

Navigating Power, Politeness, and Personal Boundaries: A Thematic Study of Refusals in L2 Pragmatics

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ABSTRACT

Refusal strategies represent a significant dimension in pragmatic studies, particularly due to their role in maintaining harmony in cross-cultural communication. Among learners of English as a second language (L2), these strategies are often shaped by local cultural norms, influencing how individuals interpret and respond to invitations or requests. **Purpose:** This study investigates how cultural background informs the use of refusal strategies in pragmatic speech acts among L2 English speakers. It specifically focuses on cultural values such as power hierarchy, politeness, and personal boundaries as manifested in the refusal strategies employed by speakers from an Outer Circle context (Kachru, 1982).

Methods: A qualitative approach with thematic analysis was adopted. Data were collected using an online Discourse Completion Task (DCT) featuring four social scenarios (i.e., interactions with a supervisor, professor, coworker, and peer). Forty Filipino university students, all L2 English speakers, participated in the study. Data were analysed through open coding and thematic categorisation using Atlas.ti software. **Results:** The analysis revealed six key themes: (1) authority and power distance, (2) autonomy and boundary setting, (3) honesty and self-disclosure, (4) politeness and face-saving strategies, (5) justification of rejection, and (6) social relationship management. Refusal acts function not only as linguistic expressions but also as reflections of cultural values, particularly respect, honesty, autonomy, and social harmony. **Implications:** The findings offer insights for intercultural pragmatic pedagogy and underscore the importance of culturally responsive materials in English language teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Refusal strategies are a highly complex and pragmatically risky form of speech act, as they can potentially threaten the face of the interlocutor in various social contexts. In cross-cultural communication, especially among second language (L2) speakers, these strategies reflect not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic awareness and deep cultural understanding (Beebe et al., 1990; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Hong, 2011). Miscommunication resulting from inappropriate refusal expressions may lead to serious interpersonal misunderstandings and impact both social and professional relationships (Hashemian, 2012; Ren, 2019). This highlights the need to examine how cultural factors shape the refusal strategies employed by L2 speakers, particularly in social contexts involving both peer and hierarchical relationships. In today's globalized world, where intercultural interaction is increasingly common across various domains, such inquiry is both timely and relevant.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that L2 speakers often transfer pragmatic norms from their first language (L1) into their second language use, leading to mismatches with the sociopragmatic expectations of the target language culture (Cui & Spring, 2019; Iliadi & Larina, 2017; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013). For instance, speakers from collectivist cultures, such as China and Thailand, tend to avoid direct refusals and instead employ politeness strategies and expressions of apology (Hong, 2011; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016). These strategies mirror deeply embedded values of social harmony and face-saving. However, in intercultural contexts where English functions as a lingua franca, communicative success depends not only on structural accuracy but also on the appropriateness of pragmatic strategies across cultural boundaries (Fujiwara, 2004; Mulo Farenkia, 2020).

Previous studies also suggest that variables such as power distance, social hierarchy, and cultural orientations toward collectivism or individualism significantly influence the selection of refusal strategies (Hashemian, 2012; Hovsepyan, 2021). In high power-distance cultures, such as in many parts of Asia and the Middle East, refusals directed toward superiors are typically conveyed with marked caution and deference (Kostromitina & Miao, 2024; Tian, 2014). By contrast, egalitarian societies like the United States or the United Kingdom tend to tolerate more direct yet polite refusals (Iliadi & Larina, 2017; Sadler & Eroz, 2002). These findings underscore how social roles and context—such as peer interactions versus hierarchical ones—shape the realization of refusal speech acts among L2 speakers.

Despite linguistic proficiency, L2 speakers often retain refusal patterns rooted in their native cultures, especially when pragmatic instruction is absent (Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Hashemian, 2012; Ren, 2019). Thus, the development of pragmatic competence in a second language is not merely a linguistic endeavor but a culturally situated process, heavily influenced by learners' exposure to the sociocultural norms of the target language environment.

To situate this study within a broader sociolinguistic context, Kachru's (1982) model of World Englishes is especially relevant. The model divides English use into three concentric circles: the Inner Circle (e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom), where English is a native language; the Outer Circle (e.g., India, Singapore, and the Philippines), where English is a second official language; and the Expanding Circle (e.g., Japan, Indonesia, China), where English is learned as a foreign language. These circles reflect not only geopolitical distinctions but also pragmatic and cultural variations in English use. In Outer Circle countries, although English is institutionalized and used in everyday communication, it remains shaped by indigenous cultural norms.

In the Philippines, a country classified within the Outer Circle (Kachru, 1982), English functions as an official second language used in education, governance, and professional domains (Bautista, 2001; Madrunio et al., 2016). Filipino speakers generally exhibit high levels of English competence, yet their language use remains informed by cultural values such as respect for hierarchy and social harmony—key attributes of collectivist societies (Gonzalez, 1998). In this regard, the way Filipino L2 speakers perform refusal speech acts in English reflects the intersection of linguistic proficiency and cultural identity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how cultural background influences the refusal strategies employed by Filipino L2 English speakers. Specifically, it examines the role of cultural values—such as power hierarchy, politeness norms, and social boundaries—in shaping pragmatic choices in different social contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a thematic analysis design (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore how cultural background influences refusal strategies in pragmatic speech acts among speakers of English as a second language (L2). This methodological choice was made because thematic analysis is particularly suitable for examining meaning, patterns, and variation in speech acts across cultural contexts. The participants in this study consisted of 40 Filipino university students, aged between 19 and 23, who

regularly use English as an L2 in higher education settings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were L2 English speakers from an Outer Circle context, (2) they had experience in cross-cultural communication in academic environments, and (3) they were willing to actively engage in the data collection process.

Data were collected using an online Discourse Completion Task (DCT) instrument, which presented participants with four hypothetical social scenarios: (1) an invitation from a co-worker, (2) an invitation from a lecturer, (3) an invitation from a close friend, and (4) an invitation to a productivity-related activity from a superior. Participants were instructed to respond to each scenario in writing, as if they were in a real-life situation. Additionally, they were asked to provide a brief explanation of their cultural considerations underlying each response. The DCT items were designed based on pragmatic speech act theory and validated through expert review to ensure content relevance and cultural appropriateness. All written responses were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. The analysis procedure followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, consisting of three main stages: (1) open coding of refusal utterances, (2) grouping of codes based on semantic similarity, and (3) identification of overarching themes that represent both refusal strategies and underlying cultural values.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, techniques such as peer debriefing and audit trail documentation were employed, aligning with established strategies in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). These procedures served to enhance the credibility and dependability of the coding and interpretive processes by ensuring that findings were both data-driven and subjected to external scrutiny. Specifically, peer debriefing provided an opportunity for independent review and critical reflection, while the audit trail offered a transparent record of analytical decisions, facilitating consistency and methodological rigor (Adler, 2022). The analysis was conducted interpretively, with the aim of identifying patterns, variations, and pragmatic motivations in the use of refusal strategies across different social contexts, consistent with the principles of meaning-oriented inquiry in qualitative pragmatics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Distribution of Codes Across Scenarios

The distribution of the table of refusal strategies shows that participants used different approaches depending on the social context in the given scenario. Of the 250 quotations analyzed, the most frequently used strategy overall was Politeness Preservation (n=62). This strategy is the most dominant strategy in all situations and is evenly distributed across the four situations. It indicates that maintaining politeness is the primary pragmatic norm upheld regardless of who the addressee is.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Cultural Considerations Underlying Refusal across Social Scenarios

Codes	Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	Situation 4	Totals
Appreciation for Invitation	6	7	6	5	24
Close Friendship Dynamics	1	0	0	2	3
Direct Honesty	5	7	5	15	32
Emotional Sensitivity	9	3	3	5	20
Encouraging Autonomy	0	0	1	0	1
Honest Explanation	6	3	6	3	18
Maintaining Future Possibility	3	1	2	7	13
Neutral Stance	0	1	0	0	1
Personal Preference	4	1	4	8	17
Politeness Preservation	17	15	15	15	62

Pressure Avoidance	0	0	1	4	5
Preventing Misunderstanding	1	1	0	2	4
Professional Boundary	0	4	4	0	8
Providing Reason for Refusal	6	5	4	0	15
Respect for Authority	0	13	11	2	26
Social Distance Awareness	0	0	1	0	1
Totals	58	61	63	68	250

In the Situation 1 (Colleague Picnic), the most prominent strategies were Politeness Preservation (n=17), Emotional Sensitivity (n=9), and Honest Explanation (n=6). This shows that even though the context was socially parallel, participants still used polite and empathetic approaches. Additionally, the Appreciation for Invitation (n=6) emerged which confirms the efforts to maintain harmonious professional relationships. In Situation 2 (Supervisor Dinner), the most prominent strategy was Politeness Preservation (n=15), followed by Respect for Authority (n=13), and Professional Boundary (n=4). The data confirms that in interactions with authoritative figures, participants are very careful in rejecting invitations and place more emphasis on hierarchical aspects and professional caution. Meanwhile, in Situation 3 (Classmate Jogging), a scenario involving close friends, there was a significant increase in the strategies of Direct Honesty (n=15), Personal Preference (n=8), and Maintaining Future Possibility (n=7). This indicates that participants were more comfortable expressing their refusal directly and openly in an egalitarian relationship context, without worrying about damaging their close social relationships. For Situation 4 (Boss Productivity Session), the most prominent strategies were Politeness Preservation (n=15), Respect for Authority (n=11), and Providing Reason for Refusal (n=4). This reflects the need to balance maintaining a professional image and explaining the reasons for refusal logically. Additionally, strategies such as Professional Boundary (n=4) and Emotional Sensitivity (n=3) also highlight the importance of workplace etiquette in formal contexts.

Emerging Themes and Cultural Insights

Authority and Power Distance

This theme reflects participants' awareness of the hierarchy of power in social interactions. Strategies of refusal are conveyed in ways that avoid violating norms of politeness toward those considered to have higher authority.

Professional Boundary

Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining professional boundaries in situations involving superiors or lecturers.

"I chose to respond that way because that response maintains politeness and shows appreciation while also rejecting the invitation." (2:8, Supervisor Dinner)

"I chose to respond that way because it's not appropriate if we do some academic dinner in that kind of situation." (2:1, Supervisor Dinner)

In the above excerpt, refusal is expressed in a professional and polite manner. Respondents consider behavioural norms in academic or work settings, where maintaining distance and boundaries is considered more appropriate than informal social engagement.

Respect for Authority

Refusals were conveyed by emphasising respect for authority, such as lecturers or superiors

"I call her with saying Ma'am/Sir and that way I showed respect and also I'm saying Thank you." (2:42)

"Because He/she is my teacher and I do respect him for that." (2:5)

Respondents indicated that refusal should always be conveyed respectfully so as not to hurt the other party's feelings. Formal greetings and expressions of appreciation are linguistic tools that can be used to reduce potential threats to hierarchical relationships.

Social Distance Awareness

Respondents acknowledged the need to maintain social distance, especially in professional relationships.

"It was not specified if I like my supervisor or not, I want to stay neutral." (2:32, Supervisor Dinner)

"I chose to respond that way to avoid a misconception." (2:24, Supervisor Dinner)

In this context, maintaining neutrality or not becoming too familiar is a strategy used to avoid negative interpretations. Refusal is not only personal but also takes into account broader social perceptions.

Autonomy and Boundary Setting

This theme shows that participants prioritise personal autonomy and individual boundaries in decision-making, including in situations of refusal. The strategies used to reflect a desire not to be controlled by social expectations or pressure from others.

Encouraging Autonomy

Participants consciously assert their boundaries and refuse invitations for reasons related to personal capacity.

"I cannot force myself in a situation that I cannot do. I know it would make me feel uncomfortable."

(3:3, Boss Productivity Session)

"I chose to respond that way because that approach respects the friendship, acknowledges their concern, and maintains my boundary." (4:8, Classmate Jogging)

"I responded that way to show appreciation while setting a boundary about my availability." (3:2, Boss Productivity Session)

Refusal is used as a way to express limits of control over time, space, and personal situations. Although conveyed politely, this form of rejection reflects cultural values that respect individual agency while avoiding burdens that cannot be fulfilled.

Personal Preference

Personal choices and habits are the main basis for expressing refusal, especially in informal social contexts.

"Because Sunday it is a free day for us. I'm always on church that day." (1:7, Colleague Picnic)

"I prefer to run at nightfall." (4:16, Classmate Jogging)

"Because I'm being cautious not to offend or hurt his/her feelings, but this is what I usually do." (1:30, Colleague Picnic)

Refusal is directed not at the invitation or the person making it, but at preferences that are ingrained in routines or personal values. This strategy avoids conflict while maintaining authenticity in behaviour.

Pressure Avoidance

Respondents rejected the invitation because they did not want to act simply because they felt compelled by social norms.

"Because I do not want to do something that I do not really want to do just because I was pressured."

(4:10, Classmate Jogging)

"Because I feel pressured, I go straight to the point. Any form of politeness is needed." (4:5, Classmate Jogging)

"I chose to respond that way, for his/her not to ask me anymore." (4:7, Classmate Jogging)

These quotes demonstrate a clear rejection as a form of resistance against external pressure. However, respondents still chose to express themselves indirectly so as not to sever relationships.

Honesty and Self-Disclosure

This theme reflects participants' tendency to express rejection openly and honestly. Honesty was chosen as a strategy that was considered to be more respectful of the other person than manipulative or too indirect rejection.

Direct Honesty

Participants expressed rejection as it is, without much elaboration, with the intention of conveying a clear message and avoiding ambiguity.

"Just tell the real story so that next time she will not insist." (4:2, Classmate Jogging)

"I want to be honest and clear, but still kind. I said no in a polite way and gave a simple reason." (4:35, Classmate Jogging)

"I choose to respond honestly." (1:33, Colleague Picnic)

This strategy demonstrates the value of honesty as a form of personal integrity. Despite the risk of sounding too straightforward, participants chose this approach for the sake of communication effectiveness and clarity of intent, which was considered more respectful to the interlocutor.

Honest Explanation

Respondents provide honest and factual explanations as a form of transparency, without trying to disguise the reasons for refusal.

"Because I have many things to do and I do not want to make him/her feel that I do not appreciate the invitation." (1:40, Colleague Picnic)

"I decided just to say I cannot come because I do not want to sound like I am making excuses." (2:10, Supervisor Dinner)

"I must say the truthfulness." (3:25, Boss Productivity Session)

The rejection here is delivered rationally based on honest reasons. This strategy is used to maintain credibility while avoiding the impression of deception or subterfuge. Honesty is positioned as a means to maintain socially healthy relationships.

Neutral Stance

A participant chose to be neutral in explaining their refusal, especially when they felt uncomfortable expressing their personal opinions too directly.

"It wasn't specified if I like my supervisor or not, I want to stay neutral." (2:32, Supervisor Dinner)

Neutrality is used as a form of protection for self and interlocutor. By avoiding emotional opinions or personal judgment, participants demonstrated strategies to avoid conflict and maintain balance in social interactions.

Politeness and Face-Saving Strategy

This theme shows that many participants use politeness strategies to maintain the harmony of social relations and prevent threats to the face of the interlocutor. Rejection is delivered in ways that are non-threatening, polite, and considerate of others' feelings.

Emotional Sensitivity

Participants show sensitivity to others' feelings when rejecting invitations, often inserting expressions of empathy or apology.

"I said thank you to be polite. I gave a short, honest reason mornings are hard so my boss knows I'm not available." (3:32, Boss Productivity Session)

"I chose to respond that way for her/him not to feel bad." (4:39, Classmate Jogging)

"I chose to respond that way because I wanted to acknowledge their kindness and make sure they felt appreciated." (1:39, Colleague Picnic)

This strategy emphasises the value of interpersonal relationships and social harmony. The rejection is not conveyed explicitly, but is wrapped in an expression that considers the other person's feelings so as not to feel personally offended or rejected.

Politeness Preservation

Respondents consciously choose forms of refusal that maintain a polite and non-confrontational image. This strategy often begins with a thank you, apology, or positive statement.

"My response is friendly, yet direct, allowing me to decline the suggestion without feeling obligated." (4:40, Classmate Jogging)

"I chose to say it like this because I wanted to sound respectful and thankful without making it awkward." (2:41, Supervisor Dinner)

"For me it's the nicest way of declining an invitation." (1:12, Colleague Picnic)

This strategy is a form of negative politeness commonly found in Asian cultures, where it is important to maintain the honor of the other party. By framing the refusal subtly and sympathetically, the participant hopes to be still able to refuse without damaging existing social relationships.

Justification of Refusal

This theme highlights participants' tendency to give explicit reasons for refusing an invitation. The reasons given serve as social justifications to defuse potential threats to the relationship and show that refusal is not a perfunctory or uncaring act.

Providing Reason for Refusal

Respondents gave specific and logical reasons for refusal, whether in the form of academic obligations, personal busyness, or impossible conditions.

"I need to be professional and eventually have to give him the reason of why I can't join since it is conflicting." (3:5, Boss Productivity Session)

"Because Sunday, it is a free day for us. I'm always on church that day." (1:7, Colleague Picnic)

"Because I wouldn't decline the invitation if there were no more important things to do than learn more." (2:31, Supervisor Dinner)

The reason given is concrete and socially acceptable. This strategy serves to protect one's identity while avoiding negative assumptions from the inviter. By providing a justification, the participant tries to show that the rejection does not stem from dislike or rejection of the person, but rather of an inappropriate situation.

Preventing Misunderstanding

One form of justification that emerged in the data was participants' attempts to prevent misunderstandings about the meaning of their refusal. This strategy shows that justification is not always conveyed in the form of concrete reasons such as busyness or schedule conflicts, but also in the form of clarifications of intent to maintain the interlocutor's perception. In this context, participants not only explain why they refuse, but also why they say it in a certain way.

"To avoid misconception since he/she might think that I just don't want to join him/her." (1:23, Colleague Picnic)

"To avoid misconception." (2:24, Supervisor Dinner)

These quotations reflect an awareness of the potential threat to social relations posed by unclear rejection. Therefore, the forms of justification provided serve not only as rationalizations but also as mitigation strategies to prevent the addressee from feeling personally rejected. In cultures that value harmony and social solidarity, such as in the context of this study, preventing misunderstandings is an important part of pragmatic competence.

Social Relationship Management

This theme reflects participants' efforts to maintain and nurture social relationships despite having to convey rejection. The strategies used are interpersonal and affective, and they often include opportunities for further interaction as a form of preserving good relationships.

Appreciation for the Invitation

Respondents begin the rejection with an expression of gratitude or appreciation for the invitation, as a way to still show respect and goodwill.

"I chose to respond that way because I wanted to acknowledge their kindness and make sure they felt appreciated." (1:39, Colleague Picnic)

"I first appreciate the fact that he/she invites me. Secondly, I'd always choose to be polite." (1:5, Colleague Picnic)

"Appreciate the invitation." (3:4, Boss Productivity Session)

Appreciation of the invitation is an important introduction before declining. This shows a cultural value that emphasizes gratitude and mutual appreciation, even when unable to fulfill others' requests.

Close Friendship Dynamics

In the context of close relationships such as classmates or best friends, participants tend to be more open and expressive in expressing refusal, while still considering the feelings of the other party.

"Since we're close friends, I feel comfortable sharing my real thoughts with him/her." (4:32, Classmate Jogging)

"I respond this way because we are classmates and we've been together for 3 years." (4:19, Classmate Jogging)

"Because I want to be honest to him/her." (4:1, Classmate Jogging)

Familiar relationships allow respondents to use rejection strategies that are more honest, direct, but still based on mutual trust. Rejection in this context is often aimed at maintaining the closeness that has been built.

Maintaining Future Possibility

This form of rejection is also accompanied by hopes or plans for future meetings, so that the rejection does not seem final or absolute.

"Maybe we can do it next time." (4:37, Classmate Jogging)

"To make him/her feel that maybe next time I can." (2:29, Supervisor Dinner)

"At least you can join in next meeting." (3:6, Boss Productivity Session)

This strategy shows a desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the invitee. By inserting the opportunity of the next meeting, the rejection becomes lighter and still opens a positive communication space.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the refusal strategies employed by Filipino speakers of English as a second language are deeply influenced by cultural dimensions, particularly those pertaining to hierarchical relationships, politeness norms, and personal boundaries. These findings corroborate earlier studies indicating that L2 speakers frequently transfer sociopragmatic norms from their L1 to L2 contexts (Beebe, 1990; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013). This pragmatic transfer is evident across diverse cultural settings, where norms of interaction—such as deference to authority and interpersonal sensitivity—mirror broader cultural values (Meier, 2010; Wierzbicka, 1985; Usmani & Almashham, 2024). In particular, the tendency to preserve politeness and express deference in vertical relationships underscores the collectivist orientation embedded in Filipino culture, which privileges social harmony and respect for hierarchy (Hashemian, 2012; Hong, 2011; Ghorbani, Ghiasvand, & Ahmadi, 2025).

Consistent with these patterns, the data also indicate a significant shift in communicative strategies within peer interactions. Among friends and equals, refusal tends to be framed through honesty, personal preferences, and autonomy management (Czajkowska-Białkowska, 2022; Manago et al., 2020). These findings lend support to the notion that equal-status relationships encourage a more direct and expressive communicative mode. As noted by Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016), while Asian communicative norms continue to value politeness, familiarity allows for increased self-expression. The preference for direct honesty and honest explanations among peers reflects a context-sensitive pragmatic flexibility, shaped by interpersonal closeness and mutual familiarity (Eslami, 2010; Shahi, 2022; Agus & Iswandi, 2025). These choices appear to be informed not only by the speaker's linguistic proficiency but also by an intuitive awareness of the social and cultural expectations governing the speech situation (Chang, 2011; Tabatabaei & Farnia, 2015). Leontovich and Gulyaeva's (2018) view that refusal can simultaneously serve relational and distancing functions is particularly relevant here, as participants balance the need for sincerity with the imperative to maintain face. In line with Peterson's (1996) analysis, this balance illustrates how honesty in close relationships can simultaneously strengthen and complicate interpersonal dynamics.

The analysis further highlights the strategic use of justification in refusal, which appears to serve both cognitive and interpersonal functions. Participants often cited concrete reasons (e.g., prior obligations) alongside mitigating explanations intended to reduce potential relational tension. This dual function supports Felix-Brasdefer's (2003) and Ren's (2019) arguments that justification strategies act not only as rational accounts but also as face-enhancing moves. In collectivist societies such as the Philippines, these justifications contribute to the maintenance of interpersonal harmony and are central to the speaker's pragmatic repertoire (Gonzalez, 1998; Madrunio et al., 2016).

Another salient theme pertains to the participants' heightened awareness of professional boundaries and perceived social pressure in hierarchical interactions. When responding to figures of authority—such as lecturers or superiors—participants employed strategies characterized by boundary-setting and avoidance of direct confrontation. These behaviors reinforce the findings of Hovsepyan (2021) and Kostromitina and Miao (2024), who argue that in high power-distance cultures, refusals are carefully managed to preserve respect and delineate acceptable social distance. Such refusals are thus not merely linguistic acts but sociocultural performances that serve to negotiate and reaffirm hierarchical roles.

Taken together, these findings substantiate the view that pragmatic competence in a second language is inextricably linked to the speaker's cultural background. Even with high levels of linguistic proficiency, the appropriateness of speech acts is mediated by culturally embedded understandings of interpersonal behavior (Fujiwara, 2004; Mulo-Farenkia, 2020). In contexts such as the Philippines—where English functions within an Outer Circle model—this underscores the need for pragmatic instruction that goes beyond structural accuracy and actively engages learners with the sociocultural dimensions of language use. Only through such integrative

approaches can learners develop the cross-cultural pragmatic competence essential for successful communication in diverse real-world interactions.

Building on this perspective, the findings of this study carry important implications for English language teaching in ESL contexts, particularly those characterized by cultural heterogeneity. Language instruction that focuses exclusively on grammar and vocabulary may fail to equip learners for complex speech events such as refusals or disagreements, which require not only linguistic but also sociopragmatic sensitivity. The participants' reliance on culturally grounded strategies highlights the need to incorporate pragmatic consciousness-raising activities, authentic discourse samples, and contextually rich role-plays—especially those reflecting both hierarchical and egalitarian interactional settings. Such pedagogical practices promote not only communicative competence but also intercultural awareness, preparing learners to navigate social dynamics with appropriateness and flexibility.

Despite the valuable insights obtained, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the data were drawn from a limited participant pool, which may not fully represent the broad diversity of sociolects and regional cultures across the Philippines. Secondly, the focus on English as a second language might obscure the complex interplay between multiple languages or dialects spoken by participants, which may influence their refusal behavior in ways not fully captured here. Moreover, the study primarily relied on self-reported responses and elicited role-play data, which, although insightful, might not entirely mirror spontaneous real-life interactions.

Future research could benefit from adopting a comparative framework, examining refusal strategies across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds within the ASEAN region or other Outer Circle contexts. Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insights into how pragmatic competence develops over time with increased exposure to diverse communicative settings. Additionally, more nuanced analyses involving multimodal data (e.g., prosody, gesture, and facial expression) could enrich our understanding of how refusals are pragmatically negotiated in face-to-face interactions. Expanding research to include digitally mediated communication, where pragmatic cues differ significantly, would also be a valuable avenue, particularly given the increasing role of technology in interpersonal exchanges.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cultural considerations play an important role in the choice of refusal strategies by Filipino speakers of English as a second language. Participants demonstrated high pragmatic awareness in responding to invitations or requests based on social context, especially in distinguishing between hierarchical and equal relationships. Strategies such as politeness preservation, justification of refusal, and respect for authority were used to maintain harmony, autonomy, and the image of the speaker and the interlocutor. These findings reinforce the view that language use depends not only on linguistic competence but also on an understanding of the cultural values underlying communication. Thus, refusal strategies in L2 contexts should be understood as a complex interaction between language, culture, and social awareness. However, this study has several limitations that need to be considered. The instrument used, the Discourse Completion Task (DCT), is hypothetical and does not fully represent language use in real situations. In addition, the participants came from a single cultural background, so generalising the findings to other L2 populations requires caution. The descriptive qualitative approach used was also not complemented by data triangulation, such as direct observation or in-depth interviews. These limitations impact the depth of understanding regarding the dynamics of refusal strategies in everyday interaction practices. To overcome these limitations, further research is recommended using more naturalistic and participatory methods. Approaches such as authentic interaction analysis, longitudinal studies, or combinations with quantitative methods can enrich the findings. Cross-cultural research involving L2 speakers from various social and ethnolinguistic contexts is also important to broaden the scope of generalisation. The findings of this study can also serve as a basis for developing intercultural

pragmatic learning in English language teaching curricula. Learning that emphasises awareness of local culture and polite strategies can equip learners with effective, sensitive, and adaptive communication skills in global interactions.

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