

# *A Study of the Effects of Language Transfer on Refusal Strategies for Second Language Acquisition among Chinese English Major Students*

Yue Xu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Foreign Languages, Shenzhen University, No.3688, Nanhai Avenue, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China*

*a. xuyue2019@email.szu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Many EFL learners have strong linguistic competence, but lack sufficient pragmatic competence, including the use of politeness strategies. The study aims to explore the effects of language transfer on refusal strategies for Chinese L2 learners with higher English proficiency. To test the common claim that refusal strategies transfer strongly from L1 to L2 and are highly influenced by sociocultural factors, online questionnaires were conducted among 22 female students majoring in English at Shenzhen University. The results indicated a limited effect of L1 on L2 for subjects with high English proficiency and showed that the transfer of refusal strategies may be influenced by the memory connections between knowledge input and transferring subjects in L2 learning, in addition to the sociocultural factors. The result suggests teachers create a more authentic communication environment to encourage students to innovatively create a variety of expressions and strategies based on what they have learned and according to different scenarios.

**Keywords:** Politeness strategies, Refusal strategies, Language transfer, Chinese EFL learners

## **1. Introduction**

Different cultures have varying expressions of speech acts, and it is necessary and important to study them [1]. According to Searle and Vandervken, the negative counterpart of accepting and agreeing is “refusal” [2].

On the one hand, as one of the speech acts, “refusal” has been studied by many researchers, including a large number of cross-cultural contrastive studies on English and other languages [3] [4] [5]. However, few studies have focused on English versus Mandarin, and even fewer have examined the impact of Mandarin as a first language on English as a second language in terms of refusal strategies [6] [7].

On the other hand, several cross-cultural studies have revealed that although refusal strategies are considered universal and many cultures share a certain similarity, they still vary across cultures [8] [9] [10]. Hall proposed to divide cultures into high-context versus low-context in order to grasp the essential differences in communication styles and cultural issues [11]. In a low-context culture (LC), individualism is characterized by members placing personal demands and purposes above the needs of the group and vice versa in a high-context culture (HC) [12]. The differences can cause certain

cultural and language issues in different countries. For instance, in a LC culture, it is considered polite to ask questions that are too private or even offensive in a HC culture [13]. Influenced by the above factors, L2 learners are likely to have a strong transfer from the native language (NL) in refusal strategies when learning a language.

### 1.1. Previous Studies on Language Pragmatic Transfer in Refusals

As mentioned earlier, despite a large amount of researches on rejection, most studies have focused on the contrastive study of two languages rather than on the possible impact of one language on the other.

Takahashi, Beebe, Uliss-Weltz, Scarcella, Andersen, and Krashen researched pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals [14]. The study showed that refusal transfer from Japanese has an impact on the English of Japanese speakers in the United States on at least three levels, including the order, the frequency, and the tone. They also pointed out the influence of sociocultural factors on a person's linguistic ability and the potential for a person to be subject to sociocultural transfer.

Liao and Bresnahan focused on a contrastive pragmatic investigation of refusal strategies between American English and Mandarin [8]. A total of 6 request scenarios were conceived for American and Taiwanese undergraduates. The study demonstrated clear differences in refusal strategies between them. In addition, the study pointed out that the use of politeness strategies reflects cultural differences between Eastern and Western countries, such as a more humble nature, supporting the idea that cultural factors affect the adoption of refusal strategies.

Apart from that, Sattar, Lah, and Suleiman studied English refusal strategies by university students in Malaysia [5]. 40 students were involved. They analyzed the data with reference to the refusal categories of Beebe and other researchers [3]. The findings showed subjects differ in the ways they make refusals and suggest a similar view that the influence of culture in one's realizations of refusals in English. Jiang empirically explored pragmatic transfer in Chinese high school English learners' speech act of refusal [15]. The findings also indicated that the first language held an influence on the second language regarding the manner and content of rejection strategies.

Taking the above studies into consideration, there is a certain degree of consistency in claiming that politeness strategies transfer strongly from L1 to L2 and that sociocultural factors have an integral influence on politeness transfer. However, all the above studies have mainly focused on contrastive research on the refusal strategies of the English speaking of non-native English speakers versus the English speaking of native English speakers, with little or no attention paid to the diversities between the refusals made by EFL learners in Mandarin and English in response to identical scenarios, specifically exploring what effects L1 would have on L2. Meanwhile, sociocultural factors can certainly affect the transfer of politeness strategies directly or indirectly, but it is not the only factor. Most of the above studies have confirmed the socio-cultural influence on politeness strategies without attempting to explore other possible factors that influence language learners during the second language learning process. Therefore, the current study will focus on exploring the aforementioned missing aspects.

### 1.2. Previous Studies on Refusal Categories

There are many categories and classifications of politeness strategies, including cooperative principles, and politeness maxims [16] [17]. The famous Brown and Levinson's face theory classifies the face into the positive and negative face [18]. The positive face puts more stress on one's self-esteem while the negative face emphasizes the freedom of action. Furthermore, the two researchers considered several factors that would influence the choice of a specific strategy, including the "social distance" (D); the relative "power" (P); and the absolute ranking (R). Although all the

above studies give references to the categories of refusal strategies, they lack sufficient applicability. Instead, they only take the perspective of Western countries or languages, which fail to explain many situations in Eastern or other countries. Besides, as far as the classification itself is concerned, there are also deficiencies. Brown and Levinson's face theory has partly limited a more specific and accurate analysis of different phenomena. For instance, positive and negative politeness strategies cannot be used to explain the occurrence of a mixture of both positive and negative strategies, impoliteness, or avoidance phenomena.

The categories of refusal strategies listed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz are more detailed compared to Brown and Levinson's [14]. They divided refusal strategies into different types with several subtypes, mainly including indirect strategy, direct strategy, and adjuncts. This classification can be better applied to the analysis of Mandarin and English. Combining the above analysis, the study takes both the categories of face theory and Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's refusal strategies into account, and processes the collected data qualitatively with flexibility.

### **1.3. Research Objective and Research Questions**

This study attempts to evaluate the common claim that refusal strategies transfer strongly from L1 to L2 and they are highly influenced by sociocultural factors. The study focuses on the effects of language transfer on refusal strategies for second language acquisition among Chinese English major students. It may help discover the rarely noticed impact of Mandarin on English and reduce the barriers Chinese English learners encounter at the pragmatic level. The research questions are:

1. Does L1 have a negative effect on L2 concerning the pragmatic use of refusal strategies among those who are competent in English?
2. What kinds of refusal strategies are used in L1 and L2 respectively? If there is an effect, what is the possible impact of L1 on L2 in terms of refusal strategies?
3. What are the possible reasons for the influence of L1 on L2?

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Materials Used in The Study**

The materials are distributed in a web-based format with an interview-based questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: basic information about the research subject, 4 English scenarios questions, and 4 Mandarin scenarios questions. To avoid situations such as direct translation of Chinese and English responses by the study subjects, the Mandarin and English scenarios are not set the same. In this study, social distance and social status are used as control factors, and four different roles, including parents, a teacher that one does not know very well, a good friend, and a classmate that one does not know very well, are selected for students to make refusals, in which the Mandarin and English scenario settings are similar. (See Table 1)

Table1: Four refusal targets

Refusal with	Social status	Social distant
Parents	higher	close
A teacher that you don't know well	higher	distant
A good friend	equal	close
A classmate that you don't know well	equal	distant

## 2.2. Introduction of The Experiment

### 2.2.1. Subjects

The research subjects are Chinese EFL learners with high English proficiency. A total of 22 female students majoring in English at Shenzhen University are involved in the study by convenience sampling. Among the subjects, all except one student have passed TEM-4, an English proficiency exam for English majors at Chinese universities. This indicates that almost all participants have a high level of English proficiency.

### 2.2.2. Procedure

The research subjects receive a link or picture of the questionnaire through WeChat, a Chinese social media application. The subjects are required to complete the questionnaire by scanning the QR code or clicking the link. Before doing the questionnaire, each subject is informed of the basic content and purpose of this study and is asked for consent to complete the questionnaire voluntarily.

## 3. Results

A total of 22 valid data are collected. The following shows the data divided into four themes based on different scenarios.

### 3.1. Refusals with Parents

In general, concerning refusals with parents, the subjects tended to have an indirect strategy, both in Mandarin and English scenarios, where most of the responses followed an identical formula. They first made self-defence and then let the interlocutor (parents) off the hook, and if necessary, they might make a promise or give alternatives to discuss with their parents. (See Table 2)

Table2: Responses in English scenario and Mandarin scenario

	Responses
English	I'm an adult now. So please don't worry about me.
	I'm not a child and I can take care of myself. I promise I will go back home before 10 p.m.
	I'm 18 years old now. I have the ability to take good care of myself. If you still feel worried, I promised I will tell you whom I go out with and where we go.
	I'm an adult now. I know how to protect myself. I won't go to the club but just go out for dinner.
Mandarin	我已经 22 岁有自己的想法，我可以独立完成自己的事情和任务，我能照顾好自己。 I'm 22 years old and I have my ideas. I can do things independently and take good care of myself.
	爸妈，我已经是个大人啦，虽然知道你们是关心我，不过我也应该有自己的独立空间。 Mom and Dad, I'm an adult now. I know you are concerned about me, but I should have my privacy.
	我觉得我已经长大了，应该有一定的私人空间，我不希望每天都想你们汇报我的事情。但我还是会经常和你们分享我发生了什么的。 I think I'm old enough to have some privacy and I don't expect to tell you what I've done every day. But I'll still share with you what's going on with me regularly.
	爸妈，我每天都吃好睡好，非常健康安全。你们不用操心我啦，每天跟你们汇报这些有点占时间，倒不如我们有空多打打视频呢。 Mom and Dad, I eat well and sleep well every day, and I am very healthy and safe. You don't have to worry about me. It takes up time to report this to you every day, so why not have more video calls when we have time?

From a detailed point of view, comparing the same subject's refusals in the Mandarin and English scenarios, respectively, reveals certain differences. Subjects used the address form "mom and dad" in the Chinese scenario, but not in the English one. (See Table 3) Additionally, one student stated that she would unconditionally comply with her parents' requests regardless of whether the scenario is in Mandarin or English. Besides, by comparing the responses of the same subject horizontally, it can be found that one responded more directly or more politely in Chinese scenarios compared to English. (See Table 4) Last but not least, subjects tended to transfer indirect strategies to English scenarios, and here according to Yan's study, native English speakers usually use them less often [19].

Table3: Number of occurrences of the address form "Mom and dad"

	Number of occurrences of the address form "Mom and dad"
Mandarin	77.27% (17/22)
English	18.18% (4/22)

Table4: An example of the comparison of the responses from the same subject

	The same subject is more politely in the Mandarin scenario	The same subject is more directly in the Mandarin scenario
English	It doesn't make sense!	Oh, I'm afraid I can't accept it.
Mandarin	爸爸妈妈，必要的时候我会和你们分享，这样会让我很不舒服，也很累赘。 Mom and Dad, I will share with you when necessary. It makes me uncomfortable and exhausted.	爸爸妈妈我已经长大了，可以照顾自己，你们应该把重心放在自己身上。 Mom and Dad, I'm old enough to take care of myself, you should keep your focus on yourselves.

### 3.2. Refusals with A Teacher That One Does Not Know Well

As a whole, there are certain differences between the subject's responses in English and Mandarin scenes. For the English scenario, subjects generally follow the following formula. They usually used to apologize or express their gratitude or willingness first, and then used something like "I'm afraid I cannot . . because ..." or "I would like to ... but ..." to politely refuse the teacher. Some of them might also express gratitude once again or give an alternative to the interlocutor (the teacher) to discuss in the end. (See Table 5)

Table5: The formula in the English scenario

	1	2	3
English	Statement of regret ("Sorry." "I'm sorry.")	Give an excuse or a reason ("I'm afraid I cannot ...because ..." "I would like to ... but ..."	Express gratitude again. ("Thanks anyway.")
	Express gratitude ("Thank you for ...")		Give alternative ("I think we can ...")
	Express willingness ("It's really a great honor to ...")		

In the Mandarin scenario, the subject often used to say sorry to the teacher and then indirectly refused the invitation with an excuse or reason later, or gave an excuse or reason directly and then apologized or expressed gratitude for the invitation.

In addition, in the Mandarin scenario, two students added some intonation words, such as "ah" and "ha ha ha", to help ease the atmosphere when they politely refused the teacher. This was not the case in the English scenario. Meanwhile, the reasons and excuses given by the subject in the Mandarin scenario are more ambiguous than those in the English scenario. Take the following data as an example.

A in Mandarin scenario: “老师不好意思，我明天有事。” ( “Sorry teacher, I have something to do tomorrow.” )

A in English scenario: “I would like to come, but unfortunately, I have an exam at that time.”

This example shows that Student A only gave “have something to do” as an excuse in the Mandarin scenario, while in the English scenario she gave a specific reason, that is, “have an exam”.

### 3.3. Refusals with A Good Friend

In the English scenario, most subjects tended to express their apologies (eg. “Sorry.”) or express their gratitude (eg. “Thank you for your invitation.”) before giving a reason or excuse. Some might also give alternatives to discuss with the interlocutor (the good friend). In the Mandarin scenario, most subjects first gave an excuse or explanation, indirectly rejected the good friend’s invitation, or rejected it directly (eg. “我不太想去。I don’t want to go.”). Only seven students expressed their regret in their responses. Additionally, the same subject responded more directly to Chinese scenarios compared to English.

### 3.4. Refusals with A Classmate That One Does Not Know Well

In response to the rejection of a classmate whom one does not know very well, most subjects in English scenarios followed the following formula. The subject first expressed her regret or expresses her willingness to help, and then gave an excuse or explanation to indirectly refuse. Some of them might give suggestions or alternatives for the classmate (eg. “I am so sorry, I need the notebook later for my homework.” “Sorry, my handwriting is too messy. I am afraid you cannot understand. You can borrow other classmates.” “I’m willing to, but I want to use it to review my lesson tonight.”). In a Mandarin scenario, most subjects expressed their regret first, and then gave an excuse or explanation to indirectly refuse (eg. “我手头上的钱可能不够。I may not have enough money on hand.” “不好意思, 我现在没空。Sorry, I’m not available now.” “我没钱。I don’t have money.”).

Meanwhile, when comparing the responses of the same subject in the two scenarios, it is found that most subjects responded more politely in the English scenario.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Refusals with Parents

Subjects are used to using address forms in the Mandarin scenario but hardly ever in the English scenario, which shows that they know how to adjust the use of address forms to different contexts. It also suggests that higher social status and close social distance may not have a huge impact on the excessive use of address forms in English by those with higher English proficiency. In response to one of the students in the subjects who said that she would listen to her parents unconditionally, this reflects the ideology that children should show obedience to their parents under the influence of Chinese traditional culture to a certain extent.

Besides that, on rejecting parents, the data shows different results from previous studies. Following the concept of high versus low context culture previously proposed by Hall, and the difference in communication styles between the two different cultures as indicated by Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella, it can be inferred that subjects should respond more politely and euphemistically in the Mandarin scenario than in the English one [11] [13]. The data partly supports this hypothesis and agrees that this is influenced by different sociocultural factors. Also, since the subjects are native Mandarin speakers, their proficiency in Mandarin enriches their vocabulary and syntax for communicative expressions to a certain extent, allowing them to be more flexible in adopting the language to achieve the effect of expression.



However, there is also data showing that the subjects' responses in the Mandarin scenario are more direct. This might be influenced by the different contexts. Considering that subjects usually communicate with their parents in Mandarin, when switching to an English context, they can feel unfamiliar and thus tend to use the learned patterned sentences for refusals, which also reveals that apart from being influenced by sociocultural factors, the English sentences and expressions memorized or acquired in the English classroom or in students' English learning affect the pragmatic use of refusal strategies to a certain extent.

Furthermore, subjects tended to transfer indirect strategies to English scenarios, and here according to Yan's study, native English speakers usually use them less often. [19] This suggests that subjects with higher English proficiency can still be influenced by the L1 language in the use of refusal strategies.

#### **4.2. Refusals with A Teacher That One Does Not Know Well**

The strategies used by the subject for rejecting a teacher in the English scenario are richer and more varied than in the Mandarin scenario. However, one similarity between the two is that subjects tended to express their gratitude or regret several times during the rejection, which can be considered a way to protect the interlocutor's face in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the subjects' use of address forms for refusal of people with higher social status and distant social distance also differ between Mandarin and English scenarios. They understand how to apply address forms properly according to various contexts.

It can be seen in the data that subjects added some intonation appropriately to ease the embarrassment caused by rejecting the teacher in the Mandarin scenario, but not in the English context. This is possibly influenced by the sense of distance that language brings to individuals. It reflects that students still tend to show their true responses in their more familiar contexts. In addition, even for high English learners, there is still a need for improvement in their pragmatic competence.

The reasons given for the subjects in the Mandarin scenario were vaguer, while the English scenario was more specific, which fits with Liao and Bresnahan's study [4]. They pointed out that Chinese people are more economic at making excuses and try not to give a peer lesson. And more Chinese people would give concrete reasons for the denial of high-status people than native Americans. When rejecting someone, the Chinese tend to give vague reasons. This suggests that subjects can, for the most part, successfully adapt reasons and excuses to different contexts when switching scenarios.

#### **4.3. Refusals with A Good Friend**

In response to refusal with a good friend, subjects rejected more directly in Mandarin scenarios than in English ones. This is also different from the way Mandarin and English should have been expressed previously under the influence of social and cultural influences. It may be influenced to some extent by the distance that language brings to people. Subjects are more familiar with the Chinese context, so it is easier for them to express what they would like to say in the Chinese context, while in the English context they are often limited by their language ability and the influence of patterned expression learning, which restricts the delivery of their original meaning.

#### **4.4. Refusals with A Classmate That One Does Not Know Well**

In response to the rejection of a classmate that one does not know well, the subject behaved very similarly in the Mandarin scenario and the English one, but with one difference. Most subjects use a positive rejection strategy in the English scene, first expressing their willingness to help and then making the rejection, but this does not occur in the Chinese context. It is understandable because Chinese people tend to adopt negative refusal strategies and indirectly make excuses to refuse when



confronted with an interlocutor who is socially distant from them and most subjects are more inclined to show respect for less close interlocutors. Instead, from the data, most subjects do not reject in the English context exactly in the Mandarin context, but use some positive strategies (eg. “I’d love to ... but ...”) to make a refusal. It also shows that the subjects know how to switch the refusal strategy according to different language scenarios.

## 5. Conclusion

Putting the above analysis together, it can be seen that for learners with higher English proficiency, L1 does have certain negative effects on L2 at the pragmatic use of refusal strategies, but the effects are limited and only in some subtle ways. This indicates that students with high English proficiency still need to strengthen their ability at the pragmatic level of English.

When rejecting a higher-status interlocutor, the subject knows how to transform the refusal strategy to better suit the context, including the use of address forms and the vagueness or specificity of the excuses given. When addressing interlocutors of equal status, subjects usually responded more directly in the Chinese context than in the English one.

The research data also shows that, in addition to sociocultural factors that may negatively affect subjects’ use and transfer of refusal strategies, they are influenced by the knowledge input subjects receive in L2 learning. For example, in everyday life, influenced by test-driven classroom teaching, teachers usually instil some common English sentences or expressions directly to students. Therefore, when the subject encounters a less familiar English context, he or she may subconsciously adopt the English sentence pattern that the memory connection formed and pattern his or her responses.

This study suggests that the transfer of refusal strategies may be influenced by the memory connections between knowledge input and transferring subjects in L2 learning, in addition to the sociocultural factors endorsed by most studies. Therefore, the study recommends that in Chinese EFL learning classrooms, teachers should not only consciously input cross-cultural knowledge to students but also create a more authentic communication environment to encourage students to innovatively create a variety of expressions and strategies based on what they have learned and according to different scenarios, rather than rigidly instilling fixed sentences to help students master refusal strategies.

It gives the opportunity to reflect on the pragmatic learning and use of EFL learners with high English proficiency. It shows that the use of speech acts at the pragmatic level is still a significant aspect that EFL learners need to overcome. Moreover, over-instilling students with fixed sentence patterns and vocabulary is not a good way to improve EFL learners’ pragmatic competence.

However, the study only focused on female English majors in one university, and the results of the study are not highly generalizable. Also, the online questionnaires may differ to some extent from the responses made by the study subjects in the real environment. Therefore, the study suggests that more research can focus on different stakeholders and purposefully study the linguistic transfer of the corresponding groups in terms of refusal strategies and the impact that L1 has on L2 to better help the subjects’ foreign language learning. Also, while focusing on the influence of L1 on L2, it is important to pay attention to the interaction and interplay between L1 and L2.

## References

- [1] Jia, Y. X. (1997). *Intercultural communication*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [2] Searle, J. R., Vanderveken, D., & Willis, S. (1985). *Foundations of illocutionary logic*. CUP Archive.
- [3] Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., Uliss-Weltz, R., Scarcella, R. C., Andersen, E. S., & Krashen, S. (1990). *Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals*.
- [4] Liao, C. C., & Bresnahan, M. I. (1994). *Men and women in the use of post-refusal Maxims in two areas*. In *Third Kentucky Conference on Narrative*, University of Kentucky, Kexington, KY. October (pp. 14-16).

- [5] Sattar, H. Q. A., Lah, S. C., & Suleiman, R. R. R. (2011). *Refusal Strategies In English By Malay University Students*. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 11(3).
- [6] Chen, R. (1993). *Responding to compliments A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers*. *Journal of pragmatics*, 20(1), 49-75.
- [7] Chen, X., Ye, L., & Zhang, Y. (1995). *Refusing in Chinese. Pragmatics of Chinese as native and target language*, 119-163.
- [8] Liao, C. C., & Bresnahan, M. I. (1996). *A contrastive pragmatic study on American English and Mandarin refusal strategies*. *Language sciences*, 18(3-4), 703-727.
- [9] Chen, H. J. (1996). *Cross-cultural comparison of English and Chinese metapragmatics in refusal*. *Indiana University*.
- [10] Guo, Y. (2012). *Chinese and American refusal strategy: A cross-cultural approach*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(2), 247.
- [11] Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Doubleday.
- [12] Triandis, H. C., Brislin, R., & Hui, C. H. (1988). *Cross-cultural training across the individualism-collectivism divide*. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 12(3), 269-289.
- [13] Nishimura, S., Nevgi, A., & Tella, S. (2008). *Communication style and cultural features in high/low context communication cultures: A case study of Finland, Japan and India*. *Teoksessa A. Kallioniemi (toim.), Uudistuva ja kehittyvä ainedidaktiikka. Ainedidaktinen symposiumi*, 8(2008), 783-796.
- [14] Beebe, Leslie, Tomoko, Takahashi, and Robin Uliss-Weltz. 1990. *Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals*. In R. Scarcella, E. Andersen, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *The Development of Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, 55-73. New York: Newbury House.
- [15] Jiang, L. (2015). *An Empirical Study on Pragmatic Transfer in Refusal Speech Act Produced by Chinese High School EFL Learners*. *English Language Teaching*, 8(7), 95-113.
- [16] Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. In P. Cole, & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press
- [17] Leech. (1983). *Longman: Principles of Pragmatics*.
- [18] Brown, P., Levinson, S. C., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge university press.
- [19] Yan, C. (2016). *A contrastive pragmatic study of politeness strategies in disagreement between native speakers of English and Chinese EFL learners*. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 39(2), 231-248.