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How to say “no” in a foreign language: the role of L2 proficiency, power relations, and eliciting acts

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Most studies on second language (L2) learners’ refusal strategies focus on the frequency and content of individual strategy use. However, research also reveals the fact that learners tend to use multiple strategies in a single refusal. How these strategy combinations are quantitatively distributed is a question that is under-researched. To address this gap, this study investigates individual strategies and their combinatorial patterns in the refusals of 237 Chinese EFL learners across three L2 proficiency levels. It further explores how power relations and eliciting acts (requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions) influence the frequency of strategies. Data were collected through written discourse completion tasks and coded with Beebe et al.’s (1990) scheme. Results indicated a positive relationship between the repertoire of refusal strategies and L2 proficiency. Power relations exerted a mixed effect on strategy use, while eliciting acts particularly influenced the use of *gratitude/appreciation* and *let interlocutor off the hook* strategies. Combinatorial analyses identified an L2 proficiency-related progression: lower-proficiency learners predominantly employed *regret + reason/excuse/explanation* sequences, whereas advanced learners favored *gratitude/appreciation + reason/excuse/explanation* combinations. These findings provide pedagogical implications for teaching refusals in Chinese EFL settings.

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Introduction

Refusal is a face-threatening act that often damages the speaker's positive face when giving passive responses to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions from the hearers (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Researchers hold that responses offer broader possibilities than initiating acts, which means that refusals reveal more complexity than many other speech acts (Eslami, 2010). Due to the potential face threats that refusals often bring and their complex properties, refusals are considered to be a "major cross-cultural sticking point for many non-native speakers" (Beebe et al. 1990, p. 56). Moreover, refusals can result in unintended offense and communication failure without appropriate behavior (Taguchi, 2013). Therefore, it is of paramount significance to investigate how second language (L2) learners perform refusals, specifically to classify the strategies they use and the patterns they follow.

A substantial body of research has examined L2 learners' use of refusal strategies (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003; Abed, 2011; Siebold and Busch, 2015; Widanta et al., 2019; Hashemian, 2021). Existing research highlights three key variables that influence learners' refusal production: L2 proficiency, power relations, and eliciting acts. While studies on L2 proficiency have produced mixed results, findings indicate both positive (e.g., Bella, 2014; Al Masaeed et al., 2020) and negative (e.g., Takahashi and Beebe, 1987) correlations, as well as instances in which no significant relationship has been observed (e.g., Chang, 2009). This inconsistency reflects the limited and inconclusive research on the effect of L2 proficiency on refusal production. Additionally, power relations and eliciting acts demonstrate variable, often culture-specific, effects on learners' refusals.

Furthermore, existing research often focuses on single refusal strategies, overlooking the dynamic combinations used in real-life communication (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007). This narrow focus fails to capture the pragmatic competence and adaptability demonstrated by learners who combine strategies to navigate diverse social situations. Notably, while interlanguage pragmatics research has extensively documented single-strategy use (Kasper and Rose, 2002), systematic investigations into strategy combinations—particularly how they reflect sociopragmatic competence across L2 proficiency levels—are still scarce. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining refusal strategies and their combinations among a large sample of Chinese EFL learners at various L2 proficiency levels, in relation to contextual variables, including power relations and eliciting acts (requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions). By treating L2 proficiency as a between-group variable and power relations and eliciting acts as within-group variables, we can explore how learners orchestrate multiple strategies in contextually sensitive ways.

Our study makes several key contributions to the field of L2 pragmatic research. Firstly, we investigate the strategy combinations used by L2 English learners, thus extending interlanguage pragmatics research by demonstrating how such combinations reflect contextual adaptability. Secondly, we verify the effects of L2 proficiency, power relations, and eliciting acts on strategy use, offering a sociopragmatically grounded analysis of how these variables interact. Lastly, we incorporate high school EFL learners as participants, a group often overlooked in prior refusal studies (e.g., Taguchi, 2013; Bella, 2014; Al Masaeed et al., 2020), thereby broadening our understanding of L2 refusal strategies across age and educational contexts.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Introduction to the theoretical framework. This study is grounded in the intersection of Speech Act Theory, Politeness

Theory, and theories related to the development of pragmatic competence. The following sections outline the theoretical underpinnings that form the basis of our research framework.

The theoretical foundation of our study begins with Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962), which posits that language is a means of performing actions. Speech acts are categorized into direct and indirect speech acts, where direct speech acts align the literal meaning of the words with the speaker's intention, while indirect speech acts involve a divergence between the literal meaning and the intended message (Acher et al., 2012). In the context of refusal strategies, direct refusals are explicit and straightforward, such as "I decline it" or "No", whereas indirect refusals may express reasons or suggest future acceptance, like "I have other things to do" or "We can watch something another time." This study aims to explore how learners employ these direct and indirect speech acts in refusal production.

Politeness Theory, particularly as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), is central to understanding the role of face in social interactions. Face is defined as the public self-image that individuals desire to maintain (Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson's model identifies face-threatening acts and the strategies used to mitigate these threats, which are influenced by three variables: power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition. In the context of refusal studies, the focus often shifts from the degree of imposition to eliciting acts, due to the specific nature of refusals. Eliciting acts refer to the speech acts that prompt a response from the hearer, which, in the case of refusals, are typically requests or invitations that the hearer declines. The choice of strategies is contingent on the evaluation of these variables, with higher values indicating a greater threat to face and a corresponding need for more polite language use. This study investigates how power relations and eliciting acts affect the choice of refusal strategies in EFL learners.

Finally, our framework incorporates theories on the development of pragmatic competence, which suggest that L2 pragmatic proficiency often lags behind L2 grammatical proficiency in EFL settings (Taguchi, 2015). This discrepancy poses challenges for learners in effectively using refusal strategies, which are inherently pragmatic in nature. The study examines how L2 proficiency influences EFL learners' production of refusal strategies.

The integrated theoretical framework posits that the production of refusal strategies by EFL learners is a complex process influenced by the interrelation of politeness considerations and pragmatic development. By examining these factors, we aim to shed light on the individual and social factors that underpin the use of refusal strategies. This comprehensive approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the variables at play and contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition and the development of pragmatic competence. The following sections review the existing literature on each of these components and their relevance to refusal production.

The effect of learners' L2 proficiency on refusal production.

Having gained sustained attention, learners' L2 proficiency has been recognized as a prominent factor in refusal production (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Rose, 2000; Taguchi, 2013; Bella, 2014; Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2018; Tabatabaei, 2020). As one of the earliest explorations, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) focused on the effect of L2 proficiency (lower and higher) and learning environment (ESL vs. EFL) on pragmatic transfer. A discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of 12 scenarios was administered to participants to elicit their refusals. These scenarios varied in terms of eliciting acts (request, suggestion, offer, invitation), power relations between interlocutors (+P, -P), and social

distance between interlocutors (+D, -D). Findings revealed that within the ESL learner group, high-proficiency learners used fewer direct refusals, more indirect refusals, and more adjuncts than their counterparts. However, in the EFL learner group, high-proficiency learners used more direct refusals, fewer indirect refusals, and fewer adjuncts than low-proficiency learners. By combining the performance of Japanese native speakers and English native speakers, the authors argue that pragmatic transfer increases with L2 proficiency; that is, compared to lower-proficiency learners, learners with higher L2 proficiency tend to refuse more like Japanese speakers, rather than native speakers of English.

In contrast to Takahashi and Beebe (1987), Bella (2014) reached an opposing conclusion by examining the developmental patterns of Greek FL learners with various L1 backgrounds in performing refusals in three request situations with varying interlocutor status (+P, -P) and social distance (+D, -D). Using 20 Greek native speakers as the baseline, the developmental patterns of refusal production were investigated using role-plays. The findings revealed that as learners' L2 proficiency increased, their strategy selection and mitigation patterns demonstrated a closer approximation to native speakers. Specifically, with increased L2 proficiency, learners tended to utilize fewer direct refusals, more indirect refusals, and more adjuncts. However, due to the diverse L1 backgrounds of the learners, no baseline group was established for their native languages—only a baseline group for the target language was set up—which may have led to inaccurate judgments about the direction of pragmatic transfer, potentially accounting for the discrepancy in results compared with Takahashi and Beebe (1987). Nevertheless, findings also revealed that even advanced learners exhibited inadequate sociocultural competence, which suggested that “high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence” (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, p. 686).

Still, another different conclusion was brought forth by Chang (2009), who examined the influence of Chinese EFL learners' L2 proficiency on pragmatic transfer. Data were collected using DCTs from 35 American native speakers, 81 Chinese EFL learners with different L2 proficiency levels, and 40 Chinese native speakers. The DCT scenarios consisted of 12 different situations classified according to four eliciting acts and three social statuses (+P, =P, -P). Results showed that freshman and senior English majors utilized significantly fewer direct refusal strategies than native speakers of English did, but the difference in their use of adjuncts was not statistically significant. This discrepancy with Bella (2014) may stem from methodological and contextual differences: unlike Bella's study, which employed role-plays and a Greek FL context, Chang (2009)'s use of DCTs within a Chinese EFL setting—where learners' L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) exhibit stark cultural-pragmatic contrasts—likely amplified L1 transfer effects and overshadowed proficiency-driven developmental patterns.

A review of prior studies indicates a complex relationship between L2 proficiency and learners' refusal production. Given that pragmatic transfer frequently influences L2 learners' development of pragmatic competence (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Trosborg, 1987), it is essential to conduct analyses tailored to specific L1 and L2 contexts. However, few studies have explored the link between L2 proficiency and refusal production among Chinese EFL learners. Considering that refusals pose particular challenges for Chinese speakers (Chen, 1996), examining how Chinese EFL learners at different L2 proficiency levels manage refusals holds significant value.

The effect of power relations on refusal production. While L2 proficiency plays a key role in shaping refusal strategies, social

factors such as power relations also significantly impact how learners navigate refusals in intercultural communication (Nelson et al., 2002; Keshavarz et al., 2006; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Shishavan and Sharifian, 2013, 2016; Hashemian, 2021). Allami and Naeimi (2011) found that American English speakers showed limited sensitivity to power relations between interlocutors, whereas Persian speakers displayed greater sensitivity, especially in their use of direct refusals, expressions of regret, and excuses. Similar findings were also reported by Keshavarz et al. (2006). However, Shishavan and Sharifian (2016) observed a contrasting pattern: both English and Persian speakers increased their use of direct refusals and decreased their use of indirect strategies when addressing interlocutors of equal power, while Iranian English learners responded in the opposite way. Furthermore, Shishavan and Sharifian (2013) revealed that Iranian English learners made few adjustments to their L2 refusals based on interlocutor status. In contrast, when using their L1 Persian, they provided more explanations to interlocutors of equal status and used more address terms when speaking to those of higher status.

The studies reviewed above offer insights into how power relations shape refusal strategies in different cultures. Power relations are particularly significant in refusal acts due to their intrinsic link to the concept of “face” (Brown and Levinson, 1987)—a critical concern in collectivist cultures like China, where maintaining social harmony and hierarchical respect often supersede directness. In high-power-distance contexts, subordinates may prioritize mitigating threats to a superior's “positive face” (desire for approval) by employing indirect refusals, whereas superiors might balance “negative face” (desire for autonomy) by avoiding overt impositions. This interplay helps explain why power relations profoundly influence strategy use.

Despite growing interest in L2 refusal strategies, few study has yet systematically analyzed how power relations shape refusal production among Chinese EFL learners. This gap is particularly striking given China's cultural facework and the centrality of hierarchical norms in Chinese communicative practices (Chang and Ren, 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial not only for advancing the refusal strategy framework but also for developing culturally responsive pedagogy for Chinese learners.

The effect of eliciting acts on refusal production. In addition to power relations, eliciting acts are another social factor that influences the use of refusal strategies. Refusals, unlike other common speech acts such as requests and apologies, serve as responses to initial communicative acts, often in the form of requests, offers, invitations, or suggestions—collectively referred to as the eliciting acts of refusals. Due to the interactive and co-constructed nature of conversation (Roever and Kasper, 2018), responses are highly constrained by these initial acts. Consequently, some studies have explored the effect of eliciting acts on refusal production (Chang, 2009; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Aghbari, 2016; Hashemian, 2021).

Chang (2009) systematically analyzed the refusal strategies of Chinese EFL learners across different eliciting acts, finding notable shifts in strategy use. For instance, “illocutionary force indicating devices”, which are routinized, formulaic expressions of refusal (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), were absent in responses to suggestions. “Gratitude/appreciation” was never used in response to requests, whereas “let interlocutor off the hook” appeared exclusively in refusals to offers. Similarly, Hashemian (2021) observed parallel patterns in Iranian English learners' refusal strategies, and Allami and Naeimi (2011) found that Iranian learners' refusals were consistently influenced by eliciting acts. Specifically, learners favored excuses or reasons paired with regret or direct refusals when responding to requests,

Table 1 Background information of participants.			
Group	Years of English-learning Range (Mean)	Gender	
		Male	Female
EM (<i>n</i> = 80)	6–18 (12.56)	12	68
NEM (<i>n</i> = 84)	6–17 (10.74)	32	52
HS (<i>n</i> = 73)	4–13 (9.23)	22	51

EM English majors, NEM non-English majors, HS high school EFL learners.

and combined gratitude/appreciation with pause fillers and excuses in refusals to offers. When refusing invitations, they often used positive opinions alongside excuses, regret, and direct refusal, while refusals to suggestions predominantly included excuses, gratitude, and pause fillers. Additionally, Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Aghbari (2016) found that Omani learners tended to use direct strategies when refusing requests and suggestions, hypothesizing that requests may be perceived as difficult to fulfill and suggestions as potential intrusions.

Notably, while cross-cultural pragmatics has expanded significantly in recent decades, empirical studies on refusal strategies remain disproportionately focused on Western or Middle Eastern EFL contexts, with limited attention to Chinese learners. This gap persists despite China’s unique cultural-pragmatic norms (e.g., high-power distance, indirect facework), which likely influence refusal production in ways distinct from those observed in previously studied populations.

Previous studies have yielded inconsistent findings regarding the impact of L2 proficiency on the use of refusal strategies. Additionally, it is clear that cultural background significantly influences L2 learners’ perception of power relations and their subsequent strategy selection. Despite these insights, there is still a need for more systematic investigation into how eliciting acts shape the use of refusal strategies. In light of the scarcity of research on the combination of strategies in L2 refusals, this study aims to explore the interplay between L2 proficiency, power relations, and eliciting acts with regard to the frequency, content, and patterns of refusal strategy use among Chinese EFL learners. The following research questions will direct our inquiry:

RQ1. What are the differences in the single refusal strategies used by Chinese EFL learners with different L2 proficiency levels in scenarios that involve different power relations and eliciting acts?

RQ2. In what patterns do the three groups of Chinese EFL learners tend to use refusal strategies in these scenarios?

Methodology

Participants. The participants in this study were 237 Chinese EFL learners, divided into three L2 proficiency groups based on their English-learning experience and academic focus: 80 junior and senior English majors (EM; female = 68, male = 12), 84 freshmen and sophomore non-English majors (NEM; female = 52, male = 32), and 73 high school EFL learners (HS; female = 51, male = 22). Due to significant age differences among participants, a standardized proficiency test was not used; instead, participants were grouped by years of English study and academic specialization, with English majors classified as advanced learners, non-English majors as intermediate learners, and high school EFL learners as elementary learners. The grouping criteria reflect distinct pedagogical and contextual differences: (1) English majors (advanced learners) receive intensive, systematic training in English linguistics, literature, and communicative skills through discipline-specific coursework (e.g., translation, advanced writing), (2) non-English majors (intermediate learners) take compulsory general college English courses focused on foundational grammar and vocabulary but do

not receive specialized training, and (3) high school EFL learners (elementary learners) are enrolled in standardized curricula with the main goal of entering higher schools, emphasizing basic language acquisition such as reading comprehension and sentence structure (Liu et al., 2025). Table 1 presents a summary of the participants’ background information.

Instrumentation. DCTs are widely used to gather data on speech acts (Nguyen, 2019). Despite critiques regarding their limited authenticity (e.g., Woodfield, 2008), they are considered effective for capturing what is typical and socially acceptable in a given situation (Golato, 2003). Moreover, WDCTs allow the collection of a large amount of data in a single setting (Nguyen, 2019). Given the above two reasons, this study used WDCTs to elicit learners’ refusal performances in eight types of contexts. The DCTs (see Appendix A) used here were adapted from Beebe et al. (1990) and Duan and Wannaruk (2008). We first retained scenarios that incorporated two contextual variables: interlocutor power (+P and =P) and eliciting acts (requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions). Then, from these, we selected eight scenarios that naturally reflected typical undergraduate social dynamics (e.g., peer requests, classroom interactions), excluding those requiring professional workplace roles.

Data collection and analysis. The DCT questionnaires were distributed and administered to the three participant groups, with background information collected on gender, age, grade, major, years of English study, and scores from the most recent English proficiency test.

The refusal strategies were analyzed using Beebe et al.’s (1990) classification framework (see Appendix B). The coding process involved two stages: initial identification and validation. A primary researcher categorized each response according to the strategy types defined in the framework (e.g., direct refusals, reasons, alternatives), and a secondary researcher independently reviewed the coding to ensure accuracy. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using percentage agreement (90.2%) and Cohen’s kappa ($k = 0.89, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.88, 0.90]$), with all discrepancies resolved through discussion. This high level of consistency reflects rigorous coder training and the use of clear coding guidelines. The frequencies of each strategy type in each situation were calculated per group. Representative examples of multi-strategy sequences (e.g., *regret + reason/excuse/explanation*) were extracted to illustrate interactional patterns.

This study used the software SPSS 26.0 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to present the distribution characteristics of refusal strategies and strategy combinations. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether significant differences existed in the use of direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts among the three participant groups (Liu et al., 2025). Post-hoc tests were then performed to identify the specific group differences.

Results

Changes in the use of single refusal strategies across L2 proficiency levels. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of refusal strategies by three groups across the eight scenarios, while Fig. 1 presents the means for the use of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts across the eight scenarios for the three L2 proficiency groups. Tables 3–5 display the results of the one-way ANOVA and post-hoc comparisons for direct, indirect, and adjunct strategy use by each group. Overall, English majors employed the highest number of refusal strategies per participant, followed by high school EFL learners, with non-English majors using slightly fewer strategies on average. Indirect strategies were

Table 2 The distribution of refusal strategies among three groups over each scenario.

Strategies	Request			Offer											
	+P			=P											
	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS
Total direct	I a	0	0.00	1	0.42	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	I b1	1	0.32	0	0.00	2	0.93	3	1.42	5	2.79	12	7.69	1	0.40
	I b2	29	9.35	13	5.51	20	9.30	14	6.60	19	10.61	23	14.74	9	3.60
	Total direct	30	9.7	14	5.9	22	10.2	17	8.0	24	13.4	36	23.1	10	4.0
	II a	71	22.90	60	25.42	60	27.91	63	29.72	44	24.58	39	25.00	27	10.80
	II b	3	0.97	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.40
	II c	78	25.16	74	31.36	65	30.23	55	25.94	60	33.52	36	23.08	69	27.60
	II d1	5	1.61	3	1.27	2	0.93	3	1.42	2	1.12	0	0.00	5	2.00
	II d2	5	1.61	6	2.54	3	1.40	31	14.62	20	11.17	29	18.59	4	1.60
	II e	1	0.32	2	0.85	0	0.00	1	0.47	0	0.00	1	0.64	0	0.00
	II f	6	1.94	4	1.69	3	1.40	1	0.47	3	1.68	0	0.00	2	0.80
	II g	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.94	1	0.56	0	0.00	0	0.00
	II h	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.56	1	0.64	0	0.00
	II i1	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.47	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total indirect	II i3	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	1.89	3	1.68	1	0.64	0	0.00
	II i5	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	II i6	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	II k2	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	II k3	1	0.32	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	II k4	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.40
	II k5	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.47	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.64	0	0.00
	Total indirect	170	54.8	149	63.1	134	62.3	161	75.9	134	74.9	108	69.2	109	43.6
	III a	38	12.26	38	16.10	26	12.09	4	1.89	5	2.79	4	2.56	4	1.60
	III c	7	2.26	2	0.85	0	0.00	7	3.30	7	3.91	2	1.28	2	0.80
	III d	1	0.32	0	0.00	1	0.47	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	87	34.80
	III e	41	13.23	19	8.05	23	10.70	14	6.60	1	0.56	4	2.56	32	12.80
	III f	23	7.42	14	5.93	9	4.19	9	4.25	8	4.47	2	1.28	6	2.40
	Total adjuncts	110	35.5	73	30.9	59	27.4	34	16.0	21	11.7	12	7.7	131	52.4
	Total strategies	310	100	236	100	215	100	212	100	179	100	156	100	250	100
Strategies	Suggestion			Invitation											
	+P			=P											
	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS
Total direct	I a	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	I b1	3	1.38	2	1.20	7	4.86	11	6.32	9	5.66	11	7.91	3	1.19
	I b2	6	2.76	7	4.19	18	12.50	26	14.94	20	12.58	22	15.83	26	10.28
	Total direct	9	4.1	9	5.4	25	17.4	37	21.3	29	18.2	34	24.5	29	11.5
	II a	10	4.61	10	5.99	17	11.81	4	2.30	16	10.06	12	8.63	28	11.07
	II b	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	III a	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.72	0	0.00
	III b1	3	1.38	2	1.20	7	4.86	11	6.32	9	5.66	11	7.91	3	1.19
	III b2	6	2.76	7	4.19	18	12.50	26	14.94	20	12.58	22	15.83	26	10.28
	Total direct	9	4.1	9	5.4	25	17.4	37	21.3	29	18.2	34	24.5	29	11.5
	II a	10	4.61	10	5.99	17	11.81	4	2.30	16	10.06	12	8.63	28	11.07
	II b	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
	III a	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.72	0	0.00
	III b1	3	1.38	2	1.20	7	4.86	11	6.32	9	5.66	11	7.91	3	1.19
	III b2	6	2.76	7	4.19	18	12.50	26	14.94	20	12.58	22	15.83	26	10.28

Table 2 (continued)		Invitation											
Strategies	Suggestion	+P						=P					
		EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS	EM	NEM	HS
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
II c		48	22.12	51	30.54	47	32.64	43	24.71	50	31.45	51	36.69
II d1		2	0.92	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	3.45	5	3.14	1	0.72
II d2		0	0.00	1	0.60	0	0.00	1	0.57	2	1.26	1	0.72
II e		0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.57	0	0.00	0	0.00
II f		14	6.45	16	9.58	3	2.08	8	4.60	5	3.14	2	1.44
II g		0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.63	0	0.00
II h		0	0.00	2	1.20	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
II i1		0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
II i3		0	0.00	1	0.60	1	0.69	5	2.87	7	4.40	1	0.72
II i5		0	0.00	1	0.60	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
II i6		13	5.99	7	4.19	2	1.39	5	2.87	1	0.63	0	0.00
II k2		0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
II k3		0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.57	0	0.00	0	0.00
II k4		1	0.46	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
II k5		0	0.00	0	0.00	3	2.08	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.44
Total indirect		88	40.6	89	53.3	73	50.7	74	42.5	88	55.3	70	50.4
III a		28	12.90	27	16.17	8	5.56	9	5.17	9	5.66	6	4.32
III c		10	4.61	1	0.60	0	0.00	6	3.45	1	0.63	0	0.00
III d		47	21.66	27	16.17	24	16.67	37	21.26	25	15.72	25	17.99
III e		25	11.52	9	5.39	14	9.72	5	2.87	2	1.26	2	1.44
III f		10	4.61	5	2.99	0	0.00	6	3.45	5	3.14	2	1.44
Total adjuncts		120	55.3	69	41.3	46	31.9	63	36.2	42	26.4	35	25.2
Total strategies		217	100	167	100	144	100	174	100	159	100	139	100

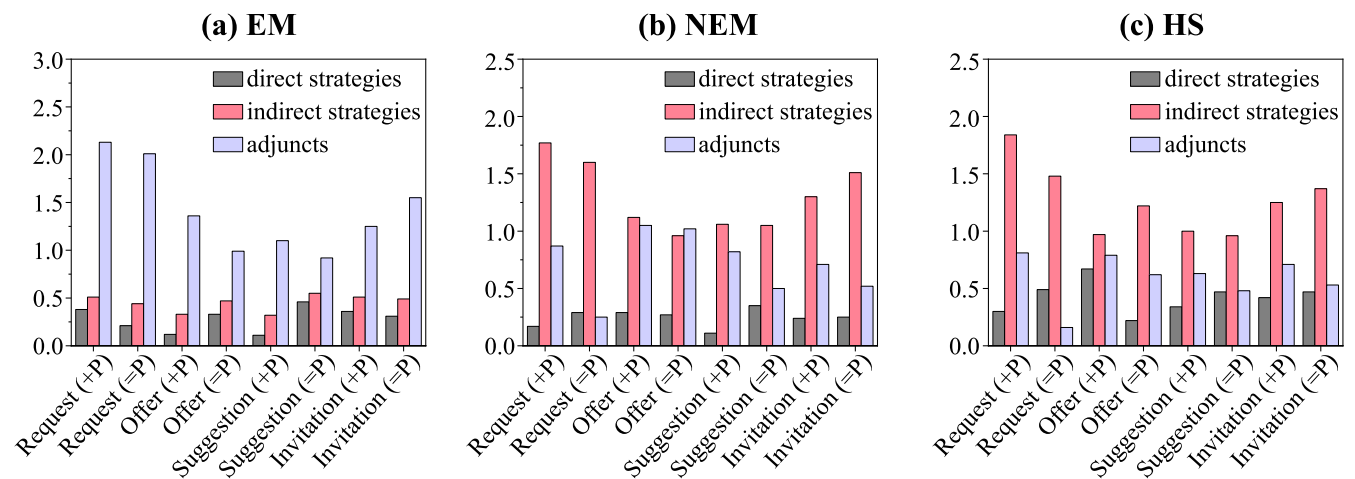


Fig. 1 Mean frequency of strategies in eight scenarios per group. **a EM** displays the strategies used by English majors. **b NEM** presents the strategies by non-English majors. **c HS** shows the strategies used by high school learners.

Table 3 Post-hoc comparisons of the use of direct strategies.							
(I)Group	(J)Group	Mean (I-J)	Std. Error	p	Hedge's g	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
EM	NEM	0.430	0.303	0.157	1.419	-0.170	1.030
	HS	-1.000	0.314	0.002	-3.185	-1.620	-0.380
NEM	HS	-1.431	0.310	<0.001	-4.616	-2.040	-0.820

Table 4 Post-hoc comparisons of the use of indirect strategies.							
(I)Group	(J)Group	Mean (I-J)	Std. Error	p	Hedge's g	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
EM	NEM	0.943	0.450	0.037	2.096	0.060	1.830
	HS	1.230	0.466	0.009	2.639	0.310	2.150
NEM	HS	0.287	0.461	0.534	0.623	-0.620	1.190

the most frequently used across groups, whereas direct strategies were the least utilized. Among all sub-strategies, excuse/reason/explanation emerged as the most commonly used. The following section provides a general analysis of these strategies.

The use of direct strategies by each group. Table 2 indicates that negative willingness/ability emerged as the most frequently used direct strategy across all scenarios, followed by the simple use of “No,” with performative refusal rarely used by learners across all groups. Table 3 presents the post-hoc comparisons for direct refusal strategies across different L2 proficiency groups. The significant differences highlighted in this table suggest that high school EFL learners consistently used direct strategies more often than both English majors ($p = 0.002$, Hedge’s $g = 3.185$) and non-English majors ($p < 0.001$, Hedge’s $g = 4.616$); however, no statistically significant difference was found between English majors and non-English majors in direct strategy use ($p = 0.157$, Hedge’s $g = 1.419$). High school EFL learners showed a higher tendency to use direct strategies in all scenarios except for Situation 1 (Request, + P) and Situation 4 (Offer, = P), where English majors took the lead. Specifically, English majors used direct strategies least often in offer situations, which contrasted with the highest frequency in invitation situations. Power relations influenced their refusals as well; they employed more direct refusals with

classmates than with professors in both offer and suggestion contexts, although they used more direct refusals toward professors in request contexts. Unlike English majors, non-English majors demonstrated a relatively high use of direct strategies in offer situations. Like high school EFL learners, they also applied more direct refusals with classmates in request and suggestion scenarios. However, high school EFL learners, similar to English majors, tended to refuse professors’ offers more directly. Additionally, they displayed higher direct strategy use in offer and invitation contexts while showing relatively lower use in request contexts.

The use of indirect strategies by each group. Table 2 highlights that *statement of regret and excuse, reason, and explanations* emerged as the two most frequently used indirect strategies across all groups, while *setting condition for future or past acceptance, statement of philosophy, and avoidance* were the least utilized. The *why don’t you do X instead of Y* strategy saw the highest frequency in Situation 2 (Request, =P) across groups, and *statement of regret* was prominently used in request situations. Notably, *promise of future acceptance* and *let interlocutor off the hook* appeared to be strategies associated with L2 proficiency, as these two were largely absent in the refusals of high school EFL learners but commonly observed in the responses of both English majors

Table 5 Post hoc comparisons of the use of adjuncts.							
(I)Group	(J)Group	Mean (I-J)	Std. Error	p	Hedge's g	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
EM	NEM	4.225	0.571	<0.001	7.399	3.100	5.350
	HS	5.235	0.592	<0.001	8.843	4.070	6.400
NEM	HS	1.010	0.585	0.085	1.726	-0.140	2.160

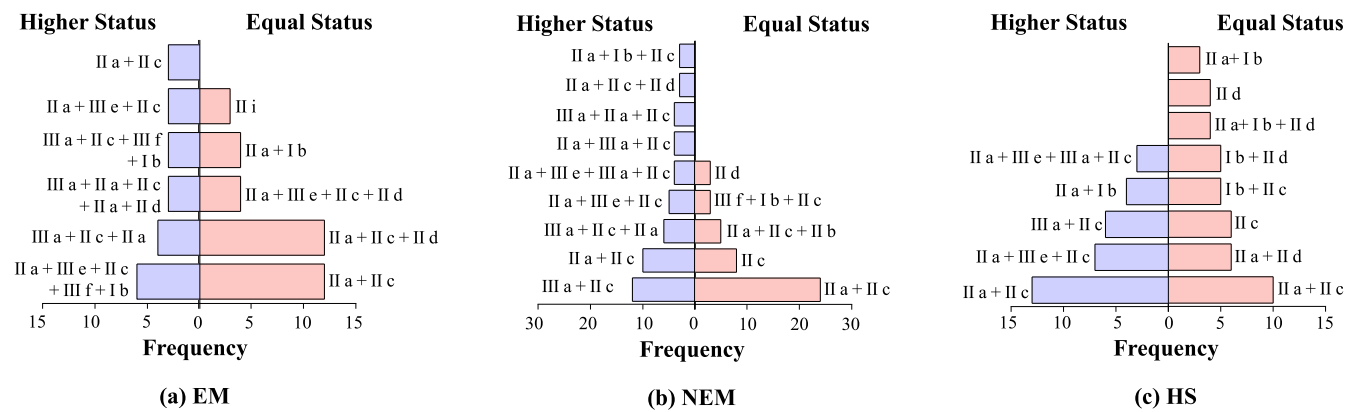


Fig. 2 The use of refusal strategy combinations by each group under request situations. **a** EM displays the refusal strategy patterns used by English majors. **b** NEM presents the refusal strategy patterns by non-English majors. **c** HS shows the refusal strategy patterns used by high school learners.

and non-English majors. Furthermore, *promise of future acceptance* was specific to Situation 4 (Offer, =P) and *let interlocutor off the hook* to Situation 5 (Suggestion, +P). The data in Table 4 reveal the post-hoc analyses of indirect refusal strategies among different L2 proficiency groups. It is evident that English majors had a higher tendency to employ indirect strategies compared to both non-English majors ($p = 0.037$, Hedge's $g = 2.096$) and high school EFL learners ($p = 0.009$, Hedge's $g = 2.639$). However, the comparison between non-English majors and high school EFL learners did not yield a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.534$, Hedge's $g = 0.623$). However, the data also presented variation across individual scenarios. While English majors led in most situations, non-English majors showed the highest indirect strategy use in Situation 6 (Suggestion, =P) and Situation 7 (Invitation, +P), whereas high school EFL learners used indirect strategies most frequently in Situation 4 (Offer, =P). In request situations, both English majors and high school EFL learners showed a notably high frequency of indirect strategies, with fewer indirect strategies used in suggestion contexts. Non-English majors mirrored this trend, employing the highest number of indirect strategies for requests, while offers saw the fewest indirect strategies. Additionally, both English majors and non-English majors were more indirect when refusing professors in all situations except invitations. In contrast, high school EFL learners displayed more indirectness toward professors exclusively in request scenarios.

The use of adjuncts by each group. According to Table 2, *gratitude/appreciation* emerged as the most frequently used adjunct strategy across all groups, whereas *pause fillers* were the least common. *Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement* was notably higher in Situation 1 (Request, +P) and Situation 7 (Invitation, +P) compared to other scenarios. While *gratitude/appreciation* was frequently used in offer situations, it was rarely applied to requests. Additionally, L2 proficiency influenced the use of pause fillers and subjective words: these features were most prevalent in the responses of English majors, occasionally present

among non-English majors, and infrequent among high school EFL learners. This pattern suggests that English majors possess a wider range of refusal strategies. Conversely, *alerters* were strongly associated with power relations, being used more often in refusals directed at professors. Examining Table 5, we observe the post-hoc comparisons regarding the employment of refusal adjuncts across various L2 proficiency levels. Notably, English majors demonstrated a consistent preference for using adjuncts, outpacing both non-English majors ($p < 0.001$, Hedge's $g = 7.399$) and high school EFL learners ($p < 0.001$, Hedge's $g = 8.843$). However, the difference in adjunct use between non-English majors and high school EFL learners was not statistically significant ($p = 0.085$, Hedge's $g = 1.726$). All three groups demonstrated similar trends in adjunct use: adjuncts were most frequently used in request situations and least frequently in offer situations. Furthermore, across all contexts, each group employed more adjuncts when refusing professors than when refusing classmates.

Changes in the use of refusal strategy combinations across L2 proficiency levels. Figures 2–5 summarize the refusal strategy combinations used by each group across requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations, focusing on those combinations that occurred more than three times. As shown in these figures, the most commonly used combinations overall were “*regret + reason/excuse/explanation*” (frequent among high school EFL learners and non-English majors), “*gratitude/appreciation + reason/excuse/explanation*” (frequent among English majors), and “*positive opinion + reason/excuse/explanation*.” These observations highlight both group preferences and the central role of *reason/excuse/explanation* as a core strategy in refusals across different contexts. The following section provides a detailed analysis of each strategy combination within specific situational contexts.

Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under request situations. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the strategy combinations used

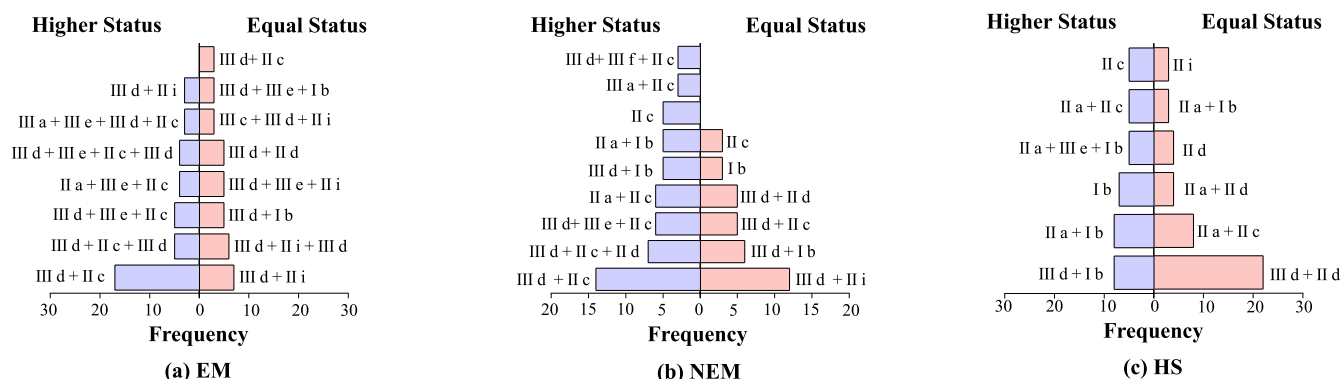


Fig. 3 The use of refusal strategy combinations by each group under offer situations. **a EM** displays the refusal strategy patterns used by English majors. **b NEM** presents the refusal strategy patterns by non-English majors. **c HS** shows the refusal strategy patterns used by high school learners.

by the three L2 proficiency groups—English majors, non-English majors, and high school EFL learners—reflect distinct patterns shaped by their L2 proficiency and awareness of power relations. In the request (+P) situation, where learners refused a professor’s request to help plan a class party, all three groups commonly employed the combination of “*regrets + excuses/reasons*”.

Examples of each group’s typical refusals to the professor’s request include:

English Major:

Sorry, professor. I’m very busy this week, so I am afraid that I can’t help you.

Non-English Major:

I’d love to, but I have something to do.

High School Student:

Sorry, I’m busy this week.

English majors, with their advanced L2 proficiency, tended to construct longer refusals and employ a wider range of strategies. They frequently incorporated adjuncts like *altermers* and *sub-junctive expressions* (e.g., “I’m afraid”), which softened the tone and conveyed deference. This nuanced approach allowed them to convey a direct refusal while maintaining a polite, respectful stance. Non-English majors, on the other hand, leaned towards brief apologies or expressions of willingness, typically accompanied by a vague explanation (e.g., “I’m busy”). They rarely used direct refusals, perhaps reflecting a more cautious approach to refusing authority figures. Similarly, high school EFL learners adopted a pattern similar to non-English majors, often opening with an apology followed by a general reason for declining the request, showing a basic level of politeness with limited elaboration.

In the “classmate” situation, where learners refused a classmate’s request to borrow homework, all groups predominantly used the combination of “*expressing regrets + reasons*”. However, distinct differences were observed in the phrasing and strategic nuances across L2 proficiency levels.

Typical refusals include:

English Major:

I’m sorry, I didn’t take notes last class. / I’m so sorry. I was badly ill last time and had no notes taken. Perhaps you could go to someone else.

Non-English Major:

Sorry, I didn’t take notes.

High School Student:

Sorry, I need it to do my homework too.

While all groups expressed regret and provided reasons, English majors often softened the refusal by offering alternatives,

like suggesting the classmate seek help from someone else. This added suggestion helped ease potential awkwardness and reflected a more sophisticated, socially aware refusal. Furthermore, English majors demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to social dynamics with their classmates, using more nuanced language to reflect this awareness. In contrast, the refusals given by non-English majors and high school EFL learners appeared more direct and less polished, often lacking an alternative suggestion. Although non-English majors showed slightly greater awareness of social relationships than high school EFL learners, both groups occasionally produced refusals that seemed blunt or even somewhat awkward. These differences underscore the role of L2 proficiency and pragmatic awareness in managing peer refusals tactfully.

Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under offer situations. This is the subtitle and its layout should be the same as those of “Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under request situations” (displayed previously), and of “Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under suggestion situations” and “Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under invitation situations” (displayed afterwards). As shown in Fig. 3, all groups frequently expressed *gratitude/appreciation* as their initial strategy to politely decline offers. However, English majors tended to use more nuanced reasons, such as stating a *lack of interest* in the offered role, while non-English majors often cited alternative commitments or prior engagements. High school EFL learners, on the other hand, tended to decline more directly, occasionally leading to refusals that might come across as abrupt despite expressing *gratitude* initially.

Examples of common refusals to the professor’s offer include:

English Major:

Thank you so much, but I’m not interested in translation.

Non-English Major:

Thank you, but I had found a perfect job.

High School Student:

Thank you, but I don’t want to be a monitor. / Sorry, I can’t do it.

English majors’ refusals were marked by polite acknowledgment followed by a reason that conveyed a personal choice, such as a lack of interest. Non-English majors leaned toward justifying their refusal by indicating other commitments, reflecting a pragmatic orientation in their refusal style. High school EFL learners, in contrast, employed a more straightforward approach, sometimes forgoing a specific reason—a response that, although prefaced by gratitude, might risk sounding curt in a formal academic setting. This variation in refusal strategies across groups highlights the influence of L2 proficiency on politeness strategies and indicates

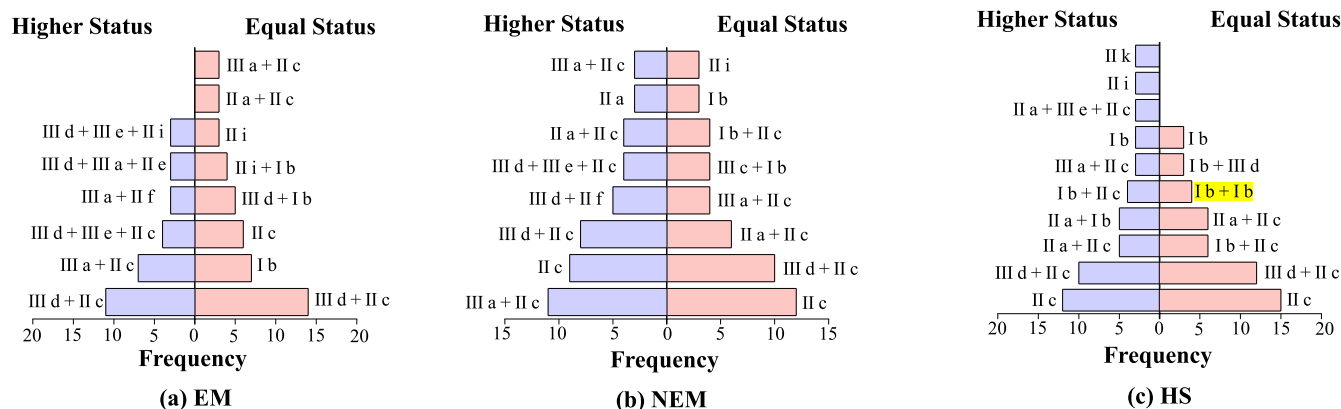


Fig. 4 The use of refusal strategy combinations by each group under suggestion situations. a EM displays the refusal strategy patterns used by English majors. **b NEM** presents the refusal strategy patterns by non-English majors. **c HS** shows the refusal strategy patterns used by high school learners.

that advanced language learners (English majors) have a more refined sense of social politeness when addressing authority figures, like professors. Non-English majors display intermediate levels of this sensitivity, while high school EFL learners, possibly due to limited exposure to nuanced social norms in academic refusals, tend to be more direct in their approach.

In the “classmate” situation, refusals to offers demonstrated a notable divergence in strategy among the three groups. Examples of refusals include:

English Major:

You are so sweet! Thanks a lot. But I think I can handle it by myself.

Non-English Major:

Thanks for your kindness. But I think I can go through it by myself.

High School Student:

Thank you for your help, but I want to solve them by myself.

Both college groups employed a strategy characterized by *gratitude/appreciation* coupled with an attempt to *dissuade the interlocutor*. They often used phrases like “Don’t worry about it,” “I’m OK,” or “I can manage it,” conveying both politeness and a sense of self-sufficiency. This approach not only acknowledges the offer but also alleviates the interlocutor’s concern, reducing their perceived obligation to assist. In contrast, high school EFL learners displayed a more straightforward rejection, emphasizing their desire to handle the situation independently. Their responses—though polite—lacked the additional layer of reassurance often found in the college groups’ refusals. This indicates a difference not only in the ability to navigate social nuances but also in the willingness or awareness to provide alternative responses. The distinction between the groups lies primarily in the nature of their refusals: English and non-English majors assert their competence while simultaneously relieving the interlocutor of any obligation. High school EFL learners, however, focus on their intent to pursue alternative solutions without engaging in the same level of interpersonal management. This highlights a developmental aspect of pragmatic competence, with advanced learners demonstrating a greater understanding of interpersonal dynamics and the social implications of their language choices.

Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under suggestion situations. As illustrated in Fig. 4, the three groups exhibited a tendency to employ more direct strategies in refusals when engaged in an equal power relation with the interlocutor. Notably, high school EFL learners demonstrated a lower sensitivity to the power relation present in these interactions compared to their college counterparts.

Examples of refusals to a professor’s suggestion to take notes for better organization are as follows:

English Major:

Thank you so much, but taking notes is not my style.

Non-English Major:

It’s a good idea, but it may not be suitable for me.

High School Student:

Maybe that’s not suitable for me.

English majors tended to initiate their refusals with adjuncts, such as *expressions of gratitude or positive opinions*. This approach was often followed by a *reason* for their refusal, blending politeness with a sense of justification. Such a structure not only conveys respect for the professor’s suggestion but also clearly states their preferences. Non-English majors also utilized “adjunct + reason” combinations, though they occasionally relied on single reasons to articulate their refusals. In contrast, high school EFL learners relied less on adjuncts and more on direct refusals, indicating a straightforward approach that may lack the nuance found in the other two groups. Despite these differences, a common thread emerged across all groups: the frequent use of the phrase “It’s not suitable for me” as a rationale for rejecting the professor’s suggestion. This similarity suggests a shared understanding of the inadequacy of the proposed solution, even as the groups varied in their expression of politeness and sensitivity to authority. The overall findings underscore the nuanced ways in which L2 proficiency influences the strategic choices learners make in refusals, particularly with respect to power relations.

In the “classmate” situation, where students refuse a classmate’s suggestion of a new diet to lose weight, the refusal strategies employed by each group reflect their differing levels of L2 proficiency and approach to interpersonal relations. The examples below illustrate common refusals from each group:

English Major:

Thanks for your advice. But I think that losing weight will influence my health; control is more important.

Non-English Major:

It’s not suitable for me.

High School Student:

I think I’m happy the way I am.

English majors predominantly used the combination of “*gratitude/appreciation* + *reason/excuse*”, showcasing their L2 proficiency in employing nuanced language that conveys both politeness and rationale. Their responses not only expressed thanks but also articulated a thoughtful reason for their refusal, emphasizing concerns about health over weight loss. Non-English

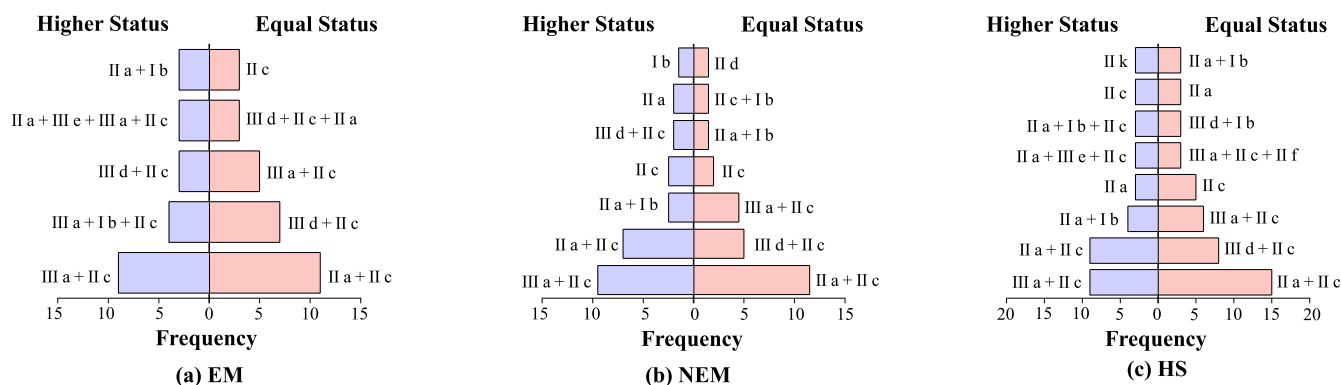


Fig. 5 The use of refusal strategy combinations by each group under invitation situations. a EM displays the refusal strategy patterns used by English majors. **b NEM** presents the refusal strategy patterns by non-English majors. **c HS** shows the refusal strategy patterns used by high school learners.

majors and high school EFL learners also frequently employed this combination, though they leaned more towards providing reasons or excuses without the added expression of gratitude that characterized the English majors' responses. The reasons provided by all three groups shared a common theme: an emphasis on the importance of health, suggesting a collective belief that dieting for weight loss could be detrimental to well-being. This shared reasoning points to a common value system across groups, despite their differing levels of L2 proficiency. The English majors' ability to weave in gratitude reflects a more sophisticated understanding of social interaction, whereas the non-English majors and high school EFL learners, while still articulating valid concerns, delivered their refusals in a more direct and less elaborated manner. This highlights how L2 proficiency not only affects the choice of strategies but also the depth and complexity of arguments presented in refusal contexts.

Refusal strategy combinations used by each group under invitation situations. In the context of refusing a professor's invitation to attend a lecture, the combinations of strategies employed by each group reflected their understanding of politeness and interpersonal dynamics, as shown in Fig. 5. The most notable combinations in this situation were "positive opinion + excuse/reason/explanation" and "regret + excuse/reason/explanation". The following examples illustrate how each group approached the refusal:

English Major:

I really love to, but I have an important exam to prepare.

Non-English Major:

I'd like to, but I have no time to attend. I'm sorry, I have an important thing to do.

High School Student:

I'd love to, but I don't have enough time to attend it. I'm sorry that I can't prepare this speech, because I have other things to deal with.

All groups began their refusals by expressing a *positive opinion* toward the invitation, demonstrating a common strategy of acknowledging the offer before presenting their reasons for declining. This approach conveys appreciation for the invitation and reflects an understanding of social norms in communication. While the English majors consistently employed a combination of "positive opinion + reason", they rarely relied on a single-strategy, which indicated a more nuanced approach to communication. In contrast, non-English majors and high school EFL learners frequently used "expressions of regret + reason", indicating a straightforward acknowledgment of their inability to attend. The reasons provided by all three groups commonly included variations of "I don't have time" or "I have other things to do,"

highlighting a shared awareness of time constraints as a legitimate rationale for refusal. However, the English majors' tendency to incorporate multiple strategies in their refusals suggests a greater proficiency in managing interpersonal relationships through language. This ability allows them to balance the expression of regret with a rational explanation, resulting in refusals that sound more polite and considerate. In contrast, the simpler refusals of the other groups may come across as more direct and potentially less tactful. Overall, these patterns underscore the influence of L2 proficiency on the complexity, politeness, and perceived effectiveness of refusal strategies in different social contexts.

In the context of refusing a classmate's invitation to dinner, the strategies employed by the three groups reveal notable similarities in their approaches. The following examples illustrate how each group articulated their refusals:

English Major:

Sorry, I have a date on this Sunday night.

Non-English Major:

Sorry. I have already had another date. Thank you for your invitation, but I have promised to go to another friend.

High School Student:

Sorry, my friend has invited me to go to the library.

Across all groups, the most frequently employed combinations were: "regret + excuse/reason/explanation", "gratitude/appreciation + excuse/reason/explanation", and "statement of positive opinion + excuse/reason/explanation". These patterns indicate a shared understanding of the importance of expressing both appreciation and regret in a social refusal context. All learners tended to favor reasons centered around having other plans. This shared preference highlights a general tendency to soften refusals by providing legitimate excuses, thus maintaining social harmony. The English majors demonstrated slightly more elaboration in their refusals, using specific phrases like "I have a date" to clarify their unavailability, whereas non-English majors and high school EFL learners offered more generalized reasons. Overall, the consistent use of these combinations across all groups underscores their awareness of social norms related to politeness and the value of maintaining relationships even when declining an invitation. This suggests a shared understanding of interpersonal refusal dynamics, regardless of L2 proficiency level.

Discussion

Use of refusal strategies by learners at three different L2 proficiency levels. To answer the first research question, the findings demonstrate that L2 proficiency not only expands learners' repertoire of refusal strategies but also enhances their ability to adapt strategies to power relations and eliciting acts. Specifically, higher L2 proficiency correlates with increased use of

adjuncts to mitigate face threats, yet directness persists in contexts where pragmatic goals override politeness norms—particularly among advanced learners. Meanwhile, power relations exert a hierarchical influence on strategy selection (e.g., heightened indirectness with superiors), but this effect is mediated by the functional demands of eliciting acts. The following section offers a detailed discussion of these findings.

Overall, there was a positive correlation between the frequency of indirect strategies and L2 proficiency. Additionally, higher proficiency levels were associated with an increased use of adjuncts. This finding contrasts with Chang (2009), who reported no statistically significant differences in adjunct use across L2 proficiency levels. Chang's low-proficiency group consisted of college-level English majors (freshmen), whereas our low-proficiency cohort comprised high school learners. This distinction is critical, as college English majors—even at initial stages—have undergone systematic L2 instruction and met university admission standards, which may indicate different developmental baselines compared to pre-tertiary learners. This divergence highlights the importance of granular L2 proficiency sampling across educational stages.

Notably, however, no significant correlation emerged between the frequency of direct strategies and L2 proficiency. Although high school EFL learners used direct strategies more frequently than both English majors and non-English majors, the latter two groups did not show any statistical significance. This finding contradicts previous research suggesting a negative correlation between directness and L2 proficiency (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Rose, 2000; Bella, 2014; Taguchi, 2013). Despite their overall higher L2 proficiency, English majors exhibited a higher usage of direct strategies in specific contexts (situations 1, 6, 7, and 8), often pairing them with mitigating adjuncts like “I’m afraid” to soften the refusal. In contrast, high school EFL learners tended to rely on blunt refusals, such as “I can’t help you”. The frequent use of direct, bald-on-record refusals poses a threat to the interlocutor’s positive face, while adjuncts mitigate this threat, suggesting that greater L2 proficiency enhances learners’ ability to manage politeness more effectively. Moreover, English majors demonstrated a broader repertoire of refusal strategies than the other groups, consistent with findings by Bella (2014) and Al Masaeed et al. (2020). In contrast, high school EFL learners’ limited strategy use—primarily consisting of direct refusals—reflects their developing linguistic and pragmatic-linguistic competence. This expansion of refusal strategies aligns with the idea that learners’ pragmatic skills evolve alongside their L2 proficiency. A potential explanation for these observations is rooted in the developmental limitations of pragmatic competence among high school EFL learners. In contrast to college students who benefit from continuous instruction in L2 pragmatics, these EFL high schoolers primarily learn English through grammar-centric classroom activities that emphasize linguistic precision over socio-pragmatic usage (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Such an instructional focus may promote form-based learning, leading less advanced learners to opt for simplistic grammatical expressions when encountering pragmatic difficulties—a trend noted in the early stages of interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Additionally, their constrained metapragmatic awareness probably hinders their ability to discern when directness is contextually unsuitable. This analysis concurs with developmental theories suggesting that L2 pragmatic proficiency typically trails L2 grammatical proficiency in EFL educational environments (Taguchi, 2015).

The analysis revealed mixed results concerning the influence of power relations on the choice of refusal strategies, echoing findings from Nelson et al. (2002) and Shishavan and Sharifian (2016). Chinese EFL learners consistently employed more adjuncts when refusing professors compared to classmates, suggesting a tendency toward greater indirectness in hierarchical

contexts. The differential use of adjuncts across power relations can be understood through the Confucian pragmatics framework governing Chinese communicative norms (Mao, 1994). Rooted in Confucianism, Chinese culture is virtue-oriented and places a strong emphasis on hierarchical social harmony. Two key concepts—ritual (Li) and righteousness (Yi)—illustrate how interpersonal conduct is morally and socially regulated. Ritual refers to the moral norms and behavioral codes that coordinate relationships and maintain social order, while “righteousness” requires individuals to fulfill duties, respect authority, and uphold societal harmony. The essence of righteousness lies in balancing hierarchical order with rational conduct in social life. Since ancient times, Chinese cultural values have contained a strong hierarchical spirit, shaped by objective differences in relationships, social status, and roles. This ethical framework assigns different levels of responsibility and appropriate behavior depending on one’s role. Although roles such as parent or teacher may confer status, they also entail increased moral obligations. Therefore, in line with these Confucian ideals, Chinese speakers tend to ritualize mitigation when refusing individuals of higher status, using language that preserves face and reinforces social order.

In alignment with previous studies by Chang (2009), Allami and Naeimi (2011), and Hashemian (2021), the current research indicated that the appropriateness of certain refusal strategies was context-dependent, particularly influenced by the eliciting act. For instance, gratitude and appreciation were absent in request situations, as thanking a requester would be inappropriate due to the requester’s vested interest. Similarly, the strategy of letting the interlocutor off the hook was primarily utilized in offer and suggestion scenarios, reflecting sensitivity to the interlocutor’s feelings. The nature of the eliciting act plays a crucial role in shaping strategy selection. Refusers with the potential for personal gain often demonstrated heightened politeness, while those making offers or suggestions faced less obligation to mitigate face threats toward the interlocutor.

Use of strategy combinations by learners at three different L2 proficiency levels. To answer the first research question, this study reveals that Chinese EFL learners predominantly favored the combination of “*regret + reason/excuse/explanation*” in their refusal strategies—a pattern primarily driven by non-English majors and high school EFL learners, who accounted for nearly 87% of this combination. This reliance indicates that both groups heavily utilized this strategy, echoing findings by Bella (2014). The persistent use of this combination, regardless of power relations or eliciting acts, suggests that high school EFL learners are still in the early stages of developing their sociopragmatic competence, often struggling to formulate appropriate refusals across varied social contexts. Conversely, non-English majors displayed a more nuanced understanding of power relations. Although they employed “*regret + reason/excuse/explanation*” most frequently, they were more likely to use it in interactions with peers of equal status, rather than with those of higher status. This sensitivity indicates a growing awareness among non-English majors, enabling more adaptive strategy use. English majors exhibited a similar tendency when using this combination, although their overall frequency was lower. Instead, English majors preferred the combination of “*gratitude/appreciation + reason/excuse/explanation*”, which they utilized across all scenarios except for requests, where gratitude was less expected or necessary. The nature of speech acts inherently carries implications of potential costs and benefits. The individual making the request stands to gain, whereas the person being approached may face a disadvantage. Thus, there is no obligation to express gratitude when refusing a request. Conversely,

in the case of actions like offering suggestions, extending invitations, or making proposals, the dynamic shifts. Here, the recipient is the potential beneficiary, and even if they have not yet reaped any benefits, a refusal accompanied by thanks serves to acknowledge the other person's thoughtful gesture and conveys politeness. The ability to navigate these differences in eliciting acts and power relations suggests that English majors possess more advanced sociopragmatic competence than their peers. Their strategic choices demonstrate a growing awareness of the social nuances involved in refusals, reflecting the development of their L2 proficiency. This indicates that English majors possess more advanced socio-pragmatic competence than their peers. Their strategic choices demonstrate a growing awareness of the social nuances involved in refusals, reflecting the development of their L2 proficiency. This heightened sensitivity to others' feelings and social contexts may be associated with a higher level of empathy (Liu et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study examined the influences of L2 proficiency, power relations, and eliciting acts on the use of single refusal strategies and their combinations by Chinese EFL learners. The findings suggest that both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence develop progressively as learners advance in their L2 proficiency. Moreover, there is a positive correlation between the frequency of indirect strategies, the use of adjuncts, and the length of single refusals—all of which are associated with politeness—as L2 proficiency increases. The study also demonstrated that power relations and eliciting acts significantly affected the frequency of specific strategies employed. Notably, the two lower-proficiency groups showed a preference for the combination of “*regret + reason/excuse/explanation*” while advanced learners favored “*gratitude/appreciation + reason/excuse/explanation*”. These findings present significant insights for the instruction of English refusals to Chinese EFL learners with lower proficiency levels. Since the context of language learning is crucial (Liu and Song, 2021), especially for pragmatic learning, teachers might begin by introducing contextually appropriate refusal tactics. Subsequently, they could create diverse role-play exercises where students practice refusing people in different power relations—for example, distinguishing between turning down a professor's request and a classmate's invitation. During these activities, the focus should be on clarifying how power relations and eliciting acts influence the selection of refusal strategies. These activities not only allow students to practice a variety of refusal strategies but also sustain their interest in learning (Chen et al., 2024).

However, this study has several limitations that warrant further research. Firstly, while DCTs efficiently elicited refusal responses across L2 proficiency levels, their non-interactive nature may have led to an overrepresentation of strategic complexity and an underrepresentation of negotiation dynamics. Therefore, future studies should triangulate DCTs with role-play recordings to assess how real-time interaction constraints reshape strategy selection and sequencing. Secondly, the lack of native speaker data limits our ability to determine whether advanced learners' strategy repertoires align with target-language norms or reflect L1 transfer. Future research should collect parallel native speaker data using matched scenarios, allowing for cross-group comparisons of sociopragmatic appropriacy. Lastly, the majority of existing research in this area has focused on college students as participants. Future research could expand the participant pool to include a wider range of learners, particularly younger age groups, to provide a more comprehensive view of how refusal strategies develop over time. Investigating younger learners could shed light on the early stages of sociopragmatic competence and how L2 learners begin to acquire the social and cultural dimensions of language use across developmental stages.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Author contributions

YC and LY contributed to the conception and design of the study. MZ organized the database and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. QL and MZ performed the statistical analysis. QL wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version. Correspondence to: YC and LY.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the College of Foreign Languages at Ocean University of China, in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations of the Declaration of Helsinki. The original approval number is OUCIRB2023005, and approval was granted on 20 December 2023. The approval covers all procedures involving participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Later, data collection showed that the sample exhibited a significant gender imbalance, which rendered the inclusion of gender as a variable statistically inappropriate and potentially misleading. As a result, the gender variable was excluded from the final analysis to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The retrospective approval (Approval no. OUCIRB2024011) was obtained to formally document this change.

Informed consent

Consent was obtained in March of 2024 through written form, conducted by the second author, from all participants. The informed consent covers participation in the study as described, the use of data specifically for academic analysis and publication, and consent to publish anonymized results derived from participants' data. All participants were fully informed that their responses would remain anonymous, with no personally identifiable information collected. They were assured that their data would be used solely for academic purposes.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05537-w>.

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