but you don't want to increase salaries this year.

Worker: As you know. I've been here just over a year now, and I know you've been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be honest, I really need an increase in pay.

You: _____

Worker: then I guess I'll have to look for another job.

Situation 6

You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave work for you have an important work.

Your boss: If you don't mind, I'd like you to spend an extra hour or two tonight so that we can finish up this work.

You: _____

Your boss: That's too bad. I was hoping you could stay.

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