

# REFUSAL AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES FAVOURED AMONG IRAQI AND MALAYSIAN LEARNERS IN MARRIAGE PROPOSALS

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## Abstract

The study targets exploring the similarities and differences between Iraqi and Malaysian learners of English in refusing marriage proposals. Also, it examines the favored politeness strategies that learners use to protect their interlocutors' face, heeding both their social distance and status. Data were gathered by a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which contained six marriage situations. Responses were analyzed based on Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal taxonomy and Scollon et al.'s (2012) politeness system. The findings indicated that both the Iraqi and Malaysian learners preferred the indirect refusal strategies in marriage proposals, as well as the hierarchical politeness in the form of independence strategies regardless of the social status and distance between interlocutors. However, they differed in the sort of indirect strategies most frequently utilized. The Iraqi learners favored reason, regret, and non-performative statements, whilst the Malaysian learners preferred regret, non-performative statements, and reason.

## Keywords

politeness, refusal, social distance, social status, marriage proposals

## 1 Introduction

On a daily basis, individuals communicate with one another for various purposes, such as conveying information, sharing thoughts, expressing feelings, and maintaining relationships (Moaveni 2014: 1). They engage in various types of face negotiation where a chain of communicative acts, such as complaints, requests, apologies, invitations, and/or refusals are engendered (Félix-Brasdefer 2006: 2159). Marriage proposals are events in which one male person asks for a female's hand to walk down the aisle, the proposal can be either accepted or refused. Gass and Houck (1999: 2) claim that refusal is described as complex seeing that it demands not merely a prolonged series of negotiations and cooperative fulfillments, but "face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the non-compliant nature of the act". However, whenever such an act is realized, politeness strategies are called into action (Chojimah 2015: 906). Thus, politeness and refusal are inseparable when one wants to protect the face of their interlocutor.

Like any speech act, refusal and politeness are held to be peculiar universally as well as culturally. They are present in every language, yet they are realized

differently across cultures (Chojimah 2015: 906). These two concepts are affected by several factors, for example, social status, age, gender, power, level of education, and social distance (Brown & Levinson 1987, Fraser 1990, Smith 1998). Hence, the current study examines politeness in regard to two key social factors, which are social status and social distance, and their effect on refusing marriage proposals. Nonetheless, refusal is arduous for L2 speakers to execute properly since both proficiency in the language and its culture are needed. Although learners of English may have enough linguistic knowledge, pragmatic expertise is necessary for different contexts because if the latter is not applied felicitously, communication breakdowns can arise (Phuong 2006).

There are several comparative studies conducted to address refusal in various daily situations. Similarly to the current study, most of the studies collected data by a DCT and analyzed refusal based on Beebe et al. (1990). The most common study is by Beebe et al. (1990) that investigated refusal strategies utilized by Japanese and American speakers using a DCT. It was concluded that the Americans and the Japanese differ considerably in their use of strategies, especially in regard to the number of occurrences, order, and content of semantic formulas. It also revealed the significance of social status; the Americans used indirect strategies when addressing lower-status people, whereas the Japanese used direct ones. However, both were polite and indirect to people of high social status. Besides, the Japanese tended to stress the social difference in interaction whereas the Americans sometimes ignore that. Nelson et al.'s (2002) findings indicated that there were commonalities between the Egyptians and the Americans in the refusal strategies favored. They found that the most common ones used by the two groups were the indirect strategies, and the most frequent semantic formulas were reasons and negative willingness.

Abed (2011) compared Iraqi learners of English and American speakers in using refusal strategies and found out that the Iraqi learners tended to refuse by statements of reasons, regrets, wishes, and adjuncts. Moreover, Iraqi learners were more sensitive and considerate when talking to lower-status people than higher or equal-status people. Saud (2019) revealed that indirect refusal strategies were the most popular among the Saudi participants, then direct ones, and lastly, adjuncts. Social status did not determine selecting the type of refusal strategies. Al-Shboul et al. (2012) indicated that both the Jordanians and the Malaysians used similar strategies and an equivalent number of occurrences emerged in refusing the situations. The most common strategies employed were statements of excuse and regret. As for the differences, the study found variance in the occurrences of indirect refusals, with the Malaysians exploiting fewer indirect strategies compared to the Jordanians. The Jordanians used gratitude statements less than

the Malaysians when they refused invitations and requests from equal and lower-status people. Sattar et al. (2011) showed that when refusing requests, Malaysian learners employed statements of regret and gave excuses or explanations more frequently. The Malaysian cultural effect was present in the students' choice of semantic formulas as they realized refusal in respect of their Malaysian perceptions. Chojimah (2015) deduced that there was a pattern of occurrences for refusal strategies dominated by indirect strategies among Indonesian learners. The most frequent indirect strategies were criticism, presentation of other agendas, display of preferences, and setting auto-limitations. Their refusal responses were wordy in content. As for the politeness strategies, redressive expressions were used the most among low-high social status, followed by high-low social status, and then, by equal status. Kasih (2020) investigated the types of refusal strategies and why certain refusal strategies are picked by Indonesian, Chinese, and Libyan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. A DCT, observation, and semi-structured interviews were performed to gather the study data. The findings uncovered that all three EFL groups utilized the regret strategy in their refusal. Nonetheless, they found indirect refusal strategies can signify acceptance to interlocutors. Maintaining the interlocutor's face and minimizing the face threat was the motive behind using these indirect strategies.

After reviewing the literature, marriage proposals are a gap in linguistic expertise to be investigated and they are fertile ground for refusal to take place. Given the lack of research on the Iraqi speakers in this regard, it has thus been chosen as the focal point of this study. Some studies examined refusal in contexts of buying and selling (Rosa 2010), American series (Putri 2010), and most studies compared the use of refusal concerning requests, invitations, and offers or approvals among groups of learners in various situations. Nevertheless, to the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated refusal in the marriage context. Hence, the current study aims at scrutinizing the similarities and differences between Iraqi and Malaysian learners' use of refusal and politeness strategies, taking into consideration the social status and distance between interactants. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the favored refusal strategies used by Iraqi and Malaysian learners in marriage proposals?
2. What are the favored politeness strategies used by Iraqi and Malaysian learners when refusing marriage proposals?

## Hypothesis of the study

The current study hypothesizes the following:

1. The Iraqi learners favor certain strategies to express their refusal to marriage situations as a result of learning English as a foreign language, while the Malaysian learners refuse in a certain way due to learning English as a second language.
2. The Iraqi and the Malaysian learners belong to different cultures, so they will have different politeness strategies to express their refusal to the situations of marriage.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Refusal

Gass and Houck (1999, as cited in Qassim et al. 2021: 523) declare that refusal is a negative response to a request, invitation, offer, suggestion, etc. It is non-compliant, face-threatening (Brown & Levinson 1987), and undesirable (Levinson 1983). Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Abbas 2013: 186) mention that a refusal “run[s] contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker”, and thereby, interpersonal relationships will be at risk; henceforth, pragmatic knowledge, which is difficult for learners to achieve, is demanded in order to perform refusal felicitously (Chen 1996, Al-Eryani 2007). It is necessary for interlocutors to comprehend some factors related to society and culture that affect how refusal is performed to achieve successful communication (Moaveni 2014: 1).

Takahashi and Beebe (1987: 133) remark that refusal is a “major cross-cultural stinking point for ESL students”. Aside from its face-threatening nature, refusal is influenced by the linguistic hindrance subsisting in the learners’ culture and language, as well as their individual evaluation of a certain situation (Nureddeen 2008). Al-Shalawi (1997) elucidates that refusal can provide information on a community’s sociocultural values, and a perception of the social norms ingrained in a particular culture. In refusing marriage proposals, speakers need to employ some politeness strategies to protect each other’s ‘face’ (Eslami-Rasekh 2005, Afghari 2007). Beebe et al. (1990) put forward a refusal strategies classification that involves three kinds (direct, indirect, and adjuncts) as follows:

- **Direct strategies**
  - a. Performative verb
  - b. Non-performative statements

- **Indirect strategies**
  - a. Statement of regret
  - b. Wish
  - c. Excuse, reason, or explanation
  - d. Statement of alternative
  - e. Set conditions for future or past acceptance
  - f. The promise of future acceptance
  - g. Statement of principle
  - h. Statement of philosophy
  - i. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:
    1. Threat
    2. Criticize the request
    3. Request help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
    4. Let the interlocutor off the hook
    5. Self-defense
  - j. Acceptance functions as a refusal by using an unspecific or indefinite reply and lack of enthusiasm
  - k. Avoidance by the topic switch, joke, repetition of part of the request, or postponement
- **Adjuncts**
  - a. Statement of positive opinion or feeling of agreement
  - b. Statement of empathy
  - c. Pause fillers
  - d. Gratitude or appreciation

On the basis that refusal is a negative speech act, the concept of ‘face’ should be taken into account when refusing. Accordingly, it is crucial to display the politeness system in further detail to analyze its impact on how refusal is performed.

## 2.2 Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) define ‘face’ as “the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself”. They note that ‘face’ is what motivates people to behave politely and that it has two components, positive and negative face. The former denotes an individual’s yearning to be admired, approved, and complemented (for example, by seeking agreement, solidarity, and reciprocity), and the latter, the negative face, relates to our desire not to be imposed on (for example, being indirect, deference, and/or apologetic).

They explain that ‘face’ can be lost, and thus must continually be paid attention to during the interaction. They assume that some speech acts, for instance, refusals, “are intrinsically threatening to face and thus, require softening” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 24). Individuals often assess the context, for example, in marriage proposals, in which they are involved in terms of two autonomous and culture-relevant factors, i.e. social distance and social status. Interlocutors tend to use mitigating and softening strategies to avoid damaging the speaker’s face, the hearer’s face, or both.

On the grounds of the politeness framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), Scollon et al. (2012: 46) use the term ‘involvement’ to draw attention to “the common ground and a person’s right and needs to be considered a normal, contributing or supporting member of society”. It is recognized by some discourse-related strategies, such as “paying attention to others, claiming in-group membership, using first names, or showing that the speaker is closely connected to the hearer”. They, on the other hand, suggest the term ‘independence’ highlights an interlocutor’s individuality, which is realized by “making minimal assumptions, using formal names and titles or giving options to the interlocutor” (ibid.).

Based on such observations, Scollon et al. (2012) propose a politeness system of three types. Based on this model, in ‘deference’ politeness, interlocutors are of the same social status, except that there is a distant relationship. Consequently, they employ strategies of independence. Interlocutors, in ‘solidarity’ politeness, share equal social status and a close relationship, so they use involvement strategies to express mutual viewpoints. Lastly, an interlocutor, in ‘hierarchical’ politeness, is in a higher social status and the other interlocutor is in a lower position. In this case, in which the relationship can be either close or distant, Scollon et al. (2012) express that when an interlocutor from a high status utilizes an involvement strategy, a lower-status person may use an independence strategy to reduce the threat or to display esteem. The current study seeks to investigate how Iraqi and Malaysian learners refuse marriage proposals in the most polite way, taking into account factors such as social distance and social status.

### **2.3 Factors affecting interaction**

One of the factors that determine the linguistic behavior of an individual is the social distance that exists between interlocutors in a given situation (Leech 1983, Brown & Levinson 1987). It ascribes to “the roles people take in relation to one another in a particular situation as well as how well they know each other” (Phuong 2006: 14). It refers to the level of familiarity that binds interactants. Brown and Levinson (1987) declare that politeness and social distance are linked;

the former increases when the latter exists. Wolfson (1988) remarks that a little solidarity can be found in the linguistic behavior among outsiders and insiders due to the relative antecedent intimacy of their relations, whilst the bargaining of the relations is in all likelihood to take place among friends.

According to Leech (1983) and Holmes (1995), the social status's role in contact engages the capability of realizing the social stand of one another. Holmes (1995) maintained that people of high status are extra apt to gain linguistic deference and negative politeness. Therefore, they are prone to avert insulting higher-status people and they tend to show them more honor. The concept of gender and linguistic behavior is looked at as interconnected variables (Holmes 1995). Stated differently, speech behavior relies on the gender link between interlocutors, hence to refuse a person of alike or unlike gender demands diverse linguistic molds. The culture of L2 speakers of English has an influence on the way they interact, i.e. the values of its society and the way these beliefs relate to the behavior of its members. Hofstede (2011: 9-13) proposed a cross-cultural framework for interaction that introduced four proportions on which values of cultures can be codified, namely individualism/collectivism; avoidance of uncertainty; power-distance, masculinity/femininity, and later long-term adaptation and indulgence/self-restraint were added. For serving the study objectives, only two of these factors are explained:

- Power distance index: it is the degree to which an individual with less power in a particular institution admits and receives that power is unevenly allotted. Here, disparity and power are expected from follower individuals, i.e. the lower strata. A high extent in the index denotes that hierarchy is obviously set up and carried out in a community, and there are not any doubts or any causes. However, a lower extent of the index suggests that individuals can challenge those with power and seek to diffuse authority (Hofstede 2011: 9).
- Individualism vs collectivism: it is the extent to which individuals are incorporated into groups in a particular society. In individualistic communities, there are loose relations that usually pertain only to an individual and their families. In contrast, collectivistic societies are characterized by highly integrated ties that extend beyond families to involve others in in-group connections. Such ties are twisted with unquestionable allegiance and show support to one another when there is a crisis (Hofstede 2011: 11).

The current study focuses on selected elements that control how individuals engage in the act of refusal in conversation on a daily basis. Such factors include social status, distance, and communication style type. In line with the literature on speech acts and communication, such variables played a key role in selecting the strategies that Iraqi and Malaysian learners employed when refusing marriage proposals.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

A total of 70 Iraqi and Malaysian learners of English were selected for the present study. Considering the fact that marriage proposals are normally directed at females, the study involved 35 Iraqi female students at the College of Education for Women – University of Baghdad, and 35 Malaysian female students at the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. All participants were learners of English between the ages of 23 and 35 years.

#### **3.2 Instrument**

Data was collected using a DCT shared through a link to a Google form emailed to the study participants (see the Appendix for the DCT form). A DCT is composed of many situations portraying various scenarios to which participants are demanded to respond either online or on paper (Blum-Kulka 1982). It is the most commonly-available and comprehensive instrument of collecting data in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. This instrument possesses several advantages, for example, comparisons of studies, a large number of participants can be administered in a limited period of time, a total control over the various contextual factors (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), no transcription is needed, and their assessment is easy (Allami & Naeimi 2011: 342). Therefore, the Google form contains six marriage situations that included refusal to a high-status person, an equal-status person, and a low-status person, and also each one involved a close and distant social distance. The marriage situations were designed by the researchers and were checked to be valid in both cultures by two professors from the College of Education for Women – University of Baghdad, majoring in linguistics. The DCT was also piloted on twelve Iraqi and Malaysian college students majoring in English for clarity and suitability purposes.

#### **3.3 Procedure and analysis of the data**

The data were codified and analyzed using Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal classification, and Scollon et al.'s (2012) politeness strategies. The responses



were qualitatively reviewed and analyzed to determine the semantic formula and adjuncts to which they fit. After presenting a qualitative description, the researchers performed a statistical analysis in terms of the number of occurrences and percentage of the data to inspect the similarities and differences between Iraqi and Malaysian learners in using refusal strategies in marriage situations.

#### **4 Findings**

This section offers an integrative description of the strategies employed by Iraqi and Malaysian learners to refuse marriage proposal situations. Qualitative analysis of the data supported by descriptive statistics is presented. Some examples of the analysis of the raw data are shown in Table 1:

| <b>No.</b> | <b>The situations</b>  | <b>Responses</b>   | <b>The analysis</b>             |
|------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| 1          | A famous person who works with attractive co-stars.                        | I don't trust celebrities                                | Statement of disinterest        |
| 2          | A great person who is way too older than you.                              | no   | Non-performative statement      |
|            |  | I would marry someone who is in my age                   | Statement of disinterest        |
| 3          | A person with a good financial income, but he is a heavy smoker/alcoholic. | maybe  | Hedging                         |
|            |  | Being a smoker is not a big problem for some girls       | Statement of philosophy         |
|            |  | But [it is] for me                                       | Statement of principle          |
|            |  | I'm sorry  | Statement of regret             |
| 4          | Your ex-husband/boyfriend who cheated on you.                              | Do you think i'm that dumb to let you cheat on me again? | Ridiculing                      |
| 5          | A person who has a physical defect.  | honey,   | Identity in-group marker        |
|            |  | You should go to a professional to fix this issue        | Condition for future acceptance |
|            |  | Before stepping into the next chapter of our life?       | Promise of future acceptance    |
| 6          | A person who has many casual relationships (playboy).                      | Sorry  | Statement of regret             |
|            |  | You're busted  | Ridiculing                      |
|            |  | There is no way...                                       | Statement of philosophy         |
|            |  | ...I would accept and say yes to your proposal           | Non-performative statement      |

**Table 1: Sample of the Iraqi and Malaysian responses to the items**

Below, the findings of the study are shown in the form of answers to the study's research questions.

#### 4.1 What are the favored refusal strategies used by Iraqi and Malaysian learners in marriage proposals?

A total of 1,716 refusal strategies were exploited by Iraqi and Malaysian learners. The analysis of the data indicated that 856 strategies were collected from Iraqi learners and 965 strategies were used by Malaysian learners. According to Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal classification, there are three types of strategies, namely, direct, indirect, and adjuncts. The number of occurrences and percentage of these strategies as they were used by the two groups are illustrated in Table 2.

| Refusal strategy    | Iraqi learners |             | Malaysian learners |             |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
|                     | Frequency      | %           | Frequency          | %           |
| Direct strategies   | 105            | 12%         | 145                | 15%         |
| Indirect strategies | 676            | 79%         | 750                | 78%         |
| Adjuncts            | 75             | 9%          | 70                 | 7%          |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>856</b>     | <b>100%</b> | <b>965</b>         | <b>100%</b> |

**Table 2: The number of occurrences and percentage of refusal strategies utilized by the Iraqi and Malaysian learners**

The indirect strategies were the most frequently employed by the Iraqi and Malaysian learners; the adjunct category was the one that was least used by the two groups, and the direct strategies were used by both the Iraqi and Malaysian learners. Clearly, both groups were aware of the adverse impact of refusing explicitly, so they tended to implicitly reject others for face protection purposes.

##### 4.1.1 The Iraqi learners

The analysis denoted that the Iraqi learners utilized several strategies to make their refusal sound appropriate; such variation is summarized in Table 3.

| Strategy type                      | Refusal strategy            | Frequency | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----|
| <b>Direct refusal strategies</b>   | Performative verb           | 0         | 0%  |
|                                    | Non-performative statements | 105       | 12% |
| <b>Indirect refusal strategies</b> | Statements of regret        | 170       | 20% |
|                                    | Wish                        | 25        | 2%  |
|                                    | Excuse, reason, explanation | 215       | 25% |
|                                    | Statements of alternatives  | 11        | 1%  |

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| Strategy type                         | Refusal strategy   | Frequency  | %           |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------|-------------|
|                                       | Set conditions for future or past acceptance                                 | 6          | 0%          |
|                                       | Promise of future acceptance   | 5          | 0%          |
|                                       | Statements of principle  | 53         | 6%          |
|                                       | Statements of philosophy   | 46         | 5%          |
|                                       | Attempt to dissuade interlocutor   |            |             |
|                                       | Threat or statement of negative consequences                                 | 24         | 3%          |
|                                       | Guilt trip   | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Criticize the request/requester  | 70         | 8%          |
|                                       | Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Let interlocutor off the hook  | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Acceptance that functions as a refusal                                       | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Avoidance  |            |             |
|                                       | Hedging  | 56         | 7%          |
| <b>Adjuncts to refusal strategies</b> | Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement                           | 30         | 4%          |
|                                       | Pause fillers  | 23         | 3%          |
|                                       | Gratitude/Appreciation   | 17         | 2%          |
| <b>Total</b>                          |  | <b>856</b> | <b>100%</b> |

**Table 3: The sub-refusal strategies as utilised by the Iraqi learners**

The most common strategy employed by the Iraqi learners was excuse, reason, and explanation (25%), statement of regret was the second (20%), then non-performative statements (12%). The least utilized strategies were promise of future acceptance and set conditions for past or future acceptance (0%).

#### **4.1.2 The Malaysian learners**

The analysis indicated that the Malaysian learners employed several strategies; such variation is illustrated in Table 4.

| Strategy type                      | Refusal strategy            | Frequency | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----|
| <b>Direct refusal strategies</b>   | Performative verb           | 0         | 0%  |
|                                    | Non-performative statements | 145       | 17% |
| <b>Indirect refusal strategies</b> | Statement of regret         | 165       | 19% |
|                                    | Wish                        | 5         | 1%  |
|                                    | Excuse, reason, explanation | 140       | 16% |
|                                    | Statement of alternative    | 30        | 3%  |

| Strategy type                         | Refusal strategy   | Frequency  | %           |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------|-------------|
|                                       | Set conditions for future or past acceptance                                 | 40         | 5%          |
|                                       | Promise of future acceptance   | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Statement of principle   | 60         | 7%          |
|                                       | Statement of philosophy  | 10         | 1%          |
|                                       | Attempt to dissuade interlocutor   |            |             |
|                                       | Threat or statement of negative consequences                                 | 65         | 8%          |
|                                       | Guilt trip   | 0          | 0%          |
|                                       | Criticize the request/requester  | 75         | 9%          |
|                                       | Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request | 10         | 1%          |
|                                       | Let interlocutor off the hook  | 15         | 2%          |
|                                       | Acceptance that functions as a refusal                                       | 20         | 2%          |
|                                       | Avoidance  |            |             |
|                                       | Hedging  | 10         | 1%          |
| <b>Adjuncts to refusal strategies</b> | Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement                           | 20         | 2%          |
|                                       | Statement of empathy   | 5          | 1%          |
|                                       | Pause fillers  | 35         | 4%          |
|                                       | Gratitude/Appreciation   | 10         | 1%          |
| <b>Total</b>                          |  | <b>860</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Table 4: The sub-refusal strategies as utilised by the Malaysian learners

As illustrated, statement of regret (19%) was the most common strategy used, followed by non-performative statements (17%), then by excuse, reason, and explanation (16%). Table 4 also displays the strategies that were employed minimally, these were wish and statements of empathy, appreciation and gratitude, hedging, request for help, empathy, and assistance, and statements of philosophy (1%).

#### 4.2 What are the favored politeness strategies used by Iraqi and Malaysian learners when refusing marriage proposals?

Based on Scollon et al.'s (2012) politeness strategies, data were analyzed for a total of 1,716 politeness strategies, 856 used by Iraqi learners, and 860 by Malaysians when refusing marriage situations. When turning down the proposals, they considered the social distance, whether distant (+) or close (-), that they have with the person making the proposal and the social status of that person, whether high (+), equal (=) or low (-). The number of occurrences and percentages were calculated to determine the strategies that were used the most by the two groups so as to sound polite.

### 4.2.1 The Iraqi learners

They utilized a set of politeness strategies; the number of occurrences and percentage of these strategies, in accordance with each situation, are illustrated in Table 5.

| Situation | Status     | Politeness strategies |     |            |     |                       |                  |
|-----------|------------|-----------------------|-----|------------|-----|-----------------------|------------------|
|           |            | Deference             |     | Solidarity |     | Hierarchical          |                  |
|           |            | Freq.                 | %   | Freq.      | %   | Independence<br>Freq. | Involvement<br>% |
| S.1       | +SD<br>+SS |                       |     |            |     | 23                    | 6%               |
| S.2       | -SD<br>+SS | 18                    | 5%  | 63         | 16% |                       |                  |
| S.3       | +SD<br>=SS | 53                    | 13% | 17         | 4%  |                       |                  |
| S.4       | -SD<br>=SS |                       |     |            |     |                       |                  |
| S.5       | +SD<br>-SS |                       |     |            |     | 42                    | 11%              |
| S.6       | -SD<br>-SS |                       |     |            |     | 41                    | 10%              |

**Table 5: Frequency and percentage of politeness strategies as employed by the Iraqi learners**

The analysis of the data demonstrated ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness strategies employed in situation one (6%). It is obvious that the distant relation and high social status have significance in performing refusal as they showed a desire to reduce the threat to the hearers’ positive face. As for situation two, the Iraqi participants employed ‘solidarity’ politeness strategies (16%). In such a situation, the close distance did not seem to influence the Iraqi learners’ response even when their interlocutor’s social status was high.

In situation three, the participants utilized ‘deference’ politeness (13%). It is obvious that they seem to show value to the distance even though they are equal in social status. As for situation four, participants did not use politeness strategies in any way, which was a result of the close distance and equal social status.

As for situation five, the participants showed a preference for ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness (11%). Despite their low social status, the Iraqi participants chose to save the interlocutor’s positive face and tended to act like they are equal in this regard. Last but not least, in situation six, the participants used ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness (10%). Obviously, whether the social distance is close or distant, the Iraqi participants treated their low-status interlocutors equally.

**4.2.2 The Malaysian learners**

They used politeness strategies when rejecting marriage situations taking into account their addressee’s social distance and social status. The number of occurrences and percentages of these strategies are illustrated in Table 6.

| Situation | Status     | Politeness strategies |     |            |    |                       |                  |    |     |
|-----------|------------|-----------------------|-----|------------|----|-----------------------|------------------|----|-----|
|           |            | Deference             |     | Solidarity |    | Hierarchical          |                  |    |     |
|           |            | Freq.                 | %   | Freq.      | %  | Independence<br>Freq. | Involvement<br>% |    |     |
| S.1       | +SD<br>+SS |                       |     |            |    | 38                    | 13%              | 22 | 8%  |
| S.2       | -SD<br>+SS |                       |     |            |    | 4                     | 1%               | 33 | 11% |
| S.3       | +SD<br>=SS | 30                    | 10% | 18         | 6% |                       |                  |    |     |
| S.4       | -SD<br>=SS |                       |     |            |    |                       |                  |    |     |
| S.5       | +SD<br>-SS |                       |     |            |    | 43                    | 15%              | 25 | 9%  |
| S.6       | -SD<br>-SS |                       |     |            |    | 36                    | 13%              | 16 | 6%  |

**Table 6: Frequency and percentage of politeness strategies as employed by the Malaysian learners**

The analysis of the data unveiled a preference for ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness in situation one (13%). The Malaysian learners valued high status and kept their distance when refusing marriage proposals. As for situation two, the participants utilized ‘involvement’ hierarchical politeness (11%). A close relationship and high social status lead participants to avoid offending their interlocutors’ positive faces.

With regards to situation three, participants used ‘deference’ politeness (10%). It is obvious that the distant relation has significance in performing refusal as participants avoid threatening their interlocutors’ face. In situation four, participants did not use politeness strategies in any way, which was a result of the close distance and equal social status.

In situation five, the participants utilized ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness (15%). The Malaysian learners show value to the interests of the hearers. Finally, situation six displayed a preference for ‘independence’ hierarchical politeness (13%). They performed refusal indirectly and politely considering the common ground between the interlocutors.

## 5 Discussion

Through answering the research questions, the results revealed some similarities and differences when refusing marriage proposals between Iraqi and Malaysian learners. Both groups of learners preferred indirect strategies, followed by direct strategies, and lastly, adjuncts. It seems that the L2 learners were aware of the attack that refusal causes on their interlocutors' 'face', especially in sensitive situations like marriage proposals, so they used indirect strategies to avoid offending them, and even if they used direct ones, they tended to soften the negative impact of refusal by blending other strategies into their responses. Such findings are in line with the majority of those in previous studies, such as Nelson et al. (2002), Abed (2011), Izadi and Zilaie (2014), Saud (2019) and many others. However, such results contradict Al-Shboul et al.'s (2012) findings that the Malaysians tend to use few indirect strategies, whereas in the current study, the number of occurrences and percentages of these strategies utilized by the two groups were almost alike. In addition, neither Iraqi nor Malaysian learners employed a guilt trip strategy in refusing marriage proposals.

The social distance and the social status had no substantial impact on the strategy selection. The findings are in agreement with Saud (2019), who found that Saudi female EFL learners did not consider the addressee's social status in situations of refusal. In addition, the Iraqi and Malaysian learners used similar politeness strategies in refusing the marriage situations. Both groups of participants used independent politeness strategies in refusing those from higher or equal social status, and with whom they have a distant or close relation. They tended to reduce the attack to the negative face of their interlocutors and show respect to them by indirectly refusing proposals. These similarities can be attributed to the Iraqi and Malaysian groups sharing the same communication style according to Hofstede (2011), both cultures are oriented as a collectivist in nature and high index where social power is appreciated, and people are integrated into cohesive and strong in-groups (Al-Shboul et al. 2012). The findings conform to Al-Shboul et al. (2012), whose findings uncovered that the Jordanian and Malaysian were alike in the use of refusal due to religious and cultural orientation. Lastly, Iraqi and Malaysian learners both responded with fewer politeness strategies to situations where they shared equal status and close relationships with their interlocutors, situations three and four. Their responses could be related to the severity of the situation (Chojimah 2015), and the speaker's assessment of the situation (Nureddeen 2008). They affected the selection of strategy since the act of an interlocutor was evaluated as inappropriate and thus led to less choice of any strategy (Watts 2003) regardless of the two social factors mentioned.

Pertaining to the differences between the Iraqi and Malaysian learners in refusing marriage proposals, they could be explained in terms of the variety of indirect refusal strategies. The Iraqi learners used excuse, reason, and explanation as the most preferable strategy, followed by statements of regret and next non-performative statements. The findings of the current study revealed that the Iraqi learners believed in giving reasons related to family matters so as to dissuade their interlocutor. Such a result can be explained by the findings of Al-Shboul and Huwari (2016: 59) which state that members of collectivist culture tend to formulate reasons in relation to uncontrollable events that are beyond their explanation. The Iraqi learners were keen to express their regret through the overuse of apologies, which were expressed at the start, middle and end of their refusal. The findings are consistent with Abed (2011), who disclosed that the refusal strategies most commonly used were excuse, reason, and explanation and statement of regret. The Malaysian learners favored statements of regret the most, next non-performative statements, and then, excuse, reason, and explanation. They believed in apologizing as the way to protect the face of their interlocutors. Such results conformed to Al-Shboul et al.'s (2012) findings that the Malaysian and the Jordanian used statements of apology and excuses, as well as reasons more than any other refusal strategies.

The two groups differed from each other in that the Malaysian learners' responses were lengthy; they varied their strategies in refusing. Unlike the Iraqi learners, the Malaysians' responses contained more idiomatic expressions and small talk phrases when refusing, and they expressed themselves more politely than the Iraqi learners. Such findings are similar to studies by Al-Shboul and Huwari (2016), as well as Chojimah (2015), in which they found that the Malaysians' refusals were long. This might be related to the Malaysian learners' exposure to English as a second language which provided them with a chance to use the language skillfully more than the Iraqi learners who could practice that in academic settings only. On top of that, there were strategies seldom used by the Iraqi learners as compared to the Malaysian learners. These strategies were threat or negative consequences, set conditions for past or future acceptance, pause fillers, and others. However, there were some strategies that Malaysian learners used less than Iraqi learners, such as hedging, statements of philosophy, appreciation and gratitude, and statements of alternatives. This can be explained in terms of the type of the culture, i.e. collectivist, where some behaviors are valued and appreciated over others.



## 6 Conclusion

In order to mitigate the face-threatening act of refusal, interlocutors usually employ indirect refusal strategies and politeness strategies. Nonetheless, it is difficult for L2 speakers to perform refusal without considering the social status and social distance of their interlocutors. The findings revealed that the Iraqi and Malaysian learners favored indirect strategies, independence and hierarchical politeness, as well as no significance given to the speakers' social status and distance when refusing marriage instances. It may be attributed to the fact that both groups have a common cultural orientation, age, educational level, and gender. However, the Iraqi and Malaysian learners differed in the type of indirect refusal strategies employed. Excuses and reasons strategies were highly preferred by Iraqi learners, while the regret strategy was largely favored by Malaysian learners. However, the present study falls short on some points. Firstly, considering the fact that marriage proposals are normally directed to females, the current study is limited to female participants only. Secondly, due to time constraints, the current study involves a total of seventy female participants who could provide their responses on time. Thirdly, due to limited financial resources, the current study employed a DCT that was shared online to the participants, rather than using interviews or any other instrument for collecting the data. It is recommended that more comparative studies be conducted on refusal in the context of marriage, because both refusal and marriage proposals are delicate in nature and require interlocutors to be precise and careful when responding.

## APPENDIX 1 - FORM OF THE DCT

### MP questionnaire

Dear participant,

This study aims to analyze PRAGMATICALLY the speech act of refusal, i.e., analyzing what you would EXACTLY SAY in the proposed situations. It is not about whether the marriage proposal suits you or not, nor whether you accept it or not. It is ALL about the way you express your refusal to the other person's proposal.

1. Email address

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Age

\_\_\_\_\_

*Skip to question 3*

**MP  
Questionnaire**

You are kindly requested to consider the following marriage proposals. Respond to them by refusing as naturally as possible, as if you were in the actual situations:

3. A famous person who works with attractive co-stars.

\_\_\_\_\_

4. A great person who is way too older than you.

\_\_\_\_\_

5. A person with a good financial income, but he is a heavy smoker/  
alcoholic.

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Your Ex-husband/ boyfriend who cheated on you.

\_\_\_\_\_

7. A person who has a physical defect.

\_\_\_\_\_

8. A person who has many casual relationships (playboy).

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Google Forms

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