PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE VERSUS LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: This study seeks to find out if L2/FL learners' linguistic proficiency develops simultaneously with their pragmatic knowledge. It uncovers and analyses the most frequently used refusal speech act realisation strategies from a group of 90 Tunisian learners of English and a group of 90 British speakers of English. The findings point to a discrepancy between the Tunisian learners' linguistic proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. Their sociolinguistic and sociocultural knowledge of British cultural norms when performing refusals has not developed proportionally with their instruction level and knowledge of English grammar.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics, native speakers, non-native speakers

I.   INTRODUCTION

There is wide agreement among applied linguists working on interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) that the classroom is an impoverished learning environment, especially for pragmatic opportunities (Kasper, 1997 [6]; Locastro, 2003 [8]; Kondo, 2008 [7]; Tsutagawa, 2013 [13]). Classroom-fronted discourse is based on the classical, decontextualised input of language forms, which do not sufficiently foster SL/FL learners' pragmatic knowledge. Other ILP studies suggest that SL/FL learners' pragmatic knowledge does not necessarily develop with their linguistic proficiency (Bouton, 1988 [2]; Kasper, 1995 [5]; Takahashi, 1996 [11]; Garcia, 2004 [4]). More precisely, the learners' grammatical command of L2/FL does not automatically lead to the command of its appropriate use in social contexts, which implies that even advanced L2/FL learners are liable to make pragmatic errors. One of the main reasons underlying learners' pragmatic failure is the quality of instruction, which may be insufficient or inadequate.

Speech act realisations in SLs/FLs, for instance, may constitute a handicap for the learners of these languages unless they receive a classroom 'treatment'. Such a handicap, or, as termed by Thomas (1983) [12], pragmatic failure, may be due to SL/FL learners' inability to perceive and/or produce contextually appropriate target language communication strategies, especially when some aspects of these learners' pragmatic competence have not been developed yet. L2/FL learners' pragmatic errors are essentially due to failures in assessing the sociocultural variables of the target language.

The sociocultural variables people abide by in one culture to ensure ongoing communication may vary from one speech community to another (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3], which has given applied linguists an impetus to investigate the noncorrespondence between L1 and L2 in relation to such social variables. The latter may be at the origin of miscommunication between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs). Studies across languages report that what is considered polite in one language, for example, may turn out to be impolite in another (Kasper, 1997 [6]; Kondo, 2008 [7]; Tsutagawa, 2013 [13]).

This study addresses the issue of NNSs' pragmatic errors resulting from failures in refusal speech act realisations. It uncovers and analyses the refusal speech act realisation strategies most frequently used by a group of 90 Tunisian learners of English and a group of 90 British speakers of English. The study also seeks to find out if the Tunisian group's linguistic proficiency developed simultaneously with their pragmatic knowledge. It unravels the Tunisian and British cultural aspects associated with refusal behaviour and provides L2/FL teachers and learners of English and other languages with some of the fundamental aspects of the role of sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics in L2s/FLs.

METHODOOLOGY

The study adopts the frequently used instrument of cross-cultural data collection in the field of ILP, the so-called discourse completion test (DCT). The present study's DCT includes 12 prompt situations where NSs and NNSs are led to refuse three requests, three invitations, three offers and three suggestions. The DCT specifies the following contexts:

Refusals of Requests

a.   Refusal of a beggar's request for alms (Beggar)

b.   Refusal of a colleague's request to use one's mobile phone (Phone)

c.   Refusal of the faculty dean's request to stay longer in a meeting (Meeting)

Refusals of Invitations

a.   Refusal of an invitation by one's students to attend his/her marriage (Marriage)

b.   Refusal of a friend's invitation for dinner (Dinner)

c.   Refusal of one's research supervisor's invitation to attend a party (Supervisor)

Refusals of Offers

a.   Refusal of a cleaning lady's offer to buy a vase she has broken (Vase)

b.   Refusal of a friend's offer of a piece of pizza (Pizza)

c.   Refusal of a high official's offer of employment at the Ministry of Higher Education (Ministry)

Refusals of Suggestions

a.   Refusal of a student's suggestion to change the methodology of instruction (Methodology)

b.   Refusal of a friend's suggestion to go to the theatre (Theatre)

c.   Refusal of the faculty dean's suggestion to change a timetable (Timetable)

Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

a.   Do the Tunisian and British informants use different refusal strategies?

b.   Does the Tunisian informants' pragmatic knowledge develop proportionally with their linguistic proficiency?

Hypotheses

We propose the following one-tailed, or directional, hypotheses:

1.   H1: The Tunisian informants will use more indirect refusal strategies in English than the British informants (H1: r ⯑ 0).

2.   H2: The Tunisian informants' pragmatic knowledge will not have simultaneously developed with their linguistic proficiency (H2: r ⯑ 0).

Operational Definitions

Linguistic proficiency. As mentioned above, the Tunisian sample is made up of students and teachers of English from the Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis (HILT). They can be categorised into the following groups:

a.   First-year university students of English (Group 1): They have studied English for four to six years in

high school, with an average of three to four hours of English per week. These students, enrolled in their first year at HILT

at the time of the fieldwork, were expected to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in the English language.

b.   Final-year university students of English (Group 2): They have also studied English for four to six

years in high school, with an average of three to four hours of English per week. These students, enrolled in their final year

at HILT at the time of the fieldwork, were expected to graduate by the end of the year.

c.   University teachers of English (Group 3): These were teachers of English with postgraduate qualifications.

Variables

Independent variables. The research depends on two sets of independent variables. The first set is based on two nominal independent variables with three levels each. The second set is based on sociodemographic variables.

Set One. Set one is based on the following:

a.   The Tunisian group (TG), which is composed of three subgroups (first-year university students of English, final-year

university students of English and university teachers of English).

b.   The British group (BG), which is composed of three subgroups (first-year university students of English, final-year

university students of English and university teachers of English).

Set Two. The sociodemographic variables 'level of instruction', 'age', 'sex' and 'occupation' were chosen for this research. The rationale underlying these choices was to find out if any induced variability between the three groups of Tunisian informants' refusal behaviour could be due to one of these variables.

Dependent Variables

The study investigates the following three interval dependent variables:

a.   The frequency of total refusal strategies used by TG and BG.

b.   The frequency of direct and indirect refusal strategies used by TG and BG.

c.   The indirect refusal strategies used by TG and BG. This variable includes 10 levels: Reason, regret, positive opinion,

gratitude, pause-filler, off-the-hook, criticism and a promise for future acceptance, wish and postponing.

Sampling Method

The population of the investigation was heterogeneous with regard to age and language proficiency. For this reason, a stratified random-sampling method was employed to divide the population into non-overlapping subgroups or strata. The advantage of stratification is that the members of each stratum are selected according to similar characteristics. It must be admitted, however, that some representativeness is lost because random sampling is not used in the present study, but more insight is gained by targeting specific population strata.

Data Coding

Data were coded in line with Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz's (1990) [1] coding schema, which offers detailed descriptions of refusal classifications. Refusals were classified into direct strategies (e.g., 'I refuse', 'I can't') or indirect strategies (e.g., 'I'm terribly sorry, I have another appointment'). They were also coded into semantic formulas: For example, if a university teacher turned down a student's request to add extra hours for a course, saying: 'I'm sorry, I wish I could; I have to start a new course next week', his/her refusal realisation strategies would be coded as comprising a statement of regret ('I'm sorry'), a wish ('I wish I could') and a reason ('I have to start a new course next week'). The data elicited by the English DCT version were coded and categorised with the help of NS inter-rater.

Data Analysis

Drawing on the work of Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990) [1] and Nelson, Carson, Al Batal & Bakary (2002) [9], the DCT responses were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis examined the frequency distribution of refusal strategies used by British and Tunisian informants. The qualitative analysis studied the wording of indirect refusal strategies—that is, the quality of the words utilised by the Tunisian and the British informants to encode indirect refusal behaviour. The data analysis section separately addresses each of the research questions.

The quantitative analysis covers inter-group and intra-group performances. The inter-group analysis compared the average frequency of (1) the total refusal strategies, (2) the direct refusal strategies and (3) the indirect refusal strategies utilised by British and Tunisian informants. The intra-group analysis

investigated the same three variables but compared the subgroups' performances within each of the entire Tunisian and British groups.

In addition, the quantitative analysis compared the frequency of indirect strategies (reason, regret, positive opinion, pause-filler, gratitude, off-the-hook, criticism and others) used by Tunisian and British informants with interlocutors of higher, equal and lower status.

The qualitative analysis also examined the linguistic forms selected by all informants to express the aforementioned indirect refusal strategies and the impact of the interlocutor's status on the informants' choice of these linguistic forms. The Tunisians' instances of pragmatic inappropriateness were classified either into sociolinguistic or sociocultural errors. The sociolinguistic errors are those related to a failure to select appropriate linguistic forms, and the sociocultural errors are those related to a failure to appropriately assess the target language's sociocultural norms.

The analysis was completed with an assessment of whether the quality of the English language instruction that the Tunisian informants received helped them produce a native-like refusal behaviour. In other words, this part of the research found out whether the informants' pragmatic knowledge developed simultaneously with their linguistic proficiency.

Statistical Testing

Descriptive statistics were calculated to measure the central tendency and dispersion for

a.   the British and Tunisian informants' use of total strategies, total direct strategies and total indirect strategies; and

b.   the British and Tunisian informants' use of total strategies, total direct strategies and total indirect strategies with lower,

equal or higher interlocutor status.

A two-tailed mean comparison using an independent-sample t-test and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure were performed to assess the significance level of the observed results. Nonparametric, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used to replace the above two tests when the assumptions of normal distribution and homogeneity of variances were not met. In addition, Spearman's rank correlation test was carried out to assess the effect of the sociodemographic variables (sex, age, level of instruction and occupation) on the informants' refusal performance.

The Kolmogrov-Simirnov test for normality and Levene's test for homogeneity of variances were used to examine the data distribution. Graphic representations were also employed when necessary to better illustrate and understand the observed similarities and differences between the Tunisian and British informants' refusal behaviours. An overall alpha level for statistical procedures was set at $p < .05$.

DATA ANALYSIS DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this section, an attempt was made to find out whether the type of institutional input that the Tunisian informants received in learning English was adequate enough to make them pragmatically aware and capable of producing native-like refusal behaviour. In view of the above classification of the TG's pragmatic errors, this section will determine who is more liable to make those errors: Is it TG1, who have little command over the target language linguistic system; or TG2 and TG3, who are expected to have more control over the underlying linguistic system of the target language?

Inter-Group Comparison

The total BG and TG direct and indirect refusal strategies were compared to answer the first research question ('Do the Tunisian and British informants use different refusal strategies?'). In regard to total strategies, the BG's average frequency of occurrence is higher than that of TG's (see Table 1 below). A two-tailed mean comparison was made using the MannWhitney U test to see whether the observed difference in the average frequency of total refusal strategies used by BG (X = 34.43) and TG (X = 32.13) is significant. The test yielded a significant difference (U = 2894.5, degrees of freedom [df] = 179, p = .001). To examine how the obtained responses varied in relation to the typical refusal behaviour, a standard deviation (SD) test showed that the BG's deviation (SD = 4.56) was nearly equal to the TG's (SD = 4.49), as indicated in Table 1 below. Individuals in both groups were then similarly grouped around the typical refusal behaviour and consequently display the same degree of homogeneity.

Compared to their Tunisian counterparts (X = 25.85), the British informants tended to use more indirect refusal strategies (X = 30.85) and, conversely, less direct ones. The BG's indirect refusal strategies

represented 89.60% of the total refusal strategies, as opposed to 80.45% (average: 5.01) for the TG. The BG (SD = 4.48) and TG (SD = 4.53) responses were almost equally dispersed around the typical refusal behaviour. A two-tailed mean comparison was made using an independentsamples t-test to see whether the observed difference in the average frequency of indirect refusal strategies used by the BG and TG is significant. The test yielded a significant result (t = 7.43, df = 178, p = 0). The intra-group analysis resulted in variant frequency averages of indirect refusal strategies employed by the Tunisian sub-groups (X = 23.46, X = 27.06, X = 27.03) and the British sub-groups (X = 32.30, X = 30.06, X = 30.26). The one-way ANOVA test did not yield significant differences for the BG (F = 2.19; df = 2, 87; p = .118) but resulted in significant differences for the TG (F = 7.05; df = 2, 87; p = .001).

As indicated in Table 1, the TG tended to use more direct refusal strategies than the BG: A total of 573 direct strategies as opposed to 322. The Mann-Whitney U test showed a significant difference between the average frequencies obtained for the two groups (U = 1842.5, df = 179, p = 0). Therefore, we reject the hypothesis number 1 (H1) that the TG is more indirect than the BG.

Tunisian Intra-Group Comparison

An intra-group analysis of the TG's total refusal strategies showed that TG1 utilised more refusal strategies and was the most tightly grouped around the typical refusal behaviour (see Table 1). The Kruskal-Wallis test yielded significant differences for the Tunisian sub-groups ($\chi 2$ = 1.124, df = 2, p = .570). Nevertheless, Spearman's rank correlation test proved that such variability in the frequency did not correlate with any sociodemographic variable (sex, age, level of instruction or occupation; see Table 2). In regard to the subgroups' use of direct refusal strategies, the one-way ANOVA test showed that the differences between groups were significant (F = 53.39, df = 2, 87, p = 0). TG1 employed 50% of the total direct refusal strategies utilised by the TG and accounted for the high level of directness that characterised the whole group's refusal performance in English. Clearly, TG1's knowledge of performing refusals is inadequate in terms of using direct strategies.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of total direct and indirect refusal strategies by British and Tunisian informants

	Both groups (N: 180)		British Group (N: 90)		Tunisian Group (N: 90)	
Statistics	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total strategies	33.27	4.56	34.43	4.35	32.13	4.49
Strategies per item	2.77	0.38	2.86	0.36	2.67	0.37
Indirect strategies	28.35	5.14	30.81	4.48	25.85	4.53
Direct strategies	4.96	2.61	3.62	1.07	6.28	2.99

Regarding the subgroups' use of indirect refusal strategies, the one-way ANOVA test yielded significant difference for the TG (F = 7.05, df = 2, 87, p = .001). TG1 (X = 23.46) used less indirect refusal strategies than TG2 (X = 27.06) and TG3 (X: 27.03). The standard deviation test showed that TG1 was more tightly grouped around the typical indirect refusal behaviour and was therefore more homogeneous than the other groups. The rank correlation test showed a significant correlation with age, level of instruction and occupation but a non-significant correlation with sex (see Table 3). The matrix of correlations between the independent variables proves that the level of instruction variable was more influential than the other three sociodemographic variables (sex, age and occupation; see Table 4). Here again, TG1 proved to be less knowledgeable than TG2 and TG3 in terms of the use of indirect refusal strategies in English. TG2 and TG3 seem to display the same proportions of indirect refusal strategies.

Table 2: Correlation of total TG refusal strategies with the sociodemographic variables

Social variables	Total refusal strategies
Age	-.158 (.138)
Level of instruction	-.108 (.311)
Occupation	-.068 (.525)
Sex	-.031 (.772)

The assessment of the individual uses of indirect refusal strategies indicated that TG2's and TG3's average frequencies of the use of all strategies were higher than those of TG1, except in the case of using reason and criticism, where TG1 used more strategies (see Table 5). Even in the use of the reason strategy, the average frequencies between TG1 (X: 10.87), TG2 (X:

10.77) and TG3 (X: 10.70) were slightly different. TG2 and TG3, however, tended to have similar average frequencies.

Table 3: Correlation of TG's indirect refusal strategies with sex, occupation, level of instruction and age

Social variables	TG's indirect refusal strategies
Level of instruction	.653 (.000)
Age	.636 (.000)
Occupation	.381 (.000)
Sex	.139 (.190)

It is interesting that the subgroups displayed considerable variability in the wording and content of their indirect refusal strategies. The TG's use of indirect refusal strategies differed from the BG's at the level of language form choice (i.e., wording) and constituted sociolinguistic errors or failures. First, the intra-group analysis showed that TG2 and TG3 employed longer and more elaborate refusals using more refined English. Examples 1, 2 and 3 below illustrate samples of the refusal speech acts employed by TG3, TG2 and TG1 to turn down a colleague's request to use one's mobile:

1.   'Sorry Sarah, I have to join my students immediately. I'm already late and they may leave.'

2.   'I'm sorry, I'm really very busy, and I have to join the class.'

3.   'No, sorry, I haven't got money in it.'

Second, the three groups seemed to make the same sociolinguistic error. Unlike the British informants, the three groups used other linguistic forms to convey the meaning of a positive opinion. While the BG employed the strategies 'I'd like to' and 'I'd love', the TG utilised a variety of strategies other than those employed by the BG ('it's a good idea', 'it's a pleasure for me', 'it's a great proposition', etc.). In addition, the TG overgeneralised the pause-filler 'oh', whereas the BG employed a variety of pause-fillers. The 'nah' strategy was mostly used to turn down an offer for food. The 'oh' strategy (50%) was heavily represented in invitation situations. The 'gosh' strategy was often found to follow the 'oh' strategy in invitation situations. The strategies 'well' and 'um' appeared more frequently in refusals to requests of unequal status interlocutors. Moreover, the TG overgeneralised the strategy 'thank you/thanks' to express gratitude and 'sorry' to express regret, while the BG interchangeably used other varieties of language forms. They used 'that's kind of you' and 'I'm very grateful' to express gratitude and used 'I'm afraid' and 'unfortunately' to express regret.

Table 4: Correlation matrix of occupation, level of instruction and age

	Level of instruction	Age	Occupation
Level of instruction	- -	0.95 (.000)	0.86 (.000)

			0.82
Age	- -	- -	(.000)
Occupation	- -	- -	- -

Note: Figures are rank correlation coefficients. Bracketed figures are significance levels.

In terms of the content of the indirect refusal strategies (see Table 5), which is referred to as sociocultural knowledge, the three Tunisian subgroups' refusal performances were alike. Their refusal behaviour was affected by the contextual variables of directness and status. They tended to be more sensitive to higher status and use more direct strategies with interlocutors of lower status, but TG1 tended to be more responsive to status than TG2 and TG3. Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate how TG1's total frequency of direct strategies outnumber those of TG2 and TG3 at lower, equal and higher status situations. TG1's overriding use of the strategy of criticism (X = 1.74) showed that the group was more responsive to status and was, consequently, less knowledgeable about British sociocultural norms when performing refusals.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of indirect refusal categories by the three Tunisian sub-groups

Tunisian groups		Regret	Reason	Pause-filler	Gratitude	Off-the-hook	Positive opinion	Criticism	Others
1	Mean	5.37	10.87	1.55	1.74	1.00	1.52	1.74	2.00
	Standard Deviation	1.19	1.01	.89	.71	.00	.67	.81	1.17
2	Mean	6.77	10.77	1.32	2.08	2.11	2.21	1.33	3.15
	Standard Deviation	2.19	2.34	.48	1.00	.74	1.10	.52	1.35
3	Mean	6.07	10.70	1.71	2.68	2.30	2.97	1.00	2.68
	Standard Deviation	1.78	2.47	.69	.95	.79	1.35	.00	.95
Total	Mean	6.07	10.78	1.51	2.14	2.01	2.30	1.57	2.58
	Standard Deviation	1.84	2.03	.70	.96	.83	1.25	.74	1.27

Concerning the content of the reason strategy, the BG provided specific details as to time and place, while the TG provided vague details. The intra-group assessment of reasons provided by the TG revealed that the three groups gave unclear reasons to the interlocutors when performing refusals. Examples 4, 5 and 6 below respectively illustrate samples of unclear reasons employed by TG1, TG2 and TG3 to account for refusing a friend's suggestion to go to the theatre:
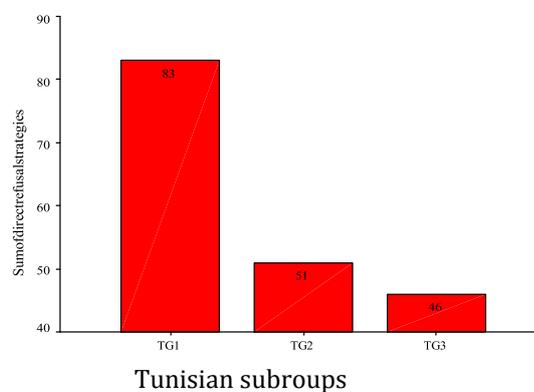
4.   'I don't think, let it for next time.[sic]'

5.   'Thank you for the invitation, but I'm quite busy today.'

6.   'Sorry, I can't; I have other plans.'
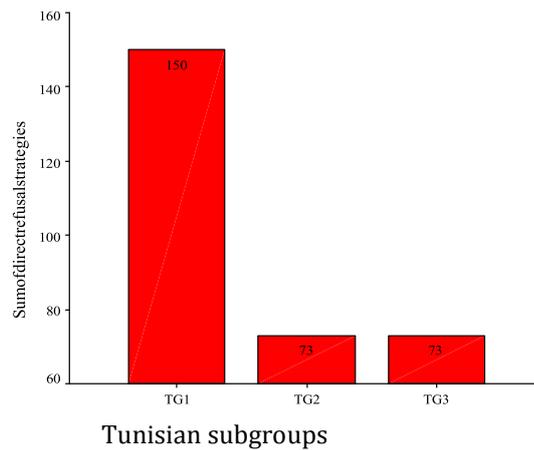
Fig 1: Direct refusal strategies by TG1, TG2 and TG3 in lower status situations.
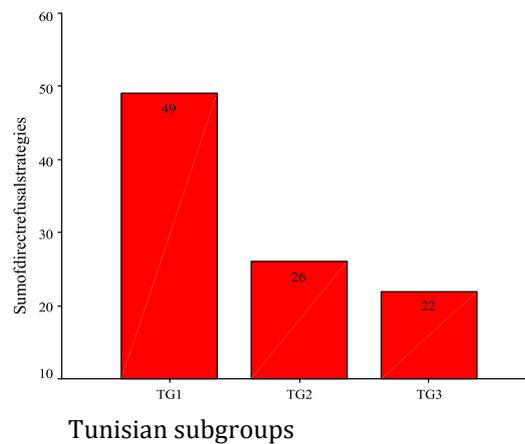
Fig 2: Direct refusal strategies by TG1, TG2 and TG3 in equal status situations.

Fig 3: Direct refusal strategies by TG1, TG2 and TG3 in higher status situations.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings point to a discrepancy between the TG's linguistic proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. The TG's sociolinguistic and sociocultural knowledge of British cultural norms when performing refusals did not developed proportionally with their instruction level and knowledge of English grammar. The data analysis further proves that TG2 and TG3 tended to approximate the British norms of performing refusals in the frequency of their use of direct and indirect strategies, but both groups, like TG1, fail to produce contextualised refusals. Therefore, we accept the hypothesis number 2 (H2) that the Tunisian informants' pragmatic knowledge did not simultaneously develop with their linguistic proficiency. These findings may point to some imperfections in the teaching of English to the Tunisian informants. It would appear that the classroom materials and teaching methods do not raise the learners' pragmatic awareness but rather focusses on providing learners with decontextualised language forms.

On the basis of the analysed TG's pragmatic failure in performing refusals, the teaching of refusals to Tunisian HILT learners of English (as future specialists of English) may follow two phases. In the first descriptive and explanatory phase, the instructor should offer metapragmatic information about the sociocultural variables affecting the performance of refusals in British culture. In the second phase, the relevant language forms should be provided.

Metapragmatic information consists of explicitly informing the learners about the sociocultural variables that prevail in the target society that are likely to impede the NNSs' speech act performance. In the case of teaching a Tunisian learner how to perform refusals in English, the instructor would explain the weight and value of the directness and status variables as they were assessed by the BG in the present research. The instructor should raise the learners' pragmatic awareness by stressing that British speakers often prefer to refuse indirectly and avoid the use of direct refusals such as 'No' and 'I can't' with unequal status interlocutors (higher and lower). As for the status variable, it should be made clear to the learners that, unlike the Tunisian informants who were found to be sensitive to status in their refusals, British speakers are not equally respondent to this variable. The learners should be encouraged to display the same degree of politeness with higher and lower status interlocutors when performing refusals. Furthermore, Tunisian learners should be taught to avoid the use of criticism strategies such as those used by TG1 (see examples 7, 8 and 9 below) because, as indicated above, refusals are in themselves face-threatening acts that cannot afford to include criticism. In addition, they should be taught to avoid the use of overly vague reasons to account for their refusals.

(7)   Beggar situation: 'I don't have money to spend on you. Why don't you try to find a job? This is really disgusting. I don't listen to beggars.'

(8)   Mobile situation: 'My mobile telephone is something private, and I don't want to give it to anyone.'

(9)   Methodology situation: 'You are not a teacher or a headmaster to give me advice or show me how to teach. [sic]'

Table 6: Examples of typical refusal speech acts performed by the BG

Mitigating expression	Conjunction	Explanation
1. I'm really sorry.	But	I haven't got any change.
2. Oh, that sounds lovely.	But	I have plans with my family this evening.
3. I'd love to.	But	I have a lot of work to finish for tomorrow.

The second phase of teaching refusals to Tunisian learners of English deals with the provision of relevant language forms. Upon an analysis of the BG's refusals, several reoccurring structures became evident (Table 6 above), and one may assert that the typical British refusal to a request, offer, suggestion or invitation can be divided into three parts:

a.   A mitigating expression (regret, pause-filler or positive opinion).

b.   The conjunction 'but'.

c.   An explanation (providing a reason).

Moreover, the instructor should draw the learners' attention to the fact that the British often use an intensifier ('really', 'very' and 'so') when expressing regret and the expressions 'I'd love to' and 'I'd like to' to express a positive opinion.

The aforementioned section makes it clear that the TG comparatively failed to produce native-like refusal behaviour. This may largely be due to the impoverished and decontextualised classroom discourse to which the TG was exposed. Anthropologists highly stress the interplay between language and culture, indicating that each of them shapes and is shaped by the other (Schiffrin, 1994) [10]. We are, then, tempted

to conclude that the teaching of pragmatics in SLs/FLs may be far less successful without supplementing it with knowledge of the target language culture.

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