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University Teachers' Use of Refusal Strategies and Students' Perception of Linguistic Politeness in Teachers' Refusals

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Abstract

Considering the cross-cultural nature of teacher-student discourse, the present study aims to investigate university teachers' use of refusal strategies in response to students' requests and the students' perception of politeness in teachers' refusals. The study was divided into two phases: the data for the first phase were collected through a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) based on requests that students often make in their classroom. The teachers were required to complete the DCT by declining each request in writing. After categorizing teachers' refusals, using the framework proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990), a rating assessment instrument was shared with the students for collecting data for the second phase of the study to investigate their notion of linguistic (im)politeness. The sample size was based on 50 teachers and 50 students from different faculties of the University of Karachi. The results of the study show that irrespective of their designation and gender, teachers employed indirect refusal strategies with greater frequency than the direct refusal strategies. However, significant gender differences were found in the nature of indirect refusals, as the female teachers were found to use multiple refusal strategies for each situation with greater frequency as compared to their male counterparts. As far as the students' notion of (im)politeness with reference to teachers' use of refusals is concerned, students considered indirect refusal strategies to be more polite as opposed to the direct ones. The study has important implications for classroom discourse as it can help teachers mitigate the face-threatening nature of refusals which in turn can make the classroom environment more conducive to learning.

Keywords: Speech Acts; Cross-Cultural Communication; Refusals; (im) politeness; Face Threatening Acts (FTAs).

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Introduction

Refusals are generally characterized as face-threatening acts. Although refusing without shattering somebody's self-esteem can be very challenging, it becomes even more challenging in situations that involve interaction among people belonging to different cultures. It would not be wrong to state that refusing without offending one's interlocutor is an art and requires a certain degree of knowledge of the culture of that person who has made a request.

Being face threatening in nature, refusals require strategic competence to avoid rift in relationships; they also require a high degree of pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996; Eshrete, 2015). Since there is a risk of the requester's face being threatened in case the request is not accepted, speakers often make efforts to employ indirect strategies to mitigate the degree of threat. Gass & Houck (1999) mention three possible refusal strategies: rejection, postponement, or offering an alternative. The employment of a refusal strategy, however, depends on a host of factors that include, age, gender, nature of relationship with the interlocutor, linguistic and cultural background of one's interlocutor and most importantly the nature of the request itself.

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The current study aims to examine the speech acts based on refusals that university teachers use in response to their students' requests by specifically focusing on the following research questions:

1. What refusal strategies university teachers employ to decline their students' requests?
2. What is the frequency of direct and indirect refusals that are employed in response to students' requests?
3. Do gender differences exist in the refusal strategies university teachers employ in their classroom discourse?
4. How do the students perceive teachers' use of refusal strategies in terms of the degree of (im)politeness?

Literature Review

Research on different types of speech acts gained momentum after the popularity of pragmatics as a field of inquiry. Whether it is the language of compliments, complaints, requests, refusals, or apologies, the analysis of speech acts has led to an in-depth understanding of the nature of discourse that is generated in a variety of speech situations in different cultural settings. It cannot be denied that the production of a speech act that has the potential of threatening

the positive face of one's interlocutor is highly risky as it can lead to offence. If we take example of the speech acts of refusals, the threatening nature of such speech acts cannot be undermined.

Considering the impact of the speech acts of refusals on communication, a number of studies have been particularly conducted on the use refusal strategies from different perspectives. There is ample research focusing on cultural differences in the use of refusal strategies in a variety of cross-cultural settings (Al-Kahtani, 2005; Al-Shboul, & Huwari, 2016; Al-Shboul, Maros, & Yasin, 2012; Asmali, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003; Genç & Tekyildiz, 2009; Jungheim, 2006; Kwon, 2004). Focusing on the cultural differences, Chen (1996), for instance, investigated the refusal strategies employed by American and Chinese speakers of English. She analyzed the data by using semantic formulae and found that both the Americans and the Chinese preferred employing indirect instead of direct refusal strategies. Despite this similarity, however, she found the Americans' employing the expression of regret in their refusals which is not commonly found among the Chinese.

Another cross-cultural study conducted by Eshrete (2015) aimed to investigate how the Palestinians and Americans decline invitations. The sample size of the study was based on 40 Palestinian Arabic speakers and 40 American English speakers. The study employed multiple tools for gathering data including observation based on naturally occurring speech situations in case of the Palestinian Arabic speakers, while TV series and films were used as tools for analyzing the American English speakers' use of refusal strategies. In addition to these tools, a questionnaire was also administered on both the groups. According to the results of the study, the Palestinian Arabic speakers were found to be more apologetic in their use of refusals as compared to the American English speakers. Moreover, the Palestinian Arabic speakers, unlike the Americans depersonalized their explanations while declining an invitation. Although both the groups of speakers employed indirect refusal strategies more frequently than the direct ones, the nature of strategies they employed were indicative of the cultural differences between the two groups. The results of this study corroborate the findings of earlier research on the differences in the use of refusal strategies across cultures.

Refusals have also been studied with reference to pragmatic transfer. A study by Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990) is worth mentioning as the current study employs the frame work Beebe et al. (1990) proposed for categorizing refusals. According to the categorization of refusals by Beebe et al. (1990), refusals can be direct or indirect. The direct refusals are further classified as non-performatives and performatives, while for the indirect refusals a detailed taxonomy is provided which is based on eleven categories with sub-categories for two. In their study on refusal patterns, Beebe et al. (1990) particularly focused on

pragmatic transfer in the production of refusals used by the Japanese EFL learners. Being a comparative study, the refusal strategies used by the Japanese EFL learners were compared with those employed by American English speakers. The results of their study revealed huge differences in the use of refusal strategies by Japanese and Americans. Like Beebe et al., Wannaruk (2008) conducted a study on pragmatic transfer in the use of refusals by Thai speakers learning English. The data were collected from three groups of graduate students for comparison, including Thai native speakers, American native speakers and EFL learners. The data were collected with the help of a DCT (Discourse Completion Task) designed after a careful investigation of the possible situations for refusal. The results of the study highlight limited proficiency in L2 and lack of pragmatic knowledge of L2 as the major reasons for pragmatic transfer in the use of refusal strategies employed by EFL learners. Besides the studies by Beebe et al. (1990) and Wannaruk (2008), there are quite a few other studies on pragmatic transfer in case of refusals (Al-Eryani, 2007; Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Chang, 2009; 2011; Hashemian, 2012).

Because of their face-threatening nature, researchers have also investigated the role of refusals and other such speech acts and examined how they can be effectively taught in a classroom, especially in a language classroom to improve the pragmatic competence of learners. Although studies have been conducted on the speech acts of refusals in an instructional setting in different countries (Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2015; Martínez-Flor, 2013; Martínez-Flor, & Beltrán-Palanques, 2014; Sahragard & Javanmardi, 2011; Uso-Juan, 2013), no such research is available on the use of refusals within Pakistani classrooms at any level. Moreover, the studies on refusals in classroom discourse cited in this section, focus either on the teaching of refusal strategies to language learners or the pragmatic transfer that occurs in the learners' use of such speech acts.

The present study aims to fill in the existing gap in the research literature on refusal strategies used in the discourse of Pakistanis in general and the university teachers in particular. The study is inspired by Kathir's study (2015) of refusal patterns in the discourse of language academicians in Malaysian universities. Nevertheless, the current study is different as it focuses not only on the refusal patterns found in English language teachers' discourse but also investigates the subject teachers' use of refusal strategies in one of the public sector universities of Pakistan. Besides this, the study also aims to investigate the university students' perception of linguistic (im)politeness in teachers' use of refusals and therefore offers a more in-depth analysis of refusals and their interpretation.

Methodology

The study being qualitative in nature, the research design employed for conducting this research is case study. Being a qualitative case study, I restricted my research to only Karachi University which is one of the largest public sector universities of Pakistan. Since the study focused on the university teachers' use of refusal strategies while declining their students' requests and the students' perception of (im)politeness in the teachers' use of refusal strategies, both quota and convenience sampling were employed for the selection of the research participants. The study was divided into two phases: for the first phase of the study, both quota and convenience sampling were employed. Quota sampling was chosen to get some representation from each faculty of the university while convenience sampling was employed to access those teachers who I managed to approach and who showed willingness to provide the required data. For the second phase of the study, however, only convenience sampling was employed.

The data for the study were collected by using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and a Rating-assessment Instrument. A Discourse Completion Task, based on five common requests that students make to their teachers, was designed to gather data for the first phase of the study. One of the advantages of using this instrument for studies on refusals to requests is that a large amount of data can be collected within a short span of time. Moreover, the tool also allows "control over the contextual variables that appear in the situational description" (Martínez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2011, p. 53). Although Discourse Completion Task as a tool has been employed for collecting data on studies conducted on different speech acts by other research scholars as well (Wannaruk, 2008), the situations I included for eliciting the data are original and based on classroom situations observed and experienced in the local context rather than adopted or adapted from any study. The Discourse Completion Task was designed with great care keeping the local context in mind and was piloted on a small group of teachers before starting the data-collection process. Initially, I approached those teachers from different departments who I was already acquainted with. The DCT was also mailed to many teachers along with sharing the aim of the study with the hope that the teachers would respond to the mail, but contrary to my belief the response rate was very low as out of the thirty-five teachers I mailed the DCT to, only three teachers responded to the mail. The teachers' reluctance to respond to the email may be indicative of the absence of e-research culture in Pakistani context as not responding to the researchers' requests through e-mail is a common practice in Pakistan. Therefore, I decided to visit the departments of all the faculties to request the teachers available at that time to fill the DCT at their convenience.

The field-work that involved visiting different departments and meeting the teachers so that they could be requested to participate in the study proved to

be advantageous in the sense that it provided a means to discover the actual response of the teachers to requests in general. Their natural response to a request was elicited through the request for responding to the DCT. There were very few teachers, who filled the DCT on the spot. The rest of them used a variety of indirect refusal strategies, the most frequent of which was postponement or delay. It must be mentioned here that I approached 100 teachers of Karachi University with the aim to gather data from a representative sample for the study but out of the hundred teachers who were approached for the study, only 62 participated in the study. Nevertheless, out of 62 teachers' response to the DCT, 12 teachers' DCT forms could not be included in the data-analysis, because they used indirect instead of direct speech to respond to the requests given in the DCT, despite the presence of clearly written instructions to employ direct speech. Thus, oral instructions were also given in addition to the written instructions to the rest of the teachers to elicit their spontaneous response in the form of direct speech. Since 12 teachers' responses had to be discarded because of their inability to provide responses in direct speech, 50 teachers' responses were finally included in the data-analysis. Out of these fifty teachers, there were 37 female teachers and 13 male teachers whose responses were included for analysis.

Keeping the research ethics in mind, teachers' names have been kept confidential and the same holds true for the students who were approached to gather data through the Rating-assessment Instrument in the second phase of the study. In order to explore students' perception of teachers' refusal strategies, the students were presented with five refusals to each request that the teachers responded to in the DCT; the students, who were approached using convenience sampling, were asked to rate each refusal on a five-point scale ranging from the least polite to the most polite refusal which reflected their notion of linguistic (im)politeness. The rating-assessment instrument used in the study has not been adapted from any previous study and is exclusively based on the teachers' refusals that were elicited through the DCT in the first phase of the data collection. After collecting data from fifty students of different departments through the Rating-assessment Instrument, students were also asked to share the reasons for considering certain responses given in the grid as more polite or less polite than others to get an in-depth understanding of their perception of (im)politeness.

Data Analysis

Since fifty teachers' data were included in the final analysis, a total of 250 examples based on refusals were codified for data-analysis. Beebe et al. (1990) who have presented a classification scheme based on different refusal strategies, including direct and indirect refusals, is utilized for categorizing the refusals elicited through the DCT. Despite being comprehensive, the taxonomy cannot be considered exhaustive as some of the indirect refusal strategies, are not included in the taxonomy, which may be because of the absence of any example of these

indirect strategies in the data Beebe et al. (1990) gathered for their study. Nevertheless, in the data gathered for the current study, in addition to the list of strategies Beebe et al. (1990) compiled, there were quite a few examples of indirect refusals based on strategies other than the ones they have listed. Although the teachers' responses to the DCT have been categorized following the taxonomy proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), those responses that do not fit under this taxonomy have also been analyzed.

In an attempt to answer the first research question, all the 250 examples of refusals were codified for categorization. The diverse categories that emerged through the codification of the data showed that the teachers of Karachi University produce a variety of direct and indirect refusal strategies to decline their students' requests. The most striking thing was the use of multiple refusal strategies within a single speech act and this pattern was found to be more frequently employed by the female teachers. Based on the categorization proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), following direct and indirect refusal strategies were found to be used by the university teachers:

Direct refusal strategies

According to Beebe et al. (1990), direct refusals can either be *performative* or *non-performative*; the latter category is sub-divided into *flat 'no'* and *negative ability/ willingness*. In the data gathered from the teachers through the DCT, there were no instances of performative direct refusals but there were a few examples of both the sub-categories of non-performative refusals to the requests presented in the DCT. However, there were significant gender differences in the use of direct refusals as their frequency was higher in case of male teachers as opposed to the female teachers.

Here are a few examples of both the types of non-performative direct refusals in response to the first two requests given in the DCT (The DCT is attached in Appendix A)

i. No!
ii. Not possible!
iii. I can't give you more time.
iv. I will not extend the submission date.

Indirect refusal strategies

In the data gathered through the DCT, indirect refusal strategies were found to be more in number than the direct ones. Out of the eleven indirect refusal

strategies, Beebe et al (1990) presented in their study, examples based on most of the categories were found in the data. These categories include:

Reason/Explanation

This was found to be one of the most commonly employed refusal strategies by Karachi University teachers. There was no significant gender difference in the employment of this indirect refusal strategy as the data include examples from both the male and female teachers.

Examples of reason/explanation based on the situations given in the DCT:

i. For this kind of an assignment, I need to see your individual performance.
ii. Time is a big constraint. There is no time to extend it.
iii. Well this assignment is really simple and straightforward, you will not need assistance to complete it, and you will learn more this way.
iv. I want you to become independent.
v. The purpose of this assignment is to test the individual capacity of students and discover individual strengths and weaknesses.

Statement of alternative

This indirect refusal strategy was found to be employed by female teachers mostly as there were hardly a few instances of the use of this strategy in the male teachers' responses to the situations in the DCT. Some examples of the 'statement of alternative' in response to the situations given in the DCT are given below:

i. I can only give two days extra.
ii. You can come to my office after the class.
iii. I will end the class ten minutes earlier.
iv. You will have to arrange an extra class tomorrow.
v. Enjoy after the class.

The first three examples are taken from the female teachers' response to the situations given in the DCT, while the last two examples are from the male teachers' data. Despite the fact that in all the responses, indirect refusal is used, there is an obvious gender difference in the discourse. If we consider examples iii and iv, both of which are used in response to situation #5 (See the DCT attached in Appendix A), the indirect refusal used by a female teacher in example iii sounds more polite and accommodating than the indirect refusal employed by a male

teacher in example iv, as the use of 'have to' in the male teacher's discourse makes it obligatory for the students to arrange an extra class which may not be feasible for students. The condition provided by the male teacher is demanding and imposes a certain obligation on students. Thus, it is a more forceful indirect refusal than the one used by the female teacher in example iii.

Unspecified or indefinite reply

There was just one example of unspecified or indefinite reply in the entire corpus consisting of 250 examples. Except one female teacher, none of the teachers of Karachi University who participated in the study employed this refusal strategy to decline requests. There was only one female teacher who used this strategy in response to situation # 1 which is a request for the extension of the date of submission of an assignment.

Example of *an unspecified or indefinite reply*:

i. Let me think but I am not sure.

The positive response in the first part of the utterance is eclipsed by the uncertainty in the second part and this uncertainty is characteristic of female discourse in general. However, this indefinite response to the request may be perceived as polite or impolite depending on the culture of the interlocutors. In some cultures, indefinite reply as an indirect refusal strategy is considered acceptable as compared to a definite reply for declining a request, as in an indefinite reply there is a possibility of the request being accepted.

Sarcasm

Like indefinite reply, sarcasm was not found to be a very common strategy for declining students' requests by Karachi University teachers, which is evident from the teachers' responses to the requests given in the DCT. Out of the 250 examples there was only one example of the use of sarcasm (E.g: *Is it the first rain of your life? What I can do is leave you a little earlier*) which was found in one of the female teachers' response to situation #5 in the DCT where the students ask the teacher to let them go out to enjoy the rain. If we have a closer look at this example, the sarcasm is followed by a statement of alternative to mitigate the force of the face-threatening act used in the first utterance.

Attempts to dissuade the interlocutor

These attempts include: *statement of negative consequences to the requestor, criticism/reprimand,* and *self-defense*. Examples of all these strategies

were found in the data gathered through the DCT. Except the statement of negative consequences to the requester and criticism/reprimand that were found to be common among the teachers of both the genders, examples of self-defense were found only in the female teachers' data.

Examples of the *statement of negative consequences to the requester*:

i. If you will not submit it on time, I will mark it as late work.
ii. If you want me to extend the date I will give you a difficult assignment.
iii. I can give you one week more but I will deduct 25% marks from every assignment.

Examples of *criticism/reprimand*

i. You cannot be present or absent as you wish. If so, you'll be responsible for the consequences.
ii. What's the rush? When I have checked the scripts, I'll give you the feedback. Pay attention to what I say then.

Examples of *self-defense*

i. My past experience of letting students work in pairs proved to be a disaster. I would not want to repeat it. Sorry!
ii. I have already granted sufficient time. No excuse is acceptable now.

Use of self-defense is a common feature of female discourse in patriarchal societies; males do not feel the need to defend their actions or decisions in such societies. It must be mentioned here that both criticism and self-defense were not used alone but were supplemented with other direct and indirect refusal strategies as evident from the data.

Verbal avoidance strategies

Some of the common verbal avoidance strategies for refusal include: *topic switch, postponement, questioning, hedging, joke, and repetition of the part of request*. In the data gathered through DCT, however, out of the six verbal avoidance strategies, only three (*postponement, questioning, and hedging)* were found to be employed for refusal by Karachi University teachers. Moreover, the most common verbal avoidance strategy used was postponement which is not only observed in teachers' discourse but is also a commonly employed refusal strategy by Pakistanis in general. In fact, postponement is the most common indirect refusal strategy that Pakistanis employ and therefore it is not perceived as impolite in the local context. In contrast to Pakistanis, however, the British do

not like any postponement. It would not be an exaggeration to state that delay is frowned upon in the British society. Thus, in cultures where postponement is considered negative, this refusal strategy, despite being indirect, can be considered highly face-threatening and annoying.

Examples of *postponement*

i. We will talk about this after the class.
ii. We will have revision classes later. *aap tab puuchh lijiye ga* (You can ask at that time).
iii. We will discuss it later.

Example of *questioning*

i. Date *to aap se hi puuchh ke* decide *ki thi na*? (Wasn't the date decided after seeking your approval?)

Example of *hedging*

i. I'm afraid I cannot go into detail about that again.
ii. Well, I regret not being able to repeat lessons for those who were absent.

In contrast to the examples of postponement, an indirect refusal strategy that is not even perceived as a refusal by many Pakistanis, questioning and hedging are less common in the local context and therefore there were very few examples of hedging and questioning in the data gathered through the DCT.

Besides the categories proposed by Beebe at al. (1990), a few new categories also emerged during the analysis. These include: *giving advice, requesting in return, showing lack of empathy, and order for reinforcement*.

Giving advice/lecturing

Since teachers are habitual of delivering a lecture in class, giving advice or lecturing was also found to be a common refusal strategy, particularly in case of female teachers.

Examples:

i. You should understand the importance of individual work.
ii. It is good to face challenges and work individually to learn new things.
iii. You should learn to work independently on any project or assignment given to you.

iv. Be regular next time.
v. Understand the significance of time and learn to meet deadlines. It is important for being successful**.**

If we compare the first three responses by female teachers with last two by male teachers, the difference becomes obvious. The use of an imperative in example **iv** and **v** makes the advice sound stronger and the denial more face-threatening than the one implied in the female teachers' responses.

Requesting in response to a request

Some of the female teachers used this unique strategy of requesting in return to a request in order to mitigate the face-threatening nature of the refusal in response to situation # 3 in which students request for the feedback on the classroom test.

Examples:

i. Please give me some time until I finish marking all the scripts.
ii. Sorry *beTa*! Give me two days more. Definitely I will give you feedback.

In example **ii**, this strategy is sandwiched between an apology and the promise for future acceptance which further minimizes the degree of threat involved in the refusal. Although the term *'beTa'* literally means 'son', it is a neutral term of endearment used to address anyone who is younger than the speaker irrespective of the gender. Addressing students by employing the term *'beTa'* shows the teacher's empathy with her students as well as her sense of realization for delaying the task for which she apologizes.

Showing lack of empathy

Although the female teachers who participated in the study responded to the situations in the DCT by using quite a few indirect refusal strategies to mitigate the face-threatening nature of refusals, a few female teachers' responses also revealed lack of empathy which is often associated with male discourse.

Example:

i. Forget the rain and study.
ii. I will not re-explain the concept that has already been discussed earlier because it was your fault not being in class so you do your own efforts to understand the concept.

Both the examples are produced by female teachers and show lack of empathy on the part of both the teachers. The first example is in response to situation # 5 whereas the second example is in response to situation # 4 given in the DCT (See Appendix A).

Order for reinforcement

This indirect refusal strategy though less frequent in the corpus was found in some female teachers' response to situation#2 based on students' request to let them work in pairs for the assignment that the teacher had asked them to do individually.

Examples:

i. It's an individual assignment and that's final.
ii. This is meant to be done individually.

In both the examples there is an air of finality which is a clear indication of the denial of the request.

Frequency of Direct and Indirect Refusal Strategies by Male and Female Teachers

Both the female and the male teachers who participated in the study employed indirect refusal strategies with greater frequency in contrast to the direct ones as is evident from the data presented in Table: 1, according to which only 10% examples consisted of the use of direct refusals, whereas in 39% examples indirect rather than direct refusal strategies were employed in response to the requests given in the DCT.

Table 1: Frequency of Refusal Strategies Used in Response to Students' Requests

	Direct Refusals	Indirect Refusals	Direct + Indirect refusals	Indirect + Direct refusals	Direct + Indirect + Direct refusals	Indirect+ Direct+ Indirect Refusal	More than one direct refusal strategy	More than one indirect refusal strategy
Female Teachers	6%	37%	7%	6%	2%	4%	0%	38%
Male Teachers	22%	46%	6%	3%	3%	2%	6%	12%
Total	10%	39%	7%	5%	2%	3%	2%	32%

Besides the use of a single indirect refusal strategy, 32% examples of refusals consisted of more than one indirect refusal strategy; a pattern that was employed with greater frequency by the female teachers as compared to their male counterparts. In the data based on the male teachers' responses, however, a few instances of the use of more than one direct refusal strategy like a flat 'no' followed by 'negative willingness' were found, but this pattern was found missing in the female teachers' use of refusals. In contrast to the male teachers' responses to the DCT, the data based on the female teachers' responses revealed several instances of multiple indirect refusal strategies like statement of apology followed by reason and promise of future acceptance, or statement of alternative followed by reason.

Students' Perception of Teachers' Refusal Strategies

In order to answer the research question related to students' perception of teachers' use of refusal strategies, the students were asked to rate teachers' refusals on a five-point scale so that the students' notion of linguistic (im)politeness can be determined. The data generated through the rating-assessment instrument gave a fair idea about students' perception of linguistic (im)politeness, carrying important pedagogical implications for classroom discourse.

The data gathered through the rating-assessment instrument reveal that students' notion of (im)politeness is situation-specific depending on the nature of the request. For instance, among the refusal strategies used in response to the first two requests (See Appendix B), majority of the students, irrespective of their gender considered negative willingness, a direct refusal strategy, to be the least polite form as it carries a high degree of threat to the requester's positive face. Both the responses "I can't give you more time" (in case of situation #1) and "Not possible" (in case of situation # 2) do nothing to mitigate the degree of threat. On inquiring about considering these responses as least polite, the students revealed that such responses sound rude because they indicate outright rejection which is embarrassing. However, the students' perception of politeness varied according

to the situation. In their assessment of responses to situation# 3, for instance, the students considered the first response given in the grid (What's the rush? When I have checked the scripts, I'll give you the feedback. Pay attention to what I say then) to be the least polite of all the given responses. Despite the fact that it is not a direct refusal, students considered it impolite because it is reprimanding in nature. According to some students, this response sounds insulting and shows lack of empathy on the part of the teacher.

Most of the students, irrespective of their gender, also considered those refusal strategies impolite that were based on the statement of negative consequences to the requester. For instance, in response to situation # 4 where a group of students absent in the last class request for re-explanation of a certain concept discussed in that class, the first response in the grid "You cannot be present or absent as you wish. If so, you'll be responsible for the consequences" was considered the least polite form of refusal despite being indirect, whereas the last response in the grid was judged to be the most polite (see Appendix B), as it involved the use of multiple indirect refusal strategies including hedging, self-defense, and statement of alternative. When the students were asked the reason for assessing this response as the most polite one, most of them were of the view that the teacher has given enough justification for not repeating the lecture in class and has also shown her/his willingness to help the students without humiliating them.

It is true that nobody likes to be insulted, and it is equally true that students do not feel comfortable in a class where they feel threatened and where their self-esteem is at stake. This is the reason that the last two responses to situation # 5 mentioned in the grid (see Appendix B), were perceived to be impolite by both male and female students who participated in the study. The response "It's time to take class. After my class you can go otherwise I will mark you absent" was considered least polite, that is almost impolite, because of the statement of negative consequences to the requester. Similarly, the last response "Is it the first rain of your life? What I can do is leave you a little earlier" was also perceived to be highly impolite because of the sarcasm implied in the question. Although in the second part of this response the teacher shows empathy with the students by providing an alternative, students judged this response to be the least polite of all the given responses because of the sarcasm in the first part.

Findings and Conclusion

The findings of the study not only reveal the use of a multitude of refusal strategies by the university teachers but also show significant gender differences, both in the nature and the frequency of different types of refusals that the teachers employed to decline students' requests. The results of the study indicate that the

female teachers not only used more indirect refusal strategies as compared to the male teachers, but also employed more than one indirect refusal strategy in response to different requests. The male teachers, on the contrary, were found to employ more direct refusal strategies. Even where they employed indirect refusal strategy for giving an advice, they used imperatives as opposed to the modal verb 'should', which the female teachers employed in response to the same situation. In spite of these differences, the results of the study also indicate some similarities, like the use of postponement--- a verbal avoidance strategy employed for refusal ----- was found in the corpus of both the male and the female teachers' response to a few situations in the DCT. Unlike postponement, hedging and questioning (two other verbal avoidance strategies) were rarely used for refusal by both the genders, as is evident from the corpus. Moreover, no significant difference was found in the frequency of using a direct refusal followed by an indirect refusal.

Besides the differences and similarities in the use of refusal strategies on the part of the male and female teachers, the results of the study highlight the importance of teacher-student discourse that plays a pivotal role in creating teaching and learning context. Sometimes teachers do not realize what impact their discourse can have on their students and how it can affect their learning. Teachers need to understand their students' psychology, which does not, of course, mean complying with each and every request students make. However, the language that teachers use for declining students' requests should be such that the degree of threat embedded within a refusal is mitigated to a certain extent.

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