

The Art of Saying “No” to University Students: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Speech Act of Refusal in Teacher-Student Role-Plays

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Several studies have examined the speech act of refusal. However, there is a dearth of research on the realization of this face-threatening speech act in the context of teacher-student talk. It is also unclear how the social variables of gender and years of teaching experience could influence the realization of this speech act in teacher-student interaction. In order to address this gap in the literature, the current study investigated how university teachers decline students' requests. To this end, the realization strategies of the speech act of refusal by 60 faculty members at a private Saudi university where English is used as a medium of instruction were examined. Data were collected through role-plays and were coded regarding the types of refusal strategies, adjuncts, and modifiers employed by the teachers. The results showed a clear preference for indirect strategies, a limited use of internal ones, and a minimal influence for gender and the teaching experience on the realization strategies. The results are interpreted in light of the politeness theory, the use of English as a lingua franca, the specific context of teacher-student talk, and the existing literature.

Keywords: speech act, refusal, pragmatics, English as a lingua franca, teacher-student talk, politeness

Introduction

The current study examines the speech act of refusal, which involves the denial of a particular proposition advanced by an interlocutor and constitutes a negative response to other speech acts, including requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions (Gass & Houck, 1999). The refusal is, thus, a response to another speech act that is initiated by another participant and it is highly likely that the refusal threatens the other participant's face (Martínez-Flor & Beltrán-Palanques, 2013). In the current study, I focus on examining how university teachers decline their students' requests. Students make various requests to teachers on a daily basis. Giving consent to the requests will be often well-received by students and is, thus, a relatively easy act to perform. Instead, declining these requests is quite a complicated task since teachers need to carefully consider a number of relevant variables, including the university policies, their prior knowledge of the students, the educational values, the pedagogical goals, and most sensitively, their interpersonal relationship with the students. After all, saying “no” may not be well received by students, will most likely be questioned, and can harm the teacher-student relationship. Hence, teachers are highly likely to pay careful attention to how they decline requests, weighing a number of informational, pedagogic and interpersonal goals simultaneously.

The context of the current study is a private university in Saudi Arabia where English is the medium of instruction (EMI) and where faculty members represent a diversity of nationalities and mother tongues. In this context, it is necessary to use the English language as a medium for everyday communication. Hence, English here is used as a lingua franca (ELF), which can be understood as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice and often the only option,” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). The use of English in this context parallels the use of ELF in real life as it has become the language of choice in a variety of international settings (Riekkinen, 2010). Due to its widespread use, ELF has become a hot topic in Applied Linguistics and English studies (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009). The traditional view of ELF as a learner language that may display deviant language use has been largely rejected (e.g., Howatt

& Widdowson, 2004; Riekkinen, 2010; Widdowson, 1994). Competent English language users who use the language to teach at universities, present at international conferences, publish in international journals, etc. cannot be considered language learners who still look to the native speaker as a model to improve their language skills. Instead, there is a general agreement that ELF is a legitimate language variety (e.g., Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Riekkinen, 2010; Widdowson, 1994) that may have linguistic innovations (Widdowson, 1994). This revised perspective calls for further investigations of the use of ELF in a variety of contexts.

Within the framework of ELF and university teacher-student interactions, the current study is highly significant. First, examining the realization of different speech acts in teacher-student talk is under-researched in the literature. Earlier studies have mainly focused on the speech acts of praising and criticizing (e.g., El-Dakhs, Ambreen, Zaheer, & Gusarova, 2019; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Lü, 2018) while other speech acts, including the refusal of requests, have not been examined. This is an intriguing gap in the literature since findings in this regard can provide insightful feedback for theoretical models and pedagogical practices in relation to teacher-student interactions. Second, the current study focuses on the realization of the speech act of refusal within an institutionalized academic setting. Earlier studies on the speech act of refusal have generally addressed cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., El-Dakhs, 2018; Moafian, Yazdi, & Sarani, 2019) or interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Morkus, 2018; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016). The current study, however, will examine how the realization of this speech act may be different in institutionalized discourse. Third, research into ELF in EMI contexts is highly needed at a time where an increasing number of universities in non-English speaking countries have decided to teach in English. In fact, in 2011, UNESCO reported that English had become the dominant medium of instruction used in higher education internationally (Tilak, 2011). Finally, the current study examines the influence of gender and the years of teaching experience on the teachers' choices of refusal strategies. Gender differences in communication are widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Holmes, 2001; Lakoff, 1975; Maltz & Borker, 1982), but the question is: will the effect of gender be equally found in an institutionalized setting such as the one employed in the current study? Additionally, in the education literature, the years of teaching experience is often considered an important variable of study (e.g., Annetta & Minogue, 2004; Graham, White, Cologon & Pianta, 2020; Nixon, Campbell, & Luft, 2016). The current study brings this variable into the domain of pragmatic research and aims to explore its influence on the realization of the speech act of refusal by teachers in a private university. Findings in relation to these two important social variables could be insightful.

The current study draws on the face-saving perspective of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and a number of other relevant studies on the speech act of refusal and the nature of teacher-student interactions. Hence, the following section will include a brief description of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory as well as a brief survey of earlier studies on the speech act of refusal and the realization of other speech acts in teacher-student interactions. This will be followed by defining the research questions, describing the methodology and results, interpreting the results, and drawing final conclusions.

Literature Review

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

At the heart of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory is Goffman's (1967) concept of 'face' which is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (p. 319). Brown and Levinson (1987) consider face to be a person's public self-image "that can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction," (p. 66). Due to its considerable importance in their model of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) further classify the concept of face into two types; namely, positive face and negative face. Positive face, on the one hand, refers to one's desire to be appreciated and approved of. People generally prefer to be appreciated and to be commended on their behaviour. Negative face, on the other hand, represents people's desire to enjoy freedom without acts of imposition. People generally prefer to have freedom in their choices, actions, and relationships.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker" (p. 70). The speech act of refusal in the current study is considered a face-threatening act (FTA). When a request is declined, the

requester's positive face is threatened because the preference of the requester is not commended or approved of. The requester's negative face also suffers because the refusal of his/her request entails taking a different course of action than the one preferred by the requester. Due to the sensitivity of FTAs, Brown and Levinson (1987) postulated that the interlocutor performing such acts often attempts to soften the effect of these acts through different redressive strategies. One politeness strategy is to avoid the FTA altogether in order to maintain harmony. In this case, priority is given to the interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors. Another politeness strategy is to express the FTA in a relatively ambiguous and indirect manner through metaphors, irony, hints, rhetorical questions, or understatements, among others. This strategy reduces the interlocutor's commitment to the FTA and allows room for negotiation. A third strategy would be to cater to the speaker's positive face. This strategy entails expressing appreciation and approval of the speaker's behaviour. A fourth strategy would be to address the speaker's negative face through mitigating the effect of imposition. Allowing the speaker some freedom of action, even if only theoretically, may help maintain face. It is also possible that the FTA is expressed directly or unambiguously for different reasons. This strategy is described by Brown and Levinson (1987) as 'bald on record'. Certainly, the choice among these strategies will be greatly influenced by several variables, including social distance, social dominance, and cultural preferences.

It is worth noting that Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) politeness theory has received some harsh criticism. According to several researchers, the model disregards the larger linguistic context (Hayashi, 1996), focuses on the self at the expense of social relationships (Spencer-Oatey, 2000), and considers human interaction to be governed by universal principles without paying adequate attention to culture specificity (Baron, 2002). Additionally, the model has been criticized for its inability to account for impoliteness as well as politeness (Eelen, 2001) and its focus on an ideal model of the person instead of accounting for the person in relation to others (Watts, 2003), which constitutes a priority in real life. Despite this criticism, and other contrary perspectives by proponents of postmodern or discursive politeness (e.g., Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), I adopted Brown and Levinson's model (1978, 1987) while interpreting the results of the current study because the theory offers an incisive description of linguistic strategies (e.g., Locher, 2006; Pizziconi, 2003) and has proved easy and flexible to use while examining the realization strategies of speech acts.

Studies on the Speech Act of Refusal

Research on the speech act of refusal can be classified into three types; namely, (1) research within one language, (2) research on cross-cultural comparisons, and (3) research into interlanguage pragmatics. Relatively few studies fall under the monolingual category, but they generally aim to explore how the speech act of refusal is realized in a given language considering a number of social variables. For instance, Félix-Brasdefer (2006) investigated the linguistic strategies employed by monolingual native speakers of Mexican Spanish in one community in Mexico in refusal interactions in formal/informal situations. The findings showed that politeness in this community is realized by a set of formulaic/semi-formulaic expressions to negotiate face, and that the negotiation of face is achieved through indirect attempts to (re)negotiate a successful resolution. Interestingly, face needs in this community are oriented towards the group, emphasizing involvement over independence. Another case in point is El-Dakhs (2018). Adopting a variational pragmatic approach, El-Dakhs (2018) compared the realization of the speech acts of giving consent and the refusal of requests in two regional varieties of the Arabic language; namely, Egyptian and Saudi Arabic. The results indicated that both groups preferred the use of indirect over direct refusal strategies. Additionally, the effect of the social variables of distance and dominance was similar across the two groups.

Other studies on the speech act of refusal were cross-cultural in nature. A case in point is Kwon (2004) who compared the variations of refusal expressions between Koreans and Americans. The results showed clear cross-cultural variations in the frequency and content of semantic formulas used by each language group in relation to a number of contextual variables, including social distance and dominance, and the eliciting speech acts, which included requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Another example of cross-cultural studies is Moafian, Yazdi, and Sarani (2019) who examined the realization of the refusal speech act in the Persian, English, and Balouchi languages. Comparisons of the refusal realization strategies revealed statistically significant differences among the three groups of speakers concerning both the total frequencies and the frequencies of direct/indirect refusal strategies and adjuncts. Similar to Kwon (2004), social variables seemed to contribute to cross-cultural variations. It is interesting to note that such cross-cultural studies often aim at increasing global understanding and facilitating inter-cultural communication through highlighting cross-cultural variations.

In addition to monolingual and cross-cultural studies, a number of studies have examined the refusal speech act from an interlanguage perspective (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Bella, 2011, 2014; Morkus, 2018; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016; Wannaruk, 2008). These studies mainly examined the pragmatic competence of foreign and second language learners with the aim of identifying potential difficulties and assessing the development of pragmatic competence. There is general agreement in the literature that language learners face great difficulties developing their pragmatic competence and often experience pragmatic interference from the norms of their native language and culture. Additionally, it has often been noted that the development of pragmatic competence is influenced by a number of variables, including language proficiency, learning environment, and type of instruction. Based on the findings of these studies, it is often recommended to integrate the teaching of pragmatics into the language classroom. To this end, several studies (e.g., Da Silva, 2003; Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Martínez-Flor & Beltrán-Palanques, 2013; Sa'd & Gholami, 2017) have explored the best practices for teaching pragmatics.

It must be notable by now that the literature has failed to recognize the special status of English when used as a lingua franca. No earlier studies attempted to examine the realization of the speech act of refusal among non-native, yet competent, English language users, who use ELF for intercultural communication. This is an intriguing gap in the literature that the current study aims to fill. This study examines the realization strategies of the refusal speech act as produced by university professors who use English competently and confidently as a lingua franca.

Studies on the Realization of Speech Acts in Teacher-Student Interactions

Research into the realization of speech acts in teacher-student interactions is relatively limited. The existing studies in this direction have mainly targeted the speech acts of criticizing and praising. For instance, Hyland and Hyland (2001) analysed the written comments of two teachers on their language learners' assignments over a complete course. It was found that praise was frequently used, particularly as a softener for criticism and suggestions. Criticism and suggestions were also mitigated with the use of several other strategies, including hedges, questions, and personal attribution. The researchers emphasized the value of mitigating criticism to redress its potential negative influence on the teacher-student relationship. However, they pointed out that mitigation and indirectness can sometimes lead to incomprehension and miscommunication by language learners. In the same vein, Lü (2018) examined the use of emails by Chinese undergraduates to communicate pedagogical criticism to their Western teachers. The results showed that the students expressed their criticism directly and sometimes even used bald critical statements in their emails. The researchers concluded that students view emails as a safe and effective channel to communicate their views. The students' preferences in this computer-mediated form of communication were clearly different from their general preferred patterns of interaction in face-to-face communication.

A few other studies were conducted on the speech act of criticizing in oral teacher-student interactions. Hiraga and Turner (1996) compared tutor-student interactions in British and Japanese academic contexts. It was noted that the Japanese students paid special attention to the face wants of the tutor while the British students tended to be sensitive towards their own face wants. While both British students and tutors tried hard to carefully attend to each other's negative face, this was not a major concern in the Japanese context, whether for the students or tutors. In a later study, Hiraga, Fuji, and Turner (2003) examined the difficulties Japanese students studying in Great Britain face regarding pragmatic understanding in tutorial sessions with British tutors. Whereas the British tutors paid special attention to students' face, students did not show similar sensitivity to their own face wants. The differences between the British and the Japanese participants in the two studies were explained in terms of cross-cultural variation. British tutors generally view university students as members of the academic community and, hence, treat them in an egalitarian manner. The relationship between tutors and students in Japanese universities is rather different since it is more hierarchical and authority-based. In the same vein, Cao (2005) highlighted the role of cultural influence on the realization of the speech act of criticism in the Chinese academic context. The Chinese lecturers' criticism was viewed as justified, and students were expected to accept the criticism and submit to the lecturers' instructions since they are assigned an inferior role in the social hierarchy in the world of academia.

Two other particularly relevant studies are Riekkinen (2010) and El-Dakhs, Ambreen, Zaheer, and Gusarova (2019). Similar to the current study, these two studies focused on the interactions of ELF-speaking university

professors in an EMI context. Extending the study of criticism to the domain of doctoral thesis defenses, Riekkinen (2010) compared the use of hedges by university professors who are native speakers of English versus those who are ELF speakers. The results showed that ELF speakers used hedges differently than native speakers of English with respect to the employed expressions and their frequencies. However, these differences did not cause any miscommunication in the professors' interactions with students. El-Dakhs, Ambreen, Zaheer, and Gusarova (2019) studied the realization of the speech act of criticizing among ELF university professors and undergraduate students. It was clear that teachers preferred the use of indirect over direct strategies and used modifiers minimally, particularly internal ones. The influence of gender and years of teaching experience was minimal.

It should be clear by now that there is a lack of studies on the speech act of refusal in the context of teacher-student talk, and a dearth of studies on the effect of important social variables, such as gender and years of teaching experience, on the realization of speech acts in teacher-student interactions. The present study aims to fill this gap through examining the realization strategies of the speech act of refusal in teacher-student role-plays. The current study also considers the effect of gender as an important variable of the study due to the repeated claims of distinctive talking styles for males and females (e.g., Holmes, 2001; Lakoff, 1975; Maltz & Borker, 1982) and the effect of years of teaching experience since the author expected that the differences in years of teaching experience could influence the realization of refusal strategies. Needless to say, the findings of this study will have important educational and pedagogical implications because the face-threatening act of refusal in academic contexts can have a negative impact on the teacher-student relationship as well as the student learning experience and academic achievement. Hence, the current study aims to examine the refusal strategies employed by university teachers in response to students' requests within an ELF context. More specifically, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do university teachers realize the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?
2. How does gender influence university teachers' realization of the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?
3. How do more years of teaching experience influence university teachers' realization of the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 60 faculty members were recruited from a private Saudi university that is characterized by its multicultural community. The sample was gender-balanced, consisting of 30 males and 30 females. The female faculty members ranged in age between 28 and 55 (mean= 41.3) and belonged to 11 nationalities. The teaching experience for the female participants varied between 5 and 30 years (Mean= 15.3), while their years of service at the private university ranged between 1 and 14 (Mean= 6.86). The male faculty members ranged in age between 30 and 58 (Mean= 41.9) and belonged to 13 nationalities. Their years of teaching experience ranged between 2 and 30 years (Mean= 14.36) while their years of service at the private university varied between 1 and 20 years (Mean= 5.56). Table (1) shows a summary of the participants' characteristics. The author did not have language proficiency scores for the participants, but the participants were competent language users who completed their university education in English, were teaching in EMI at the university level, and were communicating in English within the academic community (e.g., research papers and conference presentations, among others).

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Table 1

The study participants’ characteristics

Male	Age	Years of Teaching experience	Years of service at university	Nationality	Female	Age	Years of Teaching experience	Years of service at university	Nationality
1	45	20	5	Bangladeshi	1	45	22	5	Egyptian
2	30	3	1	Egyptian	2	45	20	12	
3	45	18	1		3	53	29	10	
4	40	12	5		4	58	30	5	
5	40	15	7		5	28	5	5	Indian
6	38	10	1	Ethiopian	6	34	10	10	
7	46	20	5	Indian	7	48	22	14	
8	42	15	6		8	38	10	8	
9	30	2	2		9	38	12	5	
10	40	13	11	Jordanian	10	37	12	9	
11	43	14	11		11	48	20	2	Indonesian
12	58	25	20		12	32	5	5	Jordanian
13	39	13	12		13	43	17	14	
14	55	30	5	Malaysian	14	39	13	12	Lebanese
15	50	25	4		15	40	13	9	
16	43	15	3	Nigerian	16	39	12	7	
17	46	20	4		17	55	30	6	
18	40	15	3		18	35	12	2	Malaysian
19	45	15	9	Pakistani	19	55	25	4	
20	48	20	8		20	30	5	1	Pakistani
21	32	3	1		21	38	14	8	
22	40	13	1		22	48	20	5	
23	45	17	17	Palestinian	23	50	25	11	
24	30	5	5	Saudi	24	50	20	10	Russian
25	35	7	3		25	30	6	3	Saudi
26	45	15	7	Tunisian	26	32	6	4	
27	33	5	1	Turkish	27	35	8	8	
28	58	29	5	Yemeni	28	29	6	1	
29	46	15	2		29	40	11	6	Spanish
30	30	2	2		30	45	19	5	Sudanese

Data Collection

Data were collected through 10 role-plays (see Appendix A) representing everyday situations that university teachers often encounter with their students. These situations were prepared through a focus group with five teachers at the same university who agreed that these are regular situations they encountered with their students. The role-plays were later reviewed by three Applied Linguistics PhD holders who found them clear and appropriate to use.

The teachers’ role in the role-plays was to decline the requests posed by the students including students requesting higher grades, submitting assignments late, and re-scheduling major exams, among others. In order to increase the probability of the teachers being able to naturally decline the students’ requests in these role-

plays, the researcher included two types of situations. The first type represented violations of university policies (scenarios 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 in Appendix A), such as a request to change the student's grade, to cancel a class without a valid reason, or to change the class time without prior coordination with the academic department. The second type of situations included requests that were somehow too difficult to accept (scenarios 2, 5, and 6 in Appendix A). Examples include a request to submit a late assignment after two extensions had already been granted and a request to re-schedule a major exam at an inconvenient time for the majority of the other students in a class without having a valid reason. The participants in the study were asked to read each scenario and then respond to the request as they would do naturally with their students. Since male teachers teach male students and female teachers teach female students in Saudi universities, the teachers imagined talking to students of the same sex. All role-plays were audio-recorded by the researcher and later transcribed manually by the researcher as well.

It is important to note that the researcher decided to collect data through role-plays, not written discourse completion tasks, because the focus of the current study is on oral communication. Role-plays increase the authenticity of teachers' interaction. Teachers are likely to respond more naturally in role-plays than if they write their responses. The researcher is aware that collecting ethnographic data would have rendered much more authentic data. However, role-plays were more feasible since it was not easy to collect naturally occurring request-refusal sequences of teacher-student talk. Additionally, role-plays allowed for more control of the study variables and comparisons across similar situations. It is also important to note that data collection took place after receiving ethical clearance from the research ethics committee at the Saudi university. Emails were sent to faculty members requesting their participation in the study. Only the faculty members who agreed to participate completed the role-plays.

Data Coding

Data were coded using Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) model of refusal strategies. The model consists of two main categories; namely, direct refusal and indirect refusal. Each of these categories includes a number of sub-categories, such as negative willingness/inability for direct refusal, and statement of regret for indirect refusals. In addition to this classification of refusal strategies, a number of adjuncts to refusals were identified, including statements of positive opinion/empathy, pause/fillers, and expressions of gratitude/appreciation. Beebe et al.'s (1990) model is provided in Appendix B. Participants were also given the choice to opt out or to agree to the requests. However, no faculty member chose to opt out and the few cases when the faculty member chose to agree to the request (N=12 situations) were excluded from the coding. Additionally, it was acknowledged that the participants may soften their refusals by using internal modifiers. Hence, Trosborg's (1995) model of internal modifiers, which can be found in Appendix C, was also used for data coding.

It must be noted that Beebe et al.'s (1990) model of refusal strategies was used for data coding in the current study because it was widely used in the literature (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; El-Dakhs, 2018; Bella, 2011, 2014; Kwon, 2004; Morkus, 2018) and because it was easy to use and fit well with the teachers' responses. In fact, the only adaptation made was to introduce the sub-category "term of endearment" under "adjuncts" because it occurred repeatedly in the data. It is also important to note that another coder who is a PhD holder of Applied Linguistics was hired. After coding the data independently from the author, an inter-coder reliability check was conducted using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) and the outcome was 90%. Hence, the author's coding was considered reliable and used as the basis for data analysis.

Results

How do university teachers realize the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?

Table (2) shows how frequently the different refusal strategies were used by the university teachers. The teachers strongly preferred to use indirect (75%) rather than direct (25%) refusal strategies. This preference for indirectness can even be noted in their use of the strategies under the direct category. The teachers showed a strong preference to use the strategy of negative willingness/inability (e.g., I can't cancel the class.), which is the least direct among "direct" strategies. In fact, this strategy was used 274 times out of the total of 332 instances of direct strategies. Regarding the indirect strategies, four main strategies dominated the scene;

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namely, giving excuses, reasons, and explanation (e.g., The new exam time does not suit other students.) (23%), setting a condition for future/past acceptance (e.g., If you had asked me earlier, I could have sorted it out.) (14%), expressing regret (e.g., I’m sorry.) (13%), and attempting to dissuade the student (e.g., But this move will have serious consequences.) (13%).

Table 2
Percentages of refusal strategies

Strategy	Sum	Percentage
Performative	8	0.6
Non-Performative	324	24.4%
I. Total direct strategies	332	25%
Statement of regret	162	13%
Wish	2	0.2%
Excuse, reason, explanation	302	23%
Statement of alternative	45	3.2%
Set condition for future/ past acceptance	189	14%
Promise of future acceptance	2	0.2%
Statement of principle	99	8%
Statement of philosophy	3	0.2%
Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	171	13%
Acceptance that functions as refusal	1	0.1%
Avoidance	1	0.1%
II. Total indirect strategies	977	75%

Table (3) shows the use of refusal strategies per situation (following the same order of situations in Appendix A). The participants used fewer direct strategies than indirect ones in all situations. The percentage of direct strategies across situations ranged between 18% and 34%. The situations in which the highest number of direct strategies was used involved situation 4 - a request to attend the course in another section than the one in which the student is registered (34%), situation 6 - submitting group work on an individual assignment (30%), and situation 10 - being considered present on the academic portal while not being present in class (29%). The situations in which the lowest number of direct strategies was used included situation 7 - requests to change class time (18%) and situation 2 - submitting an assignment late (22%).

Table 3
Percentage of refusal strategies per situation

Situation	Direct		Indirect	
	Sum	Percentage	Sum	Percentage
1	27	23%	92	77%
2	31	22%	111	78%
3	35	25%	103	75%
4	52	34%	99	66%
5	34	25%	104	75%
6	35	30%	80	70%
7	24	18%	107	82%
8	25	23%	83	77%
9	28	23%	96	77%
10	41	29%	102	71%

Table (4) shows the use of adjuncts and internal modifiers across all situations. Overall, the use of adjuncts and internal modifiers was small (n= 239 for adjuncts and 189 for internal modifiers) considering that each of the

60 participants responded to 10 situations. It is also notable that the participants produced more adjuncts, particularly in the form of terms of endearment (n=87) and giving advice (n= 54), than internal modifiers. The highest numbers for internal modifiers went for the use of intensifiers, mainly “very,” (n= 73), downtoners (n= 40), and cajolers (n= 36).

Table 4
Percentage of adjuncts and internal modifiers

Strategy	Sum	Percentage
Statement of positive opinion	21	5%
Statement of empathy	25	6%
Pause fillers	36	8%
Gratitude/appreciation	2	0.5%
Term of endearment	89	20.5%
Drawing attention	12	3%
Giving advice	54	13%
I. Total adjuncts	239	56%
1. Polite markers	24	6%
2. Understaters	2	0.5%
3. Hedges	2	0.5%
4. Downtoners	40	9%
5. Cajolers	36	8%
6. Subjectivizers	5	1%
Total downgraders	109	25%
Intensifiers	73	17%
Plus commitors	7	2%
Total upgraders	80	19%
II. Total internal modifiers	189	44%

Table (5) shows the use of adjuncts and internal modifiers for every situation (following the same order of situations in Appendix A). The participants’ tendency to use more adjuncts than internal modifiers is noted here again with a higher number of adjuncts in 7 out of the 10 situations. Interestingly, this table also shows that the adjuncts and internal modifiers were used minimally since they ranged between 82 and 28 with a mean of 42.8 per situation.

Table 5
Table 3 Percentage of adjuncts and internal modifiers per situation

Situation	Adjuncts		Internal Modifiers	
	Sum	Percentage	Sum	Percentage
1	53	65%	29	35%
2	30	63%	18	37%
3	26	55%	21	45%
4	21	62%	13	38%
5	15	38%	25	62%
6	18	58%	13	42%
7	30	56%	24	44%
8	19	61%	12	39%
9	15	45%	18	55%
10	12	43%	16	57%

How does gender influence university teachers’ realization of the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?

In order to examine the influence of gender on the teachers’ refusal strategies, a t-test was run to compare the averages of the two genders. As shown in Table 6, the comparisons reached statistical significance only in the case of one direct strategy and three indirect strategies. While males used significantly more performatives (e.g., *I refuse.*) ($P = 0.0003$) and letting the interlocutor off the hook (e.g., *Don’t worry about it.*) ($P = 0.003$), females produced significantly more statements of regret (e.g., *I’m sorry.*) ($P = 0.001$) and statements of principle (e.g., *I never mark absent students as present. This is unethical.*) ($P = 0.006$). As for adjuncts, females used significantly more terms of endearment ($P = 0.001$), expressions of empathy (e.g., *I understand how you feel.*) ($P = 0.025$), and expressions of positive opinion (e.g., *That’s a good idea.*) ($P = 0.015$). The results followed a similar pattern with internal modifiers as females produced significantly more subjectivizers (e.g., *I think*) ($P = 0.025$), intensifiers (e.g., *very*) ($P = 0.002$), and plus commitors (e.g., *of course*) ($P = 0.008$). Hence, comparisons reached statistical significance in 4 out of 22 comparisons for direct and indirect strategies, 3 out of 6 for adjuncts, and 3 out of 9 for internal modifiers.

Table 6
T-test results – influence of gender

Strategy	Gender	Mean	SD	T	Sig (2-tailed)
Performative	Female	0.003	0.06	2.140	0.0003
	Male	0.02	0.15		
Total direct strategies	Female	0.58	0.58	1.097	0.273
	Male	0.53	0.61		
Statement of regret	Female	0.35	0.48	4.416	0.001
	Male	0.19	0.39		
Statement of principle	Female	0.21	0.41	2.763	0.006
	Male	0.12	0.33		
Interlocutor off the hook	Female	0.00	0.00	3.041	0.003
	Male	0.03	0.17		
Total indirect strategies	Female	1.78	0.87	4.416	0.001
	Male	1.48	0.77		
Positive opinion	Female	0.05	0.23	2.452	0.015
	Male	0.02	0.13		
Empathy	Female	0.06	0.24	2.253	0.025
	Male	0.02	0.15		
Term of endearment	Female	0.24	0.43	6.594	0.001
	Male	0.05	0.23		
Total adjuncts	Female	0.49	0.71	3.568	0.001
	Male	0.30	0.59		
Subjectivizers	Female	0.02	0.13	2.251	0.025
	Male	0.00	0.00		
Total internal modifiers – Downgraders	Female	0.21	0.47	1.820	0.069
	Male	0.15	0.38		
Intensifiers	Female	0.16	0.37	3.143	0.002
	Male	0.08	0.27		
Plus commitors	Female	0.02	0.15	2.673	0.008
	Male	0.00	0.00		
Total internal modifiers – Upgraders	Female	0.19	0.40	3.829	0.001
	Male	0.08	0.27		

For further examination of the influence of gender on the university teachers' refusal strategies, a T-tests was run for each situation as well. As Table (7) shows, the majority of situations had one or two statistically significant comparisons. The most notable was the terms of endearment, which were significantly used more often by females in 7 out of the 10 situations. The other comparisons were noted in fewer situations. For example, the request was criticized more often by females in situations 4 ($P= 0.043$) and 7 ($P= 0.047$), and by males in situation 2 (0.001). Males produced significantly more conditions in situations 2 ($P= 0.047$) and 9 ($P= 0.009$), and more fillers in situations 2 ($P= 0.047$) and 3 ($P= 0.024$) while females used significantly more statements of principle in situations 8 ($P= 0.023$) and 9 ($P= 0.012$). Finally, females produced significantly more statements of regret in situation 9 ($P= 0.006$) and positive opinion in situation 3 ($P= 0.012$), whereas males let the interlocutor off the hook significantly more frequently than females in situation 2 ($P= 0.047$).

Table 7
T-test results – influence of gender per situation

Situation	Strategy	Gender	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
1	Terms of endearment	Female	0.43	0.50	2.688	0.010
		Male	0.13	0.35		
2	Excuse, reason, & explanation	Female	0.67	0.48	2.112	0.039
		Male	0.40	0.50		
	Setting condition	Female	0.03	0.18	2.047	0.047
		Male	0.20	0.41		
	Criticizing the request	Female	0.00	0.00	3.808	0.001
		Male	0.33	0.48		
	Interlocutor off the hook	Female	0.00	0.00	2.112	0.043
		Male	0.13	0.35		
	Fillers	Female	0.03	0.18	2.047	0.047
		Male	0.20	0.41		
3	Positive opinion	Female	0.20	0.41	2.693	0.012
		Male	0.00	0.00		
	Fillers	Female	0.03	0.18	2.344	0.024
		Male	2.23	0.43		
4	Criticize the request	Female	0.13	0.35	2.112	0.043
		Male	0.00	0.00		
	Terms of endearment	Female	0.27	0.45	2.121	0.039
		Male	0.07	0.25		
5	Terms of endearment	Female	0.23	0.43	2.971	0.006
		Male	0.00	0.00		
6	Terms of endearment	Female	0.23	0.43	2.344	0.024
		Male	0.03	0.18		
7	Criticize the request	Female	0.20	0.41	2.047	0.047
		Male	0.03	0.18		
	Terms of endearment	Female	0.27	0.45	2.121	0.039
		Male	0.07	0.25		
8	Statement of principle	Female	0.17	0.38	2.408	0.023
		Male	0.00	0.00		
	Terms of endearment	Female	0.20	0.41	2.047	0.047
		Male	0.03	0.18		

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Situation	Strategy	Gender	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
9	Statement of regret	Female	0.50	0.51	2.878	0.006
		Male	0.17	0.38		
	Setting condition	Female	0.30	0.47	2.699	0.009
		Male	0.63	0.49		
	Statement of principle	Female	0.20	0.41	2.693	0.012
		Male	0.00	0.00		
10	Terms of endearment	Female	0.20	0.41	2.693	0.012
		Male	0.00	0.00		

How do more years of teaching experience influence university teachers’ realization of the speech act of refusal in their talk with students?

In order to address the influence of more years of teaching experience on the realization of refusal among university teachers, a Pearson correlation test was run to measure the statistical relationship, or association, between the two variables. The effect of the years of teaching experience on the realization of the speech act of refusal was minimal. Overall, only one case of positive correlation reached significance. The more years of teaching experience the teachers had, the more likely they were to make use of performatives (e.g., *I refuse*.) ($R=0.116$; $P=.004$). As for the different situations, Table 8 shows that every situation (following the same order of situations in Appendix A) had only one case of statistically significant correlation except for situation 2 (the student requests to submit an assignment late), which has three statistically significant correlations. These numbers are truly minimal since the number of potential refusal strategies, whether direct or indirect, adjuncts, and internal modifiers available to the participants was 39.

Table 8

Pearson correlation test results – influence of the years of teaching experience per situation

Situation	Strategy/Modifier	R	Sig
1	Negative willingness	-0.264	0.042
2	No	0.288	0.026
	Threat/ Consequences	-0.270	0.037
	Criticize the request	-0.264	0.042
3	Not applicable		
4	Intensifier	0.269	0.037
5	Downtoner	0.268	0.038
6	Performative	0.302	0.019
7	Not applicable		
8	Statement of principle	0.307	0.017
9	Not applicable		
10	Giving advice	0.279	0.031

Discussion

The results of the present study show that university teachers prefer to express refusal to students’ requests indirectly. This general tendency to use indirect refusals, probably to mitigate the threatening effect of the speech act, has been reported in earlier studies (e.g., El-Dakhs, 2018; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006). This tendency seems to be further enhanced in the current study as these university teachers preferred to use indirect strategies in three-quarters of the situations. This highly frequent use of indirect strategies can be explained in terms of the use of ELF. The users of ELF are generally characterized as being particularly sensitive and cooperative because of their lack of familiarity with their interlocutors’ cultures (Mauranen, 2003). When

someone is unfamiliar with the addressee's culture, they tend to be more sensitive and cooperative in order to avoid any misunderstandings or conflicts.

Another contributing factor to the highly frequent use of indirect strategies is the sensitivity of the teacher-student relationship. Teachers often carefully consider their interpersonal relationship with students and give priority to rapport management while addressing FTAs (e.g., El-Dakhs, Ambreen, Zaheer & Gusarova, 2019; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). This is clearly illustrated in the university teachers' preferences for particular refusal strategies. Under the direct category, the teachers mostly expressed their inability to give consent. They mainly preferred to say "*I can't do...*" and then explained the relevant university policy or educational principle (e.g., *The university policy does not allow me to cancel classes*). Hence, any arising conflict will not be personal, but will be directed towards the set policies and guidelines. A similar pattern is noted in the use of indirect strategies. The teachers mostly used expressions of regret (e.g., *I'm sorry*), explained the university policy that justified their refusals (e.g., *The lab has a limited number of seats, so we need a limited number of students*), or attempted to dissuade the students by mentioning the consequences of their actions as set by the institution (e.g., *I will have to mark you as absent*).

In terms of politeness, the teachers' preferences reflect an obvious sensitivity to the students' face. Their limited use of direct strategies reflects their preference to avoid using bald on record strategies that are highly threatening to students' face. Instead, they preferred to cater to students' negative face by using strategies that involve minimal imposition. For instance, they preferred to dissuade students by explaining the consequences of their requests, which may theoretically allow students room to make their own decisions. For example, the teachers explained to students that if they preferred to attend an event during class time, they would be considered absent. It was then the student's decision to attend class or join the event. Another example is the teachers' preference for giving reasons and explanations for their refusal. This strategy allows room for discussion and negotiation, even if mainly theoretically. Interestingly, the teachers' explanations were mainly related to institutional policies, such as the teacher's inability to change class time without prior approval from the university management, the university stipulation that advisees need to meet with their advisors before being allowed to register for courses, the university policy regarding the maximum number of students allowed in a class, etc. Some teachers even made it clear that they could agree to the students' requests if the official in charge (e.g., department chair, registrar, etc.) would grant the student permission. Reference to the university policies helps mitigate the imposition of refusals since the primary cause is institutional and applies to all students. Because the imposition of refusals stems from the institutions, not the teachers, the teacher-student interpersonal relationship will not be harmed.

The results of the current study also show that the influence of gender and teaching experience on the teachers' responses was minimal. In the case of gender, only four comparisons were statistically significant for the direct and indirect strategies of refusal. Males used performatives (e.g., *I refuse*) and let students off the hook (e.g., *Don't worry about it*) more frequently than females while females produced significantly more expressions of regret (e.g., *I'm sorry*) and statements of principle (e.g., *I never mark absent students as present in the system*). The influence of teaching experience was even smaller with only one statistically significant comparison. Notably, the more teaching experience the teachers had, the more likely they were to produce performatives. The minimal influence of these important social variables on the teachers' use of refusal strategies can be interpreted in relation to the context of the study. Teacher-student talk in an institutionalized academic setting reflects the values underpinning the educational culture of the discourse (Hiraga & Turner, 1996) and typifies the participants' actions when engaging in interactions (Araújo, 2012). Teachers' choices in this particular discourse are governed by similar educational values and workplace guidelines. The similar values and guidelines minimize variation in the teacher talk and, thus, reduce the influence of social variables which may exert stronger influence in other contexts. In other words, whether the teacher is male/female or has few/many years of teaching experience, the policies of the institutions, the teaching guidelines disseminated across academic departments, and the regular teacher training workshops as part of the institutional professional development programs will reduce discrepancies in teachers' responses to students' requests and increase the similarity of their preferred strategies.

The university teachers' use of modifiers in the current study is particularly revealing. One important point in this regard is that the teachers employed an extremely small number of modifiers, whether in the form of downgraders or upgraders. This is in line with Cogo and Dewey's (2006) argument that ELF speakers are

content-oriented and, thus, their language often lacks interactional features such as hedges. The small number of modifiers can also be explained in terms of the fact that students in this study are language learners. As noted in Hyland (2000) and Hyland and Hyland (2001), modifiers may not be easily noticed by language learners and their use may lead to miscomprehension. Aware of their students' relatively limited language competence, university teachers may have preferred to avoid the use of modifiers, particularly internal ones, in order to enhance the clarity of the message.

Another important observation with regard to the use of modifiers is that all the statistically significant comparisons with modifiers were in favour of females. Females produced more terms of endearment, expressions of empathy (e.g., *I understand how you feel*), statements of positive opinion (e.g., *This is a good idea*), subjectivizers (e.g., *I think*), intensifiers (e.g., *very*), and plus committers (e.g., *of course*). This result comes in line with the frequently reported distinctions between males' and females' talk (e.g., Holmes, 2001; Lakoff, 1975; Maltz & Borker, 1982). Of particular relevance here is Tannen's (1986, 1990, 1994) emphasis that men's talk is different from women's talk. She wrote that the language of females is primarily 'rapport-talk,' which emphasizes establishing connections and promoting solidarity, whereas the language of males is 'report-talk,' which prioritizes conveying information and exhibiting skill. In the current study, females produced more modifiers that help maintain rapport and mitigate conflicts, such as terms of endearment, expressions of empathy, statements of positive opinion, and subjectivizers. Their use of intensifiers also created the same effect since the female teachers in her studies usually added "very" to the expression of regret "*I'm sorry*."

Two final observations are worth mentioning. First, the teachers in the current study managed to carefully manipulate the different refusal strategies to convey their messages clearly while effectively managing their rapport with students. The fact that the users of ELF in the present study manipulated the different refusal strategies adequately across different situations supports the call to treat ELF as a legitimate variety of English in its own right (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Riekkinen, 2010; Widdowson, 1994). Language learners who use English as a second or foreign language often fail to employ different refusal strategies adequately and reflect poor pragmatic competence (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Bella, 2011, 2014). Hence, users of ELF behave differently than other language learners and constitute a legitimate language variety. Second, the teachers' preferences of refusal strategies support the idea that the selection of appropriate strategies is situation-dependent (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves, 1992). For example, the teachers used more direct strategies than usual when students asked to attend class in another section than their own, to submit group work on an individual assignment, and to be considered present despite missing class. The severity of these three situations may explain why the teachers resorted to the use of more direct strategies. Attending class in another section not only violates university policy but entails major practical difficulties. It would be difficult to track the students' attendance, record their grades, etc. Similarly, submitting the only individual assignment in the form of group work can seriously impact the course assessment and the achievement of the learning outcomes. Likewise, considering an absent student present is a clear ethical violation in addition to being a breach of institutional policy. Hence, the severity of these situations appears to be an important determinant of refusal strategies.

Conclusion

It is an everyday activity for university teachers to receive requests from their students. Consenting to these requests is a much easier speech act than declining since refusal will threaten a student's face and may, thus, harm the teacher-student relationship. The students are also likely to question the teacher's refusal and engage in follow-up discussions and negotiations. Hence, teachers need to carefully consider the basis of the refusal in terms of educational principles, pedagogic goals, and institutional policies, among others. Despite the fact that declining students' requests is a common activity, and a daunting one at that, the literature lacks relevant studies on the realization of the speech act of refusal in teacher-student talk. It is this gap that the current study aimed to fill through examining how faculty members in a private Saudi university characterized by its use of EMI and its multi-cultural community declined students' requests. The current study also addressed another important gap in the literature, which is the lack of studies on the speech act of refusal among ELF users.

The results showed the teachers' strong preference for the use of indirect rather than direct refusal strategies. This reflects the teachers' sensitivity to the possibility of students losing face by minimizing imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), the teacher's careful attention to their interpersonal relationships with students, and the sensitive and cooperative nature of ELF users (Mauranen, 2003). The results also showed a limited use of modifiers. This comes in line with Cogo and Dewey's (2006) description of ELF as a content-oriented language variety that lacks interactional features. Additionally, it was found that the influence of gender and the years of teaching experience on the teachers' preferred refusal strategies was minimal. This was explained with reference to the institutionalized context of the current study. Talk in institutionalized settings often typifies the actions of the participants who appropriate their choices to the institutional conventions and norms (Araújo, 2012). It should be noted here that some gender influence was noted in the teachers' use of modifiers as females tended to use more modifiers that could support their rapport with students (Tannen, 1990).

Based on these results, two recommendations are proposed. First, it is strongly recommended to consider ELF as a legitimate variety of English that is worthy of investigation on its own. It is not wise, nor feasible, to disregard the widespread use of English as a means of intercultural communication. After all, the number of competent ELF users has surpassed the number of native English speakers in today's world (Statista, 2020). In terms of pragmatic research, empirical descriptions of ELF pragmatics are underrepresented (Seidlhofer, 2011; Taguchi and Ishihara, 2018). Therefore, it is important to conduct more studies on the pragmatic choices and preferences of ELF users. Second, teacher-student talk is an under-researched area in pragmatic research. It would be advisable to conduct more studies on teachers' and students' pragmatic decisions. In these future studies, it is highly recommended to explore other extremely important variables that the current study did not address, such as the effect of the private versus public university context and the influence of a number of individual variables including the teachers' years of service in a country, how long they had been teaching in ELF, and their cultural/linguistic backgrounds. The findings of this research will not only inform pragmatic models and principles, but will also prove useful in teacher-training programs as teachers can be trained on the best practices to ensure the appropriateness of their language while maintaining the clarity of their messages.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge three limitations in the current study. First, the study data represent teachers' responses within role-plays, not within natural interactions with students. Collecting data through ethnographic methods in future studies will add more authenticity to the data and more credibility to the results. Second, the study instrument directed the participants to decline their students' requests to some extent since it required them to explain their reasons why they would have given consent if they were to choose that option. This may have influenced the responses of some teachers. In future studies, it is recommended to allow teachers to choose whether to give consent to or decline requests in order to make the teachers' responses more natural. Finally, the author did not obtain the language proficiency scores of the participants. Although they were competent language users due to their EMI experience as students, teachers, and members of the academic discourse community, it is recommended to obtain the language proficiency scores of participants in the future to support the interpretation of the results.

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Appendix (A)

Study: Examining university teacher-student talk

Instrument: Role-play

Dear Faculty Member,

Participation in these role-plays is voluntary, so please feel free to refuse participation if you do not wish to take part in the study.

The aim of this study is to examine how university teachers handle students' requests. The data are collected through role-plays that will be recorded and later transcribed. The participants' identities will be kept strictly confidential. No special reward is offered for participation in the study. Your participation will, however, be highly appreciated by the researchers to help advance scientific research.

Procedure

You will read 10 scenarios involving students' requests. Please, decline these requests in natural spoken English as you would do in real life while actually talking to your students. In case you feel that you would not say anything in real life or you would consent to the requests, please say so and explain your reason(s).

Example:

Your student requests that you cancel your class because they want to study for an exam that is scheduled after your class.

You say: Sorry, dear. I would like to help, but I cannot cancel my class. We are already behind with the syllabus.

Now, you will be reading one scenario at a time and then have your response to your student in natural spoken English recorded.

Situation (1)

Your student requests receiving an A+ grade in the course although her performance grants her only a B grade.

Situation (2)

Your student requests submitting an assignment late although you had already extended the submission deadline twice. She has no valid reasons.

Situation (3)

Your student requests cancelling the class in order to participate in another event held on campus. You have not received any instructions from the university management to allow students to attend the event.

Situation (4)

Your student requests attending class in another section than the one he is registered because he has some friends in the other section.

Situation (5)

Your student requests re-scheduling a major exam at a time that is not convenient to the majority of students in class. He fails to provide valid reasons.

Situation (6)

Your student requests submitting an assignment in groups although you had planned this particular assignment to be completed individually. This is the only individual assignment on the syllabus.

Situation (7)

Your student requests changing the class time because the class time at 9.00 a.m. is too early for him. The university does not allow teachers to change class time.

Situation (8)

Your advisee requests that you allow her to register courses for the new semester without meeting you for the advising session required by the university.

Situation (9)

A student requests that you allow her to register in your class although your class has reached the maximum limit for registered students as per the university policy.

Situation (10)

Your student requests that you do not count his absence on the academic portal. He does not give valid reasons why he may need to miss classes.

Appendix B

Request Refusal Strategies

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz, 1990

Strategy	Example
I. Direct	
A. Performative	I refuse.
B. Non-Performative	
B. 1. No	No
B.2. Negative willingness or inability	I can't, I won't, I don't think so.
II. Indirect	
A. Statement of regret	I'm sorry, I feel terrible.
B. Wish	I wish I could help you.
C. Excuse, reason, explanation	My children will be at home that night.
D. Statement of alternative	
D. 1. I can do X instead of Y	I'd rather do – I'd prefer
D.2. Why don't you do X instead of Y?	Why don't you ask somebody else?
E. Set condition for future/ past acceptance	If you had asked me earlier, I would have...
F. Promise of future acceptance	I'll do it next time – I promise I will.
G. Statement of principle	I never do business with friends.
H. Statement of philosophy	One can't be too careful.
I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	
I.1. Threat or negative consequences	I won't be any fun tonight.
I.2. Guilt trip	I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.
I.3. Criticize the requester	That's a terrible idea.
I.4. Request help/ empathy.	I hope you understand my difficult situation.
I.5. Let interlocutor off the hook	Don't worry about it- That's okay.
I.6. Self-defense	I'm trying my best – I'm doing all I can.
J. Acceptance that functions as refusal	
J.1. Unspecific or indefinite reply	I don't know when I can give them to you.
J.2. Lack of enthusiasm	I'm not interested in diets.
K. Avoidance	
K.1. Nonverbal	Silence, hesitation, do nothing
K.2. Verbal	Topic switch, joke, postponement
III. Adjuncts	
A. Statement of positive opinion	That's a good idea.
B. Statement of empathy	I realize you are in a difficult situation.
C. Pause fillers	Uhh, well, uh
D. Gratitude/ appreciation	Thank you.
E. Term of endearment	Dear, sweetheart

Appendix C

Coding Scheme for Internal Modifiers –Trosborg (1995)

Type	Characteristic	Example
1. Downgraders		
Polite markers	Words or phrases that express politeness	<i>"Please."</i>
Understaters	Expressions that describe or represent (something) as being smaller or less important than it really is	<i>"I think it's a bit salty for me, the soup."</i>
Hedges	Mitigating word or construction used to lessen the impact of an utterance	<i>"You are making kind of a statement with the pants though."</i>
Downtoners	Words or phrases which reduce the force of another word or phrase	<i>"Yes, I mean it might be but it still seems to me at the moment that perhaps it's not a good idea."</i>
Cajolers	Flattery or insincere expressions to persuade someone to do something.	<i>"you know... you see"</i>
Subjectivizers	Expressions of subjective opinion that lower the assertive force of an act	<i>"I think" "I feel" "I guess" "I believe" "I suppose"</i>
2. Upgraders		
2.1. Swear words	Rude or offensive words	<i>"damned", "bloody"</i>
2.2. Overstaters	Words or phrases that describe or explain something in a way that makes it seem more important or serious than it really is	<i>"absolutely", "terribly"</i>
2.3. Intensifiers	A word, especially an adverb or adjective, that has little meaning itself but is used to add force to another adjective, verb, or adverb	<i>"very", "so really"</i>
2.4. Plus committers	A word or phrase that reflects the speaker's strong commitment to the utterance	<i>of course, certainly, I am sure</i>