

Politeness Strategies in Requests and Refusals

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ABSTRACT: This paper consists of five sections. Section One tries to characterize requests and refusals as face-threatening speech acts. Section Two puts forward a classification of politeness strategies used in making requests and refusals. Section Three dwells on previous studies in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, especially those on Chinese and English requests and refusals. Section Four provides a short review of related studies on interlanguage performance of requests and refusals. The last section briefly summarizes this paper.

Keywords: *Refusals, Requests, Speech Acts, Felicity Conditions, Pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Searle (1969: 16) defined speech acts as “the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication,” which could be analyzed on three levels (Austin, 1969; Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 2012; 2013a; 2014; 2016a): the locution (the linguistic utterance of the speaker), the illocution (what the speaker intends) and perlocution (the eventual effect on the hearer). The study of speech acts in Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) has concentrated on illocutionary meanings (Ellis, 1994; Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 2017a). Searle (1979) had put forward a taxonomy of illocutionary acts which were further elaborated by Salmani Nodoushan (1995; 2006a,b; 2007a,b; 2013b; 2014a,b,c), including directives, commissives, expressives, representatives and declarations. Among them, directives are those speech acts whose function is to get the hearer to do something. As attempts on the part of a speaker to get the hearer to perform or stop performing some kind of action (Ellis, 1994), requests are therefore labeled as directives (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011). Refusals were classified under the category of commissives (Yule, 1996; Salmani Nodoushan, 2016b), which were those kinds of speech acts that speakers used to commit themselves to, or free themselves from, some future action. Zhang (1999) agreed that in the sense refusal committed the refuser not to doing the action proposed by the refusee, it certainly was a commissive.

Speech act performance seemed to be ruled by universal principles of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; see also Salmani Nodoushan, 2013c; 2015a,b; 2016c; 2017b). According to Brown and Levinson, politeness involves us showing an awareness of other people’s face wants. ‘Face,’ in their definition, is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. It consists of two specific kinds of desires: the desire to be unimpeded in one’s action (negative face), and the desire to be approved of (positive face). Brown and Levinson believed that some speech acts such as orders, requests, apologies and so on and so forth were intrinsically face threatening and were often referred to as FTAs (Salmani Nodoushan, 1995; 2006a,b).

By making a request, the speaker may threaten the hearer’s negative face by intending to impede the hearer’s ‘freedom of action,’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65) and also runs the risk of losing

¹ This paper has been extracted from thesis; I have added more recent literature to the paper too.

face him/herself, as the requestee may choose to refuse to comply with his/her wishes (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011). By making a refusal, the speaker is posing a threat to the hearer's positive face by not caring about 'the addressee's feelings, wants, etc.,' (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 66).

Researchers have identified the characteristics of requests (Ellis, 1992; Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011) and refusals (Zhang, 1999; Salmani Nodoushan, 2016b), among which some common features are shared:

1. They can be performed in a single turn, or more than one turn.
2. They can be realized linguistically in a variety of ways. Three dimensions of modification can be identified:
 - a) directness level
 - b) internal modification of the act, and
 - c) external modification of the act.
3. The choice of linguistic realization depends on a variety of social factors to do with the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.
4. There are cross-linguistic differences relating to the preferred form of a request or refusal in the same situation, although the main categories of requests or refusals can be found in different languages.

The face-threatening nature and the characteristics of requests and refusals determine that various politeness strategies are needed in order to successfully achieve the communicative end.

2. Politeness Strategies for Performing Requests and Refusals

In their model of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguished a number of options and strategies available to the speaker for doing FTAs. They classified all the strategies into five broad categories (see Figure 1), arranged from the least polite to the most polite in politeness degree.

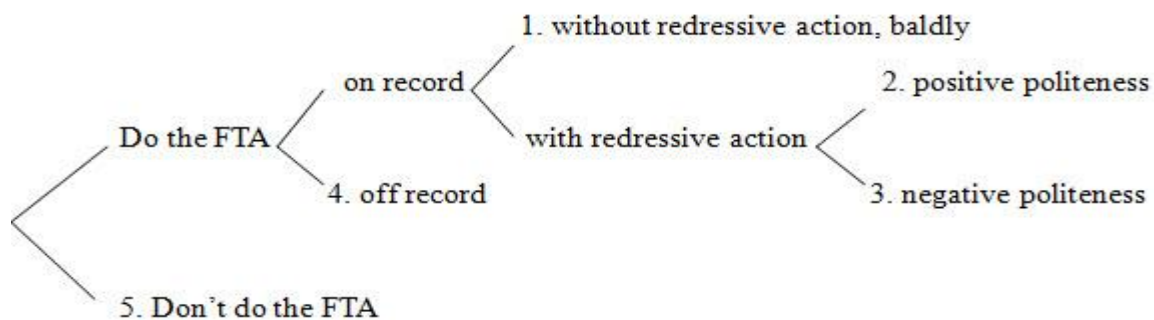


Figure 1. Politeness strategies for doing FTAs.

The least polite strategy is to *do an act baldly, without redress*. It means doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible. By *redressive action* a speaker can give face to the addressee to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA and therefore be more polite. Such redressive action takes the form of either *positive politeness*, which is oriented

toward the positive face of the hearer, the desire to be approved, or *negative politeness*, which is oriented toward hearer's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. If an interlocutor addresses the other directly and makes his communicative intention quite clear, then he is said to go *on record* in doing an act. The first three are therefore all *on record* strategies. In comparison, an *off record* strategy is often more polite as it means more than one intention has been conveyed and the interlocutor does not need to commit himself for one particular intention. The fifth, which is not to do the FTA at all, is the most polite. To make it clear, Yule (1996: 66) gave a typical example:

Suppose you want to ask someone to lend you a pen. You may say nothing but search it in the bag. In other words, you are waiting for the other person to offer. In this case, you don't do the FTA. Or you can go off record with "I've forgot my pen" so more was communicated than was said. You could also go on record with a bald request: "Lend me your pen." Or you could go on record but with redressive actions, e.g., "How about letting me use your pen?" or "Could you lend me a pen?" The former orients to positive politeness emphasizing closeness between the speaker and the hearer and the latter orients to negative politeness emphasizing the hearer's right to freedom.

In previous studies on requests and refusals, researchers have developed a coding scheme and classification of strategies in analyzing requests (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989; Lee-Wong, 2000; Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011) and refusals (Zhang, 1999; Salmani Nodoushan, 2016b). Their classification of strategies often approached requests or refusals from three dimensions, i.e., directness level of the head act, internal modification and external modification. Head act is the minimal unit which serves to realize a request or refusal independent of other elements. Internal modification or external modification modify the head act internally or externally by mitigating the face-threatening force of a request or refusal; They have been called supportive discourse moves by Salmani Nodoushan (2007c; 2008a,b; 2016b) and Salmani Nodoushan and Allami (2011). This kind of classification is easy to operate in data analysis in empirical studies and seems to be quite different from Brown and Levinson (1987)'s model of politeness. Yet to examine them more closely (See Figure 2-7), we found the two were in fact interrelated with each other.

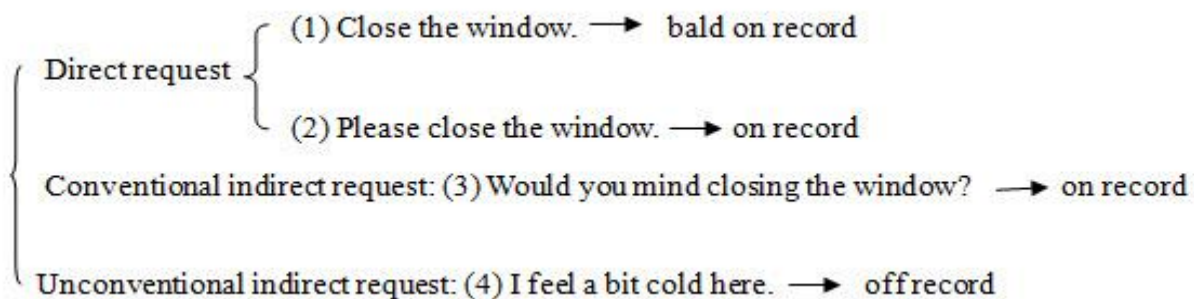


Figure 2. Directness level in the head acts of requests.

First, *directness* means the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution (Blum-Kulka et. al., 1989). Directness levels are illustrated by the following examples

from the most direct to the most indirect (See Figure 2).

In Example (1) in Figure 2, no redress occurred and the request is realized in the most direct way. In Example (2) and (3), redress actions like politeness marker “please”, consultative device “would you mind” were used to mitigate the impositive force of the request. Though literally Example (3) did not convey the illocutionary force directly, the usage has been fully conventionalized in English so that it would be read by all participants as requests (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Therefore, it is still on record strategy together with Example (2). Unconventional indirect requests like Example (4) are off record strategies as more than one “unambiguously attributable intention” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 67) is conveyed. A speaker can also choose not to say anything, i.e., “don’t do the FTA.”. Similarly, we have direct refusals and indirect refusals, which could also be termed as on record or off record correspondingly (See Figure 3). Though modal and negation have been used in “I can’t”, this usage has been conventionalized to a great extent so that it is still treated as bald on record refusals.

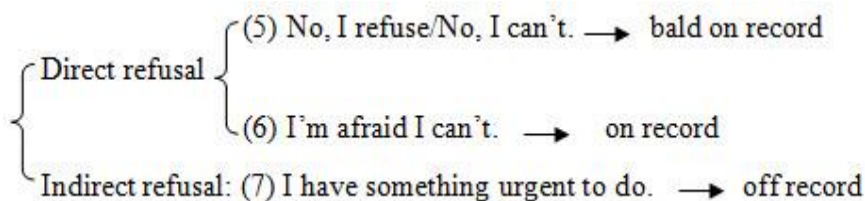


Figure 3. Directness level in the head acts of refusals.

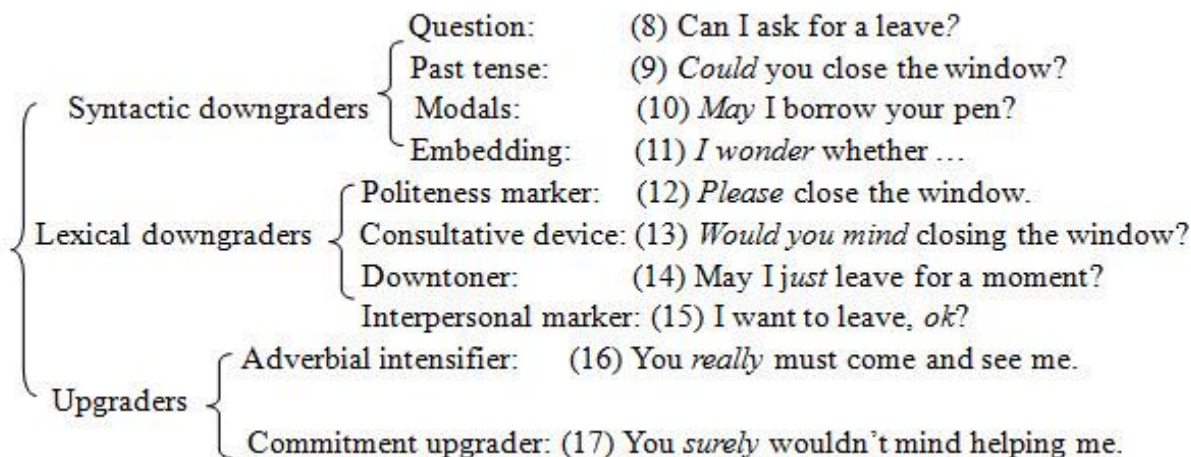


Figure 4. Internal modification in the head acts of requests.

Secondly, *internal modification* (see Figure 4 and 5) can be realized both syntactically and lexically to mitigate the force of a certain head act (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; 2016b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011). Most of them act as softening mechanisms that “give the addressee an ‘out’, [...] permitting him to feel that his response is not coerced,” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 70) and therefore are negative-oriented. However, there is an exception for the syntactic downgrader “question”. It can be either positive-oriented by showing informality (e.g., “How about lending me your pen?”) or negative-oriented by showing deference (e.g., “Could you lend me your pen?”). On the other hand, upgraders like adverbial intensifier, commitment upgrader or lexical intensification increase the impact of an utterance on the hearer. In Examples

16, 17 and 25, “S considers H to be in important respects ‘the same’ as he, with in-group rights and duties and expectations,” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 70) by using *really* and *surely*. They are therefore positive-oriented strategies.

{	Syntactic downgraders	Past tense:	(18) I <i>couldn't</i> stay here.
		Embedding:	(19) I'm <i>afraid</i> I can't.
		Modals:	(20) No, I <i>can't</i> .
		Negation:	(21) So I <i>can't</i> help you.
{	Lexical downgraders	Hesitator:	(22) Er ..., sorry.
		Downtoner:	(23) <i>Maybe</i> I can't lend it to you.
		Interpersonal markers:	(24) But <i>you know</i> , ...
{	Upgraders	Adverbial intensifier:	(25) I'm <i>really</i> sorry.

Figure 5. Internal modification in the head acts of refusals.

{	Promise:	(26) I'll return it to you as soon as possible.	} positive	
		Expression of gratitude:		(27) And I'll be very thankful to you.
{	Preparatory:	(28) I have something to discuss with you.	} negative	
		Grounders:		(29) I suddenly get a stomachache
		Imposition minimizer:		(30) If you have several pens, ...
		Apology:		(31) I'm sorry.
		Disarmer:		(32) I hope you will not mind it.

Figure 6. External modification in requests.

{	Reason:	(33) I have something urgent to do.	} positive	
	Consideration of interlocutor's feelings:	(34) Thank you for your invitation.		
	Suggestion of willingness:	(35) I'd love to.		
	Sweetener:	(36) You play basketball well		
{	Suggestion of alternatives:	(37) May I do it tomorrow?	} negative	
		Criticizing:		(38) I tell you that you should keep good notes.
		Request:		(39) May I ask for a leave?
		Statement of regret:		(40) I'm sorry.

Figure 7. External modification in refusals.

Note: The sub-strategies either in internal modification or external modification are in fact inexhaustible. New categories may be created and added to the list. Yet, the major categories identified by previous researchers have been listed here.

The third dimension is *external modification* or As for external modification usually in the form of supportive moves (see Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; 2016b; Salmani Nodoushan &

Allami, 2011), there is also a list of sub-strategies available (see Figure 6 and 7). They are either positive-oriented to emphasize commonality with the hearer or negative-oriented to show deference to the hearer.

However, as we can observe from our daily life, we do not always choose the most polite or the most indirect strategy because strategy choice are determined by various factors. Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that three sociological factors are crucial in determining the level of politeness which a speaker (S) will use to an addresser (H). They are relative power (P) of H over S, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing the face-threatening act. It was assumed that when one of these variables ranked high, more politeness would be involved to mitigate the force.

Experimental studies have supported the importance of social and contextual factors in determining politeness assessment and choice of politeness strategies (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al, 1989; Lee-Wong, 2000; Wang, 2001; Zhang & Wang, 1997). Moreover, studies on speech act performance from a cross-cultural perspective were carried out on the assumption that speech acts are realized from culture to culture in different ways. These differences may result in communication difficulties that range from the humorous to the serious (Gass, 1995). Cultural factors proved to interact with situational factors in speech act performance by CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). Their findings indicate estimates of specific social variables differ cross-culturally in a given context.

3. Studies on Requests and Refusals in Contrastive Pragmatics

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) has derived its theoretical and empirical foundation from general and especially cross-cultural pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). An effort has been made to identify universal norms of speech act behavior and to distinguish these from language-specific norms in order to better understand and evaluate interlanguage behavior (Cohen, 1996). Over the last two decades, there has been a wide range of empirical studies focusing on a set of speech acts like requests, refusals, compliments, promises, apologies, expression of gratitude, etc. One of the most comprehensive studies of speech act behavior, both for its breadth and depth, has been that of the Cross-cultural Speech Act Research Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989) which compared speech act behavior of native speakers of a number of different languages with the behavior of learners of these languages. It provided a wealth of information as to the cross-linguistic differences in the performance of illocutionary acts and also a number of non-target features of learners' interlanguage. It confirmed the effect of social and situational variables on realization patterns of a given speech act. Besides, it also produced useful instruments for data collection and a coding scheme that has been adopted in many other speech act studies.

The cross-cultural differences between speech act realizations in Chinese and in English have drawn the attention of researchers. They have studied speech acts like compliments (Li & Feng, 2000), refusals (Liao, 1996; Wang, 2001) and requests (Zhang & Wang, 1997; Lee-Wong, 2000). Similar studies have been done on Persian invitations (Salmani Nodoushan, 1995; 2006a), requests (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007c; 2008a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011)), refusals (Salmani Nodoushan, 2016b), greetings (2006b), complaining (2007a,b; 2008b), etc.

The findings of Zhang and Wang (1997)'s study of Chinese requests in part supported the view that speech acts were language-or culture-specific, and in part supported the view that speech acts were governed by some universal pragmatic principles. With written DCT as their

instrument, they found that (1) the same request sequence as in CCSARP that had been identified in Chinese confirmed the claim that the basic structure of requests was a universal feature underlying all languages; (2) social factors such as social distance, social power and the degree of imposition interacted with age and sex in determining the choice of request strategies; (3) the conventionally indirect strategy use in requests was highly valued and deemed as the most polite one in Chinese; (4) addresses (alerters) and supportive moves in the realization of requests were culturally coded.

Lee-Wong (2000) also examined how Chinese native speakers formulated face-to-face requests. Using multi-method, she found that Chinese speakers placed greater emphasis on the use of terms of address, which marked relative social distance and power. Besides, power and social distance were found to be influential factors in affecting main request strategy type and patterns of modification. The degree of imposition had been shown to be the strongest contextual variable. But different from Zhang & Wang (1997)'s findings, her study highlighted the distinct Chinese preference for a level of directness in requests.

Liao (1996) conducted a contrastive pragmatic study on American English and Mandarin refusal strategies by devising six scenarios of requests for university students in the United States and Taiwan to fill in what they would say when they would rather refuse. He found that Americans and Chinese used different formulaic expressions in refusals and applied different strategies. The ways in which politeness was manifested through performing refusals reflected the modest nature of the Oriental countries and the non-self-denigrative nature of the Western countries.

Wang (2001)'s study on Chinese and American refusals adopted written DCT as its instrument and found that (1) directness level were correlated with politeness strategies but not all the indirect refusals were polite; (2) the three social factors mentioned by Brown and Levinson (1987) were important in speech act behavior but their roles in the two languages were different; (3) though both Chinese and Americans preferred indirect refusals, the Chinese were much more indirect. But Wang did not discuss in detail how the roles of social factors were different in the two cultures.

These studies have revealed similarities and differences in speech act realization patterns between Chinese and English requests and refusals and implied that the culture-specific differences might pose great challenge for EFL learners in cross-cultural communication.

4. Studies on Interlanguage Performance of Requests and Refusals

How EFL learners perform requests has received considerable attention. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies were carried out to investigate interlanguage features and yielded different findings.

Schmidt (1983, cited in Kasper & Rose, 1999)'s three-year longitudinal study of the acquisition of English by Wes, a Japanese artist who relocated to Hawai'i, is among the earliest studies of pragmatic development in a second language. Wes' early directives were characterized by a limited range of unanalyzed request formulas, frequent use of requestive markers such as *please*, the association of the verb morpheme *-ing* with requestive force (*sitting* for "let's sit"), and an apparent transfer of Japanese sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms. At the end of the observation period, some of the request formula had been reanalyzed and were used productively by Wes—his use of imperatives had increased and his requests were more elaborated. However, some non-native features remained.

Ellis (1992) examined the acquisition of the illocutionary act—request by two child learners of English. But his focus was to demonstrate to what extent classroom communication afforded opportunities for learners to acquire the ability to perform a given illocutionary act. The results suggested that although considerable development took place over that period, both learners failed to develop either the full range of request types or a broad linguistic repertoire for performing those types. The learners also failed to develop the “sociolinguistic,” (Ellis, 1992:5) competence needed to vary their choice of request strategies toward different addressees.

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) compared request realizations of native and non-native speakers in terms of length of utterance. At the same time, he also compared intermediate and advanced non-native speakers and noted that learners’ use of supportive moves in request performance followed a bell-shaped development curve, starting out with an under-use of supportive moves, followed by over-suppliance, and finally approximating a target-like distribution.

The study of L2 refusals is more limited than the study of requests with a narrow range of subjects (only adult Japanese learners) (Ellis, 1994; Salmani Nodoushan, 2016b). Takahashi and Beebe (1987, cited in Kasper & Rose, 1999) advanced the hypothesis that L2 proficiency is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer. Yet their own study on refusals performed by Japanese learners of English at two different proficiency levels did not demonstrate the predicted proficiency effect. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and Salmani Nodoushan (2016b) found that although proficient Japanese speakers of English in the United States employed the same range of semantic formulas as Americans, they differed in the order in which they were typically used. They also reacted differently according to whether the invitation originated from a higher- or lower-status person, whereas the native speakers responded according to how familiar they were with their interlocutors. What’s more, Japanese excuses were found to be less specific than American refusals.

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1992) carried out a longitudinal study of the acquisition of two speech acts—suggestions and rejections, which could more or less illuminate on refusals. Advanced adult nonnative speakers of English were taped in advising sessions over the course of a semester. Results indicated that the nonnative speakers showed change toward the native speaker norms in their ability to employ appropriate speech acts, moving toward using more suggestions and fewer rejections, and became more successful negotiators. However, they changed less in their ability to employ appropriate forms of speech acts, continuing to use fewer mitigators than the native speakers. Furthermore, unlike native speakers, they used aggravators.

Cross-sectional studies have examined the effect of proficiency on speech act performance with explicit or implicit focus on development. In a role-play study, Trosborg (1995) examined the speech act realizations of requests, complaints and apologies among three groups of Danish learners of English at different proficiency levels. Results revealed that there was an approximation to native speaker performance in request realization strategies with increasing proficiency in English, while for apologies and complaints, only little improvement occurred.

Rose (2001) examined speech act realization strategies of Hong Kong primary school students at different grade levels, who completed a cartoon oral production task designed to elicit requests, apologies, and compliment responses. Although a number of developmental patterns were revealed, there was little evidence of either sensitivity to situational variation or pragmatic transfer from Cantonese, indicating that students had more control over pragmalinguistic than sociopragmatic aspects of speech act performance.

Kasper and Rose (1999) observed that several recent studies have revealed developmental patterns in L2 learners' speech act strategies that move in the direction of native speaker use or that resist convergence to target norms, e.g., Hill's (1997, cited in Kasper & Rose, 1999) study and Hassall's study (1997, cited in Kasper & Rose, 1999). The sometimes conflicting findings make it necessary to do more in order to further examine the effect of proficiency level and better understand EFL learners' interlanguage performance of speech acts.

5. Summary and Conclusion

In summary, previous studies have enabled us to understand the nature of face-threatening speech acts of request and refusal and what politeness strategies could be employed to tone down the face-threatening force. Efforts done in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics have revealed cross-cultural differences in the performance of the two speech acts. Studies on interlanguage pragmatic competence have witnessed a growing body of literature. Curricula and materials for L2 teaching developed in recent years include strong pragmatic components or even adopt a pragmatic approach as their organizing principle (Kasper, 1996). Yet far more need to be done to reveal interlanguage features.

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