AN ANALYSIS OF REFUSAL SPEECH ACTS USED BY VOCATIONAL STUDENTS AT A VIETNAMESE COLLEGE

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Abstract: *Refusal is considered one of the most frequently performed speech acts in people's daily lives. However, making a speech act of refusal is a challenge, especially for non-native English speakers, due to the possibility of losing other people's face and corrupting interlocutors' interactions. This study investigates how Vietnamese vocational students make the speech act of refusal to invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests. Participants of this study are 18 Vietnamese vocational students who are studying English as a second language (L2). They were asked to complete a Written Discourse Completion Task containing 12 scenarios, including 3 invitations, 3 offers, 3 suggestions, and 3 requests in higher, equal, and lower interlocutor status. Collected data were then analyzed using the classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990). The findings show that indirect strategies are preferred by Vietnamese vocational students, which can mitigate the risk of losing other people's face. The findings also reveal that Vietnamese vocational students tend to use different combinations of indirect strategies, adjuncts to refusals, and direct strategies to produce speech act sets. In addition, the interlocutor status does not influence the refusal strategies that Vietnamese vocational students choose.*

Keywords: *refusal strategies, semantic formulas, speech acts, Vietnamese vocational students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have been living in a world of language where they use words in every moment of life. Hence, it can be claimed that language is used as a means of communication that helps people express their feelings or their thoughts. They can talk to everyone, to their pets, and even to themselves. To achieve good and effective communication, people need to not only know a language but also realize how to use it in an appropriate way. Using a language does not mean that people just put words they know in a certain order to form a lexical string. Competent language users must know how to follow essential conventions to produce meaningful and contextually appropriate utterances. In addition, it is vital for language users to understand their interlocutors' intentions when engaging in various modes of communication so that

breakdowns can be avoided. In other words, both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge are required in communication so that interlocutors can understand conveyed meaning (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Pragmatic knowledge, in this case, can be understood as the ability to use language in communication in connection with the relationships between words or sentences and the contexts in which they occur (Jafari, 2014). Hence, people should obtain the ability to understand the intended meaning in utterances produced by their interlocutors so that meaningful conversations can be made. To achieve this, people must know how to use speech acts, such as making promises, offering apologies, asking questions, or refusing, successfully (Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Among speech acts, refusals are considered the most complicated action due

to their sensitive and complicated manner. Refusal may risk the positive or negative face of interlocutors, which makes them become face-threatening acts (FTA) since the action of refusal normally results in conflict with the communicative purposes of both parties involved in the information exchange. In other words, the act of refusing may breach the relational expectations from those who make invitations, requests, or offers. Meanwhile, people who receive refusals may experience the feeling of failing to select suitable interlocutors (Krulatz & Dixon, 2020). Therefore, a speaker should achieve harmonization between politeness and clarity so that the refusal message can be conveyed, and the risk of face can be reduced (Chang, 2009). In terms of linguistic aspects, semantic formulas are required when making a speech act of refusal because they can help a speaker to avoid taking offense and to save face as well. The choice of used semantic formulas for refusals, however, is influenced by various social factors such as the status of interlocutors, power, educational background, age, or gender (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). Cultural background, in addition to the previously mentioned factors, also affects the production of refusal (Al-Kahtani, 2005). People from different cultures may use refusal in different ways. Pragmatic transfer from their mother language influences the use of refusals by non-native English speakers (Farnia & Wu, 2012; Wannaruk, 2008).

From the discussion above, it can be claimed that making a speech act of refusal is a challenge, especially for non-native English speakers, due to the possibility of losing other people's face and corrupting interlocutors' interactions. To mitigate the negative effects of refusals, interlocutors must have sufficient knowledge to produce polite and effective refusals. In Vietnam, where Vietnamese is the dominant language and English is being taught as a foreign language, students' opportunities to use it outside their classrooms are somewhat limited. Therefore, it is vital to investigate how Vietnamese students make refusals in different situations. This study aims to explore the types of refusal strategies used by Vietnamese vocational students and the effect of interlocutor status on their refusals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory, which is a fundamental concept in pragmatics, reveals that language can function not merely to convey information but also to perform actions. Initially proposed by Austin (1962) in his seminal work "How to Do Things with Words," this theory challenged the traditional view of language since it introduced the idea that changes in communicative purposes can be enacted by utterances through speech itself. There are three different types of acts that are distinguished, namely the locutionary act (the act of saying something with specific meaning), the illocutionary act (the intended function of utterances), and the perlocutionary act (how a listener is affected by an utterance).

From Austin's foundation, Searle (1969) developed the concept of illocutionary force, which refers to specific communicative purposes behind utterances. He classified speech acts into five categories, including *assertives* (statements of facts), *directives* (get a listener to do something), *commissives* (future actions), *expressives* (feelings or attitudes), and *declarations* (changes in external situations). In terms of linguistic properties, the speech of refusal is a type of *commissive* as the speaker does not perform an action proposed by another.

Refusal is a complex and culturally nuanced speech act that functions as a negative counterpart to acceptance in communication. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) defined refusal as the act of declining offers, requests, or invitations. Like other speech acts, refusals generally

occur across languages, but they vary significantly in social acceptability and form due to linguistic and cultural context. Al-Eryani (2007) stated that refusal constitutes a negative reply to an invitation, suggestion, offer, and request. Similarly, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2011) argued that refusal is a disfavored and complex response to initial acts, including requests, offers, or invitations. Owing to the fact that acceptance is preferred, refusals can threaten the positive face of the interlocutor in communication. Therefore, a high level of pragmatic competence is required to perform appropriate refusals in various contexts.

Refusals, or the speech act of declining an offer, invitation, or request, are highly influenced by cultural and social factors. The way someone says "no" can vary significantly across different societies and interpersonal relationships. Regarding social factors, the social distance and power dynamics between interlocutors also play a crucial role. Speakers are more likely to use direct refusals when interacting with close friends or individuals of lower social status, but they tend to use more indirect and elaborate strategies when refusing a request from a boss, an elder, or a person of higher social standing (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). With respect to cultural aspects, research has shown that the types of strategies, the frequency of their use, and their perceived politeness differ greatly among cultures. For instance, in American English, a speaker might use a direct refusal followed by an explanation, while in some other cultures, the explanation would precede the refusal, and the refusal itself might not even be explicitly stated (Al-Kahtani, 2005). These variations highlight the importance of understanding the socio-cultural norms of a particular community to effectively communicate and avoid misinterpretation.

There are three types of refusal studies,

including intra-lingual studies, which examine refusals within a single culture or language; cross-cultural studies, which analyze refusals across multiple cultures or languages; and learner-centered studies, which investigate how language learners acquire and employ refusals in various linguistic and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural studies have predominantly explored refusals among these three types. This viewpoint is proven by the considerable amount of research into the use of refusals of language users from two or more languages or cultures (Lyuh, 1992; Chen, 1996; Nelson et al., 2002; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Al-Issa, 2003; Hashemian, 2012; Amirrudin & Salleh, 2016). These studies' results consistently demonstrated that refusal behaviors vary across cultures.

Meanwhile, the number of studies on learner-centered refusals remains limited. Zhao and Nor (2016) studied refusals produced by Chinese EFL speakers in a Malaysian university and reported that indirect refusals were preferred. Results from their study also showed that the use of refusals of participants was influenced by various factors, including power, distance, and social context. Khamkhien (2022) investigated the refusal strategies employed by Thai university students, exploring the potential influence of their first language and cultural background. Findings from his study revealed that indirectness was preferred and there was a frequently used combination of direct and indirect strategies. Furthermore, social status and social-cultural factors influenced the refusal strategies employed by Thai university students. The study by Fang (2024) revealed that Chinese English speakers frequently employed indirect refusal strategies, including providing explanations, offering alternatives, and making apologies. In another context, Han and Burgucu-Tazegül (2016) investigated how Turkish undergraduates used refusals

in English. Their study revealed the dominance of indirect refusals and the presence of pragmatic transfers from the participants' mother language. In the context of Vietnam, there is less research on refusal in the framework of learner-centered studies. Nguyen (2017) carried out a study on how power had influence on refusal strategies to requests made by Vietnamese EFL learners at their workplace. The findings showed that there was a significant difference in the utilization of refusal strategies based on social status. Tuyen (2024) conducted a study on how Vietnamese university students used refusals in their daily life. The results showed that the participants normally employed indirect refusals due to social contexts, distance, and culture. Duc et al. (2024) carried out an investigation into the use of refusals of English-majored students at a university in Vietnam. The findings revealed that Vietnamese culture influenced the way these students made refusals in English. However, no research has yet examined the use of English refusals by Vietnamese vocational students. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how refusals are used by Vietnamese vocational college students as well as whether their refusals are influenced by interlocutor status. To accomplish this, we must address the following research questions:

1. Which refusal strategies do vocational students at a Vietnamese college utilized?

2. How does interlocutor status have an effect on the selection of refusal strategies utilized by vocational students at a Vietnamese college?

3. METHODOLOGY

Eighteen vocational students who are studying at a vocational college located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam volunteered to participate in the study. Of these, 9 were males and 9 were females who were studying different majors, including Plant Protection, Cooking, Civil Electricity, Accounting, and Automobile Maintenance. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 and they were all second-year students. The aim of this choice is to make sure that all participants completed the course named Basic English taught in their first year, which equipped them with enough knowledge of English to use in communication. In addition, they all speak Vietnamese as their first language.

For data collection, a written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) which was originally proposed by Beebe et al. (1990) was utilized. DCT was selected because it is a widely used research instrument in pragmatics, which helps elicit both spoken and written language in a controlled manner (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Participants are presented short descriptions of social situations and asked to provide natural responses. In this study, the DCT was modified with some changes to suit the Vietnamese context. 12 selected situations were included with the aim of eliciting the speech act of refusal of invitations, suggestions, offers, and requests (see Appendix 1). Besides, the DCT was designed to make refusals to lower, higher, and equal social status as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Situations of refusals

Items	Stimulus types	Interlocutors	Scenarios	The Social status of interlocutors
1	Refusal of invitation	A classmate	Invite you to go to the cinema.	Equal
2	Refusal of offer	A best friend	Offer to give you some money.	Equal

3	Refusal of suggestion	A friend	Suggest trying braised tuna.	Equal
4	Refusal of request	A friend	Asking to borrow your motorbike.	Equal
5	Refusal of offer	A teacher	Offer to give you a ride.	Higher
6	Refusal of request	A senior student	Asking to borrow your English coursebook.	Higher
7	Refusal of invitation	A teacher	Invite you to have lunch.	Higher
8	Refusal of suggestion	An advisor	Suggest a startup idea that you are not interested in.	Higher
9	Refusal of request	A younger roommate	Ask for help with some English exercises.	Lower
10	Refusal of invitation	A junior student	Invite you to her birthday party.	Lower
11	Refusal of suggestion	A younger friend	Suggest visiting a new Thai restaurant.	Lower
12	Refusal of offer	A junior student	Offer to pay for an ice cream.	Lower

After receiving DCT questionnaires, all participants were asked to read all situations carefully. Then, they were given sufficient time to write down their responses. Next, 18 WDCTs were coded as S1, S2 to S18. A total of 216 responses to refusal were collected from 18 participants. The retrieved data were qualitatively analyzed based on Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification of refusal strategies (see Appendix 2). In the first phase of data analysis, all responses were coded as direct refusals (refusing directly without hesitation), indirect refusals (refusing in an indirect way), and adjuncts to refusals (additional statements to direct or indirect refusals). From there, types and frequencies of refusals used by participants could be explored. In the second phase, semantic formulas of all refusal strategies regarding interlocutors' status were examined with

the aim of identifying whether social status influenced on refusal strategies.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Types of refusal strategies

18 Vietnamese vocational students produced 390 refusal strategies in total, across 216 responses in 12 different situations. Based on the framework proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), collected refusals were categorized into three groups, namely direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. The results indicated that most of the Vietnamese vocational students preferred employing indirect strategies in refusals (250 occurrences, or 64.1%), followed by adjuncts to refusals (97 occurrences, or 24.87%), and direct strategies (43 occurrences, or 11.03%).

Table 2. Types, frequency, and percentage of refusal strategies

Refusal strategies	Semantic formulas	Frequency	Percentage
Direct refusals			
	Negative willingness/ ability	43	11.03
Indirect refusals	Statements of regret	39	10
	Wishes	1	0.26
	Excuses, reasons, explanations	120	30.77
	Statements of alternative	63	16.15
	Setting a condition for future or past acceptance	1	0.26
	Promises of future acceptance	21	5.38
	Statement of principle	2	0.51
	Avoidance	3	0.77
Adjuncts to refusals	Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	21	5.38
	Gratitude/appreciation	76	19.49
Total		**390**	**100**

4.1.1 Direct strategies

Among three direct refusals proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), there was only *negative willingness/ability* found with 43 occurrences, or 11.03%. In most cases, *negative willingness/ability* strategies were accompanied by indirect strategies, including *a statement of regret, a statement of alternative, a promise of future acceptance,* and *an excuse/ reason/explanation* (see examples 1 and 2).

(1) I'm sorry [*statement of regret*]. This weekend, I can't go with you [*negative willingness/ability*]. See you next time [*promise of future acceptance*]. (S16, situation 1)

(2) I'm sorry [*statement of regret*], but I can't help you right now [*negative willingness/ability*] because I'm busy with my homework [*excuse/reason/explanation*]. Maybe I can help you later [*promise of future acceptance*]. (S12, situation 9)

4.1.2 Indirect strategies

In total, there were found 8 semantic formulas of indirect refusals, including *a statement of regret, wish, excuse/reason/ explanation, a statement of alternative, setting a condition for future or past acceptance, a promise of future acceptance, a statement of principle,* and *wish.* The most frequently used semantic formula is *excuse/ reason/explanation*, with 120 occurrences, or 30.77%. It was followed by *a statement of alternative* with 63 occurrences, or 16.15%. The third preferred indirect semantic formula was a statement of regret, with 39 occurrences, or 10%. *A promise of future acceptance* took the fourth position

with 21 occurrences, or 5.38%. Meanwhile, *avoidance, a statement of principle, setting a condition for future or past acceptance,* and *a wish* appeared with low frequencies (3, 1, 1, and 1, respectively). These findings revealed that Vietnamese vocational students know how to use different strategies in an appropriate way to reduce the negative effects of their refusals and effectively preserve good relationships with their interlocutors. When making refusals, they normally deployed two or more semantic formulas in the same response, as shown in the examples below.

(3) I'd love to help [*A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*], but I'm busy with a lot of homework right now [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. Can we do it later when I'm done with my tasks [*A promise of future acceptance*]? (S11, situation 9)

(4) Thanks for the suggestion [*gratitude/ appreciation*], but I don't eat fish [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. I will eat pork instead [*a statement of alternative*]. (S10, situation 3)

4.1.3 Adjuncts to refusals

With 97 occurrences, or 24.87%, adjuncts to refusals appeared as the second preferred set of strategies. However, there were only two semantic formulas used by Vietnamese vocational students, including *statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement* (21 occurrences, or 5.38%) and gratitude/appreciation (76 occurrences, or 19.49%). This finding revealed that *gratitude/appreciation* was highly preferred by Vietnamese vocational students. They often used *gratitude/appreciation* to start their responses with expressions, such as "*Thank you for inviting me*" or "*Thanks for the suggestion,*" as shown in the examples below.

(5) Thanks for the suggestion [*gratitude/ appreciation*], but I don't like fish [*An excuse/ reason/explanation*]. I think I'll order pork

instead [*A statement of alternative*]. (S15, situation 3)

(6) Thank you for inviting me [*gratitude/ appreciation*]. I would like to join you [*A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*], but my mom is in the hospital [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. (S1, situation 7).

Similarly, *statements of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement*, which appeared in the smaller frequency, normally took the initial position in participants' responses. For example,

(7) That sounds amazing [*A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*]! But I can't eat spicy food [*An excuse/reason/ explanation*]. Are there any non-spicy dishes you think I should try [*A statement of alternative*]? (S10, situation 11)

(8) I'd love to help you [*A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*], but I'm busy with my homework right now [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. Could we go over it later when I have more time [*A promise of future acceptance*]? (S7, situation 9)

Overall, participants liked to use adjuncts to refusals before starting their main responses. This finding suggests that they know how to acknowledge interlocutors' intent, soften face-saving, and maintain positive relationships.

4.2 Refusals to stimulus acts

4.2.1 Refusals to invitations

Regarding refusals to invitations, it could be seen that Vietnamese vocational students used more indirect strategies than direct ones. Among indirect strategies, *excuses/reasons/ explanations* emerged as the most frequently utilized strategy, with 41 occurrences. Direct strategies, specifically *negative willingness/ability*, were less common with 21 occurrences. In addition, *gratitude/ appreciation* was a significant adjunct to refusals, with 20 occurrences. When

refusing a classmate's invitation to the cinema (situation 1), participants often began their refusals with adjuncts, such as *gratitude/appreciation,* followed by indirect strategies, such as *excuses/reasons/explanations* or *promises of future acceptance* (10 responses or 55.56%). In situation 7, when refusing a teacher's invitation for lunch, they normally used *gratitude/appreciation* (adjunct), *excuses/reasons/explanations* (indirect), and *negative willingness/ability* (direct) (12 responses or 66.67%). When they refused a junior student's invitation to her birthday party, indirect strategies, such as *statements of regret* and *excuses/reasons/explanations* were dominantly utilized (10 responses, or 55.56%). Notably, the preference of participants for the use of *excuses/reasons/explanations* may suggest that they tried to mitigate face-threatening situations through indirectness, thereby preserving the social harmony when making refusals. Examples of how refusals to invitations can be seen below.

(9) Thank you for inviting me [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I'm not feeling well today [*an excuse/reason/explanation*]. Let's go another day [*A promise of future acceptance*]. (S3, situation 1)

(10) Thank you for the invitation [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I can't join [*negative willingness/ability*] because I need to be with my mom in the hospital [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. (S12, situation 7)

(11) Oh, what a pity [*A statement of regret*]! I have an appointment with another friend [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. (S16, situation 10)

Table 3. Refusal strategies to invitations

Refusal strategies	Frequency	Examples
Direct strategies	*21*	
- Negative willingness/ability	21	*I'm afraid I can't make it.*
Indirect strategies	*67*	
- Excuses/reasons/explanations	41	*My mom is in the hospital.*
- Statements of regret	12	*I'm sorry.*
- Promises of future acceptance	10	*See you next time.*
- Statements of alternative	4	*I can help you find another copy.*
Adjuncts to refusals	*24*	
- Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	4	*That's fine!*
- Gratitude/appreciation	20	*Thank you for inviting me.*

4.2.2 Refusals to offers

When refusing offers, Vietnamese vocational students preferred employing indirect strategies (67 occurrences) and adjuncts to refusals (40 occurrences). In terms of indirect strategies, Table 4 shows that they most frequently utilized *statements of alternative* (22 occurrences) and *excuses/reasons/explanations* (19 occurrences). Meanwhile, *gratitude/appreciation* was their preferable adjunct to refusals, with 39 occurrences. In situation 2 (refusing a best friend's offer to give money), the participants tended to begin their responses with gratitude/appreciation, followed by *negative willingness/ability* and *statements of alternative* or *excuses/reasons/explanations*. *Statements of principle* (2 occurrences) and *setting a condition for future or past acceptance* (1 occurrence) were both

deployed in situation 2 to make refusals. The use of the abovementioned semantic formulas can be seen in the examples below.

(12) Thank you for your generosity [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I think I'll ask my parents first [*A statement of alternative*]. If I need help, I'll tell you later [*setting a condition for future or past acceptance*]. (S5, situation 2)

(13) Thank you [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I don't want to borrow money from anyone [*A statement of principle*]. I'll use my mother's old phone [*A statement of alternative*]. (S6, situation 2)

When refusing a teacher's offer to provide a ride (situation 5), Vietnamese vocational students mostly use *gratitude/appreciation* and *excuses/reasons/explanations* in their responses (15 responses, or 77.78%). However, when refusing a junior student's offer to pay for an ice cream (situation 12), they often used *gratitude/appreciation* to begin their responses, followed by a *statement of alternatives* (13 responses, or 72.22 %). For example:

(14) Thank you [*gratitude/appreciation*]. But I called my father to pick me up already [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. (S7, situation 5)

(15) Thanks [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I'll go back to my classroom to take my wallet [*A statement of alternative*]. (S6, situation 12)

Table 4. Refusal strategies to offers

Refusal strategies	Frequency	Examples
Direct strategies	**8**	
- Negative willingness/ability	8	*I can't go.*
Indirect strategies	**45**	
- Excuses/reasons/explanations	19	*But I called my father to pick me up already.*
- Statements of regret	1	*Sorry.*
- Statements of principle	2	*I don't want to borrow money from anyone.*
- Statements of alternative	22	*I think I'll ask my parents first.*
- Setting a condition for future or past acceptance	1	*If I need help, I'll tell you later.*
Adjuncts to refusals	**40**	
- Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	3	*It's alright.*
- Gratitude/appreciation	37	*Thank you.*

4.2.3 Refusals to suggestions

Table 5 below reveals how Vietnamese vocational students refuse suggestions. Indirect strategies were still preferred choices with 61 occurrences, followed by adjuncts to refusals (29 occurrences) and direct strategies (8 occurrences). When refusing a classmate's suggestion to try tuna (situation 3), they often used *gratitude/ appreciation* or *a statement of positive opinion/feeling* or *agreement* to begin their responses, then continued with an *excuse/ reason/explanation* and *a statement for alternative* (15 responses, or 83,33%). For example:

(16) Thank you [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I don't really like fish [*An excuse/reason/ explanation*]. I'll order pork instead [*A statement of alternative*]. (S12, situation 3).

To refuse a startup idea suggested by an advisor (situation 8), most of the participants normally started their responses with *gratitude/appreciation* and ended their responses with *a statement of alternative* (12 responses, or 66.67%). Amazingly, *avoidance* which belongs to indirect strategies could be found in situation 8 with 2 occurrences. They appeared in the form *of topic switch* and *postponement* which reflect that few Vietnamese vocational students can use indirect strategies diversely.

(17) Thank you for your suggestion [*gratitude/appreciation*], but please let me think of it, and I'll make a decision later [*postponement*]. (S5, situation 8)

(18) Thank you for your suggestion [*gratitude/appreciation*], but I hope to

work on something else [*A statement of alternative*]. Could we discuss another topic [*topic switch*]? (S7, situation 8)

However, when refusing a younger classmate's suggestion to visit a new Thai restaurant, participants tended to start their responses with *a statement of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement*, then they gave *an excuse/reason/explanation*, and ended with *a statement of alternative* (14 responses, or 77.78%). For example:

(19) That sounds nice [*statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*], but I can't eat spicy food [*An excuse/ reason/explanation*]. Do they have non-spicy dishes [*A statement of alternative*]? (S12, situation 11)

Table 5. Refusal strategies to suggestions

Refusal strategies	Frequency	Examples
Direct strategies	*8*	
- Negative willingness/ability	8	*I'm afraid I can't.*
Indirect strategies	*61*	
- Excuses/reasons/explanations	28	*I can't eat spicy food.*
- Statements of regret	2	
- Statements of alternative	28	*How about trying pork instead?*
- Avoidance	3	*I'll make a decision later.*
Adjuncts to refusals	*29*	
- Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	12	*That sounds delicious!*
- Gratitude/appreciation	17	*Thanks for your suggestion.*

4.2.4 Refusals to requests

Concerning refusals to suggestions, the dominant use of indirect strategies could be observed with 94 occurrences, followed by direct strategies with 6 appearances and adjuncts to refusals with 4 appearances. Taking into account the utilization of indirect strategies, Vietnamese vocational students showed a strong preference for *excuses/ reasons/explanations* with 32 occurrences, followed by *statements of regret* with 24

occurrences, *promises of future acceptance* with 11 occurrences, and *statements of alternative* with 9 occurrences. There was one found *wishes* as well. *Negative willingness/ability* was the only type of direct strategy used for refusing suggestions. Similarly, *statements of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement* were the sole kind of adjunct to refusals that could be found.

When refusing a friend asking to borrow their motorbike, participants normally

used *a statement of regret* to start their responses and ended with *an excuse/reason/explanation* (10 responses, or 55.56%) as seen in the example below.

(20) I'm sorry [*A statement of regret*]. My motorbike broke down [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. I haven't had it repaired yet. (S16, situation 4).

To refuse a senior student asking for borrowing an English coursebook, participants often began their responses with *a statement of regret*, continued with *an excuse/reason/explanation*, and ended with *a statement of alternative* (10 responses, or 55.56%). This type of semantic formulas can be seen in the examples below.

(21) I'm sorry [*A statement of regret*], but I really need this book to study for my exam next week [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. I can help you find another copy [*A statement of alternative*]. (S3, situation 6)

Lastly, to refuse a younger roommate asking for help with her English exercises, participants normally used *a statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement* as initial expressions, followed by *an excuse/reason/explanation*, and ended with *a promise of future acceptance* (12 responses, or 66.67%). For example:

(22) I'd like to help [*A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*], but I'm really busy with my homework now [*An excuse/reason/explanation*]. Can we arrange another time [*A promise of future acceptance*]? (S5, situation 9)

Table 6. Refusal strategies to requests

Refusal strategies	Frequency	Examples
Direct strategies	*6*	
- Negative willingness/ability	6	*I can't lend you my motorbike.*
Indirect strategies	*94*	
- Excuses/reasons/explanations	32	*I really need this book to study for my exam next week.*
- Statements of regret	24	*I'm really sorry.*
- Statements of alternative	9	*Why don't you try asking Nam for help?*
- Wishes	1	*I wish I had another one.*
- Promises of future acceptance	11	*I can help you later when I have free time.*
Adjuncts to refusals	*4*	
- Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	4	*I'd like to lend you but I...*

4.3 Interlocutor status and semantic formulas

Table 7 shows the most frequent semantic formulas used by Vietnamese vocational students based on interlocutor statuses. When they refused an interlocutor who had a higher status, they normally used *excuses/reasons/explanations* in combination with other formulas. Specifically, in situation 7 (Invitation), they started their refusals with *gratitude/appreciation*, *excuses/reasons/explanations*, and *negative willingness/ability* in 12 responses (66.67%). Similarly, in situation 5 (Offer), the use of *gratitude/appreciation* and *excuse/reason/explanation* can be observed with 15 occurrences, or 77.78%. Meanwhile, when making refusals to suggestions (situation 8), the combination of *gratitude/appreciation* and a *statement of alternative* can be witnessed in 12 responses. Nonetheless, in situation 6 (Request), most of them deployed

a statement of regret in combination with *an excuse/reason/explanation* and *a promise* *of future acceptance* (10 responses, or 55.56%).

Table 7. Most frequently used semantic formulas based on interlocutor statuses

Interlocutor status	Situations	Semantic formulas	Frequency	Percentage
Higher	Invitation (7)	Gratitude/appreciation + an excuse/reason/explanation + negative willingness/ability	12	66.67
	Offer (5)	Gratitude/appreciation + an excuse/reason/explanation	15	77.78
	Suggestion (8)	Gratitude/appreciation + a statement of alternative	12	66.67
	Request (6)	A statement of regret + an excuse/reason/explanation + statement of alternative	10	55.56
Equal	Invitation (1)	A statement of regret + an excuse/reason/explanation + a promise of future acceptance	10	55.56
	Offer (2)	Gratitude/appreciation + negative willingness/ability + a statement of alternative	9	50
	Suggestion (3)	A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement + an excuse/reason/explanation + statement of alternative	9	50
	Request (4)	A statement of regret + an excuse/reason/explanation	10	55.56
Lower	Invitation (10)	A statement of regret + an excuse/reason/explanation	10	55.56
	Offer (12)	Gratitude/appreciation + a statement of alternative	13	72.22
	Suggestion (11)	A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement + an excuse/reason/explanation + a statement of alternative	14	77.78
	Request (9)	A statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement + an excuse/reason/explanation + a promise of future acceptance	12	66.67

Situation 1 (Invitation) and situation 4 (Request) exhibit similarities in their refusals, indicating equal status. In situation 1, they preferred using *a statement of regret,* *an excuse/reason/explanation,* and *a promise of future acceptance* in the same response (10 responses or 55.56%). Meanwhile, in situation 4, *a statement of regret* and *excuse/*

reason/explanation were utilized together. Conversely, in situation 2 (Offer), *gratitude/ appreciation, negative willingness/ability*, and *a statement of alternative* were employed most frequently (9 responses, or 50%). On the other hand, in situation 3 (Suggestion), the use of *a statement of positive opinion/ feeling or agreement, excuse/reason/ explanation,* and *statement of alternative* could be found in the same frequency.

With respect to refusing people with lower status, they used *a statement of regret* and *an excuse/reason/explanation* (10 responses, or 55.56%) in situation 10 (Invitation). In situation 9 (Request) and situation 11 (Suggestion), they began their responses with *a statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement*, continued with *an excuse/ reason/explanation*, but ended with *a promise of future acceptance* (Request) and *a statement of alternative* (Suggestion) with 12 and 14 responses, respectively. However, in situation 12 (Offer), they preferred *gratitude/appreciation* and *a statement of alternative* (13 responses or 72.22%).

Overall, the abovementioned results indicate that Vietnamese vocational students utilized different combinations of semantic formulas to make refusals to invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests. Among semantic formulas found, *an excuse/ reason/explanation* was the most preferable one (found in 9 situations), followed by *a statement of alternative* (found in 6 situations), *gratitude/appreciation* (found in 5 situations), and *a statement of regret* (found in 4 situations). Other formulas, such as *a promise of future acceptance* or *a statement of positive opinion/feeling, or agreement*, were found at lower frequencies. There was only one direct strategy, namely *negative willingness/ability*, found. This, once again, helps claim the dominance of indirect strategies that Vietnamese vocational students used for making refusals. In addition, negative willingness/ability was

used to refuse an invitation from a person who had a higher status. Considering the employment and distribution of semantic formulas in connection with interlocutor status, it can be stated that interlocutor status had no effect on the use of semantic formulas that Vietnamese vocational students utilized to make refusals.

4.4 Discussion

The findings of this study partly explore how Vietnamese vocational students produced the speech act of refusal in English. From the abovementioned results, it is obvious that indirect strategies are more preferred than direct strategies. To make refusals, they employed direct strategies (e.g., *'I can't'*) in a low frequency and gave excuses, reasons, and explanations as their main strategy to reject invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests from their interlocutors. In addition, they also suggested alternatives or made promises of future acceptance in lower frequencies to produce their responses to refusals. This finding is in line with previous studies of Al-Issa (2003), Wannaruk (2008), Nguyen (2017), and Khamkhien (2022), which reported that the majority of EFL learners tend to utilize reasons and explanations to make refusals rather than other types of semantic formulas. The explanation for this tendency is that they may seek the best way to mitigate the risk of threatening others' face as well as to make them appear more polite in social communication.

Considering refusals in four eliciting speech acts (Invitation, Offer, Suggestion, and Request), it is clear that indirect strategies were dominant in each situation (see Table 3, 4, 5, and 6). However, in their responses, Vietnamese vocational students did not use individual speech acts or strategies to make refusals. In fact, they employed different combinations of indirect strategies, adjuncts, and direct strategies to produce complete responses.

For example, to refuse a best friend's offer to give them some money, most of them use a combination of gratitude/appreciation (e.g., *'Thank you'*), negative willingness/ ability (e.g., *'But I can't receive money from you'*), and *a statement of alternative* (e.g., *'I'll use my mother's old phone'*). When using such combinations to make refusals, they possibly tried to achieve effective communication and reduce the risk of face-threatening. This means that they showed a tendency to produce speech act sets that were formed from smaller units to serve only one communicative purpose (Válková, 2013). This finding is in accordance with the work of Khamkhien (2022), who reported that Thai university students normally use speech act sets in their refusals. Regarding the context of Vietnam, this finding is in line with results from previous studies of Doanh and Yen (2024), Ly and Lan (2024), and Tuyen (2024). Their findings suggest that Vietnamese learners of English frequently employ indirect methods, such as providing an excuse or a reason to soften their refusal, a strategy deeply rooted in their native culture's emphasis on "saving face."

Remarkably, the analysis from earlier sections of this study revealed that the interlocutor status had no effect on Vietnamese vocational students' refusals. In 11 situations (3 invitations, 2 offers, 3 suggestions, and 3 requests), they mostly employed indirect strategies and adjuncts to refusals. There was only one direct strategy (*negative willingness/ability*), which could be found in high frequency in situation 2, where they refused a best friend. This result is totally different from some previous studies that suggested that refusals made by EFL learners were affected by social status (Zhao & Nor, 2016; Nguyen, 2017; Khamkhien, 2022). The deep influence of Confucianism and Collectivist values can explain this finding. Specifically, the Vietnamese concept of face is defined as a socially approved image that must always

be attended to in interaction. Losing face can lead to significant social disapproval, shame, and damaged relationships. Hence, the importance of face-saving heavily influences communication styles in Vietnam, a highly collectivist society (Pham, 2014). This leads to the conclusion that the cultural backgrounds of Vietnamese vocational students impact their choices of refusal strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

Results from this study indicated that Vietnamese vocational students used more indirect strategies than direct strategies when they made refusals to invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests. *An excuse/ reason/explanation* was the most frequently used semantic formula, followed by *gratitude/appreciation* and *a statement of alternative*. The high frequency of indirect strategies in combination with adjuncts to refusals demonstrated that Vietnamese vocational students were aware of how to mitigate the risk of face-threatening when making refusals. In addition, it was found that participants always deployed combinations of different semantic formulas to produce diversified speech act sets. Lastly, findings from this study revealed that interlocutor status (higher, equal, or lower) had no impact on the production of refusals.

There are some limitations that can be found in this study. Firstly, the number of participants is still limited. Secondly, factors that may affect the production of refusals, such as age, educational background, or gender, were not considered. Lastly, other in-depth data collection techniques, such as interviews, were not utilized to explore what could really affect the choices of refusal strategies. Hence, larger studies with different data collection methods are also required to obtain a more meaningful insight into the speech act of refusal in the context of Vietnam, where English is used as an EFL, not their mother tongue.

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Appendix 1

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DISCOURSE COMPLETION TASK

Part I: Background Information

Name……………………… **Surname** ………….………………………………..

Faculty …………………… **Major** …………… **Year of Study** ………..…….

Gender

Male ☐ Female ☐ **Age**: ……………..

Part II: Discourse Completion Task

This part consists of 12 different situations. Please read the following scenarios and then respond in the blank after "You". Please give your responses as you would in actual conversation. The data will be used for research purposes only.

Situation 1

One of your classmates invites you to go to the cinema this evening. However, you are not well, and you would like to stay at home. What would you say?

You: ……………………………………………………………………………

Situation 2

You have just lost your mobile phone. Nam, your best friend, offers to give you some money so that you can buy a new one. However, you do not want to receive money from anyone. What would you say to decline?

You: ……………………………………………………………………………

Situation 3

You are in a restaurant with some classmates, but you are not ready to order. A friend of yours suggests that you should try braised tuna. However, you do not like eating fish at all, and you want to eat pork. What would you say?

You: ……………………………………………………………………………

Situation 4

A friend who is the same age as you asks for borrowing you motorbike to ride to the market for some shopping. However, you do not trust in him, and thus, do not want to lend him your motorbike. What would you say?

You: ……………………………………………………………………………

Situation 5

You are in the parking lot of your college, and you find that your motorbike has a flat tire. Your history teacher offers to give you a ride. However, you are a bit afraid of him. What would you say to refuse?

You: ……………………………………………………………………………

Situation 6

One senior student that you have known for a year wants to borrow your Basic English coursebook. However, you need this book because you are preparing for your examination next week. What would you say?

</div>

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 7

You and some classmates just helped your form teacher to finish a small project. To celebrate successful completion of the project, he/she invites all of you to lunch. However, your mother is in the hospital, and you must look after her. What would you say?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 8

You are thinking of an idea for your startup competition next month. Your advisor suggests a topic in which you are not interested at all, and you would like to work on something else. What would you say?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 9

You stay in the same dormitory with Tú. She is a high school vocational student, and she is 4 years younger than you. She comes to you and asks for help with some English exercises. However, you are not free because you are doing a lot of homework. What would you say?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 10

A junior student who is younger than you invites you to her birthday party tomorrow evening. However, you are flat broke and do not have money to buy a gift for her. What would you say to refuse?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 11

Thu, your junior classmate, is telling you what she did last week. She came to a new Thai restaurant near your college and tried some food. She suggests you visit that restaurant and try some. However, you cannot eat spicy food. What would you say?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Situation 12

You go to the college canteen to buy an ice-cream. When doing payment, you realize that you have forgotten to take your wallet. A junior student who you know well offers to pay for it. However, you would not like to accept his/her offer. What would you say?

You: …………………………………………………………………………

Appendix 2

Classification of Refusal Strategies (Beebe et al., 1990)

I. Direct

1. Using performative verbs (*I refuse*)
2. Non-performative statements

    o "*No*"

    o Negative willingness/ability (*I can't./I won't./I don't think so*)

II. Indirect

1. Statements of regret (*I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...*)

2. Wishes (*I wish I could help you...*)

3. Excuses, reasons, explanations (*My children will be home that night./I have a headache*)

4. Statements of alternative
   - I can do X instead of Y (*I'd rather.../I'd prefer...*)
   - Why don't you do X instead of Y? (*Why don't you ask someone else?*)

5. Setting a condition for future or past acceptance (*If you had asked me earlier, I would have...*)

6. Promises of future acceptance (*I'll do it next time./I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...*)

7. Statements of principle (*I never do business with friends.*)

8. Statements of philosophy (*One can't be too careful.*)

9. Attempt to dissuade an interlocutor.
   - Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (*I won't be any fun tonight* to refuse an invitation)
   - A guilt trip (when a waitress tells customers who want to sit for a while: *I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.*)
   - Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack (*Who do you think you are?/That's a terrible idea!*)
   - Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.
   - Let the interlocutor off the hook (*Don't worry about it./That's okay. / You don't have to.*)
   - Self-defense (*I'm trying my best./I'm doing all I can do.*)

10. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
    - Unspecific or indefinite reply
    - Lack of enthusiasm

11. Avoidance
    - Nonverbal
      - Silence
      - Hesitation
      - Doing nothing
      - Physical departure
    - Verbal
      - Topic switch
      - Joke
      - Repetition of part of request (*Monday?*)
      - Postponement (*I'll think about it.*)
      - Hedge (*Gee, I don't know./I'm not sure.*)

Adjuncts to Refusals

1. Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (*That's a good idea.../I'd love to...*)

2. Statements of empathy (*I realize you are in a difficult situation.*)

3. Pause fillers (*uhh/well/oh/uhm*)

4. Gratitude/appreciation

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PHÂN TÍCH HÀNH NGÔN TỪ CHỐI CỦA SINH VIÊN MỘT TRƯỜNG CAO ĐẲNG NGHỀ TẠI VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: *Từ chối là một trong những hành vi ngôn ngữ được thực hiện thường xuyên nhất trong cuộc sống hàng ngày của con người. Tuy nhiên, việc thực hiện hành ngôn từ chối bằng Tiếng Anh là một thách thức, đặc biệt đối với những người không nói tiếng Anh như tiếng mẹ đẻ, do khả năng làm mất thể diện của người khác và gây gián đoạn sự tương tác trong đối thoại. Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu cách sinh viên Việt Nam đang học ở một trường cao đẳng nghề thực hiện hành ngôn từ chối đối với lời mời, lời đề nghị, gợi ý và yêu cầu. Đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu này là 18 sinh viên cao đẳng nghề Việt Nam đang học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai (L2). Các sinh viên này được yêu cầu hoàn thành Phiếu khảo sát diễn ngôn gồm 12 tình huống. Dữ liệu thu thập được phân tích bằng cách sử dụng bảng phân loại các chiến lược từ chối do Beebe và cộng sự (1990) đề xuất. Kết quả cho thấy các chiến lược gián tiếp được sinh viên cao đẳng nghề người Việt Nam ưa chuộng, vì có thể giảm thiểu nguy cơ làm người khác mất thể diện. Kết quả cũng cho thấy sinh viên cao đẳng nghề người Việt Nam có xu hướng sử dụng kết hợp chiến lược gián tiếp, các yếu tố bổ trợ và chiến lược trực tiếp. Ngoài ra, có thể khẳng định rằng việc thực hiện hành ngôn từ chối của sinh viên cao đẳng nghề người Việt Nam không bị chi phối bởi vị thế của người đối thoại.*

Từ khóa: *hành ngôn, phân loại các chiến lược từ chối, sinh viên cao đẳng nghề, từ chối*

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Ghi chú

Các tác giả xác nhận không có tranh chấp về lợi ích đối với bài báo này.