

***Effects of Imposition on Refusals of Requests by Vietnamese ESL Learners  
in Speaking and Emails***

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**Abstract**

This study investigated effect of imposition on how Vietnamese learners of English at different levels of language proficiency refuse requests in speaking and emails. The comparison between two modes (speaking and writing) was also performed. The data was obtained with the support of 24 Vietnamese students in Melbourne, which comprise three groups of eight. Using the semantic formulas modified from the formulas proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), refusals in three role-play situations and three emails were coded to find out frequency for each strategy. Statistical analysis was done with Chi-square. Then, semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese were conducted to gain insight understanding of chosen strategies. It was found that imposition had statistically significant influences on the refusal strategies. In high imposition scenarios, greater number of direct strategies and adjuncts were employed. However, direct strategies were mainly used by the beginner group. On the other hand, adjuncts were preferred by advanced participants. As for in direct strategies, language proficiency also affected the chosen performed strategies. In terms of differences between role-plays and emails, statistically significant results were found in all three groups. While lower proficiency groups felt freer to refuse directly in writing, advanced groups applied adjuncts to make moves for their refusal in speaking.

Keywords: second language pragmatics, speech act, refusals, speaking, writing, emails

## **Introduction**

Human interaction is not only about linguistics features but also involves social and cultural norms, which makes intercultural communication challenging to non-native speakers. Particularly in situations requiring tact like refusals language should be considered more carefully due to the face-threatening nature of the speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1978). With the advancement of technology, in addition to traditional ways of interaction including face-to-face communication and hand-written letter, email has become a popular means of communication in every aspect of life. While it resembles an electronic version of a letter it is not exact the same. Ganes (1999, p.81) said email is ‘a pseudo-conversational form of communication, conducted in extended time and with an absent interlocutor’. The language in an email seems to be ‘less correct, complex and coherent than standard written language’ (Herring, 2001). However, it also follows certain etiquettes, which makes email different from spoken language as well as traditional letters.

In pragmatics the choice of proper language depends on three main variables: power, social distance and imposition. Although many studies on refusal have been conducted, the question of how imposition influences the strategies Vietnamese ESL learners employ to refuse a request has been an unanswered issue. So far there have been no studies investigating refusal strategies in emails. This study is conducted with the hope to shed light on refusal strategies used by Vietnamese ESL learners. The research’s focus is on the effect of ranks of imposition on how Vietnamese ESL learners at different levels of language proficiency refuse in open role-play and email writing.

### **Notion of ‘Face’, ‘Face-Threatening’ Act (FTA) and Perception of Imposition**

In 1959, Goffman proposed the notion of ‘face’ under perspective of Western culture, which was further developed by Brown and Levinson (1978). It is believed that ‘face’ reflects our wanted self through verbal and non-verbal interaction. In conversation, the speaker also makes a contribution to face of the interlocutor. Therefore, in interaction, there is always a process of protecting oneself and the interlocutors’ face from embarrassment. Brown and Levinson (1978, pg. 61) confirmed that ‘everyone’s face depends on everyone else’s being maintained’. In other words the mutual process depends on the negotiation between the two involved parties and the speaker will try to avoid face-threatening acts (FTA), which are defined as acts against the face wants of the interlocutor (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

However, the perceived notion of ‘face’ is not the same across cultures. Based on the research by Phan Ngoc (1994) and Tran Dinh Huu (1994), it is believed that Vietnamese concept of ‘face’ lies in between the two mentioned extremes. Like Chinese culture, in Vietnam social attributes such as age and status have a significant role in interactional choices. Plus, in Vietnam, ‘face’ not only refers to individual value but also it has a strong connection with family and community. This means that ‘face’ in Vietnam is linked with moral norms of the society (Nguyen Duc Hoat, 1995). In some cases, collective face is of greater importance than individual face.

To weight the potential FTA, Brown and Levinson proposed three variables, which are social distance, power difference and degree of imposition. Imposition refers to

degree of potential risks resulted from the message of the speaker. Ranking of imposition is described as ‘a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent’s wants of self-determination or of approval (his negative-and positive-face wants)’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pg. 42). In other words, imposition is about level of negative effects on the speech act. In general, in high imposition situations the speaker tends to employ a higher number of face-saving strategies.

### **Previous Studies**

The most influential study in investigating refusals may belong to the research done by Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990). The focus of this study is to find out pragmatic transfer in L1 Japanese speakers. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) were used to get data. Based on the data taxonomy of refusal strategies was proposed and this taxonomy has been used for reference in data coding in many later studies. In the study refusals to an invitation were analyzed according to a formulaic and it is discovered that although two groups of participants (American English speakers and Japanese EFL learners) used the same strategies differences were observed in terms of the order of semantic formulas, the frequency of the formulas, and the content of the utterance. Later on, due to the fact that

Taguchi, N. (2013) carried out a study on effect of proficiency on appropriateness and fluency of refusals produced by NSs, L1 Japanese speakers with higher level of English proficiency and L1 Japanese speakers with lower level of English proficiency. Role-play was employed to elicit speech act. Unlike DCT, it enabled researchers to examine ‘speech act behaviors in its full discourse context’ (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p.228). Based on interlocutors’ power difference (P), social distance (D), and size of imposition (R), two situations were designed. It is found that no matter how competent the participants are, production of PDR-low refusals was easier and faster than that of PDR-high refusals. Furthermore, greater significant effect of proficiency on appropriateness scores and speech rates is detected in the case of PDR-high situation. While NSs tended to use hedges and indefinite responses as supporting devices, L2 learners utilized more direct expressions. It is also pointed out that both L2 groups used direct strategies more often than NSs. Especially, less competent groups showed limited ability in mitigating their refusals with hedging and indirect replies.

Considering imposition to be an influencing factor in choosing politeness strategies, Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005); Niki and Tajika (1994) or Takahashi (1996) found that degree of imposition significantly affected on the learners’ choice of interlanguage speech act forms. In 2003, Kobayashi and Rinnert looked at the effect of imposition when L1 Japanese EFL learners produced requests. It is discovered that levels of English proficiency affected chosen strategies in situations with high degree of imposition.

Matsumoto-Gray (2009) investigated the effect of the three factors including power difference, social distance and imposition on politeness in political conversations. The findings confirmed Brown and Levinson’s model prediction that increase in imposition led to more observed polite forms.

Among studies on pragmatics in emails, request speech act seems to gain the most interest of researchers in the field. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) investigated the perlocutionary effects of email requests written to professors by NSs and non-native speaker (NNS) graduates. It is reported that in general NNS students did not address imposition properly and they performed lower number of down-graders and supportive moves than expected. In the same research topic, Soler, E. A. (2013) studied on the use of mitigators in email requests written by 145 British English (BE) teenagers and International English (IE) students. The results indicated in case writers were aware of the request imposition; they would use strategies to soften the request. However, BE students use a wider range of syntactic mitigators (both syntactic and lexical). Zhu, W. (2012) looked at the effects of proficiency on the way EFL learner made request. It was found that less competent students used fewer indirect requestive strategies than more competent group.

Refusal to a request is a common speech act, though until now there is no research looking at this aspect of email pragmatics. Furthermore, the investigation on how imposition influences strategies Vietnamese people use in refusal is still missing in the existing data pool. This study was conducted with the aim to fill this gap.

### **Research questions**

The study is conducted with the aim to find out the answers for the two following research questions.

- (1) What are the differences in the refusal strategies used by learners at different proficiency levels when refusing requests of different degrees of imposition?
- (2) What are the differences between speaking and email writing in refusal strategies of Vietnamese ESL learners when refusing requests of different degrees of imposition?

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study are Vietnamese students studying in Melbourne aged from 18 to 35. All of them took an IELTS test from 6 to 12 months prior to data collection. Based on their test results they were put into one of three groups: beginner users, intermediate users and advanced users. For participants in the beginner and intermediate groups the test must be taken in the last six months in order to ensure that their proficiency is similar to the test results. However, for advanced learners the period of time can be within a year. The following table shows a summary of the participants.

*Table 1: Summary of the participant*

	N	Gender (%)	Age	Length of Residence	IELTS scores (%)
<b>Beginner (under 6.0)</b>	8	Male: 37.5% Female: 62.5%	20-30: 75% 31-35: 25%	Under 1 year: 37.5% 1-3 years: 50% Over 3 years: 12.5%	5.0 - 100%
<b>Intermediate (from 6.0 to 7.0)</b>	8	Male: 50% Female: 50%	Under 20: 12.5% 20-30: 75% 31-35: 12.5%	Under 1 year: 12.5% 1-3 years: 25% Over 3 years: 62.5%	7.0 - 37.5% 6.5 - 37.5% 6.0 - 25 %
<b>Advanced (above 7.0)</b>	8	Male: 75% Female: 25%	Under 20: 12.5% 20-27: 87.5%	Under 1 year: 37.5% Over 3 years: 62.5%	8.5 - 25% 7.5 - 75%

### Selection of given situations

The aim of the study is to find out how imposition influences on refusal strategies. Therefore, the other two factors including social power and social distance are kept to be consistent in all given situations. Specifically, in all designed situations the power between two interlocutors is equal (they are supposed to be casual friends) and the distance is not too close but not so far.

In order to get explicit data, six situations, in which two situations are at similar low ranking of imposition, two are at similar middle ranking and two are at high ranking, are needed. The six situations are then put into two groups: speaking and writing. The three situations for role-play are:

- (1) A friend asks you to lend him \$1,000, which is a large amount of money for you.
- (2) A friend has a business trip in Melbourne. He asks to borrow your car for one day because he could not find any available car to rent.
- (3) A friend asks you to buy a cup of coffee when you are about to go out during break time.

Other three situations for emails are:

- (4) You work with a classmate on a final assignment, which is very important to you. 2 days before the due date, she asks you to finish her part for her. She has only done a little of her part.
- (5) A friend comes to Australia for the first time and asks you to pick her up at the airport. She knows that you don't have a car.
- (6) A friend asks you to tutor him how to use a computer program you know well.

(1) and (4) are supposed to be high imposition requests. In contrast, (3) and (6) are considered to be small requests. (2) and (5) are believed to be relatively big requests.

### *Open role-play*

All of the role-plays in the study happened face to face. For each situation all of the participants were fully aware of the social status and distance between them and the interlocutor. The content of the each situation was not mentioned before the role-play. Only the details of the scenario like assumed location of the interaction, the

relationship between them and the interlocutor were provided. In this way more authentic data and participant reactions can be obtained.

#### *Email writing*

Three email situations were conveyed in email form. After completing the role-play tasks the participants received three emails sent to their provided email address. The participants had one or two days to reply those emails. There were no constraints in word limit and writing styles. All of the participants had full knowledge of their goal in writing and their relationship with the emails' sender. In this way the email writing tasks were set up in a way that reflects a possible scenario in real life.

#### *In-depth interview*

After participants sent their replies, a semi-structured interview was carried out in order to gain richer reflective information from participants. Due to save travelling time to meet face-to-face, the interviews were done through telephone at participants' convenience and in Vietnamese to create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants where they can express their ideas without language barriers.

#### *Data transcription and coding*

Based on the sequence of semantic formulae developed by Beebe and Takahashi (1990), the collected data will be coded and analyzed. Beebe and Takahashi (1990, p.72-73) generalized semantic formulas for refusals and adjuncts (expressions going with a refusal but they cannot function as a refusal by itself) as presented. Based on the taxonomy and the analysis of the responses of the participants, this study coded the data based on the following semantic formulas.

##### *\* Semantics Formulas*

- I. Direct – Nonperformative
  - A. 'No'
  - B. Negative willingness ability
- II. Indirect:
  - A. Statement of regret
  - B. Wish
  - C. Excuse/ reason
  - D. Explanation
  - E. Statement of alternative
    - 1. I can do X instead of Y
    - 2. Why don't you do X instead of Y
    - 3. Statement of suggestion
  - F. Set condition for future or past acceptance
  - G. Promise of future acceptance
  - H. Statement of principle
  - I. Statement of philosophy
  - K. Attempt to dissuade the interlocutor
    - 1. Threat/statement of negative consequences to the requester
    - 2. Guilt trip
    - 3. Criticize the request/requester, ect
    - 4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
    - 5. Counter question

- 6. Self defense
- 7. Coherent questions
- 8. Remind of inconvenient current situation
- 9. Statement of disappointment
- L. Acceptance that functions as a refusal - Unspecific or indefinite reply
- M. Avoidance
  - 1. Non-verbal - Silence
  - 2. Verbal:
    - a. Topic switch
    - b. Repetition of part of request
    - c. Postponement
    - d. Hedging
- N. Statement of Reimbursement
- O. Statement of Encouragement
- P. Statement of Apology
- Q. Statement of Greetings
- R. Statement of Endings

\* *Adjuncts*

- III. Statement of positive opinion / feeling of agreement
- IV. Statement of empathy
- V. Pause fillers
- VI. Gratitude / appreciation

## Results

### *Effect of Imposition on Refusal Strategies Employed by Each Group*

Based on the similarity in ranking of imposition, situations are collapsed. Chi-square is used for statistical analysis. The following table shows the statistical results of the beginner group.

*Table 2: Statistical results of the beginner group*

	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>	<i>Adjuncts</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>High Imposition Situations (HISs)</i>	15	58	6	79
<i>Medium Imposition Situations (MISSs)</i>	7	52	0	59
<i>Small Imposition Situations (SISs)</i>	9	45	2	56
<i>Total</i>	31	155	8	194

$$\chi^2(4) = 6.77, p = .1486, V = .132$$

The following table shows the statistical result of intermediate group.

*Table 3: Statistical results of the intermediate group*

	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>	<i>Adjuncts</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>HISs</i>	6	55	6	67
<i>MISs</i>	1	62	0	63
<i>SISs</i>	3	53	3	59
<i>Total</i>	10	170	9	189

$$\chi^2(4) = 9.79, p = .0441, V = .1609, \phi = .23$$

The following table shows the statistical result of advanced group.

*Table 4: Statistical results of the advanced group*

	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Indirect</i>	<i>Adjuncts</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>HISs</i>	10	76	13	99
<i>MISs</i>	3	72	3	78
<i>SISs</i>	2	56	7	65
<i>Total</i>	15	204	23	242

$$\chi^2(4) = 9.54, p = .0489, V = .1404, \phi = .199$$

The results show that imposition has no significant effect on the beginner group. Learners at low level of proficiency tended to use similar ways of refusal in situations of different imposition rankings. In contrast intermediate and advanced groups had significant differences in refusal strategies although the effect sizes of the both cases were not high.

#### *Difference in Using Refusal Strategies by Three Groups*

In general the difference between three groups is found in frequency of using direct semantic formulas and adjuncts. The group with lowest language competence used direct strategies much more often than groups with a higher proficiency level. Taking adjuncts into account it seems that only the advanced group knew how to take advantage of this strategy. Particularly in medium situations, only advanced groups applied this kind of strategy in their refusal.

Regarding to indirect strategies, the more advanced participants are the higher number of indirect semantic formulas were used. Unlike the other two groups, indirect strategies group consists of 17 sub-categories. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the sub-categories. Chi-square will be applied to analyze data.

*Table 5: Summary of indirect strategies used in six situations*

	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	IIQ	Others
<i>HISs</i>	29	14	46	8	20	21	8	43
<i>MISs</i>	24	7	42	11	33	14	34	21
<i>SISs</i>	23	8	11	9	26	14	18	14
<i>Total</i>	76	29	99	28	79	49	60	78

$$\chi^2(14) = 48.7, p < .001$$

This shows that imposition has a significant effect on how implicit rejection is realized. Higher frequency in most strategies was found in high-imposition situations.

The following table expresses the frequency of the indirect strategies in all situations of the three groups.

*Table 6: Summary of indirect strategies used in high imposition situations*

	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	IIQ	Others
<i>Beginner</i>	13	2	20	2	2	10	1	8
<i>Intermediate</i>	8	8	8	4	5	3	4	15
<i>Advanced</i>	8	4	18	2	13	8	3	20
<i>Total</i>	29	14	46	8	20	21	8	43

$$\chi^2(14) = 29.5, p = .009$$

*Table 7: Summary of indirect strategies used in medium imposition situations*

	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	IIQ	Others
<i>Beginner</i>	13	2	16	4	8	0	8	1
<i>Intermediate</i>	6	2	12	3	12	7	14	6
<i>Advanced</i>	5	3	14	4	13	7	12	14
<i>Total</i>	24	7	42	11	33	14	34	21

$$\chi^2(14) = 26.2, p = .024$$

*Table 8: Summary of indirect strategies used in small imposition situations*

	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	IIQ	Others
<i>Beginner</i>	10	1	17	1	3	4	5	4
<i>Intermediate</i>	6	3	12	6	12	4	7	3
<i>Advanced</i>	7	4	11	4	11	7	6	7
<i>Total</i>	23	8	40	11	26	15	18	14

$$\chi^2(14) = 16.2, p = .3$$

The results show that there is a significant difference in how indirect strategies are used by the three groups in these situations. In small imposition situations, although the difference is insignificant, by looking at the table it can be seen that IIA and IIC are always the main way to refuse of learners with limited language ability. Different from the other situations, in small imposition situations it seems that IIE (statement of alternative) is more preferred by intermediate and advanced groups.

#### *Comparison between Refusals in Speaking and Writing*

Each group was compared in their role-plays and emails. The following tables compare the difference in frequency of direct strategies, adjuncts, and indirect strategies which consists of IIA, IIB, IIC, IID, IIE, IIM and ‘others’ used by each group.

*Table 9: Summary of refusal strategies used by beginner group*

	Direct	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	Others	Adjuncts
Beginner Speaking	13	21	2	30	5	2	14	10	5
Beginner Writing	18	15	3	23	2	11	0	8	3

$$\chi^2(8) = 23.5, p = .0003$$

*Table 10: Summary of refusal strategies used by intermediate group*

	Direct	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	Others	Adjuncts
Intermediate Speaking	4	10	9	14	4	12	9	8	4
Intermediate Writing	6	10	4	18	9	17	5	16	5

$$\chi^2(8) = 8.04, p = .0429$$

*Table 11: Summary of refusal strategies used by advanced group*

	Direct	IIA	IIB	IIC	IID	IIE	IIM	Others	Adjuncts
Advanced Speaking	8	9	8	21	8	19	17	18	21
Advanced Writing	7	11	3	22	2	18	4	23	2

$$\chi^2(8) = 25.1, p = .002$$

All three groups are significant different between role-plays and emails. However, based on *p* value, the difference in the case of beginners and advanced learners is more significant than intermediate learners.

Taken the difference among groups of participants into consideration, chi-square is employed again as follows.

*Table 12: Summary of strategies used in speaking*

	Direct	Indirect	Adjuncts
Beginner – Speaking	13	79	5
Intermediate – Speaking	4	66	4
Advanced – Speaking	8	100	21

$$\chi^2(4) = 14.17, p = .0068, V = .1537$$

*Table 13: Summary of strategies used in writing*

	Direct	Indirect	Adjuncts
<b>Beginner – Writing</b>	18	76	3
<b>Intermediate – Writing</b>	6	104	5
<b>Advanced – Writing</b>	7	104	2

$$\chi^2(4) = 14.39, p = .0061, V = .1488$$

The groups are significantly different for both speaking and writing. In both speaking and writing there is a big shift from direct to indirect strategies when comparing the beginner groups with the intermediate and advanced. Furthermore, in speaking a big difference in number of adjuncts used by advanced groups is found in comparison with beginner and intermediate groups.

## Discussion

*Research Question 1: What are the differences in the refusal strategies used by learners at different proficiency levels when refusing requests of different degree of imposition?*

Taking refusal strategies of the three groups into consideration, it is not out of expectations that the lowest proficiency group tended to refuse more directly. It is true that rejecting a request indirectly is more complicated than directly because it requires a certain language level and language experience to negotiate and mitigate the refusal (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2003; Taguchi, N, 2013). Limited language ability does not allow beginner participants to maintain the conversation so that they can refuse in a tactful way.

Within the three big groups of refusal strategies, *adjuncts* which were used as a supportive move were considered to be the most difficult. It is not surprising that the number of adjuncts used by advanced participants outnumbered the other two groups. In medium situations only advanced learners performed refusal speech acts with adjuncts. In response to small requests the frequency of adjuncts was much lower compared to that of big requests. From that it can be seen that adjuncts are often used as a signal of refusal in cases the chance of acceptance is small. In cases of small requests it may be performed in the attempt to save face for the involved parties.

In terms of indirect strategies, in high and medium imposition requests, Vietnamese learners tended to use far more excuses or reasons in refusal though a greater variety of strategies were also used to respond to a big request. When being interviewed the majority of participants was aware of the difference in imposition in the request. They also admitted that the higher imposition the situations were, the easier it was to refuse. However, they did not try to make a refusal plan according to the ranking of imposition. From the interview, some participants reported that casual relationship was not worth a great effort to maintain the positive face of the interlocutor and making up reasons or excuses seemed to be an easy strategy. Clearly, high imposition requests facilitate the refusal because when it is easier for participants to invent ‘good’ excuses.

In medium imposition situations, beginners showed their inability to diversify their strategies. Advanced and intermediate learners shared a lot in common in employing certain strategies like *statement of alternative* or *hedging* in opening and closing an email. However, advanced groups also used other strategies, which were different from groups of lower proficiency. Those differences among the three groups are also caused by the gaps in language level.

In the nutshell, it was found that imposition had influence on the way the participants said ‘no’. In high imposition situations more direct strategies and adjuncts were used. The more competent the learners are in using English language, the more flexible they were in using the language. Beginners employed more direct strategies while adjuncts were mainly used by advanced learners. Beginners or intermediates still depend on typical strategies such as *statement of regret*, *wish* or *excuse/reason*. On the other hands, advanced users are able to combine a greater variety of refusal strategies.

*Research Question 2: What are the differences between speaking and email writing in refusal strategies of Vietnamese ESL learners when refusing requests of different degree of imposition?*

Generally the statistical distinction between speaking and writing was found in all three groups of participants. In writing, beginners and intermediates gave more direct refusals. In speaking, they are led by the requester and the negotiation lasts until the requester gives up. In writing, they totally control the content and the strategies. As the result, it was found that in writing beginners tended to use the same strategies for all three situations and the emails were quite short. In the interview, when being asked about their strategies in writing they said that they did not have any strategies and did not use any resources as reference. In the interview, two participants admitted that to some extent they felt more superior to the requester because in the cases, requester is in need of their help. This explained why they did not care much about how to soften their refusals.

The interview also revealed the communication belief of majority of advanced and intermediate learners. They thought that Vietnamese people tended to refuse less directly than Westerners. They reported if the same situations were performed in Vietnamese, their ways of rejection would have been different according to the expectations of society. However, in English, they chose to be more explicit, especially in writing. This showed that living in target language has certain influences on their notion of ‘face’. They tended to care more about individual ‘face’ instead of collective ‘face’, which was opposite to the common concept of ‘face’ in Vietnam..

As for the intermediate group, they seem to be more flexible in writing. In emails they gave more suggestions and used more less-frequent strategies. In the case of the advanced group, saving-face factors were conveyed through adjuncts and supportive moves. It showed that the findings of the research are quite similar to what was found by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), Soler, E. A. (2013) and Zhu, W. (2012). In speaking, the number of adjuncts used by advanced participants was much higher than that in writing. This is mainly due to the fact that in speaking, the length of the conversation was quite lengthy and the speakers were forced to produce more language.

When comparing three groups in terms of three major strategy groups in speaking and writing, differences can be found in both modes. The pattern is quite consistent in that beginners always used more direct strategies. In speaking, thanks to a greater language capacity, advanced learners employed adjuncts to lessen the face-damage factors of their refusals. Especially in the case of small imposition situations, in the interviews, all of the participants admitted that face-to-face refusal to a small request is harder because they felt ashamed to say ‘no’ in the situations they could perform the request with very little effort. In writing, in general, the strategies to refuse were to give the reasons and alternative suggestions. The participants told that giving another feasible option was believed to be the softest way to reject the request.

Overall all three groups of participants showed a significant difference between the two modes. When having more freedom in choosing the strategies, in writing beginner and intermediate participants said ‘I can’t’ or ‘No’ more often. Advanced group included a higher number of adjuncts in speech act in role-play than in emails. Intermediate participants seemed to be more confident in writing, with more strategies used in writing and of a greater variety.

## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to find out the effects of imposition on the way ESL learners refused requests of different degree of imposition in speaking and emails. It was found that in high imposition requests more moves were required to reject and rankings of imposition did influence on the way the participants refuse although they were not really aware of that fact. Language proficiency also affects on the kinds of chosen strategies. Due to the difference in nature of communication in speaking and writing, different strategies are employed. While lower proficiency groups feel freer to refuse directly in writing, advanced groups apply adjuncts to make moves for their refusal in speaking. Future studies should be carried out response rating to examine the quality of the language. Plus, length of residence should be considered as a variable because level of target language exposure also affects pragmatic competence of ESL learners.

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