



## Refusal strategies and perceptions of social factors for refusing: Empirical insights from Turkish learners of English

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine refusal strategies of Turkish learners of English and explore their perceptions of social factors that are influential in their strategy use. The study was conducted at a private university in the west of Turkey, and eighty Turkish L2 learners enrolled at an English language preparatory program participated in the study. The data were obtained through an enhanced DCT, retrospective verbal reports, and interviews. The enhanced DCT included four situations where refusals were elicited through email invitations and requests. The results demonstrated that explanation/reason/excuse was the most frequently used semantic formula. The results also showed that the distribution of refusals to email invitations and requests differ in quantity, and that Turkish learners of English employed a lot more strategies when the initiating act was invitation. Additionally, Turkish learners of English were found to use indirect strategies more than direct strategies and adjuncts. Finally, the perception data revealed four general themes regarding the social factors that affect Turkish learners of English' refusal responses, and these are namely type and degree of relationship, content and purpose of the situation, emotions and expectations, and finally sociocultural understanding and practices.

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## 1. Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), the study of second language (L2) learners' use and acquisition of linguistic action in context (Kasper, 1992), has been one of the most investigated fields within pragmatics since pragmatic competence in a second language has a crucial role for becoming effective communicators in L2. As Taguchi (2011) puts it, the acquisition of pragmatic competence has become a crucial component of L2 learning because it has provided a clear distinction between mastery of the language code (verbal and nonverbal) with linguistic features and rules, and ability to understand and interpret the function of meaning of these forms. As a component of pragmatic competence, speech act realization of both native speakers and L2 learners has been prevalently studied in different languages and contexts. Even though research on ILP has accumulated and obviously contributed to the

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understanding of the ways L2 learners use language and speech acts for the last three decades, it is still necessary to scrutinize how L2 learners understand and consider pragmatic elements. More specifically, it is of great importance to discover more about ILP and thus understand pragmatic competence of L2 learners since L2 speakers negotiate their meaning by also drawing on L1 and cultural background while interacting in English. One such important aspect of pragmatic competence is the use of speech acts by L2 learners from different L1 and sociocultural backgrounds and their perceptions of social factors affecting their language use.

Refusals, the focus of this study, is particularly an interesting area of research to study because it is more complicated than the other speech acts in the sense that respondents tend to use more indirect strategies in order to minimize the offence and negotiate rather than directly saying no. That is, it is a face-threatening act for both speakers and hearers. Refusals have been called “a major cross-cultural ‘sticking point’ for many nonnative speakers” (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990, p. 56). Social variables such as gender, age, level of education, occupation, power and social distance, make refusing even more complicated (Fraser, 1990). Moreover, how speakers make refusals also depends on the elicitation speech act. For instance, respondents might prefer to use different refusal strategies while responding negatively to a suggestion than they do while responding to a request. Therefore, refusals could be regarded as a complicated issue that needs to be further discussed and analyzed in different social contexts. In doing so, it could be possible to examine the strategies L2 learners employ, and find out sociocultural factors that affect learners’ language use in various situations.

Speech act of refusals might also be rather problematic and complicated in L2 learners’ own first language and home culture. As mentioned earlier, social variables such as gender, age, level of education, occupation, power and social distance, make refusing even more complicated for L2 learners (Fraser, 1990). For example, it may not be common to simply say “no” in many of the cultures, and people might tend to be indirect when they refuse depending on the social variables. Moreover, the act of refusing may lead to misunderstandings or offend the interlocutors if they lack pragmatic knowledge of other cultures, because what is considered appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate, or even be offensive in another culture. Thus, socially and culturally situated beliefs and assumptions of the interlocutors do have an effect on performing or not performing a refusal in certain cases depending on such sociocultural factors. People tend to be indirect not to be offensive, soften their refusals with politeness strategies, and negotiate in certain cases because it is in their culture to do so. Drawing on the discussion of refusals above, it can be concluded that refusals are culturally sensitive and complicated speech acts as well as being face-threatening.

### *1.1. Literature review*

Research on the speech act of refusals can be roughly divided into three. In the first group, studies aim to compare and contrast the refusals produced across different languages and cultures. For example, one oft-cited study by Beebe et al. (1990) compared refusal production of native speakers of English and Japanese in their study with a DCT that included requests, invitations, suggestions and offers. Data was collected from 60 learners (20 Japanese, 20 L2 learners of Japanese, 20 Americans) in an attempt to see the pragmatic transfer in refusals to equal and unequal interlocutors. In the end, they found out that there are differences between native speakers and Japanese speakers of English in terms of the frequency and order of the formulas, and the content. The findings in their study also showed that the status difference played an important role in the choice of strategies.

Similarly, Liao and Breshnahan (1996) conducted a contrastive quantitative study on Mandarin Chinese and American English refusals. The data were collected through the six scenarios of requests. The analysis showed that the frequency of the politeness markers used by Americans and Taiwanese

are similar. In addition, the Americans utilize multiple techniques highlighting different reasons, but the Taiwanese use fewer techniques. The study also indicated that 27.9% of the Americans and 2.7% of the Taiwanese could not refuse the requests, and the contents of the requests they did not refuse differed in many ways. This study is significant in that the authors of the study proposed a politeness hypothesis of ‘marginally touching the point’ and suggested that the politeness strategies used while refusing depend on the modest nature of the Oriental countries and the non-self-designative nature of the Western countries.

Al-Issa (2003) also did a contrastive research on refusals with Jordanian L2 learners, Jordanian and American native speakers. He collected the data through written DCT that included invitations, suggestions, requests and offers, and follow-up interviews. He found out some evidence of pragmatic transfer. In addition, Jordanian refusals were found to be lengthy and elaborate with vague excuses with reference to God. His data indicated that the Jordanians employed more indirect strategies than the Americans. Finally, both the American and Egyptian Arabic speakers utilized similar indirect strategies with similar frequency.

More recently, Çiftçi (2016) studied the use of refusal strategies by Turkish learners of English in comparison with native speakers of Turkish and English. The semantic formulas were explored through a DCT with six different situations. The findings indicated that all groups utilized a variety of strategies; and explanations/reasons were the most frequent semantic formulas. However, the use of refusal strategies differed when the data was analyzed in terms of the status of the interlocutors, the content of the semantic formulas, and the directness and indirectness.

The second group of refusal research aims to investigate refusal production of L2 learners in order to find out the strategy use, and pragmatic or cultural transfer in their L2 responses. For instance, Félix-Brasdefer (2006) investigated refusal strategies of male speakers of Mexican Spanish in formal and informal interactions from the politeness perspective. He focused on the degree of formality, politeness systems and strategy use, politeness and the notion of face particularly. He collected the data through four role-play interactions and verbal reports. The findings indicated that social factors such as power and distance play an important role determining appropriate degrees of politeness. In addition, the negotiation of face was achieved indirectly in a polite manner when there was insistence.

The third group of refusal studies aims to focus mainly on the perceptions and processes involved in the production of refusals in a foreign language. For example, Félix-Brasdefer (2008) analyzed the cognitive processes involved in the production of refusals to invitations from a person of equal and higher status, and perceptions of 20 male native speakers of US English who were advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language in his study. He elicited data through role-plays and retrospective verbal reports (RVRs). As a result, he shed a light on language-learning and language-use strategies that were employed by learners of Spanish to communicate pragmatic intent. Refusals, whether direct or indirect, are employed with varying levels of complexity due to the necessity of picking correct form of communication to reduce the negative effects. That is why, he suggests researchers to take societal variables like age, gender, power distance, education level, and social distance into consideration. He also emphasizes that RVRs are instrumental in collecting supplemental information about perceptions of sociocultural information. It is important to note that this is one of the few interlanguage refusal studies that focus mainly on the perceptions of L2 learners and explore the minds of foreign language learners.

Similarly, Lee (2008) compared Chinese high and low proficiency level L2 learners’ refusal production with native speakers of Chinese and American English, and investigated the perceptions of Chinese L2s’ social values in her study. The data were elicited using DCTs and perception interviews, and the DCTs were analyzed using Beebe et al.’s (1990). The notion of face was found to be the main

concern for speakers of the both cultures while refusing, and some cross-cultural differences were observed. Thus, Lee's (2008) study is similar to Félix-Brasdefer (2008) in the sense that both studies examined the perception and production of interlanguage refusals. Both of the researchers suggest that data triangulation and replication of similar perception studies for better understanding of interlanguage are important in terms of speech act of refusals.

Another recent study on refusal perceptions of EFL learners was conducted by Huwari and Al-Shboul (2015). The study investigated the perception of Jordanian EFL learners' pragmatic transfer of refusal strategies in terms of cultural and contextual factors. He collected production data through a DCT and perception data using a scaled-response questionnaire. The researcher detected negative pragmatic transfer of Jordanian EFLs and the effect of cultural values. It is important to note that this study showed refusal speech acts reflect cultural values and norms of each group of learners. People from different cultural backgrounds are likely to perceive refusals differently, and this might cause misunderstandings or communication problems.

A review of literature precisely indicates that the major focus has been on the production of refusals in different languages in terms of strategy choice and frequency. In this strand of research, pragmatic transfer also seems to be a favorable aspect of interlanguage pragmatics. However, our main assumption in this study is that more in-depth insights into how L2 learners make refusals and what social factors are influential in their refusals are needed to understand the role of social and cultural context. Even though studies on perceptions specifically in the last decade have started to indicate the effect of cultural norms, values, social and power distance, it is still important to understand what contextual motives are considered by L2 learners in their refusals. Additionally, collecting refusal data in L2 where learners are almost completely surrounded by their L1 and cultural background could reveal important details about socio-cultural factors of refusing as the learners learn and use a language in such context rather than target language or culture. It is even more interesting to collect refusal data in Turkish context because the refusal utterances of Turkish native speakers of English to an undesired situation seem much more culture-bound, complex and open to comments. Thus, the strategy choice of Turkish learners of English when they refuse and the reasons why they particularly choose those strategies may shed a light on their cognition and pragmatic knowledge of refusals, cultural understanding of social factors in the use of English by Turkish learners. Finally, most of the studies on interlanguage refusals focused on Chinese, Arabic and Japanese, suggesting that pragmatic competence of Turkish speakers of English is still an understudied group. Arguing that the studies involving Turkish learners of English' refusal performances are limited, we assume that our study provides not only an overview of refusal strategy use but also insights into their perceptions of social factors that are context-dependent.

## *1.2. Research questions*

This study was conducted to find out answers to the following questions:

1. What refusal strategies do Turkish learners of English use in different social situations?
2. What are the perceptions of Turkish learners of English on their own refusal strategy use and social factors?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample / Participants

In the present study, the participants were 80 Turkish learners of English (40 male and 40 female) studying at a foundation university preparatory school. They are aged between 18 and 22 and had been studying English 1 to 12 years at the time of the data collection. This study was conducted in the English Language Preparatory School of a private university in the west of Turkey. The preparatory program aims to provide learners with an intensive English course and prepare learners for their studies at their faculties. The modules in the program are designed in accordance with Common European Framework (CEF) as A1, A2, B1 and B2. These levels refer to beginner, elementary, intermediate and upper intermediate language proficiency respectively. A student who completes these four modules within a year can study at his faculty the next year.

### 2.2. Instrument(s)

The current study relies on the tenets of qualitative research, and utilizes various data sources, such as an enhanced DCT, retrospective verbal reports, and interviews for data triangulation purposes. First, eighty B1 level learners (40 male and 40 female), who agreed to go through data collection process, were asked to respond to the situations given in the format of emails in the enhanced DCT. Thus, the situations were created more real for the learners since it is more likely to get such email in their daily lives. This written task was also enhanced in order to get longer and more elaborated responses. Invitations and requests were specifically chosen as elicitation acts with the assumption that learners are more likely to get invitation and request emails than the other initiating acts. The situations created for the task were the ones that learners are likely to encounter in their school life (e.g. graduation ceremony, asking lecture notes, a close friend's birthday party, and a request from the boss in your new job). In doing so, the learners responded to invitations and requests from interlocutors with varying degrees of social distance and power.

In the second step of the study, eight learners (4 male and 4 female), who were willing to go through the further processes, responded to the questions for RVRs and in the interview right after they completed the written DCT. The main purpose of using RVRs is to reveal in detail what information learners attend to while performing a task (Cohen, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of using RVRs in the current study is to examine the learners' sociopragmatic understanding of refusals in particular. The questions in the RVRs aimed at elaborating on each situation in detail. To do this, a number of open-ended questions were asked to eight randomly selected learners immediately after they completed the written DCT. Following the verbal reports, the learners were interviewed in order to have a deeper understanding of their perceptions of social factors while refusing. The questions addressed to the learners in the interview were related to sociocultural differences with respect to refusals, cross-cultural comparisons, and situations when they refuse. Both RVRs and interviews were conducted in Turkish so that they could express themselves easily while elaborating on each situation and their feelings. They were also audio-taped and transcribed for analysis purposes. Table 1 below shows the refusal situations in the written DCT that Turkish learners of English responded to:

**Table 1.** Refusal situations that Turkish learners of English responded to

Speech Act	Power	Distance	Initiating Act
Invitation I	-	-	A birthday party
Invitation II	+	+	A graduation party
Request I	-	+	Asking for lecture notes
Request II	+	+	A request from the boss

### 2.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

In response to the first research question, the data were collected through an enhanced DCT designed as invitation and request emails. As presented earlier, eighty (40 male and 40 female) Turkish learners of English were asked to respond to the situations in the written DCT, which were specifically designed to elicit refusals. Their replies were coded according to the taxonomy of refusals developed by Beebe et al. (1990). The Turkish learners of English mostly used multiple strategies when they refused the situations in the DCT. For instance, if a participant refused an invitation saying *I would love to come to your party but I am busy on that that so I can't come. How about meeting tomorrow?*, it was coded in the following way: [statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] + [excuse, reason or explanation] + [negative ability] + [statement of offer or alternative] using Beebe et al.'s (1990) coding scheme. After the strategy coding process, the semantic formulas in each situation were calculated in order to get an overview of refusal strategy use. Next, a comparison of semantic formulas for each initiating act was made, and the most frequently used six semantic formulas for each initiating act were presented.

In order to address the second question, eight randomly selected learners among volunteers were asked to give verbal reports right after the emails were replied. The questions aimed to reveal how the Turkish learners of English perceive their refusals. Their retrospective reports were analyzed with respect to perception and pragmatic knowledge through pattern coding. The same Turkish learners of English were later interviewed in order to have a deeper understanding on how and why they refuse. The questions in the interview were related to certain anticipated sociocultural aspects with respect to refusals and the act of refusing. The responses to the interview questions were analyzed through coding in order to generate themes and patterns.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, researchers need to ensure that their findings and interpretations are accurate. Many researchers have addressed the idea of validating findings through strategies such as member check and triangulation in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to ensure trustworthiness of this study, the researchers utilized a well-known coding scheme for refusals. The entire coding of all data sources was completed by the first researcher but member check with the second researcher was conducted throughout the data analysis process. Finally, the data triangulation was maintained through by utilizing various data sources as mentioned previously.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Overall refusal strategy use

To answer the first research question, the production data in the enhanced DCT was analyzed. Below, Table 2 presents the overall results related to the use of refusal strategies by Turkish learners of English in this study employed in each initiating act, namely invitations and requests.

**Table 2.** Overall results related to the use of refusal strategies

Initiating Acts	Direct (n)	Indirect (n)	Adjunct (n)	Total (n)
Refusals to invitations	85	317	48	450
Refusals to requests	41	224	6	271
Total	126	541	54	721

As can be seen in Table 2, the results of the study indicated that the total number of the refusal strategies employed by 80 Turkish learners of English was 721. As for the initiating acts, invitations yielded a lot more refusals (N=450) when compared to requests (N=271). Therefore, it can be stated that the distribution of the refusal strategies for invitations and requests differ in amount. With regard to the directness/indirectness, a large number of the strategies were found to be indirect refusal strategies. Thus, the total number of refusal strategies in the study included 541 indirect strategies, 126 direct strategies, and 54 adjuncts to refusals. In addition, similar to overall use of refusals, direct, indirect strategies as well as adjuncts to refusals were higher in responses to invitations than they were in responses to requests. The number of direct refusal strategies to invitations was actually twice as many refusals as the number of direct refusal strategies to requests (N=85, N=41). Similarly, the learners employed 317 indirect refusal strategies when they responded to invitations, and this number was 224 in response to requests. Finally, the number of the adjunct to refusals in response to invitations was 48 whereas this number was only 6 in response to requests. All in all, Turkish learners of English in this study utilized more refusals while responding to invitations rather than requests, and these were mostly indirect.

#### 3.2. Semantic formulas of refusals

As presented before, Beebe et al.'s (1990) category was used in order to classify the refusal strategies in the present study. The Turkish learners of English in the study employed 18 out of 32 different semantic formulas in the coding scheme. In response to requests, 17 different strategies out of 32 were employed whereas the number of refusal categories was only 10 with invitations as elicitation acts. Table 3 below demonstrates the most frequent 6 strategies employed by Turkish learners of English for each situation.

The findings below indicated that the semantic formulas used in response to requests and invitations considerably differ in amount and variety. For instance, the top three strategies were statement of explanation/reason/excuse (ERE), statement of regret, and negative willingness/ability (N=234, N=171, and N=116 respectively), and similar to overall refusal strategy use, the refusal strategies were more when the elicitation act was invitations (N=144 in invitations and N=90 in requests as for statement of ERE; N=103 in invitations and N=68 in requests as for statement of regret; N=77 in invitations and N=39 in requests as for negative willingness/ability).

**Table 3.** The most frequent 6 strategies employed by Turkish learners of English for each situation

Strategy type	Situation 1 (Invitation)	Situation 2 (Invitation)	Situation 3 (Request)	Situation 4 (Request)
1. Statement of ERE	73 (31%)	71 (33%)	34 (26%)	56 (38.6%)
2. Statement of Regret	58 (25%)	45 (21%)	32 (25%)	36 (24.8%)
3. Negative Willingness/ Ability	36 (15%)	41 (19%)	26 (20%)	13 (8.9%)
4. Promise of Future Acceptance	28 (12%)	9 (4.1%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (2.06%)
5. Wish	12 (5%)	13 (6%)	1 (0.7%)	4 (2.7%)
6. Positive Opinion	14 (6%)	17 (8%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.6%)

Although the learners in this study chose to employ the same three strategies both in requests and invitations, the other strategies they used differ greatly in variety and frequency. For example, they used the strategy of setting condition for future or past acceptance for 16 times (e.g. “...if you told me before, I would help him. Thank you for your understanding” in Situation 4, a request from the boss), statement of alternative for 14 times (e.g. “...but I could give you my English teacher friend’s phone number...” in Situation 4, a request from your boss), self-defense for 12 times (e.g. “...I can give you the titles only..... and this is all I can do” in Situation 3, a request from a classmate), and criticizing the request/requestor for 10 times (e.g. “Of course I won’t. You never talk to me in the class and ask for the notes. I think this is a bad idea...” in Situation 3, a request from a classmate) while responding to requests. As for the invitations though, the findings demonstrated that totally different strategies like promise of future acceptance (e.g. “I promise to see buy you some coffee next time...”, Situation 2, an invitation from a student) were employed for 37 times, statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g. “Hi Ayşe, I feel so happy because...” in Situation 2, an invitation from a student) for 31 times, wish (e.g. “I wish we could be together, but...” in Situation 1, an invitation from a close friend) for 25 times and statement of gratitude or appreciation (e.g. “I would like to thank you very much for...” in Situation 2, an invitation from a student) for 17 times.

Other strategies that occurred less than ten times in responses to requests were the strategy of wish (e.g. “I wish I could help you but...” in Situation 3, a request from a classmate), unspecific or indefinite reply (e.g. “I am not sure if I have them” in Situation 3, a request from the boss), promise of future acceptance (e.g. “I will help you next month after my course finishes.” in Situation 4, a request from your boss), guilt trip (e.g. “I don’t make notes to help you get better grades than mine” in Situation 3, a request from a classmate), statement of principle (e.g. “I never give my lecture notes” in Situation 3), statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g. “I would love to help your son, but...”, nonperformative statement “no” (e.g. “No, I can’t, I am sorry...” in Situation 4, a request from the boss), statement of gratitude or appreciation (e.g. “Thank you for the compliments...” in Situation 4, a request from the boss), and lack of enthusiasm (e.g. “I am not interested in teaching but if...” in Situation 4, a request from the boss) respectively. In response to invitations, the strategies of nonperformative statement *no* (e.g. “No, thanks because my friend is getting...” in Situation 2, an invitation from student and “No, thanks because a friend is having a party tonight in...” in Situation

1, an invitation from a close friend), statement of alternative (e.g. “*Let’s meet in the morning...*” in Situation 1, an invitation from a close friend), and avoidance (one student intentionally left it blank and left a note saying “*I would not respond to this email*” in Situation 2, an invitation from a student) were employed less than ten times by Turkish learners of English.

Turning back to the top 6 refusal strategies in our dataset, 4 of them were indirect strategies, one was direct strategy and one was adjunct to refusals. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that these 6 most popular refusal strategies preferred by the Turkish learners of English were namely ERE, regret, negative willingness/ability, statement of positive opinions, promise, and wish respectively. The strategy of ERE was by far the most popular strategy that was employed 227 times within all tasks by the Turkish learners of English in this study, similar to what many refusal studies indicated (Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Beebe et al., 1990; Nelson et al., 2002). It was typically employed in combination with other strategies as it could be seen in the following examples from the data:

*Hello Sir, I am sorry to tell this, but I have been taking a dance class. So if you want, I have a friend that could help your son as well.* (Situation 4 - a request from the boss)

*Hello my friend, I am so happy to hear that you’re giving a party but I am sorry I can’t come. My brother is ill and he is at the hospital and I am going to stay with him. Happy birthday to you!* (Situation 1 - an invitation from a close friend)

The strategy of showing regret closely followed ERE with a total number of 171 as the second mostly used strategy by the Turkish learners of English (e.g. *Hi Ayşe, I feel so bad now. I won’t be in your graduation party although I want to. My friend has a wedding ceremony so I have to be there* in Situation 2 - an invitation from your student). In addition, negative willingness/ability was the only direct strategy that was employed by the Turkish learners of English among these six strategies. It was employed for 116 times in total, and ranked as the third most popular formula used by the Turkish learners of English. The use of negative willingness/ability as the only direct strategy of the six commonly used refusal strategies in the study could be exemplified as follows:

*Hi Sir, I have been taking a dance class on weekdays, so I can’t help you for now but I’ll try to sort the things out later.* (Situation 4- a request from the boss)

*Hey, that sounds good but I am sorry. I can’t come because I have another important arrangement at that time.* (Situation 1- an invitation from a close friend)

As the only adjunct to refusals, the strategy of statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement was also frequently seen in the data with a total number of 33 (e.g. *Dear Ayşe, I really want to come to your ceremony but my close friend will get married the same day...* in Situation 2 - an invitation from your student, or *Hi John, I would like to lend you my notes but I can’t....* in Situation 3 - a classmate asking for lecture notes). Finally, the strategies of promise and wish are equally employed for 30 times by the Turkish learners of English in this study. The use of promise of future acceptance was commonly detected in the data as follows:

*...If it is OK for you, I will help him next month when my dance course finishes.* (Situation 4 - a request from the boss)

*...I am so sorry because I won’t come to your party. I promise I will visit you in the morning....* (Situation 1 - an invitation from a close friend)

Similarly, the strategy of wish appeared in the data as follows:

*Dear Ayşe, I wish I could join you on this special day but my best friend will get married the same day...* (Situation 2 - an invitation from your student)

*Hi! I wish to help you but I don't have the lecture notes...* (Situation 3 - a classmate asking for lecture notes)

The excerpts of the data above were chosen randomly in an attempt to offer readers typical examples from responses of Turkish learners of English. All in all, it could be stated that the most frequent 6 strategies that Turkish learners of English employed in the data were mostly combined with a number of other strategies. In other words, while refusing an interlocutor in each situation, the Turkish learners of English utilized various strategies.

### *3.3. Refusals in relation to Social Distance and Power between the Speaker and Hearer*

In order to answer the first research question in more detail, this section presents the results with regard to the Turkish learners of English' strategy use according to power relationship and the degree of social distance between the speaker and hearer in the given situations. As presented earlier, the speech act of refusals in the current study were elicited through 2 request and 2 invitation situations in the form of emails. The eliciting tasks were designed in a way that there was a different degree of social distance and power relationship in each situation. Additionally, the initiating act was found to be one of the most effective factors among Turkish learners of English in giving the decision to refuse or not.

In situation 1, the Turkish learners of English were asked to respond to an email from a close friend who invited them to his birthday party. In such situations, the power relation between the hearer and speaker is considered equal, and it was a familiar situation in the sense that they were likely to encounter in their daily lives. As seen in Figure 3, the Turkish learners of English employed the strategies of ERE, statement of regret, and negative willingness/ability in both of the invitations. However, the strategies of ERE and statement of regret were more frequent in response to the invitation from a close friend whereas the strategy of negative willingness/ability was more frequent in response to the invitation from a student. Additionally, promise of future acceptance was much higher in Situation 1 when compared to Situation 2. Finally, the strategies employed in response to Invitation 1 and Invitation 2 showed parallelism regardless of the status of the interlocutor and the power difference between them.

In Situation 3, the Turkish learners of English were asked to respond to a classmate's request, in which they do not have a close relationship. Therefore, they have equal social status and power but obviously social distance, and it was again a common situation that they were likely to encounter at school. Similarly, the learners were asked to respond to a request from their bosses in situation 4. Learners were supposed to refuse someone with a higher status in this case, and they were implicated that there was an obvious distance between the hearer and the speaker.

The strategies of ERE, regret, and negative willingness/ability are the most frequently employed strategies in both of the request situations. However, the strategy of ERE was preferred much more frequently in response to the boss's unpaid request than in response to a classmate asking for the lecture notes. In addition, learners preferred the strategy of negative willingness/ability more in situation 3 than they did in situation 4. Additionally, the Turkish learners of English employed the strategy of self-defense in response to the request from the classmate, but this strategy was used at a very low frequency in response to the request of the boss. As for the strategy of criticizing the request, it was commonly used in response to situation 3 but was not used at all in Situation 4.

Overall, the distribution of the refusal strategies that were employed in the situations in the enhanced DCT indicated that the Turkish learners of English employed a lot more strategies when the initiating act was invitation than it was request. Additionally, a variety of strategies were employed in response to requests when compared to the strategies used in response to invitations: the total number

of strategies used in response to requests was 17, and this number was 10 in response to invitations. The most frequently used three strategies in both refusals of invitations and refusals to requests were the same (the strategies of ERE, statement of regret, negative willingness/ability). However, the other strategies showed diversity depending on each situation. Finally, although the situations in the enhanced DCT were designed in such a way that refusals could be elicited, some learners did not refuse some of the situations. The Table 4 below indicates the number of the Turkish EFL learners who refused and did not refuse in each situation:

**Table 4.** The refusal and non-refusal performance in situations

Situation	Refused (n)	Did not refuse (n)	Total (n)
Invitation 1 (birthday party invitation from a close friend)	67	13	80
Invitation 2 (graduation ceremony invitation from a student)	79	1	80
Request 1 (a classmate requesting lecture notes)	61	19	80
Request 2 (an unpaid request from the boss)	65	15	80

As can be seen, 13 learners did not refuse in Situation 1, and half of the interviewees stated in the RVRs that they had difficulty while refusing in Situation 1. Similarly, in Situation 2, the Turkish learners of English were given the role of a lecturer and asked to respond to the graduation party invitation from a senior student. Unlike the first invitation situation, only 1 participant did not refuse in Situation 2. In addition, only 2 of the learners stated in the verbal report that it was hard to refuse the graduation party invitation. As for refusing the requests, 19 Turkish learners of English surprisingly did not refuse their classmate in Situation 3. Likewise, the number of Turkish learners of English who did not refuse their bosses in Situation 4 was 15.

Consequently, it was our initial assumption that L2 learners make various assumptions while refusing and consider many social factors relying on their L1 and cultural background, expectations, and understandings. Thus, after examining the number of the Turkish learners of English who refused or did not refuse the given situations, we now present the perceptions of the Turkish learners of English in this study for in-depth insights into their refusal choice and underlying reasons.

### *3.4. Perceptions of Turkish learners of English on their own Refusal Strategy Use*

In order to address the second research question, which aimed to have a better understanding of the strategy choice of the Turkish learners of English, the RVRs and interviews were conducted with eight voluntary Turkish learners of English. Overall, four general themes emerged with regard to the perceptions of the social factors that affect Turkish learners of English' refusal responses: type and degree of relationship, content and purpose of the situation, emotions and expectations, and finally sociocultural understanding and practices.

### 3.4.1. Type and degree of relationship

Fraser (1990) regards power and social distance as two distinct variables that are closely linked to refusals. Accordingly, the traces of the impact of social status and distance were commonly found in the perception data, and analysis of the RVRs indicated that Turkish learners of English remarkably consider the type and degree of relationship when they refuse. They were implicitly asked how they felt when they refused someone with a lower, equal and higher social status, and different social distance after they were reminded the social situations in the DCT. It seemed that refusing an interlocutor with a lower status was not a big deal for Turkish learners of English. However, they seemed cautious when they refuse equals or interlocutors with higher status. Some of the responses from the interview and RVRs are as follows:

*“I consider the consequences of my response when I refuse somebody superordinate like a boss or a lecturer, and act accordingly. I also try to find good excuses...”* (Student 1, Interview)

*“I felt sorry when I refused my close friend’s birthday party invitation. It was the most difficult situation to refuse because I did not want to hurt her feelings because she is important to me...”* (Student 2, RVR)

*“I was able to refuse my student easily because I thought he invited me to the graduation ceremony only out of courtesy. He didn’t expect me to go there... My best friend was getting married. I am sure he would understand me.”* (Student 4, RVR).

*“I told the reason honestly to my student...I know that party would be better without me and learners wouldn’t mind if I didn’t come.”* (Student 1, RVR)

A closer examination of RVRs and interviews showed that difference in social status and distance have effect on Turkish learners of English’ responses, and Turkish learners of English take these two into consideration before they refuse somebody. The responses indicate that they feel uncomfortable; need to give good excuses; and try not to hurt feelings when it comes to refusing somebody with higher and equal social status (Student 1 and 2). However, they find it easier to refuse somebody with a lower status because they do not feel sorry or worry about being misunderstood as much as they do with interlocutors from higher or equal status. Additionally, they honestly tell the reason of their refusal without any extra effort to show the unlikelihood of accepting the invitation or request (Student 4 and 1) mainly because of being in higher social status and degree of their relationship.

Turkish learners of English also stated that they worry about misunderstanding, make careful lexical choices, and try to be extra polite when there is social distance between the two interlocutors but they did not do so with equals or lowers. In addition, they stated that they prefer to tell the reason directly (Student 1), and expect the interlocutor to understand (Student 4) instead of making up excuses or giving explanations when there is social distance between the interlocutors. Overall, the analysis of the perception data indicated that the social status and distance seemed to be influential factors in the strategy use of Turkish learners of English.

### 3.4.2. Content and purpose of the situation

The analysis of the RVRs and interviews also revealed that Turkish learners of English take into consideration the content and purpose of the situation, and these play an important role when they refuse. For example, Student 6 states in the RVR that she empathizes with the speaker and further says:

*It doesn’t matter if we are close or not. I listen to the content and then decide to refuse or not.*

In addition, some learners express they refuse without any doubt when they feel the intention of self-interest by the other interlocutor in the situation:

*I think the classmate was taking the advantage of the fact that I was attending regularly to the*

lectures, and I didn't like this. (Student 7, RVR)

*We are not close and he asks me to do her a favor just because she wants to get high grades...* (Student 2, Interview)

Special days were also given importance by some of the learners:

*I found it hard to refuse my close friend's invitation because it was his birthday.* (Student 2, RVR)

*I really would like to be with my friend on his special day.* (Student 3, Interview)

Finally, the motive for helping somebody was also commonly found in the perception dataset:

*He is in need because he missed the lectures and this will affect his education life...I wouldn't be selfish so I didn't refuse.* (Student 8, RVR)

*Although I refused my boss, I showed that I cared about his son's case. It's about learning English, not about something nonsense.* (Student 4, RVR).

Overall, the analysis of RVRs and interviews indicated that content of the situation and its purpose play a significant role when Turkish learners of English refuse invitations or requests. They try to empathize, listen to the content of the situation, and primarily consider the purpose of the interlocutor while responding to invitations and requests. Additionally, they choose to refuse without any doubt if they feel self-interest of the other interlocutors. Finally, they specifically give importance to special days and emerging need for help as well.

#### 3.4.3. Emotions and expectations

Another emerging category of factors influencing the act of refusing in the dataset is emotions and expectations of Turkish learners of English. Most Turkish learners of English seemed to be affected by their emotional condition when they performed the act of refusing as the following excerpts indicate:

*Whether I am in good mood or not... I think this affects my choices the most.* (Student 8, Interview)

*If I feel sorry for him. I hesitate before I refuse.* (Student 1, Interview)

The data also indicated that Turkish learners of English care about how others feel even more than how they feel themselves:

*...it is again hard to refuse because I don't want him to feel bad.* (Student 7, RVR)

*I am afraid of breaking his heart.* (Student 6, RVR)

*I was not comfortable when I refused my boss. I thought I left a bad impression on him. After all, he is my boss.* (Student 7, RVR)

Similarly, expectations play a significant role for Turkish learners of English while performing refusals. Many of them thought everybody expects his/her close friend to be with him/her on a special occasion like birthday:

*I can't leave my best friend alone in her party...We are best friends.* (Student 4, Interview)

It was quite normal to get a graduation party invitation from a student because it was out of courtesy to invite lecturers although no one expects them to accept the invitation:

*I was able to refuse my student easily because...he invited me to the graduation party only out of courtesy. He didn't expect me to go there.* (Student 5, RVR).

Overall, the RVRs and interviews show that emotions and expectations of Turkish learners of English are important in performing the refusals. Specifically, they care about what others think and feel as well as expectations.

#### 3.4.4. Sociocultural understanding and practices

Last but not least, the analysis of the RVRs and interviews indicated that sociocultural understanding and practices play a significant role when Turkish learners of English perform the act of refusing. More specifically, Turkish learners of English in this study reported the difficulty of refusing family members who are superordinate in terms of their role in the family. Indeed, the learners considered the act of refusing culturally inappropriate especially because the interlocutor is older than themselves. The following excerpts from the RVRs and interviews demonstrate their perceptions of such sociocultural understanding or practices

*I try not to hurt my relationship with the family all the time, so I hardly ever refuse my family members because we don't do so in Turkey. (Student 8, Interview)*

*I feel sorry...I respect him so I feel ashamed and try to compensate somehow because it is unacceptable to refuse such a person. (Student 6, RVR)*

*I have difficulty in refusing the elderly and I feel sorry. I feel ashamed and usually say I am going to compensate what I just refused... We try not to hurt the elderly by refusing. (Student 2, RVR)*

Additionally, the data yielded that a strict hierarchical relationship was practiced in response to the request from the boss in Situation 4, an unpaid request from the boss:

*...my refusing will definitely pose a problem in the future. This is the case in many workplaces so I gave a very detailed excuse before refusing and said I was sorry for 3 times at least (Student 3, RVR)*

*I preferred to create an urgent case to prove that I really cannot do what he asked me to do and promised to help him later (Student 6, Interview)*

In order to soften their refusals, Turkish learners of English chose to give detailed explanations and imaginary urgent cases. Even too specific details about private life were given in order to show the impossibility of the situation as well:

*My grandmother is in the hospital and I am going to stay with her because she has a serious condition and there is nobody else to accompany her... (Student 4, RVR)*

Similar responses with too specific details about private issues were encountered in the data many times. The other sociocultural understanding emerging from the data was also being welcomed in the society. Turkish learners of English hesitate to refuse because of the societal concerns; and they try to align with the others in order to be accepted by others although they want to refuse:

*I believe I try to accord with the others sometimes... It is the herd mentality. I sometimes remain silent rather than refusing especially in online conversations. (Student 2, Interview)*

Overall, RVR and interview data indicated that sociocultural understanding in their L1 and cultural context played a significant role in performing the refusal data. Specifically, Turkish learners of English found refusing family members, specifically the elderly and people with higher status, culturally inappropriate, and gave too specific and urgent reasons if they really had to refuse them. They even tend to not refuse sometimes because of societal constraints too.

## 4. Discussion

Our study contributes to interlanguage pragmatics by presenting an outline of semantic formulas used in refusals by Turkish learners of English. In doing so, we focused on not only the refusal strategy use but also sociopragmatic understanding of the learners. We find it quite interesting that Turkish learners of English utilized a lot more strategies for refusing invitations when compared to requests. Such a difference in strategy use implies that it seems to be more common and easier for

Turkish learners of English to refuse requests than it is to refuse invitations. Therefore, we tend to argue that the type of elicitation act plays an important role in the use of refusals. We also assume that it is crucial to gain insights into how L2 learners perceive the given situations and what social factors they consider while refusing. By conducting RVRs and interviews, we contribute to that type of a research line and provide preliminary understanding of sociopragmatic elements Turkish learners of English take into consideration in their act of refusing.

In addition, it is possible to consider that Turkish learners of English mostly prefer to be indirect in their refusal realizations to invitations and requests. Relying on the finding that more than half of the refusal strategies were indirect, it could be argued that it is a norm for Turkish learners of English to be indirect while refusing regardless of the situation or the type of elicitation act. Yet, they were quite able to combine indirectness and directness in their choice of semantic formulas for refusals. In a similar vein, the strategy of ERE was found to be the most frequent refusal strategy regardless of the initiating act, which complies with the results of many studies in the literature (Al-Issa, 2003; Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Beebe et al., 1990; Çiftçi, 2016; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Nelson et al., 2002; Wannaruk, 2008). Again, the strategy of ERE was widely employed in combination with other strategies by the Turkish learners of English no matter what the eliciting act was. Drawing on their detailed explanations even about private issues, urgent situations and their imaginary problems in order to soften their refusals, we would like to highlight that it is a major motive for Turkish learners of English of English to strongly justify their refusals. Thus, the role of a hierarchical understanding and refusal choice accordingly is evident in our study.

Our study also provides insights into sociopragmatic understanding of the learners in this study. More specifically, the four social factors were influential in their refusal realizations and these were mainly type and degree of relationship; content and purpose of the situation; emotions and expectations; and sociocultural understanding and practices. The reported impact of type and degree of relationship makes it obvious that the power relationship between interlocutors as well as the social status shape Turkish learners of English' refusal strategies in English. Indeed, unlike previous literature highlighting a potential lack of sociopragmatic competence of L2 learners, we argue that L2 learners do have sociopragmatic awareness with regard to social factors, power dynamics, and social distance. However, as indicated by their sociocultural understanding, their perceptions are socially situated and contextual. That is, the learners might not tend to refuse an act or give a lot of explanations because it is the norm in their own context.

## **5. Conclusions**

The results of the present study provided insights into the refusal strategy choice and perceptions of Turkish learners of English on their own choices and social factors. This study suggests many implications for teaching English in EFL context. First of all, although the interviewees seemed to be aware of variables like power and distance, teachers should make sure that they focus the learners' attention on social variables like distance, power, age, occupation, level of education and gender before eliciting refusals from speech acts. In addition, formality and informality of a situation change the type of semantic formula learners use. A variety of linguistic choices should be taught along with the awareness of abovementioned social factors.

Finally, it is not our goal to generalize the findings of the current study to all or most L2 learners. However, it is quite likely to find similarities especially with the pragmalinguistic aspects in this study. As for social factors or sociopragmatic understanding, we acknowledge the role and importance of the context where L2 is learned and used. The focus of this study was also the perception of the

learners on their own strategy use and such sociopragmatic issues, which still needs to be studied in-depth. Therefore, it should be considered as preliminary insights in terms of perceptions of L2 learners in on social factors with an emphasis on refusals to invitations and requests.

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## Reddetme stratejileri ve reddetmedeki sosyal faktörlerle ilgili algılar: İngilizceyi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerden deneysel anlayışlar

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizceyi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin reddetme stratejilerini incelemek ve strateji kullanımlarını etkileyen sosyal faktörlere ilişkin algılarını açığa çıkarmaktır. Bu çalışma Türkiye'nin batısında bulunan özel bir üniversitenin İngilizce Hazırlık Okulu'nda eğitim alan ve İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen 80 Türk öğrenci ile yürütülmüştür. Veri yazılı söylem tamamlama etkinliği (STE), geriye dönük sözlü raporlar ve görüşmelerle elde edilmiştir. STE davet ve rica söz eylemleri kullanılarak oluşturulan dört durum içerir ve reddetme stratejileri bu durumlar kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, en sık kullanılan anlamsal deyim'in açıklama/sebep/gerekçe bildirme olduğunu göstermiştir. Sonuçlar ayrıca davet ve rica durumlarından elde edilen reddetme stratejilerinin dağılımının nicelik bakımından farklılık gösterdiğini ve İngilizceyi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin başlatma eylemi davet olduğunda rica durumdan çok daha fazla sayıda strateji kullandığını ortaya koymuştur. Elde edilen veriler, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin dolaylı stratejileri doğrudan stratejilere ve reddetme yardımcılara oranla daha fazla kullandığını göstermiştir. Reddetme ile ilgili algılardan elde edilen veriler ışığında, İngilizceyi ikinci dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin reddetme stratejileri kullanımlarını etkileyen sosyal faktörler dört ana başlık altında toplanmıştır. Bu ana başlıklar ilişkinin türü ve derecesi, durumun içerik ve amacı, duygulanım ve beklentiler ile sosyokültürel anlayış ve uygulamalar olarak adlandırılmıştır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* edimbilimsel yeterlik; aradil edimbilimi; reddetme; sosyal faktörler; İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrenciler

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