PRAGMATIC TRANSFER: A STUDY OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES AMONG CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

**Title:** Pragmatic Transfer: A Study of Refusal Strategies among Chinese Learners of English

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**Abstract:** The present study aims at exploring how negative pragmatic transfer has affected Chinese learners of English in terms of the completion of cross-cultural refusals and the correlation between their linguistic proficiency and pragmatic competence. The empirical data were collected through an elicitation instrument, i.e., a free discourse completion tasks questionnaire, developed by Zhu (2012). A total of 117 informants participated in the research, including 39 Chinese learners of English at the advanced level, 36 Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level, and 42 native Chinese speakers. Besides, due to the lack of access to native English speakers, the data for native English speakers were quoted from Zhu (2012). The refusal responses by each group were analyzed and compared on the basis of the type, frequency, and content of the refusal semantic formula originally proposed by Beebe et al. (1990).

The findings showed that Chinese learners of English were under the influence of the L1 convention in that they used more refusal strategies involving mitigation and regret but expressed less gratitude than did the American counterparts. Furthermore, Chinese learners of English tended to offer specific excuses, while Americans preferred vague ones. Regarding the correlation of language proficiency and pragmatic transfer, the results revealed a great deal of complexity. The advanced learners showed larger amounts of pragmatic transfer than the intermediate learners when the utilization of a strategy was highly dependent on language proficiency. However, in other cases, the intermediate learners transferred more L1 norms in making L2 refusals.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural refusals, Refusal strategies, Chinese learners of English, Pragmatic transfer, Language proficiency
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1. Introduction

Performing certain acts through words, i.e., speech acts, is fundamental to human communication. Speech acts occur whenever conversation starts, whether it is in one culture or across two or more cultures. However, the realization of a specific speech act varies from different cultures, not only in its linguistic form, but also in its pragmatic force. Being cultural outsiders, language learners tend to perform those acts by complying with their own sociocultural norms (Hong, 2011). Hence, the misuse of the pragmatic force in a second/foreign language might risk being misunderstood by native speakers and even lead to a communication breakdown. Among those scenarios in which communication breakdowns occur, many are related to making a refusal to an offer. A CNN reporter once commented on the phenomenon of such pragmatic failure between Japanese and American speakers by saying that “in Japan, there were said to be about sixteen ways of saying no, and fourteen of them would sound like yes to the American ear” (Chen, 1996). A highly possible explanation for this stunning mismatch might be the distinction between high and low context cultures. While Japan is a typical high context culture country, America, is tilted towards the other end of the continuum. Therefore, the different conventions often lead to different approaches of expressing a refusal. Likewise, sharing a similar East Asian cultural background with Japan, China is another representation of a high context culture. Hence, as a Chinese learner of English and a foreign language teacher, I became intrigued by the fact that a cross-cultural refusal made by non-native learners might be perceived as having the opposite meaning by native English speakers and could not help but wonder whether there is a similar problem encountered by Chinese learners of English.

It is widely believed that a pragmatic failure is often more detrimental than a linguistic error as the latter might only show the speaker’s level of syntax or morphology, the former could result in unwanted cultural stereotypes (Thomas, 1983, 1984). The issue of L1 pragmatic transfer among language learners has long been recognized by several scholars from various countries (e.g., Chang, 2011; Kwon, 2003; Wannaruk, 2008). While previous studies have shown that the issue of how Chinese learners of English are affected by L1 cultural norms when realizing a speech act has drawn due attention, some speech acts have
been less frequently addressed than others. A refusal is a speech act that serves as the response to another act such as a request, an offer or an invitation. As such, it is one of the speech acts that is relatively little investigated in Chinese-English studies (Lin, 2014; Chang, 2009, 2011). As Beebe et al. put it, a refusal is ‘‘a major cross-cultural sticking point for many nonnative speakers’’ (1990: 56) since it usually results in great face threats and requires a high level of pragmatic competence to strike a balance between clarity and politeness in conveying the refusal message. Hence, in light of the nature of the refusal and high level of pragmatic competence it calls for, it is not only important but necessary to explore the problems Chinese learners of English encounter when refusing in English in order to identify how and to what extent Chinese learners of English are affected by L1 pragmatic conventions. In addition, aside from the paucity of research on problems Chinese learners of English encounter in refusing in English, fewer work has been done to determine the correlation between the language proficiency and the pragmatic transfer in the realization of a cross-cultural refusal made by Chinese learners of English (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Chang, 2009). Although many researchers have suggested that advanced language proficiency could not guarantee a high level of pragmatic competence, no agreed conclusion has been reached regarding the relationship between these two parts. In this sense, there is an obvious need for further analysis.

Attempting to fill in this gap, the present study examines the differences in refusals performed by native English speakers and Chinese learners of English, with a focus on Chinese learners’ performance. To be more specific, by comparing the type and frequency of refusal strategies adopted by Chinese learners of English and native English speakers, the research aims to determine how the L1 pragmatic transfer has influenced Chinese learners and the correlation between language proficiency and pragmatic competence. The research questions are as follows:

1. Do Chinese learners of English show any pragmatic transfer when making refusals in English?
2. How does L1 negative pragmatic transfer influence Chinese learners of English in their realization of invitation refusals?

3. Is there a negative correlation between English language proficiency and pragmatic transfer?
To confirm the negative correlation hypothesis, which predicts that the pragmatic transfer decreases with language proficiency, the advanced learners should display less amount of negative transfer than the intermediate learners.

The essay includes 6 sections, which are organized as follows: Section 2 presents the overview of previous studies and the major theoretical framework of the current study. Section 3 provides detailed information about the methodology for data collecting and analysis, containing a description of participants, instruments, and procedures. Section 4 offers the main findings of the current research in terms of the type, frequency, and content of refusal strategies. The preferred refusal strategies across different groups are presented and compared to determine pragmatic transfer and its correlation to learners’ language proficiency. Section 5 comprehensively discusses the findings from section 4 and relates them to earlier literature on cross-cultural refusals in general and refusal studies of Chinese-English in specific. What is more, some limitations of the present research are also addressed. Finally, section 6 draws the conclusion.

2. Literature review
2.1 The speech act and refusals
The notion of “speech act” was termed from Austin’s (1962: 5) principle that “the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action”. Searle (1969: 16) further elaborated that “speaking a language is performing speech acts” and viewed the speech acts as the “basic or minimal units of linguistic communication”. As Austin (1962) suggested, not only can people express their thoughts through words, but they can also get things done. According to him, there are three different kinds of acts when a speech has been uttered: a locutionary act (i.e., act of saying), an illocutionary act (i.e., act in saying) and a perlocutionary act (i.e., act by
saying). Take the following refusal involving explanation as an example. When being invited to a friend’s birthday party, one replied as:

(1) *Happy birthday to you! I have another appointment so...* (CLEA#16; friend’s birthday invitation)

In saying so, the invitee has performed three acts mentioned above. To be more specific, when she performed the locutionary act by literally expressing the words, she at the same time performed the illocutionary act as refusing the invitation and the perlocutionary act as mitigating the face threats caused by the refusal and saving the face of the inviter.

Besides, Searle (1975) further extended Austin’s theory and proposed a concept of “indirectness” in speech acts. Through an indirect speech act,

*the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer* (Searle, 1975: 60-61).

Example 1 can also demonstrate how an indirect speech act works. Indirect speech acts are commonly used in everyday communication among various situations. Given the fact that the implications implied by indirect speech acts might be highly dependent on the context and social conventions, it definitely has its cultural uniqueness that deserves careful study.

Moreover, since the realization of speech acts vary, refusal, as one of the most studied speech acts, is certainly not an exception. Refusals are regarded as speech acts whereby the invitee “*denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor*” (Chen et al., 1995: 121). Therefore, its inherent face threat calls for a high level of pragmatic proficiency for nonnative speakers to perform an acceptable refusal, which predictably constitutes a major cross-cultural challenge for English second/foreign language learners. A great number of studies have focused on the realization of intercultural refusals, many of which consider Beebe et al.’s (1990) study as a solid foundation in terms of the framework for refusal strategies. In addition, some strategies that only occurred in the focused culture have also been added for depth analysis (Fang, 2020). Besides, Beebe et al. (1990) have presented four basic scenarios, i.e., invitations, offers, suggestions, and requests, in which refusals would occur. Some studies of
interlanguage refusals analyzed all four situations (Chen et al., 1995; Chang, 2009; Allami & Naeimi 2011), more of them concentrated on only one or two situations (Hong, 2011; Zhu, 2012). On top of that, the comparative studies that targeted pragmatic competence regarding the realization of a specific speech act, e.g., a refusal, were largely centered in Hong Kong and Taiwan whereas linguistic competence seemed to attract more attention in mainland China by far.

2.2 Politeness theory
Refusals are generally recognized face-threatening acts and face-saving strategies are required to perform them in an appropriate manner. With that said, face work is the crux of this issue. The notion of face is the core to Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, they termed it as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1987: 61) and claimed that the speaker comes into any conversation with two seemingly conflicting “face wants” (1987: 13): positive face wants, and negative face wants. The former are the desires to be approved and liked by other people, the latter are to remain unimpeded by others. Any communicative behavior that might endanger the addressee’s face wants is considered a face-threatening act (FTA). Ideally, it is in everyone’s best interests to honor others’ needs; however, practically, to satisfy one’s desires frequently leads one to threaten others’ faces (Yu, 1999). Accordingly, politeness strategies should be used to attend to addressees’ vulnerable faces.

Yet, as often as not, Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory, including the perception of face, is not universally applicable. For instance, to Brown & Levinson’s (1987: 96) knowledge, “formulaic entreaties” such as: “Excuse me”, “Forgive me” or “Accept my thanks” are counted as bold-on-record FTAs, because it sounds imposing to the westerners’ ear and threatens hearers’ negative faces. But it would be quite counter-intuition for native Chinese speakers to label Chinese equivalent expressions, “对不起 Duibuqi”, “请原谅 Qing yuanliang” and “接受我的谢意 Jieshou wode xieyi”, as being impolite and face-threatening (Gu, 1990). The reason that accounts for this would be the distinct definitions of face and
politeness in two cultures (Mao, 1994; Gu, 1990; Zhu, 2012; Fang, 2020). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1987, ed.), the English word “face” originated from a phrase “to save one’s face” in an English community in China, meaning “one’s credit, good name, reputation” (Yu, 1999). Seen in this light, the dynamics of Chinese face work can be taken as involving “an *interactional orientation on the part of the individual speaker toward establishing connectedness to, and seeking interpersonal harmony with, one’s own community*” (Mao, 1994: 459). In other words, unlike Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory which stressed the accommodation of individual desires, the Chinese face emphasizes the harmony of individual behaviors with the judgment of the community (Gu, 1990). Thus, compared to westerners’ value of freedom, Chinese instead attach more importance to complying with communal norms and maintaining harmony. Simply put, Brown & Levinson’s face can be deemed as an individualistic, self-oriented image, whereas Chinese face, as a communal, interpersonal one (Yu, 1999).

### 2.3 Pragmatic transfer and cross-cultural refusal analysis

Since the perception of “face” varies, politeness theories must work in a similar vein cross-culturally. Hence, the lack of communicative competence and knowledge of the target society might lead to a communication breakdown. Therefore, to successfully perform a speech act, second/foreign language learners must master certain social conventions of target communities. Three major acquisitional issues in interlanguage pragmatics have been identified by Kasper (1981), which are pragmatic transfer, pragmatic over-generalization, and teaching-induced errors. Focusing on pragmatic transfer, Kasper (1992: 207) defines the pragmatic transfer as “... *the influence exerted by learners’ pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and learning of L2 pragmatic information*”. Beebe et al. (1990: 56) view pragmatic transfer as a type of sociolinguistic transfer, in which learners transfer “*sociocultural communicative competence in performing L2 speech acts or any other aspects of L2 conversations*”. The pragmatic transfer has been a focus of many studies on interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Beebe et al., 1990; Ikoma & Shimura, 1993; Al-Issa, 2003). “Pragmatic transfer can be either positive or..."
negative, depending on the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 pragmatic knowledge” (Zhu, 2012: 24). The positive transfer will probably occur where L1 and L2 share similar cultural norms, while the negative transfer might be spotted where the features of two languages are different from each other. Consequently, the negative transfer stands a good chance of being misleading in that second/foreign language learners may inappropriately apply their L1 conventions when performing speech acts in the target language.

Being a critical potential factor for causing communicative failures, the negative transfer has drawn more attention compared to positive transfer (Baba, 2010; Yu, 2011). Among those studies, many of which focus on the realization of refusals in a second/foreign language. As mentioned earlier, Beebe et al.’s (1990) study is probably the most influential one, in which they found that there was a tendency for Japanese learners of English to copy the refusal patterns in Japanese when speaking English, confirming the negative transfer phenomenon. More importantly, their taxonomy of refusal strategies laid the foundation for the investigation of cross-cultural refusals. The majority of the following studies employed the framework of refusal strategies developed by Beebe et al. (1990). In doing so, Felix-Brasdefer (2003) determined that even advanced American learners of Spanish did not know how to make an appropriate invitation refusal, suggesting a significant pragmatic transfer due to the lack of sociocultural knowledge. Kwon (2003) examined the occurrences of pragmatic transfer among South Korean EFL learners at different levels of proficiency, he found that Korean EFL learners in all three levels displayed L1 negative pragmatic transfer including they demonstrated more sensitivity to social status and employed direct strategies less frequently than native English speakers. Additionally, Kwon (2003) further testified to the positive correlation hypothesis proposed by Takahashi and Beebe (1987) by showing that the amount of pragmatic transfer increased as the learners’ proficiency improved. Nevertheless, Wannaruk (2008) seemed to disagree with Kwon (2003)’s argument about the positive correlation and claimed that the reason why the advanced EFL learners in Thailand demonstrated more significant pragmatic transfer, such as giving specific explanation like native Thai speakers, is that EFL learners with low proficiency were not capable of doing so. Besides, Wannaruk (2008) also pointed out some evidence of pragmatic transfer in Thai EFL
learners, for example, they used fewer negative ability and gratitude strategies than did native English speakers.

2.4 Chinese-English refusal studies

Among the studies dealing with the L1 pragmatic transfer, some of them investigated this phenomenon through Chinese-English refusals. These studies found that the realization of refusals in two cultures mainly differs in terms of the frequency and content of strategies. Zhu (2012) analyzed invitation refusals in eight situations made by 35 native Chinese speakers, 35 Chinese EFL learners at the advanced level, and 35 native English speakers. The empirical data were collected through Free discourse completion tasks questionnaires in two language versions. After a thorough investigation, it was found that Chinese EFL learners performed refusals the way similar to native Chinese speakers, using fewer negative ability and gratitude strategies than their American counterparts, meanwhile adopting more regret and checking strategies compared to native English speakers. While three groups of participants all employed quite a lot of explanations and positive feelings, Chinese learners of English provided more specific explanations than did native English speakers. These findings serve as a fair representation of L1 negative pragmatic transfer among advanced Chinese EFL learners, lending a supporting hand to many Chinese-English refusal studies. Hong (2011) also noticed the negative L1 pragmatic transfer in American learners of Chinese in terms of the choice of refusal strategies, especially in direct strategies, suggesting that the lack of intercultural knowledge might be a contributing factor. Likewise, Chang (2011) found that Chinese EFL learners tended to rely on the L1 communication style to form refusals in L2, such as using substantially less direct refusal strategies and offering excuses with great details. He commented that the concept of truth might take some responsibility for this deviation regarding specific versus vague explanations in two cultures. The Americans considered specific reasons untruthful whereas the Chinese tended to use “white lies” to minimize the risk of hurting the interlocutor’s face. However, there appears to be some evidence that opposes Zhu’s (2012) results. Although similar methodology, i.e., DCT, has been utilized, Liao and Bresnahan (1996) proved that Chinese learners of English were more economic
when giving an excuse. Besides, Chinese learners used much fewer positive feeling strategies than native English speakers because “Chinese people are collectively oriented...They are afraid if they express positive opinions, then they are forced to comply with it” (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996: 704). Standing on the same side with Liao and Bresnahan, Wang’s (2003) findings partially confirmed their results that Chinese subjects offered fewer specific reasons in their refusals compared to American counterparts. What is more, despite the fact that pragmatic transfer has been a focus for Chinese-English cross-cultural studies, little work has dealt with the relationship between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency. Chang (2009) have explored the extent to which pragmatic transfer was affected by L2 proficiency among Chinese EFL speakers. The results rebutted Takahashi and Beebe’s (1987) positive correlation theory and displayed that there was no clear relation between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency.

3. Methodology

After having a look at some preliminary and previous studies of the present field, let us turn to the detail of the current study. This is an empirical study on discovering L1 pragmatic transfer in L2 refusals realized by Chinese learners of English. According to Selinker (1972), three sets of data, namely L2 learners’ interlanguage data, learners’ L1 data, and target language data are required for interlanguage studies. Thus, to identify the possible negative transfer, it is necessary to collect three sets of data from three groups of participants: 1) Chinese learners of English; 2) native Chinese speakers; 3) native English speakers. Furthermore, aiming at determining the correlation between L2 language proficiency and L1 pragmatic transfer, the first group of Chinese learners of English are divided into two groups, 1a) Chinese learners of English at the advanced level and 1b) Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level, to collect the empirical data. Additionally, due to the lack of access to native English speakers, the data of native English speakers are quoted from Zhu (2012).
3.1 Data collecting instruments

Speaking of data collection, there are mainly two forms of data used in cross-cultural pragmatic analysis: naturalistic oral data collected from observation and written data from Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT). While the spoken data from observation has long been believed that it is more reliable than the written data (e.g., Wolfson, 1986), a quite small number of interlanguage studies utilized it (Zhu 2012). For one thing, due to its naturally occurring nature, it is difficult for researchers to control the social context and variables to collect comparable data. For another, researchers are not able to collect a sufficient amount of data within a short time. In contrast, the DCT, as one of the most widely used methods in interlanguage pragmatic field (Noel & Susan, 1995), has been employed by many studies concerning intercultural refusals (e.g., Kwon, 2003; Wannaruk, 2008; Chang, 2009; Guo, 2012; Hong, 2011). The DCT not only allows researchers to change the social variables according to the aim of the study but also enables researchers to collect comparable data within a fairly short time. In other words, technically speaking, the written data is more user-friendly. Moreover, concerning authenticity, one of the most frequent criticisms of written data is pointing to DCT’s limited turns. Since a natural refusal is always realized by several conversational turns, a single pair of utterances is definitely unnatural. Therefore, instead of classic DCT, Free DCT could be applied to make up for this deficiency. The Free DCT allows informants to write down conversational turns as many as possible, which could reflect largely real-life situations. Thus, although there has been some debate about the validity of the written data, it is clear that the Free DTC is capable of reflecting naturally occurring data to a large extent.

Altogether, to collect comparable data to that of native English speakers, a previous Free Discourse Completion Task questionnaire by Zhu (2012) was adopted in the present study. The questionnaire consists of two parts: three situations and personal background information. Focusing on invitation refusals, all participants were required to refuse an invitation in three situations. The contextual variables of social distance and social status are taken into consideration. In addition, the background questionnaire was mainly used to determine the testees’ English proficiency and their experience of living abroad. What is more, the
questionnaire was presented in two language versions, the English version was used to collect the two groups of English learners’ data while the Chinese version was employed for collecting the data of Chinese monolingual speakers.

3.1.1 Free Discourse Completion Tasks

Primarily, Free discourse completion tasks (FDCT) were employed to collect the data. There are three invitation situations presented in the questionnaire. Each situation contains a simple description of the setting of the conversation and the relationship between two interlocutors. Informants were required to refuse an invitation in a given scenario. Following the description, a prompt is provided with one interlocutor initiating a dialog. An example from the FDCT is as follows:

(2) You and a good friend of yours meet at a grocery store. Your friend invites you to her birthday party at a park next Sunday. However, you cannot go and REFUSE her invitation.

Friend: You know my birthday is in two weeks. My family is holding a party for me next Sunday at Lake Murray park. Come! It will be fun!

You:

Friend:

You: ... (Zhu, 2012: 49)

3.1.2 Three situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social variables in FDCT situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A close friend’s birthday party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new colleague’s dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss’s housewarming party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Zhu (2012), the three situations were designed on the ground of two contextual variables: social distance and social status. Social distance is a binary variable, referring to whether two interlocutors know each other very well. Social status concerns the relationship between the informants in light of dominance (Schneider & Barron, 2008). The characters involved in the situations of the DCT are friends, colleagues, bosses, and employees. In the first situation, there is no social distance between close friends and they have equal social status. In the second situation, social distance exists between new colleagues since they do not know each other very well whilst they have equal social status. In the third situation, no social distance between a familiar boss and an employee whereas the boss, i.e., the inviter, has the power over the employee.

3.2 Data collecting procedures

The questionnaires were administrated online via https://www.wjx.cn/index.aspx and sent out to several Wechat (a Chinese social media) groups of the target testees. Primarily, they are college students in Xinxiang University in China, Chinese graduate students in Sweden, and Chinese Foreign language instructors in America. Besides, the questionnaires were also sent separately to the researcher’s friends and former colleagues who belong to the intended testees of this survey. Anyone who has received the questionnaire was briefly informed of the research goal and can choose to fill in the form on a voluntary basis. Basically, the participants were guided by written instructions in the questionnaire and no time limit for answering it.

Totally 173 questionnaires were retrieved from the participants, then were sorted into three corresponding groups in light of the informants’ language proficiency and overseas experience. After examination, questionnaires contain any of the three kinds of answers, i.e., 1) incomplete answers such as, “No”, “can’t go” or “I’m sorry, but...”; 2) same answers for all three situations; and 3) did not give answers to all three situations, would be considered invalid and excluded from the results. Finally, 117 questionnaires were chosen as the samples for this empirical study, among which 42 questionnaires were from native Chinese speakers,
39 from Chinese learners of English at the advanced level, and 36 from Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level. It is worth noting that although the number of the participants in each group (including the native English speakers’ group which had 35 informants) is slightly different from each other, it is not likely to exert a significant influence on the results. Because the focus here is to compare the overall type, frequency, and content of different refusal strategies employed, not the exact number, therefore, the variation could be cautiously ignored.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the present study are made up of three groups: 1) Chinese learners of English: 1a. Chinese learners of English at the advanced level (IELTS 6.5 equivalent; live/d in an English-speaking country more than 1 year); 1b. Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level (IELTS 5 equivalent; learn English more than 8 years). 2) Native Chinese speakers. 3) The data of native English speakers are quoted from Zhu (2012).

1) Chinese learners of English (CLE)

1a) Chinese learners of English at the advanced level (CLEA)

![Figure One. English-speaking countries that CLEA live/d in](image)

The CLEA group consists of 39 Chinese advanced learners of English, 8 males and 31 females. Their ages ranged between 20 and 42 years old with an average of 30 years old. 23 of the informants are currently living in the USA and have been there more than 1 year. Most
of them are Chinese Foreign language instructors in America. 6 of the informants live in Sweden and they are college students studying at the second level. The other participants are those who have studied in an English-speaking country for at least 2 years and are currently studying or working in education-related industries. Besides, 7 of them have lived in another foreign country and all of them can speak another foreign language at the intermediate level.

1b) Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level (CLEI)

The CLEI group contains 36 Chinese learners of English at the intermediate level, 5 males and 31 females. The age range is from 21 to 35 years old and the average of which is around 26. All of those participants have learned English in high school and college for more than 8 years and have passed the College English Test 4 in China (equivalent to IELTS 5.0 according to the vocabulary). Most of the informants are students or engaged in education. 10 of them have lived in South Korea for 1 year and can speak at least the beginner level of Korean. None of the participants have ever lived in an English-speaking country before.

2) Native Chinese speakers Group (NCS)

The NCS group includes 42 native Chinese speakers from mainland China, and 35 out of them are college students from Henan province. There are 9 males and 33 females in this group, and the ages are ranging from 21 to 26 years old with an average of 23. None of them is bilingual speakers, nor had they lived in an English-speaking country so far.

3.4 Data coding

After the FDCT questionnaires had been collected, the responses on the DCT were identified. Each response was segmented into semantic units, each of which was the smallest, complete unit of semantic information that could stand alone and be understood by itself (cf., Chen, 1996). Meanwhile, because the data of NES is quoted from Zhu’s (2012) study, to have the comparable data, the same range of semantic formulas should be adopted to categorize the data. Zhu (2012) pointed out that the semantic formula employed in his research is a modified version of that developed by Beebe et al. (1990) and Tseng (1999a). Generally, while Beebe et al.’s (1990) strategies’ formula was adopted, some strategies only apply to face-to-face
interaction (e.g., silence, physical departure) or specifically targeted at other speech acts (e.g., criticizing the request) were left out. In addition, the strategy exclusively found in Chinese data by Tseng (1999a) such as “Concerns about bothering the inviter” was included in the adopted formula. What is more, the strategies identified in Zhu’s (2012) work which cannot be categorized into the taxonomy proposed by both authors, for instance, “Mitigate refusal”, was also added in the current formula. The semantic formulas developed by Zhu are presented in Table 2 (Zhu, 2012: 54-56):

Table 2. The semantic formulas for invitation refusal strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Refusal strategies</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct strategies</td>
<td>Negative Ability/Willingness</td>
<td>I can’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mitigated Refusal</td>
<td>I am afraid I can’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect strategies</td>
<td>Regret</td>
<td>I’m sorry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish</td>
<td>I wish I could.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explanation/Reason</td>
<td>I have to take an exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>I will prepare a gift for you; I will treat you next time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set condition for future or past acceptance</td>
<td>If you had asked me earlier, I would…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promise of future acceptance</td>
<td>I will come next time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concerns about bothering the inviter</td>
<td>Isn’t going to bother you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedging</td>
<td>I am not sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postponement</td>
<td>I will let you know if I can make it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive opinion/feeling</td>
<td>That sounds awesome!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pause filler</td>
<td>Well; Oh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Thank you so much! (Any “thank you” that occurred in the second or third turn of the conversation which is not used for showing gratitude for the invitation were not counted as one token.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to Try</td>
<td>Once I am done, I will come to your party immediately!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Wishing</td>
<td>Hope you guys have an amazing party!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joke</td>
<td>Bring me the leftovers!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td>I remember your birthday is coming soon!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking for accuracy, asking questions about the invitation, and repeating part of the invitation</td>
<td>Next Sunday?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, to decline a dinner invitation from a new colleague, the respondent may answer as such:

(3) *That sounds great. Thank you so much for your inviting me. But I have a dentist appointment tomorrow afternoon, not sure if I would be able to make it. But I will let you know if I can finish early!* (CLEA#18; Colleague’s dinner)

This response can be divided into 5 units, each of which falls into a corresponding semantic category in the taxonomy (as shown in the brackets):

a. That sounds great [Positive feeling]

b. Thank you so much for your inviting me [Gratitude]

c. But I have a dentist appointment tomorrow [Explanation]

d. Not sure if I would be able to make it [Hedge]

e. But I will let you know if I can finish early [Willingness to try]

The CLE perhaps employed the same range of refusal strategies as the NES, but the frequency of the adopted strategies might differ within the four target groups. To determine the difference of the preference and tendency towards the refusal strategies among the four groups of participants, the number of every strategy was counted and added up to obtain the usage frequency. Like Zhu (2012), the same strategy would be counted as two (or more) tokens if it was used two (or more) times. Moreover, the focus of the current study is pragmatic errors, thus the grammatical errors that occurred in the responses will not be corrected and addressed.
4. Results

This section presents the overall results of refusal strategies across the four target groups. First of all, the type, number, and frequency of refusal strategies adopted by different groups are illustrated. Then, the top five strategies used by each group are listed. Thirdly, the difference in the preference of direct and indirect strategies are compared and analyzed among the four groups. Lastly, the utilization of major indirect strategies is analyzed in detail.

4.1 Overall type and frequency of refusal strategies adopted by group

Below you will find two tables. Table 3 lists the relative distribution of the 19 refusal strategies used by the participants in four groups across all three situations. Table 4 demonstrates the five most favored refusal strategies by each group.

| Table 3. Relative distribution of refusal strategies across the four target groups |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Explanation                     | NCS (%)| CLEA (%)| CLEI (%)| NES (%)| Overall (%) |
| Explanation                     | 24.9   | 20.6   | 26.2   | 21.1   | 23.2     |
| Regret                          | 17.7   | 9.5    | 13.9   | 6.9    | 12.0     |
| Well wishing                    | 7.7    | 13.5   | 9.9    | 6.3    | 9.4      |
| Positive feeling                | 7.1    | 10.8   | 7.5    | 9.3    | 8.7      |
| Wish                            | 4.6    | 9.5    | 12.3   | 7.9    | 8.6      |
| Gratitude                       | 1.9    | 9.8    | 7.8    | 13.6   | 8.3      |
| Future acceptance               | 6.9    | 5.3    | 2.4    | 7.9    | 5.6      |
| Negative ability                | 4.8    | 2.0    | 3.6    | 9.7    | 5.0      |
| Alternative                     | 7.7    | 4.3    | 1.8    | 4.9    | 4.7      |
| Pause                           | 2.1    | 3.5    | 3.9    | 5.7    | 3.8      |
| Mitigate refusal                | 6.2    | 3.0    | 2.4    | 1.4    | 3.2      |
| Willingness to try              | 2.5    | 2.3    | 4.5    | 2.6    | 3.0      |
| Checking                        | 2.3    | 0.8    | 0.9    | 1.0    | 1.2      |
Apart from the Set condition strategy, the other 18 strategies were found in the current study. 17 out of the 18 strategies were used by all four groups. The Joke and Concerns strategies were the two exceptions. The Joke was only used by the NES and CLEA while the Concerns by the NCS. The CLEI group used neither of the two strategies. As can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4, the Explanation was the most favored strategy by all groups, accounting for 23.2% of the total number of strategies adopted. While the Regret was the second most preferred strategy for the NCS (17.7%) and CLEI (13.9%), the Gratitude ranked the second place of popularity in the NES (13.6%). The Well-wishing and Positive feeling were the third and fourth most frequently used strategies respectively. The former was used by the CLEA
much more frequently than other groups whereas the latter was fairly evenly employed by four groups. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the Negative ability, as a direct strategy, was adopted significantly more by the NES (9.70%) than the two CLE groups. Briefly speaking, different preferences for Negative ability, Regret, and Gratitude strategies between the CLE and NES leave us a trace for possible pragmatic transfer.

**4.2 Direct and indirect refusal strategies adopted by group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A direct refusal bears the explicit intention of declining an invitation. A good number of previous studies have revealed that native English speakers used direct strategy more frequently than Chinese when dealing with refusals (e.g., Tseng, 1999b; Zhu, 2012; Fang, 2020; Hong, 2011). However, this seemingly solid fact is still faced with appearing counterevidence. Guo (2012) claimed that although native English speakers employed a larger amount of direct strategy compared to Chinese counterparts across all situations, Chinese is actually slightly more direct than American in declining an invitation. Nonetheless, the results presented in Table 5 seem to support neither of their conclusions. The frequency of direct strategy used by the NCS (11.0%) is almost identical to that of the NES (11.1%), showing that they had a similar tendency to adopt a direct strategy. Additionally, they both used direct strategies in a significantly lower frequency than to use indirect strategies. The reason why the direct strategy was relatively less favored by neither Chinese nor American is not hard to understand. To perform a face-threatening act like making a refusal, people in both cultures consider the “face” preserving as the top priority (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Hence, instead of using direct refusal strategies, they were more likely to choose indirect strategies to mitigate the face threats.
Interestingly, despite that the two groups of native speakers used a similar proportion of direct strategies, the CLEA (4.8%) and CLEI (6.0%) used it less frequently than both L1 groups. This might be explained by the “waffle phenomenon” proposed by Edmondson & House. They coined the term to refer to a phenomenon that L2 learners “excessive use of linguistic forms to fill a specific discourse ‘slot’ or ‘move’, i.e., achieve a specific pragmatic goal” (Edmondson & House, 1991: 273-274). Additionally, this phenomenon is common among all L2 learners, regardless of their L1 (Zhu, 2012). In this sense, CLE’s overusing of indirect strategies to try to achieve the pragmatic goal, namely declining an invitation politely, might be attributed to this universal feature of language learners. What is more, this might also suggest their lack of confidence when socializing in L2.

4.3 The two subcategories of direct strategies

Table 6. Relative distribution of two direct strategies across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative ability</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate refusal</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, can the results truly serve as a case for asserting that the Chinese are equally direct as the Americans when declining an invitation? The analysis of the usage of two subcategories of the direct refusal strategy would be helpful to solve this problem.

A large number of scholars have analyzed the direct strategy employed in L2 refusal based on the strategy taxonomy developed by Beebe et al. (1990), which only distinguished the explicit “No” from Negative ability (Kwon, 2003; Wannaruk, 2008; Chang, 2011). Very few studies have divided the direct strategy into two subcategories, namely Negative ability and Mitigate refusal. According to Zhu (2012: 69), Negative ability refers to “direct refusal without mitigating qualifier” whilst Mitigate refusal softened by internal modification such as “maybe” or “possibly”. Although both sub-strategies are explicitly declining an invitation, the force of directness is considerably different (Zhu, 2012). Here are two examples of Negative ability and Mitigate refusal strategies used by the CLEA:
(4) Negative ability: Oh sorry I can’t go since I have other schedule. (CLEI#20; New colleague’s invitation)

(5) Mitigate refusal: Oh, Happy birthday mate! But I’m afraid I wouldn’t be free on that day because my dog is still in hospital now. (CLEA#6; Friends’ birthday party invitation)

As Garcia puts it, the Mitigate refusal diminishes “the negative effects a refusal might have had on the interlocutor” (Garcia, 1992: 213).

It is shown in Table 6, the NCS (6.2%) used Mitigate refusal relatively more frequently than NES (1.4%). So did both the CLEA (3.0%) and CLEI (2.4%) groups. That is to say, despite the similarity between the overall frequency of direct strategy adopted by two groups of native speakers, the NCS preferred the less direct expression than the NES. The CLEA and CLEI both seemed to parallel the pattern of the NCS, using Mitigate refusal more frequently than the NES. The results here might partially support one of Zhu’s (2012) findings that Chinese used Mitigate refusal much more frequently than did Americans. Yet given that the overall amount of the direct strategies was quite small, the difference was not as significant as Zhu’s results. Still, it could suggest a hint about L1 negative pragmatic transfer in both of the CLE groups.

Furthermore, while the two CLE groups both left a trace of L1 pragmatic transfer, they have shown a different amount of it. The CLEA, resembling the NCS, employed the Negative ability (2.0%) slightly less than the Mitigate refusal (3.0%). The CLEI, on the other hand, followed the pattern of NES, using Negative ability (3.6%) more frequently than Mitigate refusal (2.4%). Thus, while the CLEI were not as direct as the NES, they tended to sound more direct than did the CLEA. In other words, the CLEA showed a greater degree of L1 pragmatic transfer than did the CLEI.

Moreover, the positive correlation between language proficiency and the L1 pragmatic transfer was better told in situation three, to refuse a Boss’s invitation. Table 7 below illustrates the relative distribution of Negative ability and Mitigate refusal strategies across the four target groups in this situation of unequal social status. The NCS group revealed their sensitivity to social status by taking a more mitigating and sensitive approach when dealing
with a higher-status person. In contrast, the NES did not seem to pay much attention to social status since they used Negative ability to refuse the boss in a great deal. The two CLE groups both transferred the native Chinese speakers’ sensitivity concerning social status. However, when it comes to differences in the amount of pragmatic transfer, the CLEA reflected the NCS’s sensitivity to the higher status to a greater degree. The CLEA adopted a fairly larger percentage of Mitigate refusal compared to the CLEI, showing evidence of them being affected more by L1 pragmatic principles.

Table 7. Relative distribution of two direct strategies in situation three across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative ability</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate refusal</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results are in the line with the positive correlation proposed by Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Kwon (2003). They reported that the L1 negative pragmatic transfer was greater among higher proficiency learners than among lower proficiency learners. The explanation offered by them was that the advanced learners had enough control over L2 to express their minds and feelings. Takahashi and Beebe’s (1987) once noted that preference of direct formulas among lower proficiency learners may be a characteristic of a developmental stage where simpler and more direct forms were being used. Therefore, the learners of higher proficiency would demonstrate the L1 transfer more evidently than the learners of lower proficiency.

However, in this sense, the positive correlation between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency is not solidly grounded. It is only valid based on the expression they have formulated and may be disproved by their meta-pragmatic perception of politeness in the target culture.

4.4 Major indirect strategies

Having known a bit about the direct strategies, we could now direct our attention to the indirect refusal strategies used by the participants across four groups. Three major indirect
strategies, namely Explanation, Gratitude, and Regret will be addressed in the following section.

4.4.1 Explanation

Table 8. Relative distribution of Explanation in each situation across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s party</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague’s dinner</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss’s party</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Relative distribution of vague and specific Explanation across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Frequency

As being illustrated in Table 4 above, Explanation is the most frequently used strategy by all the four groups in the current study. The same results have been found by many previous cross-cultural pragmatic studies (e.g., Chen, 1996; Hong, 2011; Zhu, 2012). Table 8 reflects that the CLEI and NCS groups used Explanation more often than the CLEA and NES groups. Hence, it was easy to spot that CLEA was showing less amount of L1 pragmatic transfer than CLEI at this point.

2) Content

Besides, the pragmatic transfer can occur not only in the frequency of utilizing a strategy but also in the content of the refusal strategy (Beebe et al., 1990). Since the Explanation is always used to elaborate the reasons or excuses for refusals, it is necessary to analyze the content of the strategy. Accordingly, the analytical results could highly probably provide a clue for L1 pragmatic transfer. Adopting the classification used by Zhu (2012), the content of the
explanation was divided into two broad subcategories: specific and vague. An explanation would be counted as vague if it states an unspecified reason, for example:

(6) Vague explanation: *That sounds great, but sorry, I have an appointment tomorrow, it’s a shame.* (CLEI#33; Colleague’s dinner)

Meanwhile, an explanation would be considered as specific if it contains detailed information of time, place, or person involved, for example:

(7) Specific explanation: *Cool! I really want to have a BBQ with you. But I have already got a plan, I will visit my cousin during the weekend to celebrate her birthday.* (CLEA#15; Boss’s party)

Looking into the content of the Explanation, the CLEA and CLEI groups both suggested the L1 pragmatic transfer but with different degrees. As reflected in Table 9, the NCS group and NES group differed in their preference for two kinds of explanation with the NCS resorting to the specific explanations more frequently while the NES instead to the vague ones. As for the CLE, two groups of learners at different levels both paralleled the pattern of the NCS, suggesting the existence of L1 pragmatic transfer. Furthermore, the CLEI used specific explanations much less frequently than the other two Chinese groups, offering evidence of less amount of L1 negative transfer.

The two results received from two perspectives, i.e., frequency and content, of the Explanation used by the CLEA and CLEI groups seem to conflict with each other at the first sight though, it can be sorted into some senses by attentive analysis. Elaborating on the detail of an excuse requires higher language proficiency than simply giving a vague one, which might contribute significantly to this discrepancy. English language learners at the advanced level with a broader language range could express their feelings in a more genuine way whilst learners in the lower level constantly find it hard to do so. The responses presented in the questionnaires could also prove this phenomenon:

(5) Vague explanation: *Sorry, sir. I really want to have the date with you. But i also have the work to do on Saturday.* (CLEI#32; Boss’s party)
(6) Specific explanation: *Right I haven’t congratulated you for moving in yet. I saw the pictures and it looks so nice. I would love to pay a visit but I booked a trip to Florida this weekend with my boyfriend a long ago.* (CLEA#22; Boss’s party)

(7) Specific explanation: *I heard about you moving to a new house, congrats! However, I am so sorry that I won’t make it. I have a dentist appointment that I cannot reschedule on that day.* (CLEA#13; Boss’s party)

The pattern was noticed in advanced English language learners in Thailand and South Korea as well. Wannaruk (2008) pointed out that EFL learners with higher proficiency in Thailand were more capable of giving a clear and specific explanation than those with lower proficiency, resembling more to Thai native speakers. Kwon (2003) also reported that 45% of Korean English learners confirmed that in English they were not able to express the intended politeness due to their lack of proficiency. Consequently, although CLEI exhibited less amount of L1 pragmatic transfer in the current study, their real perception of politeness in the target language is worth further exploration.

4.4.2 Gratitude

Table 10. Relative distribution of Gratitude in each situation across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s party</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague’s dinner</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss’s party</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning the use of Gratitude strategy, as being illustrated in Table 4, it is the second favorite strategy of NES and ranks the fourth and fifth place in the CLEA and CLEI groups’ top list of preferred strategies respectively. It is suggested in Table 10 that, unlike the other three groups, the NCS used much less Gratitude when they were trying to decline an invitation, accounting for only 1.9% of the overall utilization of all strategies. Several studies
have proved this common phenomenon in some oriental countries, such as Thailand and South Korea. (e.g., Wannaruk, 2008; Kwon, 2003). Nelson et al. (2002) also found that Arab counterparts showed more difference than alike to Americans regarding the use of Gratitude. However, regardless of the great gap between the utilization of Gratitude by the NCS (1.9%) and NES (11.5%), the L1 pragmatic transfer was not as obvious as expected. In effect, the two learners’ groups are hardly affected by L1 with the CLEI using Gratitude a little less frequently than the CLEA and NES. This shows that the CLEI demonstrated a slightly more L1 negative transfer than did the CLEA. What is more, in each situation, the learners resembled the NES much more than the NCS in general.

A potential reason proposed by Zhu (2012) was linked to an instructional effect. English language instructors and the textbooks in China present a large scale of formulaic expression of “Gratitude + but...” such as “Thank you for..., but...” when expressing a differing idea. Therefore, when refusing an offer or an invitation in English, it would likely be taken for granted that it sounds more appropriate to express gratitude before declining others. Which might also testify to the efficacy of formula instruction to a certain extent. Instances for the formulaic expression can be found in the data of both groups of the CLE.

(8) Gratitude: Oh, thanks for you inviting to your home. But just now, the boss assigned me a mission to go to Zhengzhou on a business trip. (CLEI#61; Colleague’s dinner)

(9) Gratitude: Thank you for asking! BBQ is my favorite. While I’d love to go, I am avoiding in-person gathering due to COVID-19 right now. (CLEA#7; Boss’s party)

Furthermore, most of the participants of the CLEA group have the experience of living in an English-speaking country, thus a large number of authentic input must deepen the impression that they need to express gratitude before making a refusal. Subsequently, the CLEA demonstrated a slightly less amount of L1 transfer in using the Gratitude strategy.
4.4.3 Regret

Table 11. Relative distribution of Regret in each situation across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NES (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s party</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague’s dinner</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss’s party</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regret is another indirect strategy that illustrates a substantial difference among the NES and NCS when they deal with refusals. Table 11 provides the relative distribution of Regret strategy in three different situations by four groups, declaring the NCS’s special fondness for Regret compared with the NES. The NCS’s overall use of Regret is almost 10% higher than that of the NES (8%). Despite that the CLEA and CLEI did not display marked similarity to the pattern of either native groups in three situations, they did adopt visibly less Regret strategy than did the NCS, especially the CLEA. To be specific, the CLEI, though used Regret less frequently compared to the NCS, still used it almost twice as frequently as NES. In contrast, following closely to the NES, the CLEA’s preference of Regret is only 1.4% higher than that of the NES, showing the less L1 pragmatic transfer. This appears to once again rebut the positive correlation between the proficiency and negative transfer claimed by Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Kwon (2003). The expression of Regret prevailed greatly in the NCS and CLEI, for example:

(9) Regret: 不好意思，我有事情。下次有机会我请你吃饭。Buhao yisi, wo you shiqing, xiaci you jihui wo qing ni chifan. “I am sorry, I’ve got planes. I will treat you next time!” (NCS#1; Colleague’s dinner)

(10) Regret: Sorry. I already got plans. (CLEI#62; Colleague’s dinner)

(11) Regret: Sorry, my mother will go to hospital in that day, I have to accompany with her. (CLEI#31; Boss’s party)
Native Chinese speakers’ inclination to choose the Regret strategy when making a refusal has also been ascertained by Chen et al. (1995) and Zhu (2012). They have found that the Regret token is one of the most frequently used strategies in English language learners’ refusals. Which runs counter to the convention in American society where people normally do not apologize or express regret unless they are accepting the blame. Therefore, regret serves as a means of admitting fault. (Mizutani, 1979; Henstock, 2003). In China, however, besides the function of acknowledging a mistake, regret can also work as an effective tool to maintain relationships between the interlocutors and preserve harmony in society (Zhu, 2012). Hence, the CLE might have transferred the social norms in Chinese when refusing in English.

4.5 The ritual refusal

Table 12. Relative distribution of the ritual refusal across the four target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CLEA (%)</th>
<th>CLEI (%)</th>
<th>NCS (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the questionnaire that Zhu (2012) developed, I added three questions regarding a unique phenomenon in China: the ritual refusal. It is an expression that seems like a refusal but actually indicating otherwise. Take the example in Gu’s (1990: 252-253) study for this: A (a prospective mother-in-law) invites B (a prospective son-in-law) to a family dinner (word-for-word translation):

(12) A: 明天来吃晚饭啊。Mingtian lai chi wanfanar.
      (tomorrow come eat dinner)

      B: 不来了太麻烦。Bu laile, tai mafan.
      (not come, too much trouble)

      A: 麻烦什么呀。Mafan shenmeyya,
      (trouble nothing)

      菜都是现成的。Cai dou shi xianchengde.
      (dishes all are ready-made)

;
In this successful invitation, the inviter insisted that the invitee should accept the invitation although being explicitly declined. Accordingly, the invitee ultimately accepted it after repeated decline. In Gu’s (1990) view, this unique phenomenon might look quite strange for westerners as the inviter being imposing while the invitee hypocritic. Chinese people, however, regard it as they were both well-behaved according to the social norm. A’s behavior is not imposing in any way but intrinsically politeness since she demonstrated the observance to the cardinal principle of politeness in China: sincerity. Similarly, by giving an invalid reason (concerns for troublesome), B showed that he declined it for the sake of politeness (Gu, 1990).

In Table 12, it could be found that 62.0% of the NCS confirmed that they were accustomed to make a ritual refusal for politeness, closely followed by the CLEI (61.2%) and then CLEA (57.5%). This result once again agrees with the existence of L1 negative transfer in that westerners could not even make sense of it, let alone perform it. Therefore, this supposed politeness strategy might lead to an unwanted stereotype assumption in all probability. As told in the data, the CLEA indicated less resemblance to the NCS than CLEI, implying the negative correlation of pragmatic transfer and language proficiency on this issue. Nevertheless, even though the CLEA is the least likely to use this strategy among three groups, more than half of them favored it rather than not. This deviation vividly illustrates that L1 pragmatic transfer is problematic for even advanced language learners and deserves greater attention.

5. Discussion

From the above analysis, we can see that the realization of invitation refusals among native speakers of Chinese and English differed in many regards. When making a refusal in L2, the CLE often transferred the L1 pragmatic principles, which might convey unintended
connotation in the target culture and therefore led to a pragmatic failure. Meanwhile, the level of directness of a refusal, the preference of various refusal strategies, and the content of them were all showing more differences than alike. In addition, the degree of L1 negative pragmatic transfer varied from the two different CLE groups at different proficiency levels, indicating a correlation between the pragmatic transfer and language proficiency.

First of all, the directness versus indirectness style has its cultural basis. In both American and Chinese cultures, the rationale behind an appropriate speech act is the same one, to perform it politely. However, it is the perception of politeness that varies from different cultures. The Chinese culture is generally believed to be a high context and collectivist culture, while the American is seen as a low context and individualism culture (Hall, 1981). Thus, the former is more concerned with other face-maintenance and indirect tokens meanwhile the latter values individual orientation and overt communication codes (Chang, 2009). Consequently, attempting to maintaining harmonious relationships between the interlocutors, native Chinese speakers would tend to express their ideas less directly than their American counterparts. Although it seems like common knowledge among the learners, it is still no easy job for English Language learners to perform the way Americans do. The results presented in the current study lend supporting evidence for this case. It is hard for even the CLEA to strike a balance between the politeness and directness. As a result, the two groups of CLE both chose to play it on the safe side and ended up with excessive avoidance of the direct strategy. Admittedly, people deliberately deviate from Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle at times to attend to the interlocutor’s face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, by being indirect, the speaker violates a maxim of manner, i.e., avoid ambiguity, to show attention to the hearer’s face. Nonetheless, if the speaker goes too far and expresses too much ambiguous information, he/she may leave the interlocutor feeling uncertainty and risk of being misunderstood.

Secondly, the gap between the definitions of “face” in two cultures, particularly the “negative face” plays an active role in the expected L1 negative pragmatic transfer that the CLE have experienced. According to Gu (1990) “negative face” is differently defined in Chinese culture from the Western world. He argued that in China, an invitation normally
would not be regarded as a speech act that threatens the interlocutor’s “negative face”, meaning impeding the hearer’s freedom. Instead, the Chinese “negative face” only threatened “when self cannot live up to what s/he has claimed, or when what self has done is likely to incur ill frame or reputation” (Gu, 1990: 242). Moreover, the inviter’s insistence after being explicitly declined by the hearer, which would be perceived as impeding by westerners but only more sincere by Chinese people. Accordingly, since an invitation is not imposing while a refusal is an evident FTA, it is almost obligatory to use Regret strategy when refusing other people’s generosity, to “preserve the face”(留面子 Liu mianzi) of the inviter. This pattern could be observed from the prevalence of the semantic formula “不好意思 Buhao yisi”(I am sorry) used by NCS. Thus, in this instance, the CLEA and CLEI both showed a certain level of L1 pragmatic transfer. Likewise, the detailed information given in the explanation by Chinese people could also be attributed to this mismatch. To elaborate on the reasons why he/she has to turn down the invitation, especially sticking to the extrinsic reason to show that he/she is not willing to decline but being forced to, the speaker manages to save the hearer’s “face” (Liao & Bresnahan, 1996). Take a look at the following examples:

(13) Specific explanation: 老板，很抱歉，周六下午我要回家陪我父母去医院，我会找时间再去拜访的。Laoban, hen baoqian, zhouliu xiawu wo yao huijia pei wo fumu qu yiyuan, wo hui zhaoshijian zai qu baifang de. “Boss, I’m so sorry, I need to take my parents to the hospital, I will visit you another time.” (NCS#60; Boss’s party)

(14) Specific explanation: Oh, thanks for inviting me but I afraid I can’t go since you know, next Saturday is my parents’ 20th wedding anniversary and I have planned a trip with my family next whole week. So sorry for that ! But you won’t missing my present, haha ! (CLEA#20; Friend’s party)

However, not as motivated as the Chinese counterparts, the Americans appear to consider specific reasons inappropriate due to untruthfulness. Together with the value they have attached to privacy, vague reasons are more of appropriation (Chang, 2009).

Thirdly, there seems to exist a hierarchy of difficulty for learning the pragmatic principles in the target culture (Chang, 2009). In particular, it found the supporting evidence
from the differing degrees of the negative transfer occurred in Regret and Gratitude in the present study, as the pragmatic transfer was much more significant in the use of Regret than the use of Gratitude in both learners’ groups. Chang (2009) maintains that acquiring the pragmatic rules is like learning grammatical structures, the relative level of difficulty varies for language learners. Those involving differences in cultural beliefs such as maintaining others’ faces are far more difficult to acquire than those concerning differences only in existence/nonexistence of an expression. The adoption of Regret and Gratitude strategies by the CLE serves as an excellent example for understanding Chang’s statements. As analyzed in the preceding paragraph, the decisive reason for the unlike popularity of Regret in two languages is related to the cultural belief, thus indeed a deep hill for the CLE to climb.

Nevertheless, the CLE did not find the Gratitude too tough to perform. Actually, both learners’ groups resembled the NES quite well. Why is that? The most likely reason might be that the Gratitude only rarely employed by Chinese because the equivalent of English gratitude “Thank you for your invitation”--“谢谢你邀请 Xiexie ni de yaoqing” is seldom adopted in daily informal conversation in Chinese. It simply is not a typical colloquial Chinese refusal expression. To express gratitude, on the other hand, does not have any inconsistency in Chinese culture. Therefore, it is easier for the CLE to liberate from L1 transfer when just adding a new expression to their language repertoire rather than changing their cultural beliefs.

Last but not the least, the seemingly contradictory results regarding the correlation between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency are in effect reasonable beyond the superficial. In the above results session, the positive correlation was confirmed by the elicited data regarding the choice between Negative ability and Mitigate refusal, and the preference of specific and vague Explanation. In these two instances, the CLEA demonstrated a larger amount of L1 negative transfer than the CLEI. On the other hand, the negative correlation was testified by the relative distribution of the Regret and Gratitude strategies among the four target groups as well as the tendency of making a ritual refusal. In this case, the CLEA showed less amount of L1 pragmatic transfer compared to the CLEI. The elicited data held a pretty large responsibility for this inconsistency. In some cases, the elicited data leans heavily
on the learners’ language proficiency therefore might not fully reveal the real intention of the informants, especially those who have the lower proficiency. For example, elaborating an excuse calls for a wider language repertoire than simply giving a vague reason. In this sense, the participants are likely forced by their limited language repertoire to use a vague excuse. This assumption is endorsed by many previous interlanguage pragmatic works. In the follow-up interview conducted by Wannaruk (2008), he found that it was problematic for English language learners in Thailand to express the intended politeness in L2. English learners with lower proficiency in South Korea also reported the similar feeling when making a refusal in L2 (Kwon, 2003). In other cases, when the use of a strategy has little bearing on language proficiency, such as expressing regret by saying “I am sorry”, the elicited data could substantially unwrap the intentions of the participants. To put it in a nutshell, to further determine the correlation between pragmatic transfer and language proficiency, more comprehensive approaches including the meta-pragmatic questionnaire and follow-up interviews are required to manifest their true ranking of the appropriateness among the L2 refusal responses (Chang, 2009).

Apart from that, although extra attention has been paid to the potential weakness, the current research is not free of limitations. First, the gender of the participants is not evenly distributed across the three groups in the current study with the number of females being way larger than the male participants. As the majority of the target testees who were chosen for this survey, e.g., teachers and college students majoring in humanities, are females, it was not easy to have the equivalent number of different genders. With little data obtained from the male participants, a comparison between different genders turned out hard to follow. As gender has been regarded as a key factor of linguistic politeness (Mills, 2003), the conclusion drawn here cannot be generalized to all CLE. Secondly, the informants are mainly students, teachers, and staff of educational-related industries, hence it is possible that the polite manner to which they are accustomed might not apply to English learners in all walks of people in China. Thirdly, despite that the free discourse completion tasks allow the informants to write down the responses as long as they believe necessary, many of the answers still only contain one single turn to make a refusal. Obviously, it is rare in the natural daily conversation. Thus,
due to the participants’ unwillingness to fill out the form in more than 20 minutes, the data collected from the written tasks could not truthfully reflect genuine situations in some way. Lastly, the elicited data are constrained by the language proficiency of the participants, therefore might not be able to fully reveal the informants’ perceptions of politeness in the target language. To get a more comprehensive picture of L1 negative pragmatic transfer among CLE, other instruments such as meta-pragmatic questionnaires should be considered.

6. Conclusion

The current study contributes to cross-cultural communication by comparing the pragmatic performance of Chinese learners of English to native English speakers with regards to the realization of invitation refusals. The native Chinese speakers served as a control group to identify the evidence of negative pragmatic transfer from L1 Chinese. Meanwhile, the Chinese learners of English were divided into two groups in terms of their language proficiency to determine the correlation between pragmatic transfer and learners’ language proficiency. The data were collected through the free discourse completion tasks questionnaires. Subsequently, the type, frequency as well as the content of refusal strategies adopted by each group were categorized and analyzed.

Based on the findings, it was evident that the Chinese learners of English have faced the problems of L1 pragmatic transfer. In particular, the major problems that the CLE encountered appeared to be their overuse of Regret strategy, underuse of Gratitude strategy, and frequent use of specific Explanations in L2 refusal. Regarding the choice of direct and indirect manner when making a refusal, despite that there was no distinct evidence suggesting that Chinese tended to be more indirect and avoid explicit “no” in any case, they were prone to employ softener more frequently to mitigate the face threats that a direct refusal might cause. The results have demonstrated the existence of L1 negative transfer and how it affected the performance of the CLE. Concerning the two contextual variables adopted in the current study, i.e., social distance and social status, the findings did not exhibit that these two variables have exerted a special influence on the refusals realized by the CLE in general. One
exception was that the CLE tended to use softeners to mitigate the refusals when declining a boss while the NES did not. This showed that the learners have transferred their sensitivity of social status to L2 refusals.

Additionally, the findings of the current study revealed a great deal of complexity with regards to the correlation between the L1 negative pragmatic transfer and L2 language proficiency. Even though it seemed contradictory at the first glance that the advanced learners demonstrated more negative pragmatic transfer in some cases while less affected by L1 in others, the results were in effect reasonable. When the use of a strategy was highly dependent on the L2 language proficiency, such as giving an excuse in a great detail, the advanced learners would exhibit a larger amount of pragmatic transfer. The limited language range of learners at the intermediate level could be a reason for this phenomenon. Constrained by their proficiency, the CLEI could not express their intended politeness properly in L2. Meta-pragmatic questionnaires could be employed to get a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the correlation between these two aspects.

The occurrence of L1 negative pragmatic transfer among CLE has attracted a lot of interest since the number of Chinese speakers that need to communicate with native English speakers has increased greatly in recent years. In analyzing the specific speech act of invitation refusal, the results showed that even though the Chinese learners were considered grammatically advanced speakers with years of exposure in the target culture, they still sometimes failed to perform the native-like speech act as expected. Let alone the intermediate English language learners who only got the instructions from textbooks. Consequently, the unconventional manner of performance might potentially lead to pragmatic failures or communication breakdowns. To fix this problem, language learners and instructors should be aware that solely input and advanced linguistic competence do not automatically guarantee a high level of pragmatic competence, explicit instructions concerning the pattern of realizing a speech act and the pragmatic force in L2 are indeed indispensable.
References


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Appendix: FDCT questionnaire

Dear participants, please finish the dialog for each of the 3 situations described below. Please write in English. Imagine all situations take place in USA and the person you are talking to is a native speaker of American English. For each situation, please read the circumstances described and the relationship between the speaker carefully. Fill in what you and the person you are talking to would say in the given situation. You may write as much as you feel is necessary. Thank you for your time!

1. You and a good friend of yours meet at a grocery store, your friend invites you to her birthday party at a park next Sunday. However you cannot go and REFUSE her invitation.

Friend: You know my birthday is in two weeks. My family is throwing a party for me next Sunday at Lake Murray park, come! It will be fun!

You:

Friend:

You:

...

2. A new colleague of yours invites you to his house for dinner. This colleague just started working in your company a couple of weeks ago. You are not in the same group and you do not meet or talk to him often. You know some of your colleague will go to his dinner and some will not. You cannot go and REFUSE his invitation.

Colleague: Can you come to my place for dinner tomorrow evening? I will cook spaghetti and meatballs!

You:

...

...

3. You have been working in a small company for a few years. Your boss and his family moved to a new house a couple of months ago. He sent a group email to invite all employees to a housewarming party at his new house Saturday afternoon. You have not replied to his email yet. Now you are in your boss's office discussing a project with him. After the discussion, before you leave, your boss mentions his party. However you cannot go and REFUSE his invitation.

Boss: Do you think you will stop by Saturday afternoon? Any time will be fine. We will have a BBQ!

You:

...

...
**Background Information**

Age

**Gender**

- Male
- Female

**In daily life, have you ever made a ritual refusal before actually accepting an invitation?**

(please remember that we are talking about the communication with English native speakers; If you have never had this conversation with English native speakers before, please imagine what would you do if you did.)

- Yes
- No

**How old were you when you started to learn English?**

**What is your level of English proficiency?**

- High school
- CET4
- CET6
- NETEM (National Entrance Test of English for MA/MS Candidates)
- TEM4
- TEM9
- IELTS/TOEFL

**Have you ever lived in an English-speaking country?**

- Yes
- No

**Have you ever lived in any other foreign countries besides the one you have mentioned above?**

- Yes
- No
Do you speak any other foreign languages besides English?

- Yes
- No

Do you interact in English with English native speakers on daily basis? (If you had before, please choose the option that suits your situation then.)

- No
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-3 hour(s)
- 4-5 hours
- 7 hours or more

Do you watch English TV programs or listen to English radio programs on daily basis?

- No
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-3 hour(s)
- 4-6 hours
- 7 hours or more