

# The Speech Act Sets\* of Complaint and Refusal as Used by Iraqi EFL University Students

Lecturer Ahmed Sahib Mubarak, M. A.

University of Babylon, College of Education/ Saffey elDeen elHilli

## 1. Introduction

A good deal of the work in the field of interlanguage pragmatics has been conducted within the framework of speech acts theory. Speech acts can be thought of as ‘functions’ of language, such as complaining, refusing, thanking, apologizing, requesting, inviting, and the like. Within this view, the minimal unit of communication is the performance of linguistic act. All languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universals; yet, the ‘form’ used in specific speech acts varies from one culture to another. Thus, the study of foreign language speech acts is concerned with the linguistic possibilities of forms available in languages for speech act realization and the effect of cross-cultural differences on foreign language performance (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993:113).

The ability to use language forms in a wide range of environments involved in the social and cultural context of the situation is the domain of the communicative or pragmatic competence (Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Gass and Selinker, 2001). Speakers who may be considered “fluent” in a foreign language due to their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of that language may still lack pragmatic competence; in other words, they may still be unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate. Speakers employ a variety of communicative acts, or *speech acts*, to achieve their communicative goals, which are generally categorized as: commissives, declarations, directives, expressives, and representatives, in addition to more specific acts such as complaints, refusals, apologies, and requests, (Kasper and Rose, 2001: 2). A great deal of research has been done on the performance of EFL learners with respect to the speech acts of apologies and requests, including studies by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) House and Kasper (1987), Trosborg (1995) ...etc. but few studies have investigated the performance of EFL learners regarding the speech act sets of complaints and refusals. Hence, this paper sets itself the task of investigating the performance of Iraqi EFL university students in using these two

speech act sets. It is hoped that this study will provide a more broad understanding of the performance of Iraqi EFL university students regarding the speech act sets of complaints and refusals through the attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the components (individual speech acts) Iraqi EFL university students use to express the speech act sets of complaints and refusals?
2. How close is their performance in these two speech act sets to the performance of native speakers of English?

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2. 1. The Speech Act Set

The performance of common speech acts usually involves choosing from a set of possible strategies, some of which may involve the use of other distinct speech acts. Olshtain and Cohen (1983: 76) report that the term *speech act set* has been introduced and used in this field to differentiate between a sole speech act and a combination of speech acts (i. e.) a speech act set. For example, in complaining, one could include a threat, which constitutes a speech act distinct from complaining (e.g., “OK, then. If you won’t turn your music down, *I’ll call the police!*”), or in apologizing, a criticism may be added (e.g., “Sorry I bumped into you, lady, but *look where you’re standing!*”).

A speech act set, therefore, is a mixture of individual speech acts that, when produced together, embrace a complete speech act set (Murphy and Neu, 1996: 194). Often more than one distinct speech act is required for a speaker to develop the major communicative purpose – or illocutionary force – desired. For example, in the case of a refusal, one might appropriately produce three separate speech acts (Chen, 1996: 23):

- (1) an expression of regret, “I’m so sorry,” followed by
- (2) a direct refusal, “I can’t come to your graduation,” followed by
- (3) an excuse, “I will be out of town on business.”

The speech act set, Scollon and Scollon (2001: 26) explain, is similar to the speech event, which takes into account the speech acts of all interlocutors. For example, the speech event “asking for the time,” could be composed of four speech acts. The first speaker may:

- (1) excuse him or herself for interrupting (apology), then,
- (2) ask the listener for the time (request). The other speaker will likely
- (3) state the time (stating), and the first speaker will
- (4) thank him or her for the information (thanking).

### 2. 1. 1. *The Speech Act Set of Complaint*

The speech act of complaint occurs when a speaker reacts with discontent or displeasure to an action that has affected the speaker unfavourably. Like a refusal, it is also a face-threatening act for the listener, and often realized through indirect strategies. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) studied the speech act of complaint as produced by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. They developed five components of the speech act set of complaint that were based on the severity of a specific scenario, in which one colleague had waited for another colleague, who arrived late to a scheduled appointment. The five components were (ibid: 202):

- (1) below the level of reproach: *“No harm done, let’s meet some other time”*
- (2) disapproval: *“It’s a shame that we have to work faster now”*
- (3) complaint: *“You are always late and now we have less time to do the job”*
- (4) accusation and warning: *“Next time don’t expect me to sit here waiting for you”*
- (5) threat: *“If we don’t finish the job today I’ll have to discuss it with the boss.”*

They (ibid) also found that both groups, regardless of their first language, made use of each component, while – at least for this particular scenario – tending to prefer the middle of the scale – disapproval, complaint and accusation – rather than the extremes of the continuum (below the level of reproach and threat), avoiding being either too soft or too aggressive.

Murphy and Neu (1996: 203) applied the speech act set to complaints produced by American and Korean speakers of English. They identified the components of the speech act of complaint as (1) an explanation of purpose, (2) a complaint, (3) a justification, and (4) a candidate solution: request. They found a high correlation between native and non-native speakers when producing three of the four speech act components – explanation of purpose, justification, and candidate solution: request.

Native and non-native speakers differed in production of the second component, the complaint. The American subjects produced a complaint in each instance, e. g.:

- *I think, uh....., it's my opinion..., maybe the grade was a little low.*

whereas most Korean subjects tended to produce a criticism, e. g.:

- *But you just only look at your point of view and, uh..., you just didn't recognize my point.*

Such criticism was reported to have the potential of offending the interlocutor or shutting down the interaction (ibid: 207). For this reason, it is said that complaints require a high level of pragmatic competence in any language, both for native speakers and non- native speakers, because they have to do with sorting out the norms of behaviour that have to be shared daily within society, family, friends, or multilingual workers (Morón *et al*, 2009: xxii).

### 2. 1. 2. The Speech Act Set of Refusal

The speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says *no*. Therefore, refusal is characterized as being a response to one of four speech acts; namely, request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. It is the speech act by which a speaker denies to be engaged in an action proposed by an interlocutor (Zhou Geyang, 2007: 155). Consequently, like complaints, refusal is a face-threatening act to the interlocutor because it contradicts his or her expectations, and so it is often realized through indirect strategies. It is for that reason that it requires a high level of pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996: 28). Beebe, *et al* (1990: 58), studying refusals produced by American English speakers and Japanese EFL learners, analyzed the refusals as a formulaic sequence, comprised – in the case of refusing an invitation – of:

- (1) an expression of regret, followed by
- (2) an excuse, and ending with
- (3) Offering alternatives.

In studying these refusals, they found that Japanese speakers of English and native speakers differed in three areas: the order of the semantic formulae, the frequency of the formulae, and the content of the utterances. While the Japanese speakers appropriately produced the same semantic components as their American

acquaintances, the quality of the utterances was very different. The American subjects tended to offer specific details when giving explanations, while the Japanese subjects often produced explanations that might be interpreted as vague by Americans.

Chen (1996: Ch3) used semantic formulae to analyze speech act sets of refusal (refusing requests, invitations, offers and suggestions) produced by American and Chinese speakers of English. She found that a direct refusal (i.e., “No”) was not a common strategy for any of the subjects, regardless of their language background. Further, she found that an expression of regret which is regular in American speakers’ refusals was generally not produced by the Chinese speakers, which could lead to unpleasant feelings between speakers in an American context.

Al-Kahtani (2005: 81) shows that the American, the Arab, and the Japanese were different in the way they realized refusals with respect to the three dimensions of semantic formulae: the order, the frequency. and content of semantic formulae. Nevertheless, they were not different across all situations. He reports circumstances in which the American, the Arab, and the Japanese tended to react in the same way.

### **3. The Empirical work**

#### 3. 1. The elicitation technique

To find out the components Iraqi EFL university students use to express the speech act sets of complaints and refusals and to compare their pragmatic performance to that of native speakers when using the speech act sets, an elicitation technique; namely a questionnaire, was used to collect the required data from both the native speakers and the Iraqi EFL university students. The subjects were asked to write their responses to four situations, representing the two speech acts, within familiar equal and superior-inferior relationships. The questionnaire have been used as the tool of many speech act studies, including Olshtain and Weinbach’s (1987) study of complaints, and Beebe, *et al* ’s (1990) study of refusals. Responses of native English speakers were reviewed for evidence of common components of speech act sets to establish a model for analyzing the responses of Iraqi EFL university students regarding the presence and quality of the speech act components as compared to the native speakers.

#### 3. 2. The subjects

This study comprises two sorts of subjects: one sort represents the experimental group consisting of sixty Iraqi EFL university fourth-year students (academic year 2010-2011) chosen randomly from the Department of English College of Education/ Saffey ed-Deen el-Hilli/ University of Babylon. They range in age between twenty-one and twenty-four years old. Of the sixty subjects, twelve are male and forty-eight are female subjects. They share the same educational, economic, and social backgrounds and none of them spend a period, whatsoever, in an English speaking community. The other sort of subjects represents the control group of the study consisting of eight native speakers of American English. They range in age between thirty-six to forty-eight years old. Each of them carries a bachelor degree in a certain specialization and they work in different NGOs in Babylon and Najaf Provinces.

### 3. 3. The Questionnaire

Although the questionnaire is a time-saving testing tool, it is not the best way to obtain authentic data. Subjects write, do not speak, and this gives them the opportunity to consider and modify their responses as they like, something that is much less probable in a naturalistic spoken setting. To minimize these disadvantages of a questionnaire, all subjects of the experimental group in this study responded in the class under the researcher's observation and they were asked not to use pencils so that their chances of erasing and modifying their answers would be lesser. The control group subjects were handed over the questionnaire and asked to return it back as soon as possible. They differed in the time they returned it; some took one day, others after a week! The questionnaire (see Appendix) consisted of four situations taken with adaptation from Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) study of complaints, and Beebe, *et al*'s (1990) study of refusals to elicit the specific speech act sets comprising the focus of this study; viz, complaints and refusals. In each situation, the subject was familiar with the interlocutor. The situations were deliberately chosen to simulate contexts that could occur in a university setting. Below is an outline description to each situation in the questionnaire:

1. **Complaint** made to professor for a missing letter of recommendation
2. **Complaint** made to classmate for missing thesis in a photo-copy shop.
3. **Refusal** of invitation given by a supervisor.

4. *Refusal* of invitation given by classmate.

3. 4. Administration of the task : The researcher himself administrated the test in January, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The subjects were provided with the questionnaire and were asked to complete it all and not leave any situation unanswered. The subjects were asked to respond by writing what their oral response would be to each situation posed. They were encouraged to respond spontaneously (i. e.) to write their responses to match as closely as possible what they might actually say in everyday real interactions.

#### 4. Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed to find out the components of each speech act present in the responses. Using the native speakers' responses to the questionnaire, a model for each speech act set was formulated. The presence of each component was calculated for frequency of use for both native speakers (the control group) and Iraqi EFL university students (the experimental group). The frequency of each component is presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 below. Each of the native speakers' responses was analyzed for individual speech acts that served to complete the speech act set for each situation. the situations used to elicit complaints produced two different formulae; while the situations used to elicit refusals produced identical semantic formulae. The quality of the components produced by native speakers differed from those produced by Iraqi EFL university students. In general, the latter's responses were linguistically correct, but often lacked the pragmatic elements that mitigate these face-threatening acts to be well received by the interlocutor.

##### 4. 1 Analysis of Complaints

Four components were found in the native speakers' production of the speech act set of complaints. These components were:

- (1) **excusing self for imposition**, such as, "Excuse me for interrupting;"
- (2) **establishing context**, as in, "I placed an order last week;"
- (3) **a request**, such as, "Can you please look for it?" and,
- (4) **expression of necessity**, as in, "I need it right away."

##### 4. 1. 1. *The First complaint situation*

The first complaint situation, in which the speaker is a student complaining to his/her professor for a missing letter of recommendation, native speakers tended to produce the following components of the speech act set:

- (1) excusing self for imposition, "Sorry to bother you;"
- (2) establishing context, "I was wondering about the letter of recommendation you offered to write for me;" and,
- (3) a request, "Did you get a chance to send it?"

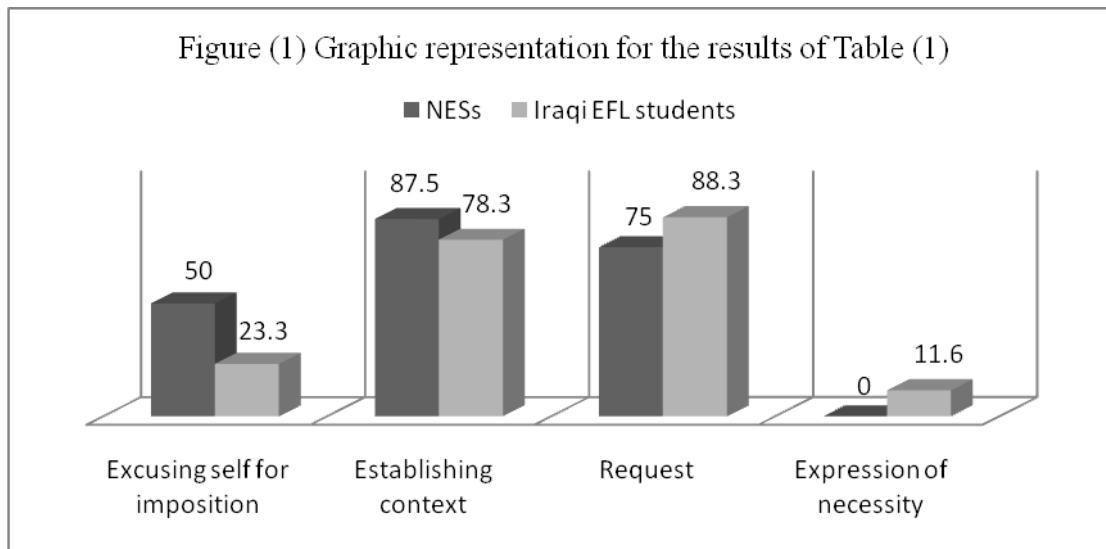
Table (1) below shows the frequencies of these components.

Components	Frequency of Use		Percentage %	
	NESs	Iraqi EFL students	NESs	Iraqi EFL students
Excusing self for imposition	4	14	50	23.3
Establishing context	7	47	87.5	78.3
Request	6	53	75	88.3
Expression of necessity	0	7	0	11.6

**Table (1) Complaint made to professor for a missing letter of recommendation**

As Table (1) reveals, the final component, expression of necessity, did not appear in the data produced by the native speakers for this speaker-listener relationship. The reason might be attributed to the fact that the student could not, in a way or another, "oblige" the professor to send the letter of recommendation since this is not part of his/her regular job and it is done as a favour to the student. As for Iraqi EFL university students, this component recorded a very low and insignificant percentage and this could be ascribed to the same reason above. Regarding the other components, both groups produced the components of this complaint speech act set with roughly the same frequency. The difference of 26% between the native speakers and Iraqi EFL university students in producing the component of excusing self for imposition is not so significant when it is taken into consideration that only half of the native speakers produced this component consistently.





In this situation, although Iraqi EFL university students produced the request component with a close percentage to that of the native speakers', their requests could be considered less appropriate than those produced by the native speakers. Consider the examples below:

- (1) *I wonder, sir, whether you have a copy of the recommendation so we can send it again?*
- (2) *Would you mind, Prof, telling me when did you send it?*
- (3) *Did you send the letter I asked you to write for me?"* and
- (4) *"Is it done?*

At best, examples 1 and 2 above sound insolent, and at worst entail that the student was asking for proof that the letter had been written. Examples 3 and 4 suggest that the professor can be held "guilty" by the student and actually they are in general too direct, and may even sound antagonistic.

#### 4. 1. 2. The second complaint situation

The second complaint situation involved a speaker complaining to a photo-copy shop clerk about an important copy job that is missing. Other than the power relationship existing between the customer and the clerk, the latter is a classmate and accordingly shares a relationship that is familiar in terms of social distance with the former. The components of the speech act set in this situation were:

- (1) establishing context, "I dropped it off yesterday;"
- (2) request, "Please look again;" and,
- (3) expression of necessity, "I have to turn it in to my committee in one hour."

The first component of the second situation, excusing self for imposition, recorded a very low frequency, something which is expected considering the familiarity of the interlocutors and their familiarity in social status, being classmates. The highest frequency recorded in this situation is in the third component, request, which goes with the content of this situation. The frequencies of use and percentages of the other components of the speech act set for this situation are shown in Table 2 below.

Components	Frequency of Use		Percentage %	
	NESs	Iraqi EFL students	NESs	Iraqi EFL students
Excusing self for imposition	1	4	12.5	6.6
Establishing context	6	44	75	73.3
Request	8	52	100	86.6
Expression of necessity	7	32	87.5	53.3

**Table (2) Complaint made to classmate missing thesis in a photo-copy shop**

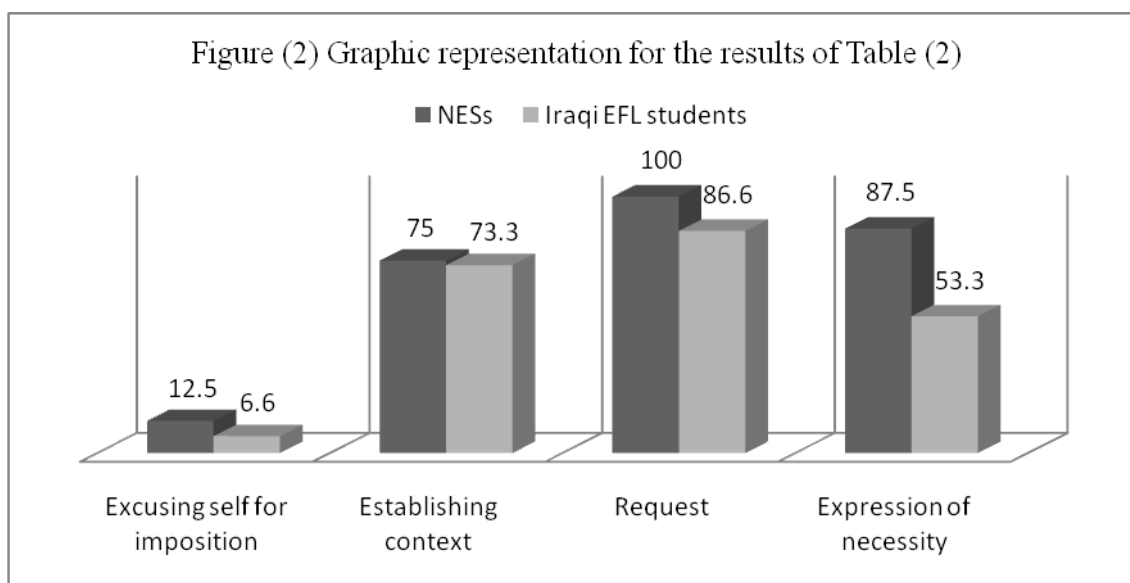
Iraqi EFL university students responses in this situation are again not so appropriate compared to native speakers' responses. The former produced utterances with a personal element such as:

- These papers are very important *to me!*

On the contrary, native speakers expressed necessity with little personal detail:

- I have one hour to deliver the copies to the evaluation committee.

The personalization of one's troubles may not be very appreciated in American culture, where one's own special circumstances are not considered valid or responsible excuses for late work or delay (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993: 117).



#### 4. 2 Analysis of Refusals

Three components were found in native speakers' production of refusals of an invitation, and they were steady between the two situations, regardless of whether the interlocutor was of the same or higher social status. These components were:

- (1) an expression of regret, "I'm sorry;"
- (2) an excuse, "I have to pick up a friend at the airport;" and,
- (3) Offering alternatives, "Can we meet again tomorrow?"

*4. 2. 1. The first refusal situation*

The first refusal situation required the speaker to decline an invitation to go to the cafeteria with the supervisor. Table (3) below shows the percentages of responses in this situation. What is surprising is that Iraqi EFL university students' percentage in the first component, expression of regret, is higher than that of the native speakers'. This, in no way, suggests that the former's performance is better than the latter's, of course. Most native speakers offered a specific excuse in this situation, producing utterances like:

- I have to pick up a friend at the airport.

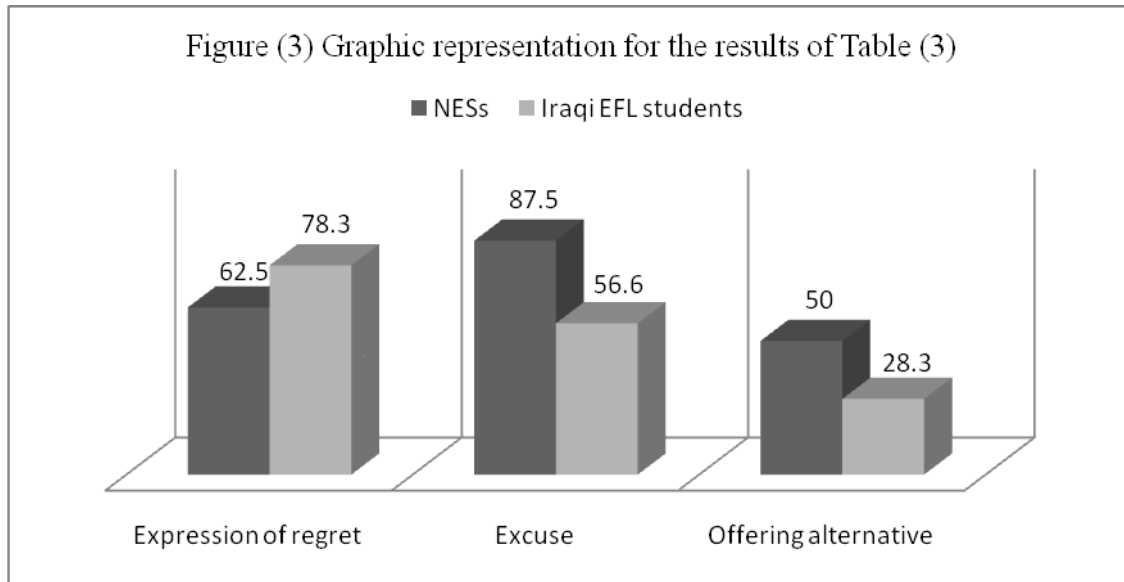
About half of the Iraqi EFL university students presented an excuse that was not specific, stating instead:

- I have to leave soon, I have an important work to do.

Components	Frequency of Use		Percentage %	
	NESs	Iraqi EFL students	NESs	Iraqi EFL students
Expression of regret	5	47	62.5	78.3
Excuse	7	34	87.5	56.6
Offering alternatives	4	17	50	28.3

**Table (3) Refusal made to supervisor's invitation**

The frequency of use of the other two components recorded a percentage for Iraqi EFL university students that is lower than that of the native speakers'. One notable difference occurs in the component of offering alternatives; Iraqi EFL university students were somewhat less likely to offer an alternative for the refusal of the supervisor's invitation while half of the native speakers found it important to offer an alternative for the invitation.



#### 4. 2. 2. The second refusal situation

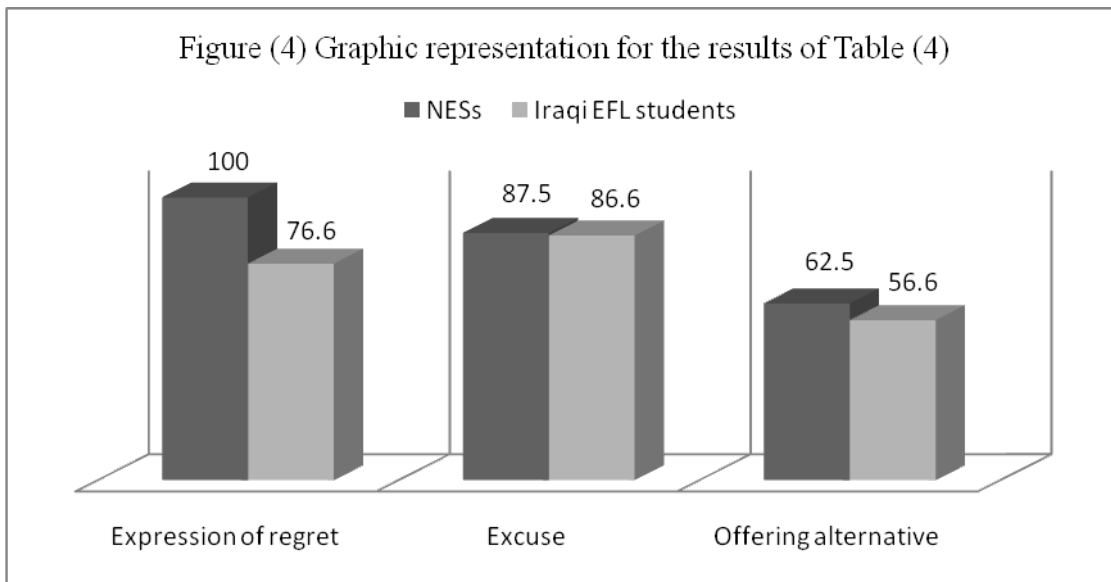
In the second refusal situation, the speaker declined an invitation to go to lunch with a classmate. Iraqi EFL university students’ refusals to the classmate were analyzed for the presence of each of the components of the speech act set of refusal. The frequency of use of the components of the speech act set for this situation are shown in Table 4 below.

Components	Frequency of Use		Percentage %	
	NESs	Iraqi EFL students	NESs	Iraqi EFL students
Expression of regret	8	46	100	76.6
Excuse	7	52	87.5	86.6
Offering alternatives	5	34	62.5	56.6

**Table (4) Refusal made to classmate’s invitation**

The component of excuse was produced with almost the same frequency between native and Iraqi EFL university students. Below are two examples:

- NSs: I’ve really got to get caught up on this project.
- Iraqi EFL student: I need to study for an exam I’ll have tomorrow.



Iraqi EFL university students produced fewer expressions of regret and offers of alternatives than the native speakers. Expressions of regret were produced in every native speaker refusal speech act in this situation, and offers of alternative were produced by more than half of the native speaker refusals. It seems that when refusing a classmate's invitation, Iraqi EFL university students find that it is less necessary to express regret or offer alternatives, due to the familiarity and close social distance. However the fact that both of these elements are present in nearly all of the native speaker responses suggests that these components are in fact culturally and socially important in American refusals.

## 5. Conclusions

The main conclusions arrived at in this study can be summarized as follows:

1. When expressing complaints, it is found that Iraqi EFL university students use the following components: (1) excusing self for imposition; (2) establishing context; (3) a request; and (4) expression of necessity.
2. When expressing refusals, it is found that Iraqi EFL university students use the following components: (1) an expression of regret; (2) an excuse; and (3) Offering alternatives.
3. Despite the fact that Iraqi EFL university students produce the same components native speakers produce and with close percentages sometimes; yet, their performance is found to be less appropriate than is required, something which signals potential occurrences of pragmatic failures.

4. Iraqi EFL university students need help to attain a reasonable pragmatic awareness of the target language. Their teachers have to make them conscious of specific speech act sets and the linguistic features required to produce appropriate complaints, refusals, and other important speech act sets.

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## Appendix

### The Questionnaire

Please use the blank spaces to write your responses in and, as much as possible, be spontaneous (i. e.) try to write the first things that come to your mind when reading the situations.

## The Speech Act Sets\* of Complaint and Refusal as Used by Iraqi EFL

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1. You are applying for a job in a big company. The interview committee has requested that you have your professors send letters of recommendation directly to the company. When you call the interview committee to check the status of your application, you are told that one of the recommendation letters has not arrived. You are concerned because you asked your professor for the letter over a month ago. You go to your professor's office to find out what has happened.

Professor: Hi. How are things going?

You: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Yesterday you left your graduation paper at the photo-copy shop to have three copies of it. Today you must deliver the copies to your evaluation committee by 12:00 noon. When you go to the photo-copy shop at 11:00 am to pick them up, the clerk, who happens to be one of your classmates, seems confused and does not know where your graduation paper is.

You: Hi, have you finished copying my graduation paper?

Clerk: Hmmm. Uh, I don't see anything here under your name.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

3. You are working on a research in collaboration with three other students. Your group is having a discussion with your supervisor late Monday afternoon. It is 2:30 pm. You are planning to meet a friend immediately after the meeting and must leave the university within 15 minutes.

supervisor: Why don't we all go to the cafeteria? We can finish up there while we eat some sandwiches.

You: \_\_\_\_\_

4. A classmate that you have known for a couple of years stops by your desk at the library and invites you to lunch. You want to leave the university early today, so you would rather work through lunch to get ahead on your project.

Classmate: Hi. How have you been? Hey, do you want to go to the cafeteria and get something to eat?

You: \_\_\_\_\_