

An Investigation of Iranian Learners' Utilization of Politeness Strategies and Power Relations in Refusal Speech Act across Different Communicative Situations

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the L2 pragmatic knowledge of Iranian intermediate learners of English through the performance of the speech act of refusals in English across diverse situations. One hundred and twenty five Iranian learners whose language proficiency was at the intermediate level took part in this research. The required data were collected by mean of an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). The results showed that most respondents tended to use more indirect strategies (55.5%) to refuse another speaker's suggestion or request either with higher or lower power or within different social distance. They utilized direct strategies with 24.1% and adjuncts to refusals with 18.9% respectively. The findings are illustrative of the fact that the variations in the use of different strategies are less seen in the data. In other words, learners employed almost the same semantic formulas or pragmalinguistic forms to refuse affairs in most of the situations. It can be said that learners might not have enough awareness or consciousness regarding the use of different pragmalinguistic forms in performing the refusal since they did not have sufficient understanding of context and contextual factors involved as well. Therefore, the results can suggest that the learners lack sufficient pragmatic knowledge in confronting different situations. The implication of this study is for Iranian language instructors to teach a variety of speech acts' strategies, politeness strategies and draw learners' their attention to the contextual features in opting out the appropriate strategy in a variety of situations.

Keywords: Iranian learners of English, L2 pragmatic knowledge, politeness strategies, power relations, refusal speech act

1. Introduction

Communication among diverse cultures is an everyday phenomenon in recent decades due to the globalization and multiculturalism around the world. Therefore, there should exist a shared channel for the purpose of intercultural communication. So, the English language occupies a fundamental position in this perspective and it is considered as shared vehicle among an assortment of cultures. Since individuals should understand each other's speech in the act of communication in order to convey the intended meaning, therefore the matter of appropriate intercultural understanding of speech becomes important among interlocutors (Al-Zumor, 2011; Dastjerdi & Farshid, 2014). It is worth mentioning that the use of the English language is accentuated more in EFL contexts since EFL learners are necessitated to make use of the English language for their interactive purposes. These needs include doing their business with other communities, searching and reading scientific articles, applying for diverse jobs in other countries and so on.

According to Kachru (1996), Iran is situated in the Expanding Circle Countries (ECC) like Japan and Korea, where English is considered as the Foreign Language (EFL) as contrary to outer circle countries which English is used as a Second Language (ESL) like Malaysia and inner circle countries such as U.S., Canada, and Australia where English is utilized as the First Language. Iranians learn English language as the dominant foreign language to connect and interact with other communities worldwide.

Moreover, it is important to know that Iran as a foreign language context does not provide EFL learners sufficiently to have contact with the English language and culture outside the classroom setting and learners have

to depend on classroom learning (Allami & Naemi, 2011). As such, the majority of Iranian students (primary, secondary, high school, and university students) and even other individuals with diverse educational levels and majors with different ages prefer to go to private language institutes to study and learn English to practice it more there (Farhadi et al., 2010; Hosseini, 2007). In this way, private language institutes have taken the responsibility to satisfy people's needs to learn English (Shoarinejad, 2008).

The justification of the above issue is better manifested by the following statistics; approximately 100,000 learners have enrolled in a private language institute, namely the Iran Language Institute (ILI) established in different cities in Iran in 2013 (Moradi et al., 2013). An assortment of Iranians' incentives can contribute to such reputation of learning English at private language institutes. These motives are for example seeking better educational or employment opportunities, augmenting the mobility and migrating to diverse English speaking countries (Hakimzadeh, 2006). The report shows that more than 150,000 Iranian citizens migrate to other countries each year, particularly the English speaking countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada (Moradi et al., 2013). This census is indicative of the positive attitudes of Iranians, especially the younger generations, towards learning English. In order to satisfy their communicative demands in intercultural communications and multicultural world, they have to learn English to use it. Considering this issue, Moivnavziri (2008) reported that her participants were highly instrumentally and integratively motivated to learn English. Vaezi (2008) also acknowledges the previous findings and declares that Iranians have high motivation to learn English.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

When speakers from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds interact with each other, they may not comprehend another interlocutor's speech or intended meaning and as a result, cross-cultural misunderstanding may take place in some specific situations between people. This quandary is considered as the one of the problems that EFL learners, especially Iranian learners of English face when they communicate interculturally with other individuals (Derakhshan & Zangoei, 2014). In fact, the main problem Iranian learners of English encounter in the act of intercultural communication is pertinent to pragmatic-rooted one related to the appropriate use of language (Gahrouei, 2013). Therefore, it can be claimed that the most fundamental cause of misunderstanding between cultures is concerned with the pragmatic breakdown in opting out the proper speech act strategies (Kia & Salehi, 2013). As such, to eschew intercultural misapprehensions and the consequential pragmatic breakdown in the act of interaction, L2 pragmatic knowledge of EFL learners should be sufficiently developed so that they can cross their intended meaning to other interlocutors. This issue can give rise to more efficient and prosperous intercultural communication (Lin, 2014; Salehi, 2013).

Since the classroom context is the sole place that Iranian learners learn the English language, therefore second language acquisition researchers have been inspired to examine the current position of L2 pragmatic knowledge of Iranian learners of the English language in language classrooms and investigate the development of learners' pragmatic knowledge in EFL contexts (Sabzalipour, 2013; Tamjid & Noroozi, 2014). In addition, the review of research literature of L2 pragmatics in EFL contexts has illustrated that the most researches done (Abu Hamaeid, 2013; Know, 2004; Lin, 2014) were intercultural studies which made a comparison between the pragmatic production of English native speakers with non-native English speakers in terms of the understanding and producing the strategies of speech acts. These studies have mostly epitomized on learners' pragmalinguistic knowledge without the consideration of the effect of contextual factors (pragmalinguistic knowledge) on learners' pragmatic performance. As such, there is a dearth of research to examine both Iranian learners of English pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge in EFL contexts. Therefore, this study tries to fill this gap by examining L2 pragmatic knowledge of Iranian learners (both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge) via performing and producing the speech act of English refusal in various situations. This study employed two theoretical models, i.e., the speech acts theory of Austin (1962), the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The subject of this research included one hundred and twenty five Iranian EFL learners whose language proficiency was at the intermediate level. After the administration of OPT placement test, 125 learners were chosen as intermediate level learners according to the test results and the reminders were eliminated from the research. The whole participants were female since the gender was not considered as a variable in this research and their age ranged between 25 to 40 years old.

2.2 Instruments

For the accumulation of the necessary data for the purpose of this research, a Written Discourse Completion Task or Test (WDCT) was employed in this study. This questionnaire is an international recognized and most common employed questionnaire for evaluating L2 pragmatic knowledge of learners. This questionnaire was utilized in this research for some reasons. First, given that the purpose of this study was to evaluate the pragmatic knowledge of learners, the most effective instrument to achieve necessary data is by means of this questionnaire. Secondly, the preparation and administration of this type of questionnaire for a bulky number of participants need less time. Thirdly, more time is allocated to subjects to think about the situations and the given responses and they may employ diverse strategies compared to other instruments. The questionnaire of this study was adapted from Allami and Naeimi (2011). The situational variables of social power, distance, and imposition/severity were inserted in the situations of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of twelve natural situations with different degrees of social power, distance and imposition regarding different matters. The whole questionnaire comprised three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions situations which the respondents were required to refuse suggestion, requests, invitations and offers. Furthermore, each situation includes one refusal to a person of higher status, one to a person of equal status, and one to a person of lower status. The following table shows topics and situational variables of the refusal speech act.

Table 1. Topics and situational variables of refusal situations

Item	Topic	Variable		
		Imposition	Status	Distance
1	Refusing to increase the pay of a worker as a book shop owner.	-	+	+
2	Refusing to give notes to a classmate for the exam.	+	=	-
3	Refusing to eat out in an expensive restaurant with a sales person of another company as the president of a big company	-	=	+
4	Refusing to go to the boss's party with your spouse.	-	-	+
5	Refusing to eat a snack at the friend's house.	+	=	-
6	Refusing to give a report to the boss	-	-	+
7	Refusing to receive money for the cleaning lady's mistake from her.	+	+	+
8	Refusing a student's suggestion about the class in the university.	+	=	+
9	Refusing a friend's offer of another piece of cake.	+	=	-
10	Refusing a friend's invitation for a party.	+		
11	Refusing the boss's suggestion for a better position due to moving to another city	-	-	+
12	Refusing the boss about staying over at work.	-	-	+

Considering the validity of the questionnaire, four experts approved its validity by checking both the content and face validity of the questionnaire. The experts were four professors of applied linguistics from university kebangsaan Malaysia. Regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, the inter-rater reliability was performed. The inter-rater reliability estimate for the questionnaire was achieved at around 0.91% which is an acceptable index.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

The procedure of data collection was conducted at the classroom sessions of the winter academic semester of 2015 at five private language institutes in Shiraz city, Iran. The sampling procedure was a convenient random sampling. The number of intermediate EFL learners was 125 learners. The reason is that the number of subjects should be more than 100 for survey researches (Dornyei, 2007). The data were accumulated at sessions when the classroom instructors let the researcher to do so. First, all the necessary explanations with regard to whole questionnaire were given by the researcher in both the English and Persian languages in order to eschew any misunderstanding by the learners to provide the appropriate answers. The questionnaire had the instruction part. It asked the participants to read the 12 situations. After each situation, the participants were asked to write a response in the blank after 'You'. The subjects should imagine that they do not want to comply with their request, invitation, etc. in addition, they were supposed to respond as naturally as possible and try to write their response as they feel they would say it in the situation. Then, they were given half and hour minutes time to give the

answers for each situation for the speech act under study. At the end, all the questionnaires were collected by the researcher.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis and categorization of the collected data by means of the questionnaire were conducted based on the refusal taxonomy with regard to the kind and frequency of the pragmatic strategies or linguistic forms opted out by participants. Therefore, the taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990) was employed for the speech act of refusal in this study. The selected taxonomy is shown below.

Table 2. Taxonomy of Refusal: (Beebe et al., 1990)

Strategy	Example
I. Direct	
A. Performative	I refuse
B. Nonperformative statement	
1. No	
2. Negative willingness/ability	I cant, I won't, I don't think so.
II. Indirect	
A. Statement of regret	I'm sorry. I feel terrible
B. Wish	
C. Excuse, reason, explanation	My children will be home that night. I have a headache.
D. Statement of alternative	
1. I can do X instead of Y	I'd rather do...I'd prefer
2. Why don't you do X instead of Y	Why don't you ask someone else?
E. Set condition for future or past acceptance	If you had asked me earlier, I would have...
F. Promise of future acceptance	I'll do it next time. I promise I'll. Next time I'll..
G. Statement of principle	I never do business with friends
H. Statement of philosophy	One can't be too careful
I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	
1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	I won't be any fun tonight to refuse an invitation
2. Guilt trip	I can't make a living off people who just order coffee (waitress to customers who want to sit a while)
3. Criticize the request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion, insult, attack)	Who do you think you are? That's a terrible idea!
4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.	
5. Let interlocutor off the hook	Don't worry about it. That's okay. You don't have to.
6. Self-defense	I'm trying my best. I'm doing all I can.
J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal	
1. Unspecific or indefinite reply	
2. Lack of enthusiasm	
K. Avoidance	
1. Nonverbal	
a. Silence	
b. Hesitation	
c. Do nothing	
d. Physical departure	
2. Verbal	
a. Topic switch	
b. Joke	
c. Repetition of part of request, etc.	Monday?
d. Postponement	I'll think about it.

e. Hedging	Gee, I don't know. I'm not sure.
Adjuncts to refusals	
1. Statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement	That's a good idea...I'd love to...
2. Statement of empathy	I realize you are in a difficult situation.
3. Pause filler	Uhh...well...uhm...
4. Gratitude/appreciation	

3. Results

In order to meet the research objective of this study, the data were collected through the Written Discourse Completion Test/Tasks (WDCT). The researcher examined the L2 pragmatic knowledge of Iranian intermediate learners of English by producing the speech act of refusals in English across diverse situations. It was aimed to evaluate learners' knowledge in recognition and production of accurate and appropriate speech act strategies or linguistic forms as well as situational understanding of three factors of social power, distance and imposition. In so doing, they were given some situations and they had to write the answers to the situations based on what they would say verbally for each scenario.

The following table illustrates the descriptive results based on frequency of the speech act' strategies and the corresponding percentage in each situation. As it was mentioned before, the items of the questionnaires differ in terms of social distance, power and rank of imposition to tap learners' awareness in using various strategies.

Table 3. Percentage of refusal strategies across all situations

Strategies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
I. Direct	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24.1%
A. Performative	-	-	3.1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.2%
B. Non Performative statement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1.No	-	18.1%	6.2%	2.2%	11.5%	4%	13.3%	3.8%	28.2%	6.5%	8.3%	-	9.04%
2.Negative willingness/ability	34.4%	15.1%	12.5%	15.5%	15.3%	16%	16.6%	7.6%	6.5%	8.6%	25%	11%	14.9%
II. Indirect	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	74.9%
A. Statement of regret	24.1%	30.3%	25%	22.2%	3.8%	8%	-	-	-	19.5%	11.1%	31%	15.1%
B. Wish	-	-	-	2.2%	-	-	-	-	-	2.1%	-	2.8%	0.7%
C. Excuse, reason, explanation	17.2%	30.3%	34.3%	33.3%	26.9%	36%	-	19.2%	30.4%	34.7%	25%	48%	28.8%
D. Statement of alternative	-	-	-	-	3.8%	-	-	-	2.1%	-	-	-	0.4%
1. I can do X instead of Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Why don't you do X instead of Y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
E. Set condition for future or past acceptance	3.4%	-	3.1%	2.2%	-	4%	3.3%	7.6%	-	2.1%	2.7%	-	2.2%
													0.7%
F. Promise of future acceptance	3.4%	3%	-	-	-	-	-	3.8%	-	-	-	-	-
G. Statement of Principle	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.6%	7.6%	-	-	-	-	0.9%
H. Statement of Philosophy	-	-	-	-	-	-	10%	15.3%	-	-	-	-	1.7%
I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Guilt trip	-	3%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.2%
3. Criticize the request/requester	3.4%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.7%
4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.6%	-	-	-	-	-

the request													
5.Let interlocutor off the hook	-	-	-	-	4%	36.6%	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.9%
6.Self-defense	3.4%	-	-	-	3.8%	4%	-	-	-	-	2.7%	-	1.2%
J.Acceptance that functions as a refusal													
1.Unspecific on indefinite reply	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2.Lack of enthusiasm	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
K.Avoidance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1.Nonverbal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
a.Silence	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
b.Hesitation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
c.Do nothing	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
d.Physical departure	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2.Verbal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
a.Topic switch	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
b.Joke	-	-	-	-	3.8%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
c.Repetition of part of request	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
d.Postponement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
e.Hedging	-	-	-	-	3.8%	-	-	-	-	-	2.7%	-	-
Adjuncts to refusals													
1.Statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement	3.4%	-	3.12%	8.8%	7.6%	-	7.6%	2.1%	4.3%	8.3%	-	-	3.9%
2.Statement of empathy	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.6%	-	-	-	-	-	0.4%
3.Pause filler	3.4%	-	-	4.4%	7.6%	12%	6.6%	7.6%	2.1%	8.6%	2.7%	2.8%	4.6%
4.Gratitude/ appreciation	3.4%	-	12.5%	8.8%	11.5%	12%	-	7.6%	28.2%	13%	11.1%	2.8%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Twelve situations with different degrees of social power, distance and imposition were given to learners to refuse to invitations, requests, offers and suggestions. They were required to refuse three suggestions, three requests, three offers and three invitations. In this regard, respondents' use of refusal strategies was divided into direct, indirect and adjuncts to refusals. The results showed that most respondents tended to use more indirect strategies (55.5%) to refuse another speaker's suggestion or request either with higher or lower power or within different social distance. About 3% of the respondents just used performative strategies in the situation three. They utilized direct strategies with 24.1% and adjuncts to refusals with 18.9% respectively. Among direct strategies, negative willingness/ability with 14.9% and No strategy with 9.04% were the first and second most used strategies respectively.

Bringing an excuse; reason or explanation was among the most frequent indirect strategies used by the respondents. The respondents used these strategies to talk to a person of more or equal power in all situations except for situation 7, talking to a cleaning lady and situation one (refusing to increase the pay of a worker as a bookshop owner). The respondents used regret as a strategy to refuse the request in the first 6 situations. Since the first 6 situations required the respondents to talk to a variety of people within different social distances such as, worker, classmate, president of a company, executive of a company, friend, boss it proves that regret can be entitled as one of the most frequent strategies used in terms of social distance. The fact that 2.22% of the respondents used wish in situation 4 statement to refuse a suggestion and never used this strategy for other situations, places this strategy among the least frequent strategies used by the respondents.

The different point with regard to the use of strategy is concerned with situation one and seven. Negative willingness/ability was the most utilized strategy by respondents in situation one whereas respondents made use of "let interlocutor off the hook" to refuse to receive money from the cleaning lady by statements such as "don't worry about it", "Be clam. No problem", "It doesn't matter. Forget it", "It's not important", "Don't bother yourself" in situation seven as the most utilized strategy.

Statement of regret with 15.1% and attempt to dissuade interlocutor with 5% were the second and third most used strategies among the indirect types by respondents. Among adjuncts to refusal strategies, most respondents made use of appreciation strategy as well to refuse requests, invitations, offers and suggestions. Other strategies such as pause filler, statement of positive opinions, and statement of empathy were less opted out by learners to perform the speech act of refusal. The findings are illustrative of the fact that the variations in the use of different strategies are less seen in the data. In other words, learners employed almost the same semantic formulas or

pragmalinguistic forms to refuse affairs in most of the situations.

Therefore, it can be said that learners might not have enough awareness or consciousness regarding the use of different pragmalinguistic forms in performing the refusal since they did not have sufficient understanding of context and contextual factors involved as well. The justification is that they almost made use of the same strategy or linguistic formulas in performing the speech act of refusal since each situation differed in terms of social power, distance and imposition involved.

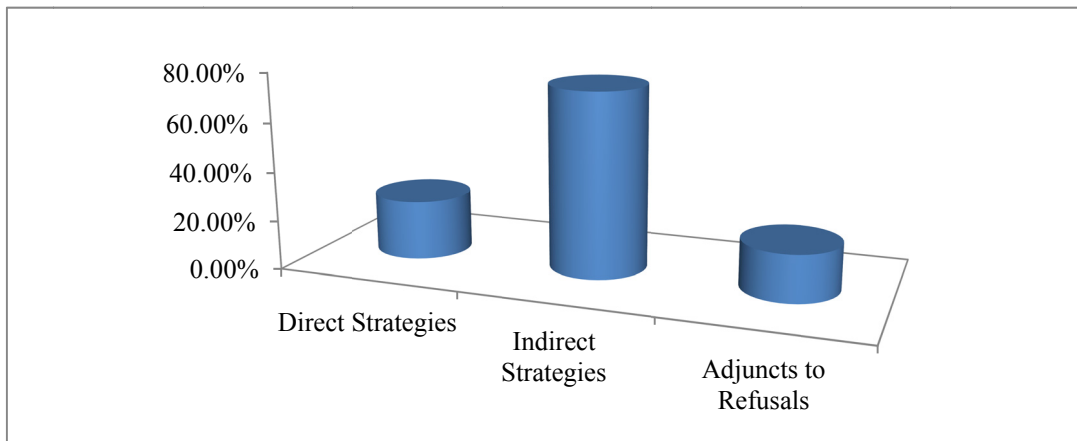


Figure 1. Refusal strategies across all the situations

The above bar chart displays the distribution of different types of strategies used in the production of refusal speech acts. As it can be seen in the figure, the most strategies employed by learners belong to the indirect type while the least opted ones are pertinent to the adjuncts to refusal strategies. Less learners utilized direct type to perform the refusal compared to indirect and adjuncts to refusal types.

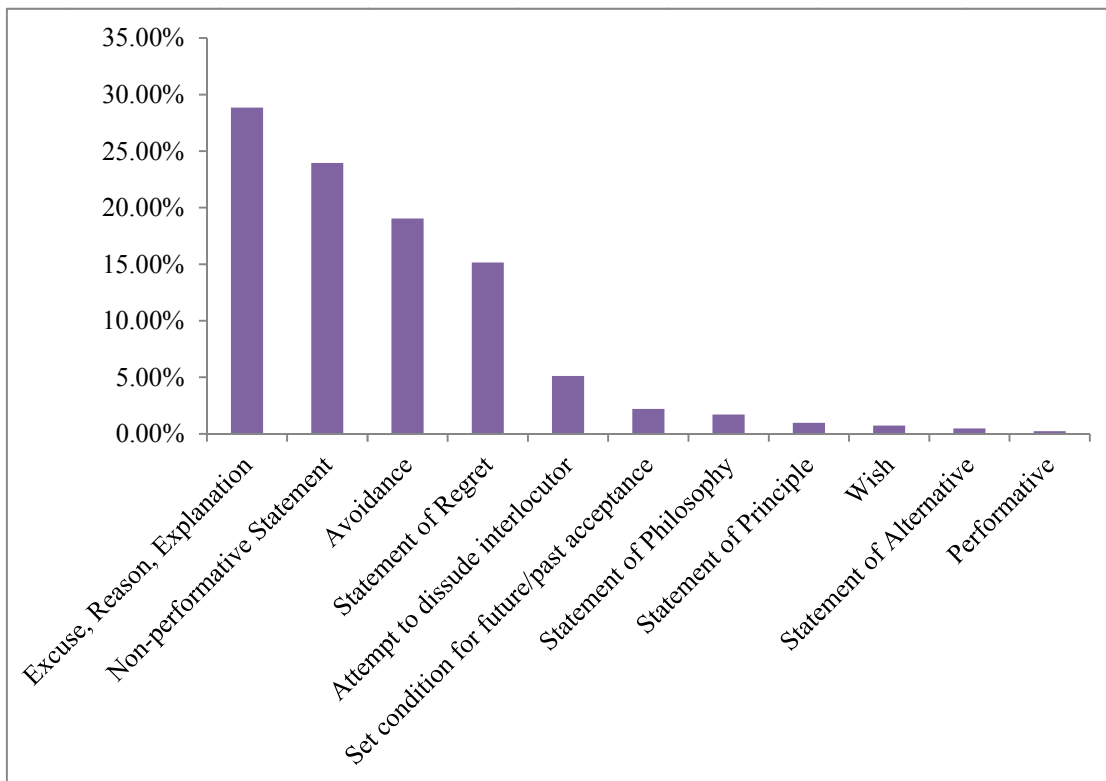


Figure 2. The most frequently used refusal strategies in all situations

The above bar graph illustrates the most utilized strategies in all the situations by learners. As can be seen, most

learners justified or explained about the situation to refuse. This strategy belongs to indirect type. Other strategies used by learners were non-performative statements, avoidance, statement of regret, attempt to dissuade interlocutor, set condition for future/past acceptance, statement of philosophy, wish statement, statement of alternative and performative respectively.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of WDCT with regard to how learners refuse requests, invitations, suggestions and orders showed that learners mostly refused invitations, requests, suggestion and orders indirectly in various situations. In other words, they employed the indirect strategies (74.9%) nearly three times more than the direct ones (24.1%). The three most utilized strategies among the indirect type were excuse, reason, explanation (28.8%), statement of regret (15.1%) and gratitude (10%). Therefore, it can be concluded that the learners do not have sufficient pragmatic knowledge (both paralinguistics and sociopragmatics) in producing the speech act of refusal in different situations. This finding is consistent with that of Knwo (2004) who found out that Korean learners utilized more different reasons and more indirect expressions to make the refusal. Lin (2014) also showed that Chinese EFL learners employed the indirect strategies more than direct and adjunct strategies. Contrary to these findings, Vaezi (2011) found that Iranian EFL learners directly refused using no statement, negative willingness/ability like no, never, I can't, sorry. Likewise, Abu Hamaeid (2013) showed that Iraqi EFL university students mostly used negative ability to refuse requests in all the situations.

The overuse of refusal indirect strategies by Iranian EFL learners can be supported by Eslami (2010) claim that a refusal is an action which is dispreferred and it potentially threatens the hearer's face, therefore, it should be performed by means of indirect strategies. Moreover, it necessitates the face-saving trials to fulfill its non-congruent nature and avoid clashes as well as the lengthy sequences of debate and cooperative achievement (Gass & Houck, 1992). Therefore, it is necessary to teach this speech act to learners due to its intricate nature and intrinsic venture in offending the hearer.

Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that although learners' L2 pragmatic knowledge was investigated by means of WDCT, future studies can utilize other data collection instruments such as role-plays or other tasks. In addition, the politeness strategies examined in this study were power, social distance, and imposition of the task. Further studies can investigate other politeness strategies or situational factors, such as age and gender of interlocutors in situations.

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