

When Culture Shapes Refusal: Speech Acts and Politeness in Multicultural Indonesian EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Refusal is a socially consequential act through which speakers negotiate communicative intentions, face, and interpersonal harmony. Despite growing research on interlanguage pragmatics, limited attention has been devoted to how ethnically diverse Indonesian EFL learners realize refusals within a shared university environment. Addressing this gap, this study examined the distribution, combinations, and ethnic variation of refusal and politeness strategies among 113 EFL students representing seven Indonesian ethnic groups in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning. Using a descriptive quantitative design supported by qualitative exemplification, data were elicited through a Discourse Completion Task adapted from Beebe et al. (1990). Participants' responses were segmented into semantic formulas and classified as direct refusals, indirect refusals, or adjuncts. Coding reliability was established through validation by three independent linguistics experts. Indirect strategies predominated (67.13%), followed by adjuncts (24.77%), whereas direct refusals were least frequent (8.10%). Statement of Regret was the most prevalent indirect strategy, Gratitude/Appreciation was the leading adjunct, and the recurrent combination of Statement of Regret with Statement of Alternative reflected layered mitigation intended to preserve relational harmony. Although Batak participants demonstrated a comparatively greater tendency toward directness, indirect and mitigated refusals remained dominant across all ethnic groups. These findings indicate that a shared EFL learning environment fosters broadly convergent politeness practices while retaining culturally patterned variation. The study's originality lies in mapping intranational ethnic diversity within an Indonesian EFL setting, thereby extending intercultural pragmatics beyond cross-national comparisons and supporting explicit, culturally responsive pragmatic instruction in increasingly multicultural English-language classrooms.



1. Introduction

Language is never culturally neutral. Every linguistic choice communicates not only propositional meaning but also identity, social positioning, and culturally grounded expectations, enabling speakers to negotiate relationships, construct social realities, and manage interpersonal tensions (Thomas, 1995). Successful communication therefore depends on more than morphosyntactic accuracy; it requires pragmatic competence, or the ability to select and interpret language appropriately, sensitively, and in accordance with sociocultural expectations (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

This competence has become increasingly important as migration, digital connectivity, and globalization intensify contact among speakers whose linguistic resources may overlap but whose pragmatic conventions differ (Scollon et al., 2012). Intercultural pragmatics consequently investigates how individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds produce, interpret, and negotiate meaning, particularly when they communicate through a shared language without necessarily sharing the cultural frameworks needed to manage relationally sensitive interactions (Kecskes, 2014).

Few national contexts illustrate this pragmatic complexity as vividly as Indonesia. Across more than 17,000 islands and over 1,300 ethnic groups, Indonesian society encompasses diverse languages, cultural traditions, social hierarchies, and communicative norms. Although Bahasa Indonesia functions as the national lingua franca and the principal medium of formal education, local languages and their associated pragmatic conventions continue to influence everyday communication (Saddhono & Rohmadi, 2014). Because successful interaction depends on understanding the cultural and social characteristics of each communicative event (Kreishan, 2018), Indonesian EFL classrooms constitute especially valuable sites for examining intercultural pragmatic variation. Students in these classrooms communicate in English while drawing on different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural repertoires. Their speech-act choices may therefore reflect differing understandings of directness, hierarchy, solidarity, obligation, and interpersonal harmony, making multicultural classrooms important microcosms of intranational pragmatic diversity.

Politeness lies at the heart of this negotiation because potentially disruptive speech acts require speakers to balance communicative clarity with relational sensitivity. Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualize face as a public self-image comprising positive face, or the desire for approval and acceptance, and negative face, or the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. From this perspective, speakers select politeness strategies according to the relative power of interlocutors, their social distance, and the degree of imposition involved. Politeness, however, is neither culturally uniform nor reducible to fixed linguistic formulas. It is discursively constructed and culturally contingent (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003), scalar and context-dependent (Leech, 2014), and shaped by culturally specific expectations regarding rights, obligations, and interpersonal rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). It also functions as a mechanism for preventing or mitigating conflict (Lakoff, 1989).

Refusal is particularly sensitive because declining a request, invitation, offer, or suggestion may threaten the interlocutor's positive face while simultaneously endangering the speaker's social standing (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Described as a cross-cultural "sticking point," refusal is strongly influenced by cultural norms, social variables, and interlocutor expectations (Beebe et al., 1990). It is therefore commonly realized through sequences of regret, explanations, alternatives, appreciation, and hedging rather than through a single negative expression. EFL learners must consequently develop not only the necessary linguistic resources but also the culturally appropriate pragmatic practices required to perform refusals effectively, while simultaneously negotiating potential pragmatic transfer from their first languages (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Thomas, 1995).

A substantial body of research demonstrates that refusal strategies vary across cultural, linguistic, and developmental contexts. Egyptian Arabic and American English speakers both favored indirectness but differed in their selection and sequencing of semantic formulas (Nelson et al., 2002), whereas interactions between Japanese and American speakers revealed negotiated patterns that written elicitation instruments may not fully capture (Gass & Hough, 1999). Learners' pragmatic repertoires may also expand in relation to proficiency, length of residence, and study-abroad experience (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2008; Wang & Ren, 2022). Chinese learners have been found to transfer first-language norms into English and construct elaborate multi-formula refusals informed by cultural schemas (Chang, 2009; Zhang, 2022), while research in English-as-a-lingua-franca contexts has identified sequential patterns that extend Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy (Fang, 2024).

Further variation has been reported between Iranian and Anglo-Australian speakers in their use of indirectness (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016), among Turkish learners who favored explanations and expressions of regret (Satıç & Çiftçi, 2018), in Persian refusals shaped by *taarof* or ritual politeness (Izadi & Zilaie, 2015), and between Iraqi and Malaysian learners displaying different politeness orientations (Qassim et al., 2023). Cultural background has similarly influenced the strategies employed by Korean and Norwegian speakers of English (Krulatz & Dixon, 2020), the harmony-oriented indirectness of Javanese speakers (Wijayanto, 2019), Bahraini and Indian L2 learners' sensitivity to social distance, gender, and imposition (Al-Sallal, 2024; Al-Sallal & Ahmed, 2022), and ESL undergraduates' refusal choices across gender and power relations (Kamal & Ariffin, 2023). Theoretically, refusal has increasingly been understood as a multilayered pragmatic structure (Caponetto, 2023) shaped partly by principles of (im)politeness reciprocity (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021).

Within Indonesia context it seems Batak EFL students employed direct strategies more frequently than their Malay counterparts, offering preliminary evidence of intranational ethnic variation. Nevertheless, most existing studies have primarily compared national groups, examined monolingual or bilingual contexts, or focused on individual semantic formulas without sufficiently exploring how multiple strategies are combined and sequenced in actual refusal practices. Moreover, findings from cross-ethnic research are rarely translated into concrete, pedagogically relevant recommendations for pragmatic instruction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Consequently, refusal practices among multiple Indonesian ethnic groups within the same institutional EFL environment remain insufficiently explored, leaving important aspects of intranational pragmatic variation and culturally shaped refusal patterns inadequately mapped.

The present study occupies this underexplored space by conducting an intranational, cross-ethnic analysis of English refusals produced by Batak, Javanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Sundanese, Nias, and Acehese students enrolled in the same university program. By holding the target language, institutional environment, and educational level relatively constant, the study provides a more focused account of how local cultural backgrounds may shape L2 pragmatic performance.

Its novelty lies not only in comparing seven ethnic groups within one multicultural EFL setting but also in documenting combinatory, multi-formula refusal patterns that are not fully represented in Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy. The study therefore moves beyond treating direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts as isolated categories by examining how learners layer these resources to negotiate face, directness, and interpersonal harmony. In doing so, it integrates politeness theory, intercultural pragmatics, and pedagogical analysis (Eslami, 2010; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), thereby challenging the tendency to regard Indonesian pragmatic behavior as culturally homogeneous.

This inquiry is significant because pragmatically inappropriate refusals may cause misunderstanding, appear unnecessarily confrontational, or create unintended impressions of insincerity and excessive indirectness, even when learners' grammar is accurate. Understanding how culturally diverse students formulate refusals can therefore inform culturally responsive teaching that develops pragmatic awareness alongside linguistic proficiency. Specifically, the study aims to identify the types of refusal strategies employed by students from seven Indonesian ethnic groups, determine the frequency distribution of direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts, compare their observed patterns across ethnic groups, and consider the cultural influences and pedagogical implications associated with those patterns. Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) What refusal strategies are employed by multicultural EFL students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning? (2) How are direct, indirect, and adjunct refusal strategies distributed in frequency across the seven ethnic groups? and (3) How do these patterns differ among ethnic groups, and what cultural factors may account for these variations?

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that pragmatic behavior within a shared national and educational context cannot be fully explained by a single notion of "Indonesian politeness." Instead, refusal performance emerges from the interaction of ethnic background, sociocultural values, educational experiences, and situational demands. This perspective extends intercultural pragmatics beyond traditional cross-national comparisons and provides a replicable framework for examining intranational pragmatic

variation. Its broader implication is that multicultural EFL education should explicitly address refusal strategies, semantic formula sequencing, and cross-cultural interpretations of politeness. This approach can improve curriculum design, teacher education, and materials development while enhancing learners' communicative effectiveness and interpersonal appropriateness (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design supported by qualitative exemplification to investigate refusal strategies among multicultural EFL students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning. Quantitatively, written responses were coded using Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal taxonomy and analyzed through descriptive statistics to identify the frequency and percentage of each strategy type. Qualitatively, selected excerpts were further examined to illustrate contextual realizations of refusal strategies and to interpret the sociocultural factors that shaped and influenced participants' pragmatic choices. The qualitative component served a complementary explanatory role rather than forming an independent dataset. The following sections describe the participants, data collection instrument, and analytical procedures.

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design with qualitative exemplification to investigate refusal strategies among multicultural EFL students at the English Education Study Program, Universitas Lancang Kuning. Quantitatively, written responses were coded according to refusal taxonomy and analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency and percentage of each strategy type. Qualitatively, representative excerpts were examined to illustrate how refusal strategies were realized in context and to interpret the sociocultural factors underlying participants' pragmatic choices.

The qualitative strand therefore served a complementary and explanatory function, providing deeper contextual interpretations of the quantitative findings rather than constituting an independent dataset. The following sub-sections detail the participants, the data collection instrument, and the analytical procedures.

2.1 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised 219 undergraduate EFL students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Lancang Kuning. Before data collection, a preliminary online survey was distributed via Google Forms to identify each student's self-reported ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background; the survey results were used solely to establish the ethnic composition of the population and to guide participant selection for the cross-ethnic comparison.

The final sample was determined through purposive sampling, a technique that applies specific criteria aligned with the research objectives rather than relying on random selection (Arikunto, 2013; Sugiyono, 2010). Two criteria governed inclusion: (1) respondents were active EFL students whose ethnic backgrounds had been confirmed through the preliminary survey, and (2) respondents completed the

research instrument in full accordance with the study requirements. On this basis, 113 students representing seven ethnic groups Batak (n = 48), Malay (n = 26), Javanese (n = 21), Minangkabau (n = 10), Sundanese (n = 4), Nias (n = 3), and Acehnese (n = 1) were included in the final sample. The complete distribution is presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The Ethnic Distribution of Participants

No	Ethnicity	Number of Students
1	Acehnese	1
2	Batak	48
3	Javanese	21
4	Malay	26
5	Minangkabau	10
6	Nias	3
7	Sundanese	4
Total of Respondents		113

As Table 2.1 shows, Batak students constituted the largest proportion of the sample, followed by Malay and Javanese students, while Minangkabau, Sundanese, Nias, and Acehnese participants were represented in smaller numbers. This distribution reflects the actual ethnic composition of the study program at the time of data collection rather than a deliberate design choice. Because the ethnic groups were not equally represented, frequency differences reported in subsequent analyses should be interpreted as patterns observed within the present sample rather than as definitive indicators of broader ethnic communication preferences. The findings therefore provide exploratory insights into ethnic variation in refusal strategies rather than generalizable conclusions about the respective ethnic communities.

2.2 Data Collection Instrument

The primary instrument was an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms comprising two sections: demographic information and a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). A WDCT is a controlled elicitation tool in which respondents read a brief situational prompt and write their intended response in the space provided, rather than producing the refusal orally (Moaveni, 2014).

This written format enabled the collection of responses from a relatively large number of participants under controlled and comparable conditions. The instrument builds on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) developed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), which established the DCT as a standardized procedure for comparing speech-act realizations across social and cultural groups. Accordingly, the present study systematically varied social power (high-to-low, low-to-high, and equal status) and social distance across twelve scenarios designed to elicit refusals of requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations. Gass and Houck (1999) note that DCTs of this kind are particularly useful for accessing participants' pragmatic knowledge and preferred linguistic choices in specific communicative contexts.

The demographic section collected data on name, age, gender, year of enrollment, region of origin, ethnic group, daily communication languages, first language, and social interaction language. The twelve refusal scenarios were adapted and modified from Beebe et al. (1990), Moaveni (2014), Shishavan and Sharifian (2016), Wardani (2019), and Wijayanto (2019). The blueprint of the WDCT is presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 The Blueprint of Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) Questionnaire

Stimulus Type	Refusal Status	Social Factor	Question	Situation
Request	High to Low	Power (-); Distance (-)	5	Senior–Junior at college: A senior college student needs to refuse a junior student’s request to sit next to them.
	Low to High	Power (+); Distance (-)	2	Child–Parent: A child needs to refuse their mother’s request to bring their sister along on a trip.
	Equal	Power (-); Distance (-)	9	Peers (Friend–Friend): A college student needs to refuse a friend’s request to borrow their notebook.
Invitation	Equal	Power (-); Distance (-)	1	Peers (Friend–Friend): A college student needs to refuse a friend’s invitation to watch a movie.
	Low to High	Power (+); Distance (+)	4	College Student–Professor: A college student needs to refuse a professor’s invitation.
	High to Low	Power (+); Distance (+)	10	Owner–Salesperson: A company president needs to refuse a salesperson’s invitation to dinner at a fancy restaurant.
Suggestion	Low to High	Power (+); Distance (+)	3	College Student–Lecturer: A college student needs to refuse their lecturer’s suggested topic for their paper.
	Equal	Power (-); Distance (-)	6	Peers (Friend–Friend): A student needs to refuse a friend’s suggestion to take a break from work.
	High to Low	Power (+); Distance (+)	11	Lecturer–Students: A lecturer needs to refuse a student’s suggestion to use more conversation activities in a foreign-language class.
Offer	High to Low	Power (-); Distance (-)	8	Elder Sibling–Younger Sibling: An elder sibling needs to refuse a younger sibling’s offer to buy them something for their birthday.
	Low to High	Power (+); Distance (+)	7	Employee–Boss: An employee needs to refuse their boss’s offer to pay for a rather expensive book the employee wants to buy.
	Equal	Power (-); Distance (-)	12	Roommates: A speaker needs to refuse their roommate’s offer to pay for a broken vase.

As shown in Table 2.2, the WDCT scenarios were designed according to social distance and relative power between interlocutors, following the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka & Olshain, 1984). It should be acknowledged, however, that DCTs carry inherent limitations. As elicited rather than naturally occurring data, DCT responses may not fully capture authentic interactional behavior; the written format does not record prosodic features, turn-taking processes, nonverbal cues, or the spontaneous negotiation of meaning characteristic of real-time communication (Kwon, 2004; Gass & Houck, 1999). The findings of this study should therefore be interpreted as representations of participants' pragmatic knowledge and intended communicative choices in hypothetical situations rather than direct observations of naturally occurring refusal.

2.3 Data Analysis

Responses were coded using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, which classifies refusal strategies into three main categories. The first category is direct refusal, comprising performative statements (e.g., "I refuse") and non-performative statements (e.g., "No" or expressions of unwillingness/inability). The second category is indirect refusal, which encompasses eleven subtypes; the most prominent in the present data were statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry..."), statement of alternative (e.g., "I'd rather..."), and excuse/reason/explanation (e.g., "I have a headache"). The third category is adjunct to refusal, including statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement, statement of empathy, pause fillers, and gratitude/appreciation. Data analysis followed an integrated framework combining Sugiyono's (2010) qualitative model data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification with Yin's (2016) five-stage qualitative procedure. Operationally, the analytical sequence proceeded as follows: (1) all raw responses were compiled and organized; (2) during the disassembling stage, each response was segmented into

semantic units and irrelevant or redundant expressions were removed; (3) during reassembly, each semantic unit was coded and tagged according to the refusal strategy framework; (4) coded data were grouped into broader strategy categories and displayed in tables and matrices; and (5) the identified patterns and frequencies were interpreted and verified to draw conclusions.

To preserve authenticity, all participant quotations are presented verbatim, including grammatical errors and non-standard language forms, as these linguistic features constitute part of the analyzed data. Coding reliability was established through independent review by three linguistics experts with graduate-level training in linguistics and English language education. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Because the validation relied on expert agreement rather than statistical reliability testing, the procedure should be understood as a qualitative reliability measure.

3. Results

The findings of this study indicate that multicultural EFL students at the English Education Study Program of Universitas Lancang Kuning employed three main types of refusal strategies: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals.

3.1 Expert Validation of the Coding Instrument

Before the analysis of refusal strategies, the coding instrument was subjected to expert validation to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the refusal classification.

Three independent experts evaluated the coding decisions using a dichotomous validation checklist. The analysis included 824 complete coding decisions after excluding incomplete evaluations. Table 3.1 shows the expert validation results for the refusal strategy coding instrument.

Table 3.1 Content Validity and Inter-Rater Agreement of the Refusal Strategy Coding Instrument

Index	Value	Interpretation
Number of complete coding decisions	824	—
Percentage Agreement	98.30%	Excellent
Mean I-CVI	0.993	Excellent
S-CVI/UA	0.983	Excellent
S-CVI/Ave	0.993	Excellent
Modified Kappa	0.989	Excellent
Fleiss' Kappa	0.171	Slight Agreement*

Table 3.1 shows that the validation demonstrated a Percentage Agreement of 98.30%, indicating a very high level of agreement among the validators. Likewise, the mean Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI) reached 0.993, while the Scale Content Validity Index based on Universal Agreement (S-CVI/UA) was 0.983, and the Scale Content Validity Index based on Average (S-CVI/Ave) reached 0.993. Furthermore, the Modified Kappa coefficient was 0.989, which falls within the *excellent* category according to Polit and Beck (2006). These findings indicate that the coding framework possesses excellent content validity and is appropriate for analyzing refusal strategies in multicultural EFL contexts.

Although the calculated Fleiss' Kappa coefficient was 0.171, corresponding to *slight agreement* according to the Landis and Koch (1977) interpretation, this value should not be interpreted as evidence of poor coding reliability. Rather, the relatively low coefficient reflects the Kappa paradox, which commonly occurs when almost all expert judgments fall into a single

response category. In the present validation, approximately 99% of the coding decisions were judged as appropriate ("Yes"), substantially increasing the expected agreement by chance and consequently reducing the Kappa coefficient despite the very high observed agreement.

Therefore, the content validity indices provide a more appropriate indicator of expert agreement for this type of dichotomous validation. The relatively low Fleiss' Kappa coefficient reflects the well-documented Kappa paradox, which may occur when one response category overwhelmingly dominates the ratings. Accordingly, the content validity indices (I-CVI, S-CVI, and Modified Kappa) offer more representative and reliable evidence of expert agreement for the present study (Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990; Polit & Beck, 2006).

3.2 Frequency of Refusal Strategies

Table 3.2 shows the types of refusal demonstrated by participants as well as the frequency of their use.

Table 3.2 The Frequency of Refusal Strategies Used by Respondents

No	Type of Refusal	Total Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Direct	53	8.10%
2	Indirect	439	67.13%
3	Adjunct	162	24.77%

As shown in Table 3.2, indirect refusal strategies were the most frequently used, whereas direct refusal strategies were the least frequent. The frequencies reported in this table represent semantic formulas rather than individual responses following the coding framework of Beebe et al. (1990). A single response could contain more than one refusal strategy, with each semantic formula being identified and coded separately to capture the complexity of the refusal process. Consequently, the total frequency of 654 represents the overall number of semantic formulas identified across all responses, rather than the number of participants or Discourse Completion Task (DCT) scenarios. This approach allows for a more accurate representation of the variety, frequency, and combination of strategies employed by participants when producing refusals. By examining each semantic formula individually, the analysis can better capture the nuanced ways in which participants construct their refusal responses and reveal the complexity of pragmatic choices involved in refusal production.

3.3 Direct Refusal

In direct refusal strategies, speakers explicitly convey their unwillingness, either by using negative propositions or by directly rejecting a proposed action. The data reveal two main tendencies within this category, highlighting the different ways in which speakers employ direct forms of refusal to communicate their intentions while managing the interactional demands of the situation: performative and non-performative direct refusals. In performative direct refusals, speakers explicitly signal refusal through verbs such as *I refuse* or *I decline*. These utterances are straightforward and convey clear non-acceptance of an invitation, request, or suggestion. In contrast, non-performative direct refusals are generally shorter, more explicit, and more assertive in nature, typically realized through straightforward expressions such as *no* or *I can't*. These forms convey the speaker's rejection with minimal elaboration, prioritizing clarity and directness over the use of additional explanations or mitigating devices.

Table 3.3 The Frequency of Direct Refusal Strategies by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Performative	Non-Performative (Willingness/Ability)	Non-Performative (No)	Total Frequency	%
Batak	5	11	11	27	50.94
Javanese	1	11	0	12	22.64
Malay	0	7	2	9	16.98
Minangkabau	0	2	1	3	5.66
Sundanese	0	0	1	1	1.89
Nias	0	1	0	1	1.89
Acehnese	0	0	0	0	0.00
Total of Frequencies				53	100

Table 3.3 shows the types of direct refusal by participants as well as the frequency of their use. The most frequently used direct refusal strategy among respondents was non-performative refusal expressing willingness/ability, and Batak participants were the most frequent users of direct refusal overall.

Examples of direct performative refusal strategies:

***I refuse** your invitation, I'm tired now and in a bad mood, I can't join with you.*
(Question 1, S-52, Batak)

Example of direct non-performative refusal strategies by using "No":

***No**, I am not in a good mood, maybe next time we can go out together. I am afraid that I can ruin our day, I am sorry.*
(Question 1, S-26, Batak)

Example of direct non-performative refusal strategies by using "Willingness/Ability":

***I can't** bring my sister along because I'm with my best friend, Mom. I don't want my sister feel neglected because I wouldn't be able to focus on her.*
(Question 2, S-21, Malay)

Although performative refusals were identified in the data, they were often realized through extended utterances that included explanations or mitigating elements. As illustrated by the example above (S-26).

This suggests that even when employing direct refusal forms, EFL students tended to soften their refusals by embedding them within longer, explanatory structures, reflecting an underlying concern for

politeness and face preservation. The examples provided are illustrative of this pattern; however, to ensure transparency in participant attribution, each excerpt is identified using anonymized participant codes (e.g., S-52, Batak). In line with the reviewer's suggestion, a summary table mapping participant codes to their respective ethnic backgrounds is provided in the Appendix to support traceability of the data while maintaining participant confidentiality

3.4 Indirect Refusal

Indirect refusal strategies demonstrated greater variation and constituted the most frequently used category overall. Such strategies are typically employed when speakers avoid explicit refusal in order to minimize the risk of offending the interlocutor and to maintain interpersonal harmony. The predominance of indirect strategies in this study reflects the politeness-oriented nature of refusal behavior, particularly in multicultural and collectivist communicative contexts where face concerns are highly salient. The analysis identified 18 subtypes of indirect refusal strategies employed by the participants.

Given that this number exceeds the canonical taxonomy proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), each subtype is explicitly enumerated and systematically mapped to the original Beebe classification. The mapping also specifies whether each subtype represents a faithful reproduction of the original category, a refinement of its linguistic realization, or a new contextually emerging extension. This detailed classification is presented in Table 3.4

Table 3.4 The Frequency of Indirect Refusal Strategies by Ethnic Group

Indirect Refusal	Batak	Java nese	Malay	Minang kabau	Nias	Sunda nese	Aceh nese	Total	%
Statement of Regret	82	38	42	12	2	10	1	187	42.59
Wish	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	6	1.37
Excuse, Reason, Explanation	14	5	5	3	2	0	0	29	6.60
Statement of Alternative	38	15	7	5	1	0	1	67	15.26
Past/Future Acceptance	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	6	1.37
Promise	23	6	3	0	0	0	1	33	7.51
Statement of Principle	22	6	9	3	4	5	0	49	11.16
Philosophy	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	4	0.91
Attempt to Dissuade Interlocutor (Guilt Trip)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.23
Criticize	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0.68
Request for Help/Empathy	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0.68
Let the Interlocutor off the Hook	1	4	6	0	0	1	0	12	2.73
Self-Defense	3	2	1	0	1	1	0	8	1.82
Acceptance that Functions as a Refusal	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	6	1.37
Silence	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	4	0.91
Physical Departure	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	7	1.59
Postponement	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	0.91
Hedging	5	1	3	1	0	0	0	10	2.28
Total Frequency	210	89	84	25	10	18	3	439	100

Table 3.4 shows the types of indirect refusal used by participants and their frequencies. Statement of regret ranks first among indirect refusal strategies and is the most frequently used overall among the EFL students in this study. This strategy essentially consists of expressions that convey regret and soften language when refusing a request. It is commonly realized through expressions such as *I'm sorry*, *I feel terrible*,

and *I apologize*. Furthermore, the data also show that most respondents explained why they could not fulfill the interlocutor's request, offer, invitation, or suggestion by providing reasons and considerations.

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with a statement of regret:

I'm so sorry, Sir, I really want to join the lunch event, but circumstances do not allow me to. I joined because my mother is sick, and I have to look after her.

(Question 4, S-88, Javanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy by using “wish”:

I wish I could get you something special, but I need to prioritize my college expenses right now. Maybe we can celebrate differently

(Question 8, S-72, Javanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy using an excuse, reason, and explanation:

I feel like we have to finish this now because the deadline is approaching. I'm worried that if we delay, tomorrow we might run out of time or energy to finish it well.

(Question 6, S-94, Malay)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with a statement of alternative:

I'm currently focused on this assignment and need a quiet place. Maybe you can find another place first, or if you prefer, I can help you find a chair in another area. Thank you for your understanding.

(Question 5, S-54, Batak)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with a set condition of future or past acceptance:

I'll give you a gift, but not right now because I don't have any money. If I had it, I'd buy you whatever you want.

(Question 8, S-89, Javanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with promise:

I know that you want to come along, but I'm afraid this trip might be too tiring for you. How about we go together another time, and I stay with the guys today? I promise.

(Question 2, S-3, Javanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with a statement of principle:

I will do both grammar, and conversation exercises.

(Question 11, S-78, Javanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with a statement of philosophy:

Doing better if you want to be successful.

(Question 11, S-22, Sundanese)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor using a guilt trip:

I am Sorry Sir, because this time I couldn't help the lecturer, namely because I didn't understand the topic this time, and for now I am working on something.

(Question 3, S-53, Batak)

Example of an indirect refusal strategy with an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor by criticizing the requester:

Are you good at using grammar? Your knowledge of grammar is still very poor.

(Question 11, S-89, Javanese)

Example of an indirect strategy with an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor by using “request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request:

Please, friends, we must finish this night.

(Question 6, S-83, Javanese)

Example of an indirect strategy with an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor by letting the interlocutor off the hook:

It's okay, it's not a big deal, I can replace it with a new one.

(Question 12, S-4, Javanese)

Example of an indirect strategy with acceptance that functions as a refusal:

I am ready for instruction and will always be great, but I still need to do my first project.

(Question 3, S-14, Malay)

Example of an indirect strategy with non-verbal avoidance (silence):

Silent and I chose not to buy the book.

(Question 7, S-52, Batak)

Example of an indirect strategy with non-verbal avoidance (physical departure):

I felt uncomfortable, so I would be quieter, speed up my activities, and leave first.

(Question 5, S-40, Batak)

Example of an indirect strategy with verbal avoidance (postponement):

I'll think about it, but let me take the first appointment.

(Question 10, S-6, Malay)

Example of an indirect strategy with verbal avoidance (hedging):

I'm not sure, because I don't like the film.

(Question 1, S-56, Batak)

3.5 Adjunct

Adjuncts to refusals constituted the third category identified in the data. Adjuncts do not independently convey refusal but accompany refusal strategies to enhance politeness and pragmatic appropriateness. Four types of adjuncts were observed: Statement of

Positive Opinion or Agreement, Statement of Empathy, Pause Fillers, and Gratitude/Appreciation. In these cases, the head act of refusal was either delayed or made implicit to emphasize empathy and politeness. Table 3.5 shows the frequency and types of adjuncts used by the participants.

Table 3.5 The Frequency of Adjunct Refusal Strategies by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Statement of Positive Opinion	Statement of Empathy	Pause Filler	Gratitude/Appreciation	Total Frequency	(%)
Batak	3	6	1	57	67	41.36
Javanese	6	2	1	18	27	16.67
Malay	1	2	4	23	30	18.52
Minangkabau	1	2	0	21	24	14.81
Nias	1	0	0	7	8	4.94
Sundanese	1	1	0	2	4	2.47
Acehnese	0	0	0	2	2	1.23
Total	13	13	6	130	162	100

Based on the Table 3.5, the most frequently used adjunct is Gratitude/Appreciation. The frequency of use of this adjunct stands out the most compared to other types of adjuncts.

Example of an adjunct refusal strategy with a Statement of Positive Agreement:

*I am really interested in discussing our products, but I already have a prior commitment at that time.
Can we schedule a meeting for another day?*
(Question 10, S-72, Javanese)

Example of an adjunct refusal strategy with a Statement of Empathy:

I understand that you want her to come, but I am worried that it might disrupt the trip.
(Question 2, S-18, Minangkabau)

Example of an adjunct refusal strategy with pause filler:

ah...it's fine bruv, it's just a vase, you needed the money more than me for that vase, please don't give me your money, okay? Just focus on your college; your college is more important than this vase, even if it's my favorite vase.
(Question 12, S-10, Malay)

Example of an adjunct refusal strategy with gratitude/appreciation:

I appreciate the suggestion, but we are really close to the deadline, and I think it's important to push through and finish it now.
(Question 6, S-11, Malay)

The examples presented demonstrate that expressions of appreciation function as refusal adjuncts rather than refusal strategies themselves. Consistent with Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, these expressions serve as supportive moves that accompany and mitigate the refusal. In the data, gratitude is employed to reduce the potential face-threatening effect of declining an interlocutor's request, offer, invitation, or suggestion. The refusal itself is conveyed indirectly through the overall response rather than through the appreciation expression alone.

Therefore, the use of appreciation contributes to the politeness of the refusal by softening its impact while maintaining the interlocutor's positive face. In line with the objectives of this study, refusal strategies were further examined through the lens of ethnic background to explore whether participants' ethnic affiliations influenced their pragmatic choices and the ways in which they expressed refusals in interaction. The following table presents the frequency of refusal strategy use across the ethnic groups examined.

Table 3.6 The Frequency of Refusal Strategies (Direct, Indirect, Adjunct) by Ethnic Group

Ethnic	Direct	%	Indirect	%	Adjunct	%
Batak	27	50.94	210	47.84	67	41.36
Javanese	12	22.64	89	20.27	27	16.67
Malay	9	16.98	84	19.13	30	18.52
Minangkabau	3	5.66	25	5.69	24	14.81
Nias	1	1.89	10	2.28	8	4.94
Sundanese	1	1.89	18	4.10	4	2.47
Acehnese	0	0.00	3	0.68	2	1.23
Total	53	100	439	100	162	100

The frequency across ethnic groups shows in Table 3.6 that Batak students dominated the use of all three refusal strategy types. Although indirect refusals were the most frequently used strategy overall, Batak students exhibited the highest proportion of direct refusals compared to other ethnic groups. Notably, they frequently employed non-performative direct refusals using the equivalent of “no”, whereas students from Javanese and Malay backgrounds were more likely to use performative forms such as “*I refuse*” or “*I decline*”. In contrast, no direct refusal strategies were observed among the Acehnese participant (n=1). However, the absence of direct refusals in this subgroup should be interpreted cautiously, as the limited representation of Acehnese participants may not provide a sufficient basis for concluding broader ethnic communication preferences.

Within indirect refusals, Statement of Regret remained the dominant strategy across all ethnic groups, accounting for 42.59% of total indirect refusals. This strategy was consistently used by Batak, Javanese, and Malay students, indicating a shared orientation toward face-saving and interpersonal politeness in multicultural EFL contexts.

The second most prominent strategy was Statement of Principle, particularly among Batak and Javanese students (11.16% of total indirect refusals). This strategy reflects the tendency to justify refusals by referring to personal values or principles rather than mere unwillingness. The use of Excuse/Reason/Explanation (6.60%) further supports the finding that justifying is perceived as an acceptable means of mitigating refusal.

Conversely, strategies such as Guilt Trip, Criticize, and Request for Empathy were rarely used (each below 1%), suggesting that these strategies are perceived as overly confrontational or culturally inappropriate in the given contexts. Other strategies, including Hedging

and Letting the Interlocutor off the Hook, appeared infrequently and functioned mainly as situational complements to mitigate the force of refusal. Quantitatively, Batak students demonstrated the highest frequency of indirect refusals (47.84%), followed by Javanese (20.27%) and Malay students (19.13%), while Acehnese students showed the lowest frequency (0.68%), which may be partly attributable to the smaller number of respondents in this group.

Certain strategies, such as Threat or Negative Consequences, were absent from the data. However, this absence should be interpreted with caution, as it may also reflect the limitations of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) scenarios used in this study. In particular, the scenarios may not have been designed in ways that naturally elicit more aggressive or high-imposition refusal strategies, thereby constraining the observable range of pragmatic realizations. Acknowledging this methodological constraint helps to ensure a more balanced interpretation of the distribution of refusal strategies across groups.

A closer ethnic comparison reveals that students from Batak, Javanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Sundanese, Nias, and Acehnese backgrounds all demonstrated a strong preference for the Statement of Regret strategy, although variation emerged in the use of supporting strategies such as Statement of Alternative and Statement of Principle. Notably, certain strategies, such as Threat or Negative Consequences, were absent from the data. However, this absence should be interpreted with caution, as it may reflect the nature of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) scenarios employed in the study, which may not have been designed to elicit highly confrontational or high-risk refusal strategies. Therefore, the absence of these strategies does not necessarily indicate their nonexistence in the participants’ pragmatic repertoire, but rather suggests a

methodological constraint in capturing the full range of refusal realizations. This reinforces the general tendency to avoid face-threatening refusals in Indonesian sociocultural contexts, while acknowledging the influence of instrument design on the observed distribution of strategies.

A relatively uniform pattern was also observed in the use of adjuncts. Gratitude/Appreciation was the most dominant adjunct across all ethnic groups, accounting for 130 of the 162 adjunct occurrences. Batak students produced the highest proportion of adjuncts overall (41.36%), followed by Malay and Javanese students. Other adjuncts, including Statements of Positive Opinion, Statements of Empathy, and Pause Fillers, occurred relatively infrequently and appeared only in specific contexts. Notably, even ethnic groups with lower overall adjunct frequency, such as Nias, Sundanese, and Acehnese students, consistently employed expressions of gratitude as a primary mitigation strategy.

This pattern may suggest the influence of a broader Indonesian politeness norm rather than ethnic-specific pragmatic preferences alone. Expressions such as *terima kasih* ('thank you') and *mohon maaf* ('I am

sorry') are commonly emphasized in Bahasa Indonesia education and everyday social interaction, potentially providing a shared pragmatic foundation across speakers from different ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, the predominance of gratitude adjuncts may reflect a common Indonesian pragmatic baseline, whereas ethnic variation may be more evident in the relative frequency and combination of refusal strategies. Further research involving more balanced ethnic representation and comparisons with speakers from different national contexts would be needed to examine this possibility more directly.

3.6 Combination in Refusal Strategies

Beyond confirming Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, this study identified complex pragmatic patterns that combine multiple refusal strategies within a single utterance. These combinations occurred both between indirect strategies and between adjuncts and indirect strategies, reflecting speakers' efforts to adapt to social context and maintain politeness.

The following Table 3.7 presents the frequency of combinations in refusal strategies.

Table 3.7 The Frequency of Combinations of Refusal Strategies

No	Combination Type of Refusal	Frequency
1	Indirect (Statement of Regret) combined with Indirect (Statement of Alternative)	58
2	Adjunct (Statement of Empathy) combined with Indirect (Statement of Alternative)	29
3	Adjunct (Statement of Empathy) combined with Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation)	1
4	Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation) combined with Indirect (Statement of Alternative)	53
5	Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation) combined with Indirect (Self-Defense)	8
6	Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation) combined with Indirect (Let the Interlocutor off the Hook)	5
7	Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation) combined with Indirect (Promise for Future Acceptance)	5
8	Adjunct (Gratitude/Appreciation) combined with Indirect (Wish)	3

As shown in Table 3.7, the most frequent combinations were Statement of Regret + Statement of Alternative (58 occurrences) and Gratitude/Appreciation + Statement of Alternative (53 occurrences). These patterns suggest that participants preferred to mitigate refusals by combining indirect strategies with supportive moves. The frequent use of

such combinations indicates that refusals were commonly realized through multiple semantic formulas rather than isolated strategies. This finding is consistent with Félix-Brasdefer (2008) and Chang (2009), who reported that refusal speech acts are often structured as sequences of mitigating strategies to maintain politeness and interpersonal harmony.

The most frequent combination involved Indirect (Statement of Regret) and Indirect (Statement of Alternative), Example:

I am sorry, but I need to focus on my paper and I need to have some quiet right now. Maybe you can find another spot to sit, or if you are in a pinch, I could suggest another place with available seating.

(Question 5, S-11, Malay)

In this pattern, regret functions as a mitigator, while the alternative provides a cooperative solution. Another prominent pattern combines Adjunct (Statement of Empathy) with Indirect (Statement of Alternative), for example:

I understand your feedback, but I believe focusing on grammar is essential for overall language development. Maybe we can incorporate more conversation practice in future classes

(Question 11, S-111, Nias)

In this statement, empathy is first shown to protect the feelings of the other party, followed by an implied refusal. This combination of strategies is reinforced with an alternative statement so that the subject does not feel immediately rejected, but rather that their offer is being deferred for approval. Other strategies with

similar pragmatic goals are also seen in combinations: Adjunct (Empathy) and Adjunct (Gratitude), Adjunct (Gratitude) and Indirect (Alternative), Adjunct (Gratitude) and Indirect (Self-Defense), Adjunct (Gratitude) and Indirect (Freeing the Interlocutor from Responsibility), Adjunct (Gratitude) and Indirect (Promise of Future Acceptance), Adjunct (Gratitude) and Indirect (Hope). All of these combinations show the same tendency: to reduce the weight of the refusal and emphasize other, more positive aspects, namely appreciation, empathy, and providing alternatives so that the request, invitation, or offer being declined can still be accepted on another occasion.

This combination also indirectly reveals a unique pattern: these multicultural students demonstrate a high degree of pragmatic sensitivity in practice by mitigating the refusal to maintain the norms of politeness, an important part of their culture.

3.7 Summary of the Refusal Taxonomy

To consolidate the findings reported above into a single, readily interpretable model, [Table 3.8](#) summarizes the three main refusal categories identified in this study, together with their most frequent subtypes, an illustrative marker, and their overall share of the 654 semantic formulas coded

Table 3.8 Summary of the Refusal Taxonomy Identified in This Study

Category	Most Frequent Subtype(s)	Illustrative Marker	Share of Total Formulas
Direct Refusal	Non-performative (Willingness/Ability); Non-performative (“No”)	“I can’t...”; “No,...”	8.10%
Indirect Refusal	Statement of Regret; Statement of Alternative; Statement of Principle	“I’m sorry...”; “Maybe you can...”	67.13%
Adjunct to Refusal	Gratitude/Appreciation	“Thank you for..., but...”	24.77%

As [Table 3.8](#) shows, indirect strategies anchored by Statement of Regret accounted for the largest share of the data, while adjuncts, dominated by expressions of gratitude, most frequently co-occurred with indirect strategies rather than functioning as stand-alone refusals.

4. Discussion

The findings highlight a clear preference for relationally sensitive refusal behavior among the multicultural EFL students. Indirect strategies dominated the data (67.13%), followed by adjuncts (24.77%), whereas direct refusals were comparatively infrequent (8.10%). Statement of Regret was the most prominent indirect realization, while Gratitude/Appreciation was the most frequent adjunct. This distribution indicates that participants generally attempted to reduce the interpersonal force of refusal

and protect their interlocutors’ face ([Brown & Levinson, 1987](#); [Beebe et al., 1990](#)). Importantly, the 654 identified semantic formulas did not represent isolated pragmatic choices. Participants frequently combined regret, explanations, gratitude, and alternatives within a single response, particularly through the pairing of Statement of Regret with Statement of Alternative. This layering reflects the sequential complexity identified in lingua-franca refusal interactions ([Fang, 2024](#)) and supports the conceptualization of refusal as a multilayered pragmatic structure ([Caponetto, 2023](#)). Refusing in this context therefore involved a dynamic negotiation between declining an interlocutor’s proposition and sustaining interpersonal harmony, consistent with the principle of (im)politeness reciprocity ([Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021](#)).

Within this general orientation toward indirectness, meaningful cross-ethnic variation emerged. Batak participants produced 50.94% of all direct strategies and employed the two non-performative direct subtypes with equal frequency. This comparatively stronger directness may reflect the egalitarian and open interactional orientations commonly associated with Batak communication (Simatupang et al., 2015). In Batak society, clan distinctions primarily organize kinship and familial affiliation rather than constituting rigid social-class divisions (Tobing, 2015), which may contribute to a greater tolerance of explicit expression. Nevertheless, Batak society comprises multiple sub-ethnic communities with distinct sociolinguistic characteristics (Simanjuntak & Pardede, 2025); therefore, the observed tendency should not be interpreted as a uniform cultural trait. Instead, it supports earlier findings that Batak EFL speakers may display relatively greater directness than learners from other Indonesian cultural backgrounds.

Javanese participants, by contrast, accounted for only 22.64% of the direct refusals and relied predominantly on expressions of inability. This pattern may be understood in relation to the historically stratified nature of Javanese social organization (Tobing, 2015) and the continuing importance of *rukun*, or social harmony, in contemporary Javanese interaction (Sariningsih, 2021; Sarosa, 2025). The limited number of direct strategies, comprising only 12 occurrences, together with 27 complementary politeness markers, further indicates the continuing salience of face preservation (Muda et al., 2026). These results do not suggest that Javanese participants avoided refusal itself; rather, they tended to frame their refusals through inability, regret, and supportive expressions that reduced the possibility of interpersonal confrontation.

A similar preference for mitigation characterized the other ethnic groups, although its realization varied. Malay participants employed adjuncts more frequently than their Javanese peers, consistent with the view that Malay communicative practices place substantial value on social harmony (Omar, 1986). Recent studies similarly show that Malay speakers use explanations, apologies, gratitude, and extended reasoning to soften disagreement or refusal (Ismail & Nordin, 2025; Nordin et al., 2024). Minangkabau participants also preferred indirect forms, reflecting discourse conventions that attend closely to speaker-listener identity and situational context (Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2022). Sundanese participants relied almost entirely on indirect strategies, corresponding with evidence that Sundanese speakers favor face-saving indirectness (Chintawidy & Sartini, 2022). Nias participants likewise gravitated toward indirect refusals and adjuncts, which is compatible with the indirect communicative orientation reported by Laia et al. (2023). However, the Acehnese category included only one participant, who produced three indirect refusals.

This evidence is insufficient for characterizing Acehnese refusal behavior and should be regarded only as a preliminary observation.

The overall predominance of indirectness accords with findings from diverse EFL and cross-cultural contexts. Strong preferences for indirect refusal have been reported among Saudi learners (Qadi, 2021; El-Dakhs, 2020), Bahraini and Indian learners (Al-Sallal & Ahmed, 2022; Al-Sallal, 2024), Iraqi and Malaysian participants (Qassim et al., 2023), Chinese English majors (Zhang, 2022; Wang & Ren, 2022; Chen, 2020), and Iranian and Anglo-Australian speakers (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016). Across many Asian communicative contexts, indirectness and honorific resources serve to sustain social harmony (Handriani et al., 2025). Nevertheless, pragmatic performance cannot be explained solely through first-language cultural norms, as demonstrated among Korean and Norwegian users of English (Krulatz & Dixon, 2020). In the present study, Gratitude/Appreciation was the most common adjunct across all ethnic groups. This shared pattern may reflect broader Indonesian politeness values, but it may also result from participants' exposure to conventional expressions of politeness in English-language instruction. Refusal performance should therefore be understood as the product of interacting cultural, instructional, linguistic, and situational influences rather than attributed exclusively to ethnicity (Taguchi, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2022).

These findings address two persistent gaps in refusal research and establish the study's principal novelty. First, most previous investigations have compared speakers from different national backgrounds (Czerwionka & Cuza, 2020; Chang, 2009; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Haugh & Chang, 2019), leaving intranational ethnic diversity comparatively underexamined. By comparing seven ethnic groups within the same university program, this study reduces variation in target language, educational level, and institutional environment, making ethnic and cultural background more analytically visible. The findings show that indirectness varies in degree and realization rather than constituting a monolithic "Indonesian" pragmatic characteristic. Second, the study identifies and quantifies combinatory patterns, particularly regret paired with alternative and gratitude paired with alternative, as recurring pragmatic units. This strategic layering enables learners to protect face and preserve harmony (Chojimah, 2015), confirming that refusals are commonly realized through complementary sequences rather than isolated semantic formulas (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Chang, 2009; House & Kádár, 2023).

Theoretically, the findings support Brown and Levinson's (1987) account of refusal as face-threatening while also aligning with post-classical perspectives that conceptualize politeness as relational, discursively negotiated, and contextually evaluated

(Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Mills, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005). Participants did not simply retrieve fixed formulas; they flexibly combined pragmatic resources according to the perceived interpersonal demands of each situation. Pedagogically, this flexibility underscores the need for explicit pragmatic instruction in multicultural EFL curricula. Scenario-based role plays, contrastive cultural-awareness tasks, analysis of authentic refusal exchanges, and technology-enhanced instruction can help learners evaluate how power, distance, imposition, and cultural expectations influence strategy selection (Xiao, 2023; Barón & Celaya, 2022; Kamal & Ariffin, 2023). Instruction should therefore move beyond teaching formulaic expressions such as “I am sorry” and provide opportunities to compare, sequence, and adapt refusal strategies across communicative contexts.

These contributions should be interpreted alongside several limitations. Unequal ethnic representation prevents direct frequency comparisons from being considered evidence of stable community-wide differences. The written DCT reflects participants’ stated pragmatic knowledge but does not capture prosody, non-verbal behavior, response timing, or spontaneous interaction. Furthermore, the single institutional setting limits transferability. Future research should involve more balanced samples across Indonesian universities, with greater attention to underrepresented groups, particularly Acehnese and Nias speakers. Natural conversations, role plays, stimulated-recall interviews, and digital communication data may further reveal how refusal sequences develop in real time. Longitudinal and intervention studies are also needed to examine the effects of explicit pragmatic instruction on learners’ strategy selection and sequencing. (Czerwionka & Cuza, 2020; Xiao, 2023). Further research may productively explore refusal strategies across a wider range of contexts, including institutional, workplace, online, and multilingual environments, to better understand how pragmatic practices are shaped by different communicative settings. In addition, future studies could examine the interplay between ethnicity and other social variables, such as gender, language proficiency, social power, and mobility, in order to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced account of intranational pragmatic variation.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that refusal in multicultural EFL classrooms is not a single act of saying “no,” but a layered pragmatic process through which learners balance communicative intentions, politeness, and interpersonal harmony. Among 113 students representing seven Indonesian ethnic groups, indirect strategies predominated (67.13%), followed by adjuncts (24.77%), while direct refusals were least frequent (8.10%). Statement of Regret was the most common indirect strategy, Gratitude/Appreciation was the dominant adjunct, and the recurrent combination of

regret with an alternative revealed participants’ preference for mitigating refusal through multiple semantic formulas. Although Batak participants demonstrated a comparatively greater tendency toward direct refusal, indirect and face-preserving strategies remained prevalent across the ethnic groups. These patterns should be interpreted as tendencies within the present sample rather than as fixed characteristics of the wider ethnic communities, particularly because participant representation was unequal.

The study’s novelty lies in comparing refusal practices across seven ethnic groups within the same Indonesian university program while also documenting combinatory refusal patterns as meaningful pragmatic units. By connecting refusal performance, politeness, and multicultural English education, the findings extend intercultural pragmatics beyond conventional cross-national comparisons and support the explicit teaching of pragmatic competence. EFL instruction should therefore incorporate authentic refusal examples, contrastive cultural-awareness activities, and contextualized role plays that help learners select and sequence strategies according to power, distance, and communicative purpose. Future research should involve more balanced samples across multiple institutions and examine naturally occurring, spoken, digital, and workplace refusals, particularly among underrepresented Acehnese and Nias speakers, while investigating how pragmatic instruction, proficiency, gender, and social relationships influence refusal development over time.

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