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مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

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تعنى بدراسات وأبحاث اللغات وآدابها

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Pragmatic Analysis of Refusals in Arabic and English: Strategies and Sociocultural Influences

Omar A. Khalil[1]
General Directorate of Education in Anbar, Ramadi, Iraq[1]
E-mail: omararchivemanager@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-5685-3852
Dr. Ammar A. Al Abdely[2]
Department of English, University of Anbar, Ramadi, Iraq[2]
E-mail: dr.ammar1974@uoanbar.edu.iq
ORCID: 0000-0002-7083-046X

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ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7083-046X [1]
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5685-3852 [2]

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Correspondingauthor:*Ammar AlAbdely*.

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ABSTRACT:

This study provides a pragmatic investigation of refusal strategies among Iraqi EFL learners, examining how gender and proficiency level influence the choice of strategies in English. Using a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), the study analyzes data from 60 Iraqi learners across different proficiency levels and genders. The findings reveal that indirect and adjunct strategies were the most frequently employed, reflecting a strong influence of Arabic pragmatic norms on English refusals. Although female learners tended to use more polite and indirect strategies, while male learners were slightly more direct, statistical tests showed no significant gender-based differences. Similarly, high-proficiency learners demonstrated more native-like use of mitigators and softeners, whereas low-proficiency learners showed greater evidence of pragmatic transfer and directness; however, these differences were not statistically significant. The results highlight the persistence of L1 pragmatic influence even among advanced learners, underscoring the need for explicit pragmatic instruction in EFL classrooms. This research contributes to the field of interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural communication by offering insights for language educators and curriculum designers on how sociocultural and linguistic variables shape pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Refusal strategies, pragmatic Transfer, speech acts, Arabic speakers, English Speakers, Sociocultural Influences

تحليل تداولي للرفض في اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية : الاستراتيجيات والتأثيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية

م.م. عمر عبد العزيز خليل[1]
قسم التعليم المهني ، مديرية تربية الانبار، وزارة التربية ، العراق.
أ.د. عمار عبد الوهاب العبدلي [2]
قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية التربية للبنات ، جامعة الانبار، الأنبار ، العراق.

المستخلص

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلًا تداوليًا لاستراتيجيات الرفض لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين كلغة أجنبية، مع التركيز على تأثير الجنس ومستوى الكفاءة على اختيار الاستراتيجيات في اللغة الإنجليزية. استخدمت الدراسة منهجا يمزج بين المنهج الكمي والنوعي من خلال اختبار إكمال الخطاب(DCT) ، وحُللت بيانات 60 متعلمًا عراقيًا من مستويات كفاءة وأجناس مختلفة. أظهرت النتائج أن الاستراتيجيات غير المباشرة واستراتيجيات المساندة كانت الأكثر استخدامًا، مما يعكس تأثير المعايير التداولية العربية على الرفض باللغة الإنجليزية. وعلى الرغم من أن المتعلمات الإناث فضّلن استخدام

استراتيجيات مهذبة وغير مباشرة أكثر من الذكور الذين مالوا إلى المباشرة، إلا أن الفروق لم تكن ذات دلالة إحصائية. كما أظهر المتعلمون ذوو الكفاءة العالية استخدامًا أكثر قربًا من أساليب الناطقين الأصليين من حيث التلطيف والتخفيف، في حين أظهر ذوو الكفاءة المنخفضة نقلًا تداوليًا أكبر ومباشرة أعلى؛ ومع ذلك، لم تكن هذه الفروق ذات دلالة إحصائية. تؤكد النتائج استمرار تأثير اللغة الأم حتى لدى المتعلمين المتقدمين، مما يستدعي دمج التدريب التداولي الصريح في صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية. تسهم هذه الدراسة في ميدان التداوليات بين اللغات والتواصل بين الثقافات من خلال تقديم رؤى تفيد المعلمين ومصممي المناهج حول كيفية تأثير العوامل الاجتماعية والثقافية واللغوية في الكفاءة التداولية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البراغماتية عبر الثقافات، استراتيجيات الرفض، الناطقون بالعربية، الناطقون بالإنكليزية، التأثيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية.

1. Introduction

Félix-Brasdefer (2008) defines refusal as a negative response or reaction to a request, invitation, offer, or recommendation. According to Searle (1977), refusal is a directive-response act in which the interlocutor agrees to refrain from carrying out an action. Refusal "occurs in the form of responses to a variety of illocutionary acts such as invitation, offers, requests, and suggestions," Ellis (2008, p. 186). According to Gass and Houck (1999), a refusal is a speech act that manifests as a negative reaction to beginning acts, including invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests. Interlocutors meet refusals on a daily basis in their social interactions. They frequently meet circumstances where they must decline invitations, offers, requests, or suggestions. In every culture and language, this seemingly straightforward act of refusal is essential to human contact. Because of their strong illocutionary impact and the need for careful inference to be properly understood, refusals make for an interesting research topic. Speech acts known as refusals take place in accordance with societal norms, individual preferences and cultural expectations (Caponetto, 2023). The substance and structure of refusals, which are frequently lengthy negotiated sequences, are determined by the speech act that prompted the refusal (Eslami, 2010). An important ability that differs greatly throughout cultures is detecting when someone is subtly declining an offer or how to properly decline it.

Refusals are regarded by Brown and Levinson (1987) as face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they fundamentally go against the requester's desires or expectations, which could threaten their positive face (the need for approval) and negative, face (the need for autonomy). Because it suggests rejection or non-compliance, refusing a request can undermine social cohesion; therefore, politeness techniques must be used to lessen its effects.

Since refusals are face-threatening acts (FTAs) that can affect social relationships, it is important to understand refusal techniques in intercultural communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To lessen the threat to both positive and negative face, different cultures employ different politeness techniques. If speakers do not line their refusals with cultural norms, miscommunications could occur, which could cause offense or strained relationships. Understanding these techniques lowers the possibility of misunderstanding in promoting mutual respect and improves effective communication.

The inadequate examination of pragmatic variations and sociocultural influences on refusal strategies represents the research gap in the comparative analysis of refusals in Arabic and English. Although there are studies (Al-Eryani, 2007; Turki, Juma'a & Al-Kubaisy, 2020. Al-Shalawi, 2021) on refusals in both Arabic and English, there is a lack of thorough comparative studies that look at how Arabic and English speakers deal with directness,

politeness, and face-threatening behaviors in refusal situations. Furthermore, contextual factors that influence refusal displays, like power dynamics and social distance, are frequently ignored in earlier research. Moreover, no previous study has attempted Iraqi informants with reference to gender effect on refusal strategies speakers employ. The current study attempts to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the common refusals strategies employed by Iraqi EFL learners?
2. How does Iraqi EFL's gender influence their choice of refusal strategies in language?
3. How does Iraqi EFL learners' proficiency level influence their choice of refusal strategies in English?

Accordingly, the research objectives for this research are:

1. Finding out the standard refusal techniques/strategies utilized by EFL learners in Iraq so far?

2. Finding out whether the gender of EFL's gender in Iraq has an influence the utilizing of refusal techniques/strategies in the two languages.

3. Finding out whether the proficiency level/skill of EFL's in Iraq has an influence the utilizing of English refusal strategies.

This study is vital due to examining whether proficiency level and gender influence the refusal strategies utilized by English language learners in Iraq. An understanding of such characteristics enhances the improvement of cross-cultural communication and pragmatic skills. The results from this study may potentially support learners in creating more effective language courses that are corresponded to the sociocultural backgrounds of those they are teaching. Additionally, by enlightening changing in refusal strategies, the study contributes in the development of interlanguage pragmatics. Furthermore, it can enhance curriculum learners including pragmatic considerations into language training. Finally, this study presents guidance to learners on concerning how to handle with refusal strategies in different situations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatics of Refusals

This study explores how people or learners request, offer, suggest or invite ideas and places in everyday interaction. Attempting to keep more polite, and promote unity among people is referred to as the pragmatics of refusals. To prevent insulting the individual who spoke, refusals are face-threatening acts. Cultural strategies and careful-language acquisition are notable challenges. Are they including in daily communication? Depending on context, social rank, and politeness standards, different languages and cultures use a variety of direct and indirect strategies. Since it enables speakers to move through contacts with ease and appropriateness, an understanding of refusal strategies is crucial for both language learning and successful cross-cultural communication (Beebe et.al., 1990).

Brown and Levinson (1987) in their theory of *Politeness* describe to what degree they assume the general correctness of Grice's theory of conversational interaction. They state that "…the only essential presumption is what is at the heart of Grice's proposals, namely that there is a working assumption by conversationalists of the rational and efficient nature of talk. It is against that assumption that polite ways of talking show up as deviations, requiring rational explanation on the part of the recipient, who finds in considerations of politeness

reasons for the speaker's apparent irrationality or inefficiency" (Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 4). Consequently, Brown and Levinson state that maintaining politeness is a key justification for deviating from conversational maxims (ibid).

The Cooperative Principle (CP) takes a different position in Brown and Levinson's theory than in their predecessors' theories. The CP creates a socially neutral environment in which frequent communication occurs. The framework's central theory is that rational efficiency should never be deviated from in the absence of explanation. Deviations from the CP's assumption are frequently caused by the consideration of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987).

2.2 Speech Acts

Austin (1975) and Searle (1969) in their *Speech Act Theory* describe that a huge variety of speech acts can be performed by utterances. Speech acts include things like requests, apologies, and even refusals. Discussing how speakers carry out their acts and how listeners get at the speaker's desired performance is crucial. It is not easy to determine the speaker's intended speech act, though. According to Austin (1975), speech acts can be divided into three categories. These three categories of acts are perlocutionary, illocutionary, and locutionary. He claims that the act of "saying something" is the simplest way to characterize a locutionary act (Austin 1975, 94). It is the act of making a statement. Conversely, the illocutionary act conveys illocutionary force and is more focused on the speaker's intended meaning (Austin 1975). The impact of the speaker's speech act on the environment is known as the perlocutionary act (Austin 1975).

As an illustration, when a speaker says, "It is cold here," the locutionary act is merely saying the statement. Illocutionary behaviors rely on the circumstances. The illocutionary force of the utterance in this instance might be a request, perhaps to turn on the heater or close the window. Lastly, a perlocutionary act occurs when the speech act is performed and results in a specific reaction (for example, the interlocutor gets up and shuts the window). However, the speaker's goals may not encompass the impact on the listener. It affects the hearer's emotions and thoughts in addition to their behavior (ibid, p.101).

A speech act is an example of linguistic communication carried out with a specific type of intention, according to Searle (1969). It is not always necessary for a speech act to be spoken. For example, they can be carried out via written words, sounds, or symbols on paper. Regardless of the communication method, the primary component of a speech act is the communicator's purpose to carry out a specific action through their statement (Searle 1969). By making a strict difference between an utterance's force and substance, Searle's approach departs from that of his predecessor (Searle 1969).

The degree to which a refusal is expressed obviously varies between direct and indirect refusals. While indirect refusals depend on modifying strategies like reluctance, excuses, or regretful statements (e.g., "I'd love to, but I'm busy"), direct refusals employ straightforward and simple language, such as "No, I can't." The relationship between speakers, politeness strategies, and cultural standards all affect the decision between direct and indirect refusals.

The inclination for directness varies among speakers of different languages and cultural backgrounds (Beebe, et.al, 1990). For instance, Arabic speakers commonly practice indirect strategies, like professions of regret or reason, to preserve politeness and refrain from face-threatening behaviors, but English speakers classically choose more direct refusals in casual contexts.

2.3 Pragmatic Transfer

Pragmatic transfer indicates the way how individuals utilize of pragmatics in L2 have an impact by one's cultural standards and L1. It takes place when learners adopt L1-based communication concepts (such as politeness techniques and speech acts or communicative standards and rules) to L2 interactions. Sometimes this may sometimes cause pragma-linguistic errors or misinterpretations (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Positive transfer of meaning will presumably arise in situations where a gap exists between L1 and L2 norms whereas a violation or a negative transfer of meaning will probably arise where gap exists between usage or context (Odlin, 1989). This critically matters for the acquiring of a second language, as it reveals how a learner's pragmatic proficiency could be guided by their language and culture.

2.4 Refusals in English

Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that refusal, in interaction, is a category of speech act (a direct face-threatening act) which may result in terminating an interaction. Fraser (1990) and Smith (1998) noticed in their researches, a number of various categories of cultural features like gender, age, education, power, etc. It is essential for interlocutors to utilize a range of refusal strategies to reduce the negative effects of refusing the requirements speech act. A speaker who mismanages the suitable refusal technique will hurt the hearer's face someone gets displeased and their relationship gets damaged which will make a failure in interaction.

Beebe et al. (1990) pointed out three categories of refusal techniques which include direct, indirect and adjunct/neutral refusals. When a participant, contradictory to the performative and non-performative, fittingly reject or denies another's request, offer, invitation, suggestion etc., this is referred to as "Direct refusal". The speaker for example utilizes performative expressions like "refuse", "decline", "reject" to reject a participant or non-performative statement for instance "No", "I can't", "No, I don't like it". This is commonly done to keep the positive or negative face of the hearer. Indirect refusals are a politeness technique utilized to minimize or reduce Face Threatening Acts (FTA). These categories of refusals aim to keep, or at the very least not threaten, the addressee's face (Brown & Levinson, 1980).

A communication strategy known as "indirect refusal" is when someone turns down an offer or request without stating "no." People rather soften the rejection with justifications, hints, or polite words. In order to keep social cohesion and not upsetting the person making the request, this strategy is frequently employed. For example: "Can you help me move this weekend?" said person A. Person B says, "Oh, I'd love to help, but I already have plans with my family" (Amarien, 1997).

The third type of refusal strategies is adjuncts, which is according to Savic (2014, p. 72). include "expressions that accompany refusals but are not themselves used to perform refusals," These could consist of expressing apology or regret, expressing a positive view, expressing agreement or feeling, mentioning God, expressing gratitude or appreciation, attracting the attention of the other person, and expressing concern or empathy. Adjuncts to refusals are external changes made to the primary act of refusal; they are not a part of the refuse itself. By showing harmony with the interlocutor, they act as strategies for attending to the interlocutor's positive face needs (Beebe et al., 1990). According to Beebe et al., who give an example of refusal adjuncts, participants frequently stated positive sentiments (e.g., "That's a good idea…") prior to offering an explanation. Positive ideas expressed alone

could be interpreted as acceptance if they are not followed by an explanation (e.g., "but I have to work late").

Cultural norms, beliefs, and communication techniques all have an impact on refusal patterns, which show significant differences among English-speaking societies. The ways in which people use direct and indirect strategies to decline offers, requests, or invitations clearly reflect these differences (Gass & Houck, 1999). Refusal patterns are significantly shaped by cultural context and hence divided into the following:

(i) High-Context Cultures: To keep harmony and prevent conflict, refusals are frequently made indirectly in cultures where communication primarily depends on contextual clues and indirect messages.

(ii) Low-Context Cultures: Refusals in cultures that place a high importance on clear and unambiguous communication are typically more direct and less dependent on contextual subtleties (Chang, 2009).

Effective cross-cultural communication requires an understanding of these cultural differences in refusal patterns. Understanding whether a culture favors direct or indirect rejections can make people more effective at navigating social situations, promoting respect for one another and lowering the chances of misunderstanding. According to Al-Shalawi (1997), cultural values have a big impact on how refusals are communicated in English. They determine the strategies used as well as how direct or indirect the communication is. These variances have their roots in social hierarchies, cultural norms, and values. Refusal strategies are also influenced by power relations and social hierarchies. In order to preserve harmony and respect, people in cultures with significant power distances may respond to people of higher rank with more subtle refusals. Direct refusals, on the other hand, might be more acceptable in cultures that value equality more since hierarchical differences are not as important.

2.5 Refusal in Arabic

According to pragmatics, refusal is a speech act in which a speaker expresses disapproval of a request, invitation, offer, or recommendation made by another. As a "negative second-turn illocution," this kind of behavior acts as an indirect responding action that rejects or negates the previous part of communication (Austin, 1975).

A number of variables, including as learners' gender and proficiency level, affect Arabic refusal strategies. Effective communication requires an understanding of the ways in which these features influence the selection and application of refusal strategies. Several studies such as Yousef and Al-Khawaldeh (2021) and Rabab'ah, Alghazo, and El-Dakhs (2025) used gender variations in refusal strategies as used among Arabic speakers. Gender significantly influences the refusal strategies they choose. These studies indicate that gender plays a significant role in the selection of refusal strategies among Arabic speakers. The Arabic speakers use preference for indirectness, indirect refusal techniques are primarily employed by males and females, for example. However, females prefer adjuncts to refusals, whereas males are more likely to use direct techniques and they employed particular strategies: When responding to offers, both genders prefer direct refusal techniques in Spoken Arabic, with "negative willingness/ability" being the most often employed strategy across all socioeconomic classes (Saud, 2019).

Moreover, language proficiency level can affect on refusal strategies and also has a big impact on how learners use refusal techniques through (i) preference for directness: Research

on EFL learners and Arabic speaker's shows that both groups choose indirect refusal techniques over direct ones. However, compared to native speakers, who employ more adjuncts to refusals, EFL learners typically employ more direct and indirect strategies. (ii) pragmatic transfer: Learners with higher competence levels may modify their refusal strategies to better conform to the norms of the target language, demonstrating less pragmatic transfer from their native tongue (Nelson, Al Batal, & Echols, 1996).

In short, proficiency level and gender considerably form Arabic communicator' and participant' refusal strategies. Learning or understanding these characteristics may enhance cross-cultural interaction and shape language teaching techniques, aiding learners to be involved more effectively in social interaction.

2.6 Gender Influence on Refusal Strategies

The influence of gender on refusal techniques has become an issue of several pragmatic and sociolinguistic studies. Refusal techniques represent the ways that learners who utilize in order to respond or reject requests, ideas, invitations, or offers. Based on a learner's gender, these ways could vary considerably. Studies focused on how males and females utilize direct and indirect refusal techniques throughout different contexts, usually due to social and cultural norms (Lakoff, 1975).

Based on studies, indirect refusal strategies are habitually utilized by both male and female learners. Compared to their fellow male colleagues, female learners naturally refuse in a more diplomatic and discreet way. Female learners are usually offering more details thorough explanations and preferring indirect replies over a clear word "no," however, male learners commonly reply to be clearer and briefer in their refusals (Chen, 1996).

Conversely, the other investigations did not find out any noteworthy gender distinctions in refusal techniques. The cultural class held a larger part than gender in this situation. This was as discovered from the study of the Persian learners who determined no notable distinction within males and females in their choice of refusal techniques (Maltz et.al, 1982).

These results presented the fact that, although there are extensive variations of gender differences in refusal strategies, for example, females prefer to be more indirect and males prefer to be more direct, these variations do not always exist. Across genders, the use of refusal strategies is greatly affected by contextual variables, social standing, and cultural standards.

Here the ways of the Impact of gender on refusal strategies according to Tajeddin and Alizadeh (2018):

- **Direct vs. Indirect Strategies**:

Research shows that males are far more likely to utilize direct refusal techniques, including saying "no" in clear way and without any further explanation .Conversely, females typically utilize indirect refusal techniques to soften their rejection, which might include hedging, clarifications, or apologies.

- **Employing Mitigation and Politeness**:

In order to preserve social harmony, females typically use more apologies, politeness signs, and softener compounds (such as "I'm really sorry, but I can't") . Males could be far less likely to utilize mitigating language as well as to be more direct.

- **The Impact of Culture on Gender-Based Refusals**:

Both males and females might prefer indirect refusals in collectivist societies (such as those in China, Japan, and the Middle East) as a means to stop conflicts. Males are typically more direct in individualistic societies (such as Germany and the United States), but females nevertheless try to be to some extent polite.

- **Behavior Specific to Context**:

Both males and females can adopt their refusal strategies in order to conform to social standards in formal contexts, like offices or educational institutions. Differences among gender are particularly obvious in casual dialogues, as women frequently show greater respect for the opinions of the other person.

Here the following examples of strategies for gendered refusal according to Al-Shalawi (2021):

Male's refusal:

"No, I can't." (Direct)

"I'm busy." (Brief)

Female's refusal:

"I'd love to, but I have another commitment." (Indirect + polite)

"I really appreciate it, but I'm afraid I won't be able to." (Apologetic)

2.7 The Effect of Level of Proficiency on Refusal Strategies

The way people utilize refusal strategies when interacting is greatly affected by their level of linguistic competence. The strategies speakers utilize to politely and non-offensively reject offers, requests, invitations, or ideas are known as refusal strategies. The speaker's language proficiency, cultural origins, and context of interaction all have an impact on these strategies. Higher competency learners, according to investigations, typically utilize more complicated and indirect refusal strategies, like offering justifications, making excuses, or offering alternatives. On the contrary, because of their grammatical rules and delimited vocabulary, low-proficiency learners commonly respond to straightforward refusals (Beebe, et.al, 1990).

Highly experienced learners are able to select refusals which correspond with politeness strategies giving that they are more conscious of pragmatic rules and cultural standards. They might reduce their refusals by using mitigation techniques like deferring or hedging reactions. On the contrary, learners can have difficulty with pragmatic proficiency, which could manifest in impolite or sudden refusals (Al-Eryani, 2007). Direct interpretations from their first language (L1) are frequently applied by low-proficiency participants, but they might not constantly be effective in the target language (L2). According to Keshavarz, Eslami, and Ghahraman (2006), this could lead to pragmatic errors like too direct refusals that can be viewed as impolite. Conversely, highly experienced speakers obtain a deeper comprehension of L2-specific refusal standards.

Learners become increasingly aware of sociocultural variations in refusal strategies as their competency increases. For instance, learners of other languages might adopt alternative conventions, but English speakers could reject indirectly through the use of sentences like "I'll think about it." Felix-Brasdefer (2008) argues that high-proficiency learner has the ability to adopt their rejections in order to look more socially fitting as well as cultural. In conclusion, refusal techniques have an immense influence on proficiency level. If

participants have weaker language skills, they can utilize direct refusals which might be viewed impolite. But a higher proficiency level can enable the participant to not only have indirect refusals but also softer and politely-expressed refusals. By getting aware of these variations, language learners will enhance their abilities to interact and keep clear of miscommunications in cross-cultural situations.

2.8 Review of Related Studies

This section synthesizes previous research on refusal strategies and highlights clear similarities and differences between those studies and the current investigation of Iraqi EFL learners. The synthesis focuses on four angles: research focus and aims, participants and context, methodology and measures, and main findings to show similarities and differences.

Sharqawi (2021) carried out a fascinating study on Iraqi EFL learners to explore how gender influences refusal performances in English. By utilizing a Discourse Completion Test/Task (DCT) with 86 participants regularly divided between males and females, the findings displayed those males have tended to prefer direct refusals, like saying "No" or "I can't," whereas females tended more towards indirect techniques, habitually including explanations and apologies, along with expressions of gratefulness (Adjunct refusals). Sharqawi highlighted the significance of adopting gender-sensitive teaching procedures in EFL to develop both grammatical and pragmatic skills. Correspondingly, Al-Shalawi (1997) looked into refusal techniques among Iraqi Arabic speakers, paying special attention to gender distinctions. While both genders commonly utilize indirect refusals, females have more than likely to soften their replies with explanations and polite phrases, but males have naturally more direct, especially when interacting with those of lower standing in society. This research highlighted the noteworthy role that gender and social dynamics serve in forming pragmatic performance in Arabic.

Examining the field of pragmatic transfer, Al-Shboul, Huwari, Al-Dala'ien, and Al-Daher (2022) took a closer look at how Jordanian EFL learners and Jordanian Arabic speakers deal with refusal techniques. Their research distinguished refusals in both Arabic and English, showing that learners generally brought their Arabic politeness standards into their English refusals. This occasionally resulted in replies that were too direct or not quite fitting for the cultural context. The two investigators emphasized the need of improving of pragmatic competence in EFL courses to assist minimize communication difficulties in intercultural interactions.

In their 2020 study, Al Masaeed, Taguchi, and Tamimi, examined how language proficiency has an effect refusal characteristic among L2 Arabic learners at various stages: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. They realized that proficiency is essential in pragmatic performance. Advanced learners chose to utilize more discrete, indirect, and contextually suitable refusal techniques that reflected those of native speakers, while beginners often tended to utilize direct refusals. This study emphasized the importance of participating pragmatic skills training into L2 Arabic teaching to assist learners improve sociolinguistic adequate suitability.

In his 2021 study, Al-Juraywi and Abdulaziz (2021). examined more closely of how pragmatic transfer influences highly skilled Saudi EFL learners. Although these skilled learners had a powerful control of the language, they frequently slipped into using Arabic refusal norms when interacting in English. This showed up as long explanations, too many apologies, and a tendency to be indirect. In contrast, native English speakers naturally select to be simple and clear when refusing something. The study emphasized that these patterns were frequently less suitable in English-speaking situations. Al-Juraywi and Abdulaziz

(2021) concluded that providing obvious direction on the cultural differences in refusal strategies is essential to assist reduce negative transfer and increase learners' understanding of pragmatics. The study concluded by highlighting the value of clear teaching of refusal strategies to support Saudi EFL learners' development of pragmatic English proficiency. According to the results, educating people about cultural variations in refusals may decline the occurrence of negative pragmatic transfer.

These studies together emphasize the intricate relationship between gender, language proficiency and pragmatic transfer in forming how EFL learners and Arabic speakers deal with refusals. They correspondingly highlight the significance of pragmatic competence as a key element in effective language teaching and learning, as a result giving a strong groundwork for the current research. However, various research gaps discovered within literature review on refusal strategies could be covered by this study. This study tackles new issues while building upon earlier research. These issues can be summarized below.

The study can enhance knowledge of refusal strategies used by Iraqi EFL Learners By shedding light on how Iraqi students reject in English, this study fills this knowledge gap and assists clarifying whether or not their behaviors are similar to those observed in other Arab nations. Moreover, the current study examines the meeting of proficiency levels and pragmatic transfer. Although pragmatic transfer has been the subject of many studies, the relationship between transfer and proficiency levels has not been precisely tackled. By examining whether lower-proficiency Iraqi EFL learners include more Arabic refusal standards into their English refusals than higher-proficiency learners, this study is going to close this gap. The reverse scenario will be investigated in this study: the neglected development of pragmatic competence in English by Arabic-speaking learners.

In addition to proficiency level, the current study analyzes gender variations in the refusal strategies of Iraqi EFL learners via examining whether male and female Iraqi EFL learners vary in their level of pragmatic transfer when refusing in English, this study will contribute a new additional aspect to gender-based pragmatic analysis. Whether gender-based refusal practices can be affected by competency. The present study is also unique in employing a Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis to offer a fuller Knowledge. Most prior studies examined how sociocultural norms, gender, and proficiency shape refusal realizations in EFL or Arabic contexts. Al-Juraywi and Abdulaziz (2021) and Al-Shalawi (1997) specifically investigated gender-based variation in refusal performance, while Al-Shboul et.al. (2022) and Al-Juraywi and Abdulaziz (2021) emphasized pragmatic transfer from Arabic to English. Al Masaeed et al. (2020) foregrounded proficiency-level differences. The current study integrates these strands by concurrently investigating gender and proficiency effects and explicitly measuring pragmatic transfer among Iraqi EFL learners. Thus, while earlier work tended to focus on one primary variable (gender or proficiency or transfer), the present study's aims are more integrative testing whether gender and proficiency interact with L1 transfer in the same participant group.

A key difference concerns the sampling of as earlier studies drew on Saudi, Jordanian, Yemeni, or cross-national samples; for example, Al-Shalawi (1997) worked with Saudi and American contexts, and Al-Shboul & Huwari (2022) examined Jordanian learners. The current study targets Iraqi EFL learners (third and fourth-year university students) and thus fills a regional gap in the literature by providing evidence from Iraq. Like several prior studies, the sample size here (N = 60) is moderate and balanced by gender, enabling within-group comparisons; however, some prior dissertations and larger surveys used bigger or more heterogeneous samples, which affects generalizability.

Most of the compared studies used Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) or similar elicitation techniques (Beebe et al., 1990; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), a methodological commonality that facilitates comparison across studies. The present study also uses a DCT, combined with both descriptive and inferential statistics (independent samples t-tests, one-sample t-tests), and a qualitative look at actual responses this mixed approach is shared with some recent research but is more comprehensive than studies relying solely on qualitative coding. A methodological distinction is the systematic reporting of adjuncts and strategy counts (direct vs. indirect vs. adjuncts) and the explicit use of placement test scores to group participants by proficiency, which allows for clearer operationalization of proficiency effects than studies that used self-reported proficiency.

Based on the discussion above, the present study contributes to the literature by (1) providing data from an underrepresented regional context (Iraq); (2) combining quantitative hypothesis testing with qualitative exemplars of pragmatic transfer (real anonymized responses); and (3) demonstrating that descriptive patterns (gendered tendencies, proficiency trends) do not always translate into statistically significant differences. This nuanced finding cautions researchers and practitioners against overgeneralizing descriptive tendencies without appropriate statistical validation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Instruments

The current study analyzes refusal strategies as used by Iraqi EFL learners with special emphasis on the effect of gender and proficiency level on the refusal strategies. Discourse Completion Tasks/ Tests (DCTs) were used in a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather data from Iraqi EFL learners. It was widely accepted that empirical data was necessary for achieving the aims of the study. The Discourse Completion Task/Test, a quantitative method, was used in this study. It was created specifically to comprehend speech acts., and it is among the most authentic and dependable approaches for researching the refusal strategies of two or more distinct cultures. Blum-Kulka (1982) was the first to create and apply the DCT, and it has subsequently been utilized extensively in several studies such as Al Issa 1998, Beebe et al. 1990, Nelson, Carson, Batal, and Bakary (2002), Saeki and O'Keefe (1994), and AlBugami (2019). The DCT was requested to be completed by those who participated in both groups. The scenarios were drawn from hypothetical situations. It outlines the situation or events that every person may run across on a daily basis (See Appendix A (2)).

3.2 Participants

In terms of sampling, the respondents were Iraqi Arabic speakers studying in the University of Anbar, Iraq. They were 60 participants recruited purposively as they were pooled from among 100 learners of English at two English Departments College of Education for Humanities and College of education for women. More specifically, participants who took part in the poll were from third and fourth stages. These two stages were targeted as they were supposed to show a reasonable level of language interaction after three to four years of exposure to English. Full demographic profiles are provided in the results section of this work (See appendix A (1)). To respond to the research questions attempted in this study, participants were chosen according to their gender and proficiency level. To determine participants' proficiency levels, participants were asked to sit for the Oxford Placement Test which follows the European Framework for language proficiency

(http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp). Hence, they were divided into low and high proficient learners based on their results in the placement test. It is worth noting that the placement test was meant to identify participants' general level of proficiency in English. To account for regional language variances, this group includes people from a variety of Arabic-speaking students, more specifically Iraqi students speaking a Baghdadi dialect.

4. Results & Discussion

This section offers the descriptive and statistical results obtained in this study aiming to respond to the objectives of the study. The results are directly discussed after each subsection.

4. 1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Refusal Strategies

4.1. 1 overall descriptive statistical analysis

The study had sixty participants in total (thirty males and thirty females). As was stated earlier, these were divided based on their proficiency level in English into high and low learners. Their refusal strategies were divided adopting the classification system developed by Nelson et al., 2002. Table (1) below shows the overall performance of the study informants in response to the 10 situations offered in the test. These results are necessary to identify the extent to which Iraqi learners are influenced by their L1 pragmatic conventions.

Table 1: Overall Refusal Strategies used by all participants

Type of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Strategies	150	25.00 %
Indirect strategies	257	42.83%
Adjuncts Strategies	193	32.17%
Total number of Situations	600	100%

As shown in Table (1) above, the majority of informants opted to use indirect strategy of refusal with 257 and 42.8% counts and percentage respectively. The second most selected strategy was to refuse with adjuncts with 193 and 32.1% counts and percentage respectively. On the other hand, direct refusal strategy was used the least with 150 counts and 25% percentage.

The results obtained in the current study show that Iraqi EFL speakers are significantly influenced by the pragmatics of their L1. Arabic as stated earlier tend to be polite when refusing a request or an offer. The desire to be polite is seen in their indirect refusal and the use of adjuncts in their responses of refusal. The results also imply a lack of cultural awareness on the part of Iraqi EFL users, as English native users tend to be direct and refuse without adding adjuncts that make the refusal less rude.

The findings revealed significant pragmatic transfer among low proficiency learners. For instance, many participants used expressions such as 'God willing' or lengthy justifications that are common in Arabic but inappropriate in English refusals". Similarly, many participants used sayings like "Inshallah" or extended clarifications that are normally used in Arabic but unfitting in English refusals, showing a large pragmatic transfer among low proficiency learners, according to the results.

4.1.2 descriptive statistical analysis with reference to gender

Table 2 below shows the counts and percentages tabulated based on gender with reference to the three refusal strategies used by the study informants.

Table 2: Counts and percentages of male and female informants based on refusal strategies used

Strategy	60 Males		60 Females	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Strategies	86	28.67%	64	21.33%
Indirect strategies	112	37.33%	145	48.33%
Adjuncts Strategies	102	34%	91	30.33%
Total number of Situations	300	100%	300	100%

As it is shown on Table (2) above, both males and females tended to use indirect and with adjunct refusal strategies respectively; however, there some differences in the counts and percentages obtained. Moreover, in a few cases, both female and male opted to use direct refusal in 28% and 21% situations for males and females respectively.

4.1.3 descriptive statistical analysis with reference to proficiency level

The results of the test conducted in this study are presented in Table (3) below to show how informants with low and high proficiency levels responded to the 10 situations included in this study.

Table 3: Informants' refusal strategies based on proficiency level

Strategy	Proficiency Levels			
	High (30 Participants)		Low (30 Participants)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Frequency
Direct Strategies	103	34.33%	64	21.33%
Indirect strategies	110	36.67%	130	43.33%
Adjuncts Strategies	87	29%	106	35.33%
Total number of Situations	300	100%	300	100%

As shown in Table (3) above, counts and percentages obtained referred to noticeable differences between low and high proficient learners. Firstly, low proficient learners used direct refusal strategy more than high proficient ones with counts 103 and 64 for low- and high-proficient learners respectively with 21.3% and 34.3% for high and low proficient informants respectively.

4.2 Inferential Statistical Analysis of Refusal Strategies

The following sections present the results of the statistical analysis that aim at identifying the effect of gender and proficiency level variables on the refusal strategies used by Iraqi EFL of English in response to 10 situations offered in the test conducted in this study. The statistical tests selected were independent samples T. Test and one-sample T. Tests as the study includes two groups for each variable examined.

4.2.1 inferential statistical analysis of gender differences

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there were statistically significant differences between male and female participants in their use of refusal strategies across ten different situations. The results revealed that females (M = 20.90, SD = 2.37) reported a slightly higher mean score than males (M = 20.57, SD = 1.85). However, this difference was not statistically significant, t(58) = -0.607, p = .546, indicating that gender does not play a significant role in influencing the frequency or intensity of refusal strategy usage. The results of the T. Test are shown in table 4 below.

Table 4: Results of Independent Samples T. Test and Levene's Test (Gender)

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
RS	Equal variances assumed	.763	.386	-.607	58	.546	-.33333	.54884

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variances (F = 0.763, p = .386), thus validating the use of the equal variances assumed row in the t-test output (see Table 4 above).

In addition, a one-sample t-test comparing the overall refusal strategy mean score to a test value of 20 indicated a statistically significant difference: t(59) = 2.687, p = .009, with a mean difference of 0.733. This suggests that the participants, overall, employed refusal strategies at a slightly higher rate than the hypothetical midpoint (see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Results of One-Sample T. Test (Gender)

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 20					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
RS	2.687	59	.009	.73333	.1872	1.2795

These findings suggest that while participants are slightly inclined to use refusal strategies more frequently than a neutral benchmark, gender differences in this regard are minimal and not statistically significant.

Furthermore, while males' participants commonly used more direct strategies that include performing like (I reject…), negative ability/desire like (I won't, I don't think so, I can't) and the flat (No), females' participants typically utilized more softer and indirect strategies include wishes like (I wish I had ability to help…), regret and apology like (I feel awful… or I am sorry…), reason, excuse and explanation like I have back pain, I am busy…, or My father will be home that morning) and other options like promise of future approvals like (Next time, I will attempt to do it or I promise I'll do it next time).

Female participants tended to use more indirect and polite strategies, such as apologies and expressions of regret, whereas male participants often opted for more direct strategies. Compared to females, males are likely to utilize direct strategies with greater frequency (103

vs. 64). Indirect strategies are strongly preferred by females (145 vs. 95). The use of adjuncts was slightly more common for males but generally fairly corresponding. For example, the questionnaires for both males and females whether they are high or low proficiency level use adjunct strategies like statements of empathy like (I understand that you are in…), gratitude/appreciation like (Thanks or Thank you), statement of positive feeling/opinion or agreement like (I'd love…, That's good idea) or pause fillers like (Oh or Well). When rejecting, males' EFL learners select more direct strategies, which might be affected by social and cultural standards of aggressiveness.

4.2.2 inferential statistical analysis of proficiency level differences

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in the use of refusal strategies between participants with low and high levels of English proficiency. The descriptive statistics revealed that participants with low proficiency (M = 20.97, SD = 2.33) reported slightly higher use of refusal strategies than those with high proficiency (M = 20.20, SD = 2.01). Table 6 below shows the results of the independent T.Test.

Table 6: Results of Independent Samples T. Test and Levene's Test (Proficiency Level)

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
RS	Equal variances assumed	.763	.386	-.607	58	.546	-.33333	.54884

To ensure the validity of the comparison, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was performed and showed no violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances (F = 0.220, p = .641). Thus, the equal variances assumed row in the t-test was interpreted (see Table 6 above).

The results of the independent samples t-test indicated that the observed difference in mean scores was not statistically significant, t(58) = 1.367, p = .177. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference [-0.356, 1.890] includes zero, further confirming the lack of statistical significance. Although the low proficiency group appeared to use refusal strategies more frequently, the effect was not meaningful in a statistical sense.

A one-sample t-test was also conducted to evaluate whether the overall mean score for refusal strategies significantly differed from a neutral benchmark value of 20. The test revealed a statistically significant difference: t(59) = 2.065, p = .043, with a mean difference of 0.583 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.02 to 1.15. This indicates that, regardless of proficiency level, participants showed a modest tendency to use refusal strategies more frequently than the expected average (see table 7 below).

Table 7: Results of One-Sample T. Test (Proficiency Level)

One-Sample Test				
Test Value = 20				
T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference

				Lower	Upper
2.687	59	.009	.73333	.1872	1.2795

In summary, the results suggest that English proficiency level does not significantly influence the employment of refusal strategies among the participants. However, all participants collectively demonstrated a slight, yet statistically significant, inclination toward employing refusal strategies above a neutral baseline.

Moreover, advanced learners were more capable of employing native-like refusal strategies, such as softeners and mitigators. In contrast, beginners often used literal translations from Arabic, leading to pragmatic failure." Include real anonymized responses from the data: "For instance, one beginner-level male responded to a request with: 'I don't want, sorry for that,' which reflects both directness and non-native phrasing. Compared to low proficiency EFL learners, both males and females high proficiency learners utilized more direct strategies. Among females with low proficiency, indirect strategies significantly improved (79 examples). Because they had less language skills, low proficiency EFL learners may have utilized adjuncts more frequently as a mitigating strategy.

5. Discussion

The results of this study reveal that Iraqi EFL learners rely heavily on indirect and adjunct refusal strategies, reflecting the sociocultural influence of Arabic pragmatic norms. This finding supports earlier works such as Beebe et al. (1990) and Félix-Brasdefer (2008), which emphasized the role of cultural norms in shaping politeness and indirectness in refusals. The preference for indirectness among Iraqi learners aligns with findings from Arabic-speaking contexts (Al-Shalawi, 1997; Yousef & Al-Khawaldeh, 2021), where politeness and face-saving mechanisms are culturally valued.

Although descriptive data indicated that female participants tended to employ more polite and indirect strategies, statistical analysis showed no significant gender differences. This suggests that while gender may shape the tone or manner of refusals, it does not substantially alter the frequency or structure of the strategies used. These results are consistent with Maltz and Borker (1982), who noted that contextual and cultural factors often outweigh gender in determining pragmatic behavior.

Similarly, the proficiency-level analysis demonstrated that higher-proficiency learners displayed more native-like refusal behavior, using mitigators and softeners effectively, whereas lower-proficiency learners showed more directness and evidence of pragmatic transfer. However, the absence of statistically significant differences suggests that linguistic competence alone does not guarantee pragmatic competence—an idea supported by Kasper (1997) and Al-Eryani (2007). This reinforces the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness and instruction into EFL curricula.

Overall, the findings highlight the enduring impact of first language norms on second language pragmatic use. Iraqi EFL learners' refusals reflect an interlanguage stage in which L1 sociocultural expectations coexist with developing L2 skills. Explicit teaching of pragmatics, particularly in speech acts such as refusals, is essential to bridge this gap. Future research may explore the role of contextual variables, such as power relations, formality, and exposure to native English interaction, to further explain how pragmatic transfer evolves with experience.

6. Conclusions

This study is interested in showing L1 pragmatic competence and its influence on the way users react to requests and offers with various refusal strategies. It is also interested in showing any potential significant effect gender and proficiency level can have on Iraqi EFL learners' usage of refusal strategies. The study arrived at the following conclusions provided based on the study variables and the study objectives. These conclusions are summarized below.

1. L1 pragmatic transfer is highly influential on foreign L2 users as it is manifested in the way these users think and the way they express themselves in real like situations. Iraqi EFL users of L2 are not fully aware of cultural and social differences between Arabic and English; thus, they do not consider these differences in their interaction in the L2.

2. Descriptive statistics did reveal differences between male and female Iraqi L2 users. Females highlight face-saving; hence, they prefer to be more polite and utilizing mitigating strategies. On the contrary, males used direct refusal strategies more than females did. This indicates their indifference to face-saving issues. Nevertheless, these descriptive differences were not reflected in the statistical testes conducted where no statistically significant difference was found between male and female users. This means that pragmatically speaking all informants need more cultural, socio, and pragmatic training.

3. Descriptive statistics also referred to differences between low and high proficient Iraqi L2 users. High proficient EFL learners were better able to utilize native-like refusal strategies including mitigates and softeners. On the other hand, low proficiency level frequently took translations from Arabic directly, which resulted in pragmatic failure. Again, descriptive differences were not reflected in the statistical testes conducted in this study. T. tests did not reveal any significant differences in the refusal strategies used based on proficiency level. This also stresses the need for more cultural, socio, and pragmatic practice to raise L2/EFL users' awareness.

7. Recommendations

The study arrived at the following recommendations:

1. The findings of the study emphasized the significance of pragmatic learning in EFL classes, especially in cases when it comes to speech acts like refusals, where interlocutors from different cultures interact and cause miscommunication that may affect their relationships. Intensive training is more than necessary to familiarize learners with the cultural, socio, and pragmatic peculiarities of English to minimize negative L1 pragmatic transfer.

2. Further studies can work on the use of refusal strategies by L2 speakers from different cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds to identify L1 pragmatic transfer on the performance of these users.

3. Further studies can investigate the effect of other variables such as age of L2 learning, nature of L2 exposure, amount of L2 exposure, and motivation with reference to the use of refusal strategies.

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Appendices

Appendix A (1)

Consent Form

- Aim of the project: This questionnaire aims at identifying refusal strategies used by Iraqi EFL learners when asked to respond to hypothetical situations with any form of refusal. This questionnaire was adapted from Nelson's et al. DCT (1996) and was used in the research conducted by Nelson et al. (2002).
- What you will be asked to do: Refuse in all hypothetical situations
- How the data collected will be used: The data will be analyzed and used anonymously for a research paper. Additionally, you are free to withdraw from participation at any time with no need for explanation.

Thank you for your help!

1. Please tick

□ I confirm that I have read and understood the information above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

□ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

□ I agree to take part in the above-named survey.

2. Gender

○ Male

○ Female

3. Age:

4. Current Stage:

○ 1st

○ 2nd

○ 3rd

○ 4th

- Direction to answer: Please insert your answer in the empty box. Pretend you are the person in the situation. You must refuse all requests, offers, invitations, and offers. Respond as you would in actual conversation.'

Appendix A (2)

Hypothetical Scenarios

First Situation:
You are in your third year of college. You attend classes and you take really good notes. Your classmate often misses a class and asks you for the lecture notes. On this occasion, your classmate says, 'Oh no! We have an exam tomorrow but I don't have the notes from the last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Second Situation:
You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a company that sells paper invites you to an expensive dinner. The salesman says, 'We have met several times to discuss your purchase of my company's products. I was wondering if you would like to be my guest at the Royal Remington (expensive restaurant) in order to firm up the contract.' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Third Situation:
You are a top executive at a very large accounting firm. One day the boss calls you into his office. He says, 'Next Sunday my wife and I are having a little party. I know its short notice, but I'm hoping that all of my top executives will be there with their spouses. How would you refuse?

Answer:

Fourth Situation:
You're at a friend's house watching TV. The friend offers you a snack. You turn it down saying that you've gained some weight and don't feel comfortable in your new clothes. Your friend says, 'Hey, why don't you try this new diet I've been telling you about?'. How would you refuse?

Answer:

Fifth Situation:
You're at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you're searching through the mess on your desk, your boss walks over and says, 'You know, maybe you should try and organize yourself better. I always write myself little notes to remind me of the things. Perhaps you should give it a try.' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Sixth Situation:
You arrive home and notice that your cleaning lady is extremely upset. She comes rushing to you and says, 'Oh God, I'm so sorry! I had an awful accident. While I was cleaning, I bumped into the tables and your China vase fell and broke. I just feel terrible about it. I insist on paying for it.' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Seventh Situation:
You're at a friend's house for lunch. Your friend says, 'How about another piece of cake?' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Eighth Situation:
A friend invites you to dinner, but you really can't stand this friend's fiancé. Your friend says, 'How about coming over for dinner Saturday night? We're having a small dinner party.'. How would you refuse?

Answer:

Ninth Situation:
You have been working in an advertising agency for some time. The boss offers you a raise and a promotion, but it involves moving. You don't want to go. Today the boss calls you into his office. He says, 'I'd like to offer you an executive position in our new offices in Yolk town (smaller town). It's a great town, only three hours from here by plane. And a nice raise comes with the position.' How would you refuse?

Answer:

Tenth Situation:
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. But your boss says, 'If you don't mind, I'd like you to spend an extra hour or two tonight so that we can finish this.' How would you refuse?

Answer:

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