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Refusal Strategies and Face Concerns: A Cross-Cultural Study of Chinese and Malaysian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Refusal speech acts are among the most face-threatening interactions, especially in multicultural academic and business settings. This small-scale exploratory study investigates how Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS) and Malaysian Bachelor of Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students (BALBAS) perform refusal speech acts in English and perceive their face-threatening effects. Guided by Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, this mixed-methods research utilized Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQs), Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVRs), and semi-structured interviews. Sixteen participants from a Chinese public university and a Malaysian public university participated in the study. They provided data on three key aspects: refusal strategies, semantic formulas, and sociopragmatic perceptions. These were examined across both formal and informal scenarios, which varied systematically in terms of social status and social distance. The results indicate that both groups favored indirect refusal strategies. However, Chinese students employed longer, more complex refusal formulas with a focus on postponement and alternatives, reflecting a cultural emphasis on harmony and indirectness. Malaysian students demonstrated a pragmatic balance between politeness and controlled directness, especially among peers, consistent with multicultural norms. Malaysian participants also reported higher face-threat perceptions across contexts, highlighting greater sensitivity to relational dynamics. Social status and distance significantly influenced pragmatic choices for both groups. These findings offer insights into intercultural communication and underscore the importance of explicit pragmatic instruction in English

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized business landscape, cross-cultural communication skills, particularly those related to refusal speech acts, are essential. Refusals, which involve declining proposals, invitations, offers, or suggestions, carry a high risk of threatening interpersonal face. When handled inappropriately, they may lead to misunderstandings and strained relationships. Mastery of appropriate refusal strategies is especially crucial for international students, such as Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS) and Malaysian Bachelor of Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students (BALBAS), as they prepare for careers in multinational and cross-cultural environments[1–3].

Despite extensive English education in both China and Malaysia from primary school to tertiary levels, many learners still struggle with pragmatic competence. While they may demonstrate grammatical accuracy, they often falter in navigating context-sensitive interactions, leading to pragmatic failure[4,5]. This study seeks to address this gap by comparing how Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS perform refusals in English, with attention to three areas: (1) the refusal strategies and semantic formulas they use; (2) their perceptions of face-threatening acts and offense severity; and (3) how sociopragmatic factors such as social status and distance shape their choices.

Cultural frameworks play a central role in shaping refusal behavior. In Confucian-influenced Chinese contexts, harmony and respect often motivate highly indirect and mitigated refusals, particularly toward individuals of higher status. In contrast, Malaysia's multicultural setting encourages a dynamic balance between collectivist values and controlled directness, especially in peer interactions[6–8]. Exploring these differences offers opportunities not only to refine politeness theory[9] and intercultural pragmatics but also to develop practical guidance for EFL teaching[10–13].

With increasing educational, commercial, and diplomatic ties between China and Malaysia, understanding refusal speech acts among students preparing for global careers is both timely and important[14–16]. This study draws data from students at a northern Chinese public university (CU) and a northern Malaysian public university (MU). It explores refusal strategies and perceptions across scenarios that vary by social status and distance, contributing to both theoretical models and pedagogical applications.

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

(1) Map the refusal strategies and semantic formulas employed by Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS in English.

(2) Investigate learners' perceptions of face-threatening acts and offense severity.

(3) Examine how social status and distance affect the realization of refusals.

In accordance with these objectives, three research questions are posed:

(1) What refusal strategies and semantic formulas do Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS use across diverse social situations?

(2) How do they perceive the face-threatening nature and offense severity of refusals?

(3) In what ways do social status and social distance influence the realization of refusal speech acts in English?

This comparative study contributes to pragmatic instruction for global workforce preparation and advances cross-cultural pragmatics literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speech Act Theory and Refusals

Speech Act Theory[17,18] conceptualizes utterances as actions rather than mere linguistic expressions. Within this framework, refusals are categorized as commissive acts, whereby speakers reject proposals, invitations, offers, or suggestions[19]. Due to their inherently confrontational nature, refusals are considered among the most face-threatening speech acts, particularly in intercultural contexts where communicative norms and language proficiency can diverge sig-

nificantly[20].

In high-context societies such as China, refusals are frequently delivered in indirect forms, employing vague expressions, hedging, and preparatory remarks to mitigate rejection and preserve social harmony[21,22]. Similarly, in Malaysia, a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, refusal speech acts are often characterized by indirectness and politeness, especially when directed toward individuals of higher status, older age, or limited familiarity[8]. Shaped by Islamic values and collectivist orientations, Malaysian speakers frequently adopt empathetic indirectness through strategies such as postponement, vague excuses, and expressed willingness to cooperate in the future to lessen the face-threatening impact of refusals[23].

2.2. Politeness Theory and Face Management

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory differentiates between two aspects of face: positive face (the desire for approval) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). Refusal speech acts threaten both dimensions, thus requiring tactful mitigation strategies[9].

- **Chinese contexts:** Refusals are typically indirect and embedded in expressions of deference and ambiguity, serving as essential tools for maintaining face and social harmony[24].
- **Malaysian contexts:** The multicultural fabric of Malaysian society encourages a blend of indirect politeness and situational directness, especially in interactions among peers[7,25].

2.3. Cross-Cultural Refusal Studies

Empirical studies confirm that Chinese speakers predominantly rely on indirect refusal strategies, such as providing excuses, postponing responses, or using vague language, to minimize conflict and preserve relational harmony[22,26]. In contrast, studies in the Malaysian context emphasize a flexible refusal style that balances politeness with situationally appropriate directness[7,25].

For example, Farnia and Wu[27] compared refusal strategies among Chinese and Malaysian students in Malaysia. They observed that while both groups employed similar types of strategies, Malaysian students tended to use them more frequently in comparable situations. Similarly, Zhao and Nor[28], focusing on Chinese postgraduate students in Malaysian universities, found that Chinese EFL learners continued to prefer indirect strategies when refusing requests, attributing this preference to multiple socio-cultural influences.

2.4. Social Status, Social Distance, and Refusals

Sociopragmatic variables, such as social status (e.g., hierarchical roles) and social distance (i.e., the degree of familiarity between interlocutors), have a significant impact on refusal realizations[29–31]. Refusals directed at high-status individuals are typically more indirect and deferential[32], whereas those aimed at peers may adopt a more direct tone[33]. Jalis et al.[25], in a comparative study of Malaysian and German speakers, found that social status substantially influenced the choice of refusal strategies in both cultures.

2.5. Research Gaps and Significance

Despite numerous prior studies, several research gaps persist:

(1) **Comparative focus:** Few studies have conducted direct comparisons between Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS, two academically and professionally aligned groups preparing for global business roles[27].

(2) **Theoretical framing:** While Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory have been widely applied, their targeted implementation in analyzing pragmatic behavior of Asian student cohorts within business-oriented English-medium education is still underexplored[34].

(3) **Interplay of sociopragmatics:** Limited empirical work examines how social status and distance interact with cultural norms to shape refusal strategies in professional English contexts[30].

This study addresses these gaps through a focused comparative analysis of these two student groups. Grounded in Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, it aims to enhance pragmatic instruction and intercultural competence for learners entering international business environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach[35], combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine refusal speech acts among Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS. The quantitative phase includes Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) and Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQ) to systematically capture participants' strategy use and perceptions. This is followed by qualitative Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVR) and semi-structured interviews that reveal the motivations and socio-cultural interpretations underlying refusal behaviors.

This design enables methodological triangulation, enhances the validity of findings, and provides a comprehensive understanding of both the linguistic realizations and the pragmatic reasoning that inform refusal strategies across the two student groups[36,37].

3.2. Participants

The study involved 16 undergraduate students purposefully selected to reflect the target demographics for this cross-cultural pragmatic investigation. The Chinese cohort included ten Business English Major students (BEMS) from CU (a Chinese university), consisting of two males and eight females aged 20–23. The Malaysian cohort consisted of six Bachelor of Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students (BALBAS) from MU (a Malaysian university), including two males and four females aged 19–23.

All participants reported intermediate to advanced English proficiency, corresponding to CEFR levels B2 to C1, verified through self-assessment and academic coursework. This proficiency threshold ensured that participants' performance reflected pragmatic competence rather than linguistic

limitations, in accordance with established interlanguage pragmatics research standards[38,39].

Purposive sampling ensured participants shared similar educational backgrounds in language and communication and had some exposure to intercultural communication through academic or social experiences. This approach increased comparability across cultural groups, controlled for confounding linguistic variables, and directed analytical focus toward cultural and pragmatic factors[40].

3.3. Instruments

The study employed four main instruments to collect data: Discourse Completion Task (DCT), Scaled Response Questionnaire (SRQ), Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVR), and semi-structured interviews. Each instrument was designed to address the study's research questions and offer both quantitative and qualitative data on refusal speech acts[36,41].

(1) Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT)

The DCT was used to explore refusal strategies, directly addressing **Research Question 1**. It presented participants with hypothetical situations and asked them to respond as naturally as possible. Scenarios were rooted in campus and business contexts to reflect participants' lived and anticipated experiences[42–45]. As noted by Karpava[46], DCTs are effective for eliciting speech acts in controlled environments, making them appropriate for cross-cultural pragmatic studies.

Each scenario varied in social status and social distance, facilitating an analysis of how these variables influenced participants' pragmatic responses. DCT responses were categorized and analyzed for strategy type and frequency, providing a quantitative basis for cross-cultural comparison[36,45]. **Table 1** demonstrates the distribution of the 8 scenarios of refusal speech acts based on social status and social distance.

Table 1. Eight refusal scenarios for Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS.

Refusal Scenarios	Social Status	Social Distance	Context
Situation 1 Lecturer's Assistance Request	Non-equal	Close	Campus life
Situation 2 University Event Invitation	Non-equal	Distant	Campus life
Situation 3 Friend's Laptop Borrowing Request	Equal	Close	Campus life
Situation 4 Classmate's Project Collaboration Suggestion	Equal	Distant	Campus life

Table 1. *Cont.*

Refusal Scenarios	Social Status	Social Distance	Context
Situation 5 Manager's Overtime Request	Non-equal	Close	Business setting
Situation 6 Executive's Internship Extension Offer	Non-equal	Distant	Business setting
Situation 7 Co-worker's Shift Swap Request	Equal	Close	Business setting
Situation 8 Fellow Intern's Extra Task Request	Equal	Distant	Business setting

(2) Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQ)

The SRQ addressed **Research Question 2** by capturing participants' perceptions of face-threatening effects and offense severity. Participants rated each scenario on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating the extent to which they perceived face threat and offense severity. This instrument draws upon Spencer-Oatey's [47,48] model of face and sociality rights, which suggests that variations in context shape evaluations of face threats [49]. It also reflects methods used in recent studies that measure perceived imposition and discomfort in speech acts [50].

The SRQ provided culturally comparable, systematic data on participants' sensitivity to face and offense perceptions. Likert-scale measures have been effectively used in L1/L2 refusal research and studies that explore speech act appropriateness and severity under social variation [30,51].

(3) Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVR)

RVRs addressed **Research Question 3** by probing participants' reflections on their DCT responses, offering insight into how they interpreted social status and distance. This instrument captured participants' cognitive processes and face-related considerations [52,53].

RVRs are valuable for understanding how individuals make decisions in hypothetical scenarios [52,53]. Through this process, participants explained their choice of strategies, illuminating how cultural norms and personal beliefs influence pragmatic behavior. These insights complemented the DCT findings, adding interpretive depth to the data.

(4) Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews complemented the RVRs and addressed **Research Questions 2 and 3**. They enabled participants to elaborate on their perceptions and motivations in performing refusal speech acts. This flexible format allowed for follow-up questions that clarified responses or explored emerging themes [36]. Dörnyei [54] highlights that interviews provide rich contextual data, especially for interpreting social dynamics. Recent research affirms their ability to elicit emotional and reflective insights into sensitive topics [55,56], while also revealing how participants construct meaning in pragmatically demanding situations [57,58].

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQs) were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were used to examine patterns in refusal strategies and perceived offense severity across scenarios.

The DCT responses were manually coded using a modified version of Beebe et al.'s refusal strategy taxonomy [20], adapted by Chang and Ren [59] (See **Table 2**). To ensure reliability, two trained coders independently annotated the data. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$), indicating substantial reliability.

Given the small and unequal sample sizes (10 Chinese and 6 Malaysian participants), non-parametric tests were employed for cross-group comparisons. Specifically, the Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare mean ranks of face-threat ratings, and Fisher's exact test was applied to analyze categorical differences in refusal strategy frequencies. These statistical techniques are robust under small-sample conditions and do not assume normality.

In addition to significance testing, effect sizes were reported to provide a measure of the practical significance of observed differences. However, all results should be interpreted as exploratory, given the pilot-scale nature of the dataset.

Table 2. Coding scheme for refusal strategies.

I. Direct refusal
1. No
2. Negative willingness/ability, e.g., "I can't/I won't/I don't think so."

II. Indirect refusal
1. Statement of regret, e.g., "I'm sorry." or "I feel terrible."
2. Wish, e.g., "I wish I could help you…"
3. Excuse, reason, explanation, e.g., "I have a headache."
4. Statement of alternative, e.g., "Why don't you ask someone else?"
5. Set condition for acceptance, e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have…"
6. Criticism/preach, e.g., "As a student, you should come to class…"
7. Postponement, e.g., "I'll think about it later."
8. Topic switch (Avoidance)
9. Repetition of part of request, e.g., "this weekend?"

III. Adjuncts to Refusal
1. Gratitude, e.g., "Thank you"
2. Pause filler
3. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement, e.g., "I'd love to…"

Qualitative data from Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVRs) and interviews were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach[60,61]. Themes were inductively generated, focusing on cultural motivations, face concerns, and situational sensitivity in participants' refusal behaviors. Quotes were selected to illuminate group-level differences and individual variation.

4. Results

4.1. Refusal Strategies and Semantic Formulas

Research Question 1: *What strategies and semantic formulas do Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS employ to realize speech acts of refusal?*

This section analyzes the refusal strategies and semantic formulas used by Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS) and Malaysian Bachelor of Applied Linguis-

tics and Business Administration students (BALBAS). Insights are drawn from semantic formula analyses and cross-group comparisons.

(1) **Refusal strategies adopted by Chinese undergraduate students**

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of refusal strategies used by Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS). The strategies are categorized into three main types: Direct Refusals (13.98%), Indirect Refusals (64.83%), and Adjuncts to Refusals (21.19%). Indirect strategies such as *Excuse/Reason/Explanation* (31.78%) and *Statement of Alternative* (13.56%) were the most frequently used, indicating a preference for face-saving and mitigation. Adjuncts, particularly *Gratitude/Appreciation* (16.10%), were also commonly employed to soften the refusal. Direct refusals, though less frequent, were still present, mostly through *Negative Willingness/Ability* (12.29%).

Table 3. Distribution of refusal strategies employed by Chinese undergraduates.

Strategy Type	Frequency (No.)	Percentage (%)
Direct Refusal	**33**	**13.98**
No	4	1.69
Negative willingness/ability	29	12.29
Indirect Refusal	**153**	**64.83**
Statement of regret/apology	2	0.85
Wish	15	6.36
Excuse, reason, explanation	75	31.78
Statement of alternative	32	13.56
Set condition for acceptance	1	0.42

Table 3. *Cont.*

Strategy Type	Frequency (No.)	Percentage (%)
Postponement	8	3.39
Promise of future acceptance	7	2.97
Statement of principle	7	2.97
Statement of philosophy	1	0.42
Request for help/empathy/assistance	5	2.12
Adjuncts to Refusal	**50**	**21.19**
Gratitude/Appreciation	38	16.10
Pause filler	1	0.42
Statement of positive opinion	4	1.69
Statement of empathy	7	2.97
In total	**236**	**100**

Notes: "No." refers to the number of strategy instances; "%" indicates their proportion out of the total (N = 236).

Here is the detailed bar chart displaying the number of each refusal strategy. Each bar represents a specific strategy and its corresponding frequency.

This bar chart in **Figure 1** illustrates the distribution of refusal strategies employed by Chinese BEMS participants. The most frequently used strategies include *Excuse/Reason/Explanation*, *Statement of Alternative*, and *Gratitude/Appreciation*, reflecting a strong preference for indirect and mitigating approaches in managing face-threatening acts.

(2) **Refusal strategies adopted by Malaysian undergraduate students**

Table 4 presents the distribution of refusal strategies used by Malaysian BALBAS participants, categorized into *Direct Refusals*, *Indirect Refusals*, and *Adjuncts to Refusals*. The majority of responses fall under *Indirect Refusals* (72.50%), with *Direct Refusals* and *Adjuncts* each accounting for 13.75% of the total. Within the indirect category, the most frequently used strategies include *Excuses/Reasons/Explanations* (27.50%) and *Statements of Regret or Apology* (19.38%), reflecting a strong preference for polite mitigation and face-saving strategies in refusal speech acts.
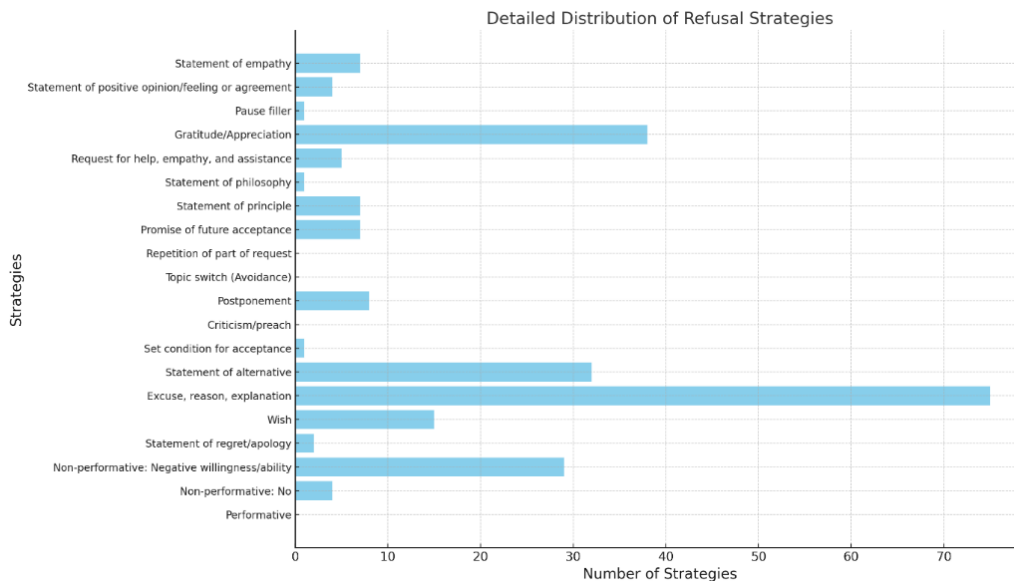

Figure 1. Frequency of refusal strategies among Chinese undergraduates.

Here is a comparative horizontal bar chart that displays the percentages of refusal strategies grouped by category (*Direct Refusal, Indirect Refusal,* and *Adjuncts to Refusal*).

This horizontal bar chart in **Figure 2** presents the percentage distribution of three main categories of refusal strategies (*Direct Refusal*, *Indirect Refusal*, and *Adjuncts to Re-*

fusal), which are used by Chinese BEMS participants. The data indicate a predominant reliance on *Indirect Refusal* strategies, followed by *Adjuncts*, with *Direct Refusals* being the least employed.
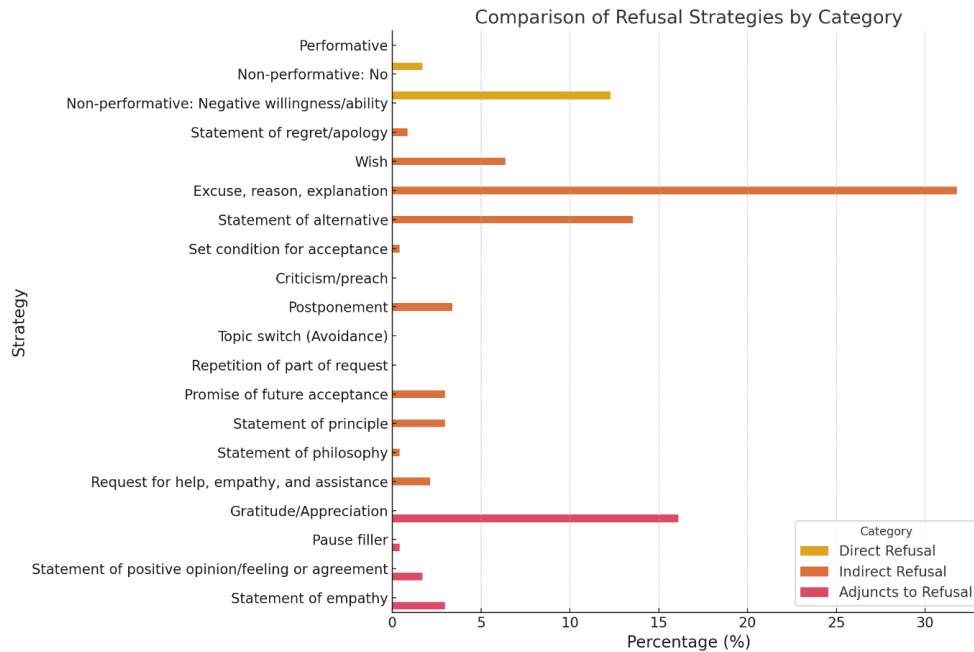

Figure 2. Comparative distribution of refusal strategies by category among Chinese undergraduates.

Table 4. Refusal strategies employed by Malaysian undergraduates.

Types of Refusal	No.	%
I. Direct refusal	**22**	**13.75%**
1. Performative		
2. Non-performative		
a. No		
b. Negative willingness/ability	22	13.75%
II. Indirect refusal	**116**	**72.50%**
1. Statement of regret/apology	31	19.38%
2. Wish	1	0.62%
3. Excuse, reason, explanation	44	27.50%
4. Statement of alternative	18	11.25%
5. Set condition for acceptance	6	3.75%
6. Criticism/preach		
7. Postponement	7	4.38%
8. Topic switch (Avoidance)		
9. Repetition of part of the request		
10. Promise of future acceptance	4	2.50%
11. Statement of principle	4	2.50%
12. Statement of philosophy		
13. Request for help, empathy, and assistance	1	0.62%
III. Adjuncts to Refusal	**22**	**13.75%**
1. Gratitude/Appreciation	13	8.12%
2. Pause filler		
3. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	8	5.00%
4. Statement of empathy	1	0.62%
In total	**160**	**100%**

Notes: "No." refers to the number of strategy instances; "%" indicates their proportion out of the total (N = 160).

Here is the detailed bar chart displaying the number of each refusal strategy. Each bar represents a specific strategy and its corresponding frequency.

This bar chart in **Figure 3** illustrates the frequency distribution of individual refusal strategies used by Malaysian BALBAS participants. The most commonly employed strate-

gies include *Excuse/Reason/Explanation*, *Statement of Regret or Apology*, and *Gratitude/Appreciation*, highlighting a strong preference for indirect and face-preserving responses in Malaysian communicative practice.
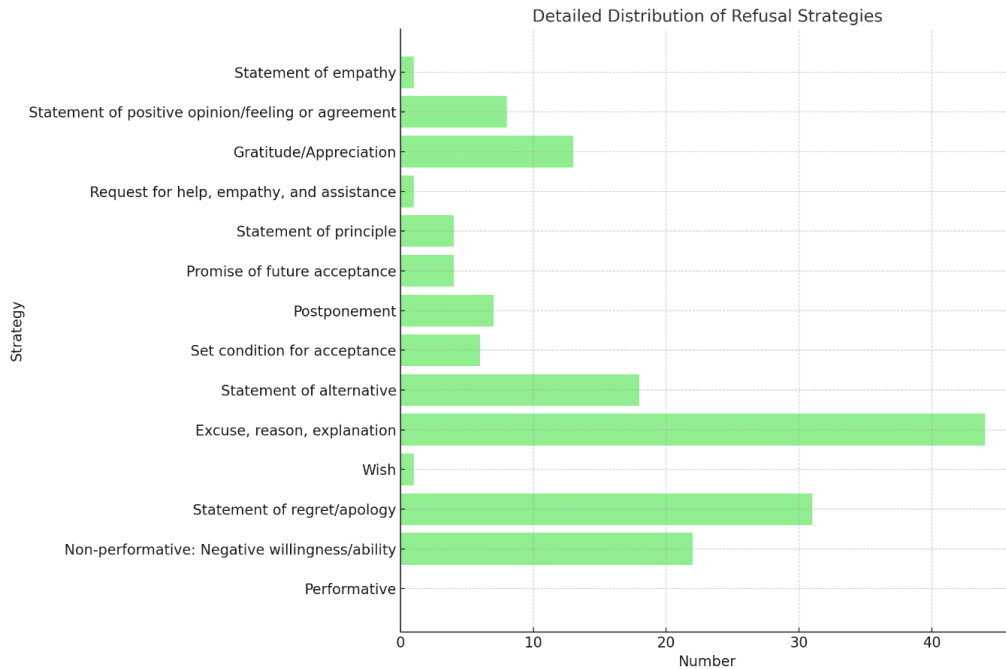

Figure 3. Frequency of refusal strategies among Malaysian undergraduates.

Here is a comparative horizontal bar chart, which displays the percentages of refusal strategies grouped by category (*Direct Refusal, Indirect Refusal,* and *Adjuncts to Refusal*).

This horizontal bar chart in **Figure 4** compares the percentage distribution of refusal strategies employed by Malaysian BALBAS participants across three main categories: *Direct Refusal*, *Indirect Refusal*, and *Adjuncts to Refusal*. The chart reveals a strong preference for indirect strategies (72.50%), with direct refusals and adjuncts each comprising 13.75% of the total, underscoring the emphasis on politeness and face-saving communication in Malaysian cultural contexts.
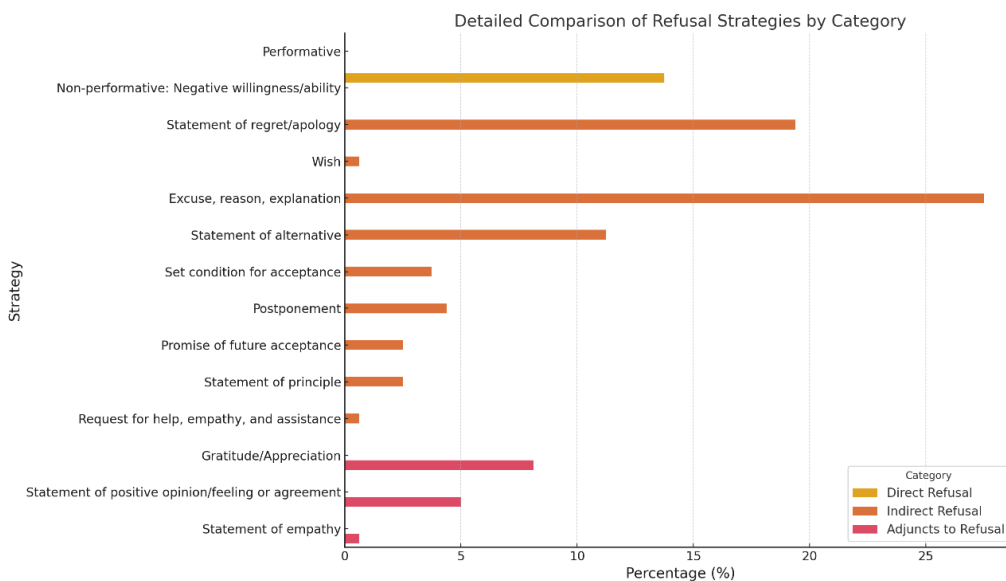

Figure 4. Distribution of refusal strategy categories among Malaysian undergraduates.

(3)   **Comparison of Refusal semantic formulas of Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS**

Table 5 presents a comparative overview of the average length and commonly employed mitigating strategies in refusal speech acts by Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS. It highlights how each group structures their refusals and the preferred politeness mechanisms embedded in their responses.

Table 5. Comparison of refusal semantic formulas between Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates.

Group	Average Length of Formula	Frequent Mitigating Strategies
Chinese	4.2	[Postponement, Statement of Alternative]
Malaysian	3.8	[Gratitude/Appreciation, Statement of Alternative]

Summary of Comparison:

- Chinese BEMS tend to employ longer, more elaborate semantic formulas (average of 4.2 strategies per refusal), emphasizing indirectness and relationship maintenance.

- Malaysian BALBAS use slightly shorter formulas (average of 3.8 strategies), marked by expressions of gratitude and polite alternatives.

- Both groups frequently employ Excuse/Reason/Explanation strategies.

- Chinese participants favor Postponement, suggesting an orientation toward temporally deferring refusals; Malaysians more often use Gratitude, signaling politeness and positive face maintenance.

These observed tendencies reflect culturally rooted pragmatic preferences: Chinese refusals are shaped by a desire to preserve harmony and minimize confrontation, while Malaysian refusals blend cautious directness with strategic politeness[62,63].

4.2. Perceptions of Face-Threatening Effects

Research Question 2: *How do Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS perceive the face-threatening effect and offense severity of refusal speech acts?*

This section presents both quantitative ratings and qualitative insights gathered through Scaled Response Questionnaires (SRQs) and Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVRs). The focus is on how students from the two cultural groups perceive the degree of face-threat and offense severity across various refusal scenarios.

To examine potential cross-cultural disparities in the perception of refusal speech acts, **Table 6** presents a comparison of face-threatening effects and offense severity ratings between Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates.

Table 6. Comparison of Face-Threatening Effects and Offense Severity Ratings between Chinese and Malaysian Undergraduates.

Scenario	Chinese Mean Rating	Malaysian Mean Rating	Chinese Comments	Malaysian Comments
Refusal to Lecturer	2.6	3.17	Formal, professional context	Professional, high stakes
Refusal to Event Official	2.4	2.8	Formal but less severe	Formal, less severe
Refusal to Friend	2.3	2.6	Informal context, low stakes	Moderate severity in informal setting
Refusal to Classmate	2.0	2.4	Casual, low stakes	Casual, collegial context
Refusal to Manager	2.8	3.67	Professional, moderate stakes	High emphasis on hierarchy
Refusal to Executive	2.9	4.0	Professional, hierarchical context	Professional, highest stakes
Refusal to Co-worker	2.8	3.0	Collegial but professional setting	Professional, collaborative context
Refusal to Fellow Intern	2.2	3.0	Casual, low stakes	Moderate professional stakes

Table 7 displays the average perceived severity ratings (on a 5-point Likert scale) across eight refusal scenarios, alongside representative participant comments that contextualize their evaluations. The summary of perceptions are as follows:

- Chinese BEMS tended to assign moderate face-threatening and offense severity ratings, especially in professional settings (e.g., refusals to managers and executives), while rating peer-related scenarios significantly lower.

- Malaysian BALBAS, in contrast, consistently gave higher ratings across all contexts, especially in hierarchical interactions, suggesting heightened sensitivity to face loss and greater sociopragmatic awareness.
- The largest rating disparities were observed in refusals to *managers* (2.80 vs. 3.67) and *executives* (2.90 vs.

4.00), indicating a more pronounced concern for status and authority among Malaysian students.
- Informal situations (e.g., refusals to friends or classmates) elicited relatively low ratings in both groups but still showed higher offense perceptions among Malaysians.

Table 7. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Face-Threat Sensitivity in Refusal Scenarios.

Scenario	Chinese BEMS	Malaysian BALBAS
Refusal to Manager	2.80	3.67
Refusal to Executive	2.90	4.00
Refusal to Co-worker	2.80	3.00
Refusal to Fellow Intern	2.20	3.00

These results reflect culturally grounded interpretations of communicative appropriateness and the perceived severity of pragmatic violations, aligning with the broader face-management strategies discussed in earlier sections.

4.2.1. Face-Threatening Effects and Offense Severity Ratings by Chinese and Malaysian Undergraduates

The following bar charts present the average ratings of face-threatening effects and offense severity as perceived by Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates in eight refusal scenarios. These scenarios vary in terms of social status and social distance, allowing for a nuanced comparison across both formal and informal contexts.

This chart in **Figure 5** visualizes Chinese BEMS students' mean ratings for each scenario, with higher values indicating greater perceived face-threat or offense severity.

This chart in **Figure 6** displays the corresponding mean ratings provided by Malaysian BALBAS participants across the same eight scenarios.

This comparative bar chart in **Figure 7** juxtaposes the Chinese and Malaysian ratings, highlighting variation in perceptions between the two cultural groups.
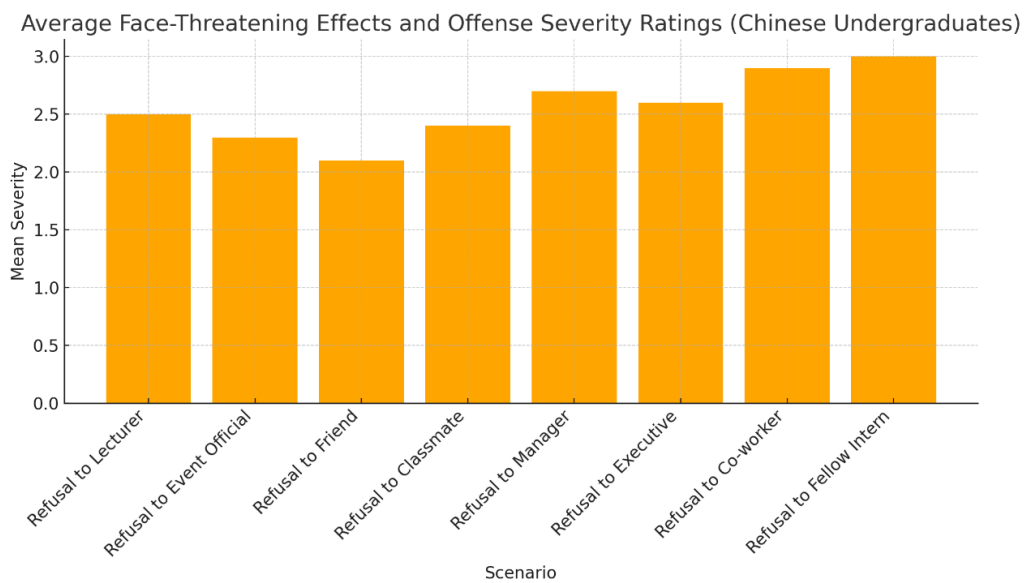

Figure 5. Average face-threatening effects and offense severity ratings by Chinese undergraduates.
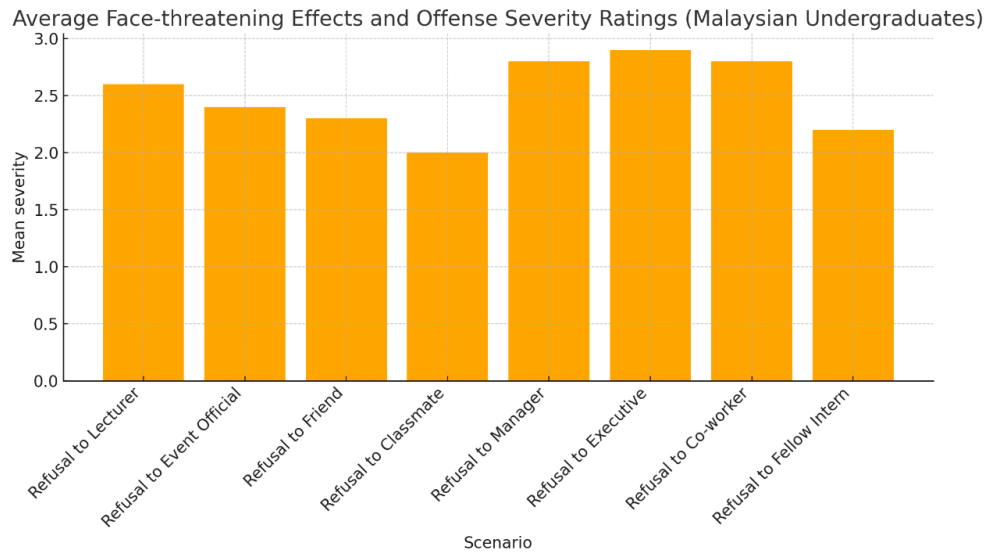
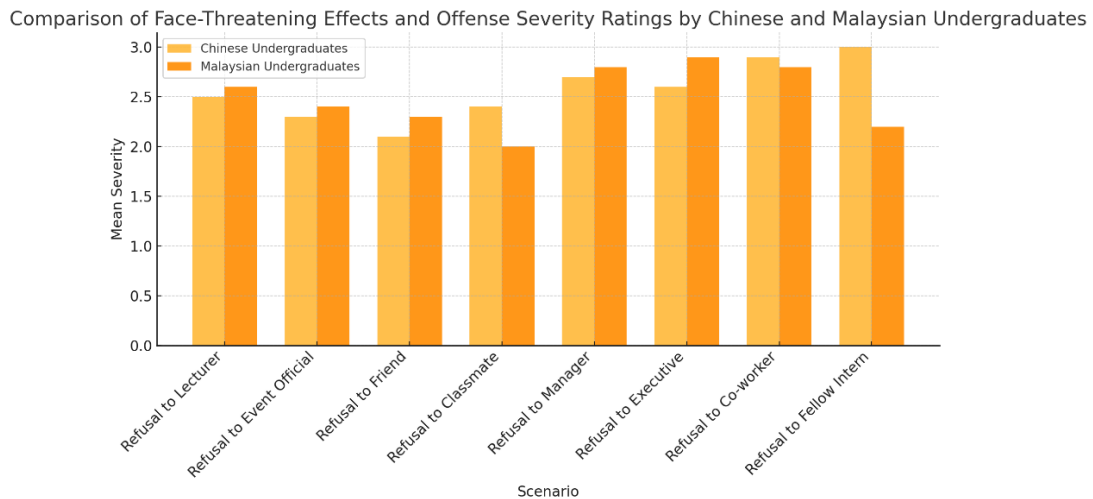**Figure 6.** Average face-threatening effects and offense severity ratings by Malaysian undergraduates.

Figure 7. Cross-cultural comparison of face-threatening effects and offense severity ratings.

The data visualized in **Figures 5**–**7** demonstrate clear cultural contrasts in the evaluation of refusal-related face threats:

- **Chinese BEMS** assigned moderate ratings in formal contexts (e.g., lecturers, managers, executives), ranging from 2.6 to 2.9. Informal interactions (e.g., classmates, friends, interns) received lower ratings, typically between 2.0 and 2.3. This suggests that Chinese students were more attuned to hierarchical distinctions but exhibited relatively low sensitivity to peer-level refusals.

- **Malaysian BALBAS**, by contrast, consistently assigned higher ratings across all contexts, with formal refusals rated between 3.0 and 4.0, and informal ones between 2.4 and 3.0. This pattern indicates a more pronounced sociopragmatic sensitivity and a broader concern for relational face maintenance, regardless of power or distance.

- **Notably**, the most significant cross-cultural rating gaps appeared in hierarchical scenarios, particularly refusals to managers (2.8 Chinese vs. 3.67 Malaysian) and executives (2.9 Chinese vs. 4.0 Malaysian), underscoring stronger power-distance awareness among Malaysian students.

These results reinforce the notion that Malaysian participants are more consistently cautious in evaluating the potential offensiveness of refusal speech acts, an interpreta-

tion consistent with Malaysia's collectivist and high power-distance sociocultural orientation.

4.2.2. Findings and Analysis

(1) General Trends

a. Chinese BEMS

Chinese participants generally perceived refusals in formal and professional contexts as moderately face-threatening. For instance, refusals directed at lecturers (M = 2.60), managers (M = 2.80), and executives (M = 2.90) received comparatively higher ratings than peer-related refusals. These moderate evaluations indicate an awareness of hierarchical roles and associated face dynamics, although the overall perceived offense severity remained measured and restrained[62,64].

In contrast, refusals in informal contexts, such as those to friends (M = 2.30), classmates (M = 2.00), and fellow interns (M = 2.20), were rated lower in severity. This suggests that refusals among close peers or within casual relationships are perceived as less face-threatening, consistent with the lower stakes and reduced power asymmetries in these interactions[62,64].

b. Malaysian BALBAS

Malaysian participants, on the other hand, consistently assigned higher ratings across all scenarios, reflecting greater sensitivity to the face-threatening potential of refusals. Refusals in formal contexts were rated as significantly severe, including those to lecturers (M = 3.17), managers (M = 3.67), and executives (M = 4.00), suggesting heightened concern for hierarchical harmony and professional decorum[8]. Even in informal contexts such as refusals to friends (M = 2.60), classmates (M = 2.40), or fellow interns (M = 3.00), Malaysian students demonstrated slightly elevated ratings compared to their Chinese counterparts. This reflects a more cautious interpersonal orientation and a broad commitment to face-preserving strategies even in low-power or familiar interactions[8].

(2) Comparative Analysis

A cross-cultural comparison highlights consistent differences in face-threat sensitivity:

The data in **Table 7** suggest that Malaysian students perceive higher face-threat and offense severity across all contexts, with the most pronounced differences emerging

in formal, hierarchical scenarios. Even in peer-level interactions, Malaysian BALBAS demonstrated more caution in their evaluations than their Chinese counterparts.

(3) Cultural and Contextual Influences

a. Chinese BEMS

The moderate severity ratings in hierarchical contexts reflect Chinese students' recognition of social roles and face-related considerations, yet suggest a more flexible interpretation of offense within authority-based interactions. This finding aligns with collectivist norms emphasizing relational harmony and context-sensitive communication, while also reflecting evolving perspectives among younger Chinese speakers exposed to global academic and professional environments[62,64].

Lower ratings in informal contexts confirm that refusals among peers are perceived as relatively non-threatening, underscoring the role of relational closeness and low power distance in Chinese pragmatic evaluations[62,64].

b. Malaysian BALBAS

The consistently higher severity ratings among Malaysian students indicate a strong sociopragmatic orientation shaped by Malaysia's multicultural and high power-distance context. Refusals in hierarchical settings were rated especially high, reflecting deep-seated values of respect for authority, professional harmony, and face-saving communication[8].

Interestingly, elevated ratings in informal scenarios point to a culturally ingrained cautiousness in interpersonal communication, even where relational proximity might otherwise reduce face concerns. This may stem from broader collectivist values and the emphasis on social cohesion across communicative contexts[8].

(4) Summary

Overall, the data demonstrate that while both Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates evaluate refusals based on contextual cues such as social status and distance, Malaysian students exhibit a consistently higher perception of offense severity. These findings suggest more risk-averse, face-conscious communicative tendencies among Malaysian BALBAS, even in informal settings, compared to the relatively context-modulated responses of Chinese BEMS.

These insights advance our understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics by revealing subtle yet meaningful differences in how refusal speech acts are perceived by students preparing for international academic and business environments. They also reinforce the need for pragmatic instruction that sensitizes learners to the cultural underpinnings of face management, interpersonal harmony, and status negotiation in English-mediated intercultural communication[63,65].

4.3. Influence of Social Status and Social Distance

Research Question 3: *In what way do social status and social distance influence the realization of speech acts of refusal by Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS?*

This section explores how social status (e.g., hierarchical role) and social distance (e.g., degree of familiarity) shape the refusal strategies adopted by Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS) and Malaysian Bachelor of Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students (BALBAS). The analysis draws on data from Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), Retrospective Verbal Reports (RVRs), and semi-structured interviews[66,67].

4.3.1. Influence of Social Status

(1) Chinese BEMS

Chinese BEMS exhibit increased politeness and indirectness when refusing requests from higher-status interlocutors, such as lecturers, managers, or executives. Their responses often begin with apologies or deferential expressions and include justifications or offers of future assistance. For instance, when declining a lecturer's request, a typical response might be: "I appreciate the opportunity, but I have a prior commitment." This strategic use of mitigated refusals reflects a cultural orientation toward hierarchical respect and harmony preservation, consistent with Confucian traditions[8,22,64].

(2) Malaysian BALBAS

Malaysian BALBAS also modulate their refusals according to social distance. Among close peers, they may use direct refusals softened with politeness markers. For example, "Sorry, I can't help right now." In contrast, with less familiar interlocutors, they prefer indirectness and formal mitigation, such as: "I'm sorry, but I already have a commitment that day"[68,69].

(3) Comparison

Both groups demonstrate context-dependent refusal strategies, adapting their language based on social closeness. However, Chinese BEMS more frequently supplement refusals with alternative solutions, even in casual settings, reflecting a culturally embedded emphasis on relational harmony. Malaysian BALBAS, while consistently polite, display greater directness with peers, using polite expressions to offset face-threat without extensive elaboration[8,70].

Overall, the findings affirm that both social status and social distance significantly influence the realization of refusal speech acts. Cultural differences manifest in the degree and type of mitigation used, with Chinese students favoring elaborative, harmony-oriented strategies, and Malaysian students opting for formulaic politeness within a context-sensitive framework. These patterns support the Prague School's theoretical legacy, particularly its focus on context-driven linguistic choices and the communicative function of pragmatic acts.

4.3.2. Influence of Social Distance

(1) Chinese BEMS

Among close peers such as friends or co-workers, Chinese BEMS adopt more casual, direct refusals while maintaining a degree of politeness. For example, in response to a friend's laptop borrowing request, students may say, "Sorry, I need it for my studies this weekend." In contrast, refusals directed at more distant acquaintances, such as classmates or fellow interns, are more formal and often include explanations or suggestions for alternatives, reflecting sensitivity to social distance and a desire to manage face appropriately[22,30].

(2) Malaysian BALBAS

Malaysian BALBAS similarly display more directness in refusals among close peers, with expressions like, "Sorry, I can't help right now." However, they consistently include politeness markers to soften the refusal. In interactions with distant acquaintances, such as classmates or unfamiliar colleagues, they adopt more indirect refusals emphasizing face maintenance, exemplified by responses such as, "I'm sorry, but I already have a commitment that day."[7,69].

(3) Comparison

Both groups demonstrate context-dependent refusals,

adjusting directness and politeness according to relational distance. Chinese BEMS are notably consistent in including alternative solutions or additional mitigating strategies across both close and distant relationships, reinforcing cultural values of harmony and relational consideration. Malaysian BALBAS emphasize politeness in both peer and distant interactions but exhibit a greater tendency toward directness with close associates, balanced by culturally appropriate mitigation devices [27,69].

Overall, the findings reveal how both social status and distance significantly influence refusal realizations among Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS, with clear evidence of cultural variation in the application of politeness and face management strategies.

4.4. Summary

This small-scale exploratory study provides preliminary insights into refusal speech acts among Chinese BEMS and Malaysian BALBAS, contributing to broader understandings of intercultural communication in higher education settings.

Specifically, the findings identify common refusal strategies, highlight participants' perceptions of face-threatening acts and offense severity, and reveal how cultural and social norms influence pragmatic behavior. Both groups demonstrated an awareness of social status and distance in shaping their refusals [68]. When addressing higher-status interlocutors, students from both cultures employed more formal, elaborate, and indirect strategies, often incorporating preparatory remarks, apologies, and justifications.

Cultural divergence became more evident in peer interactions. Chinese BEMS maintained a relatively high level of indirectness, even when refusing close friends, underscoring a cultural orientation toward relational harmony and face consideration [47]. In contrast, Malaysian BALBAS more frequently used direct refusals with peers, albeit mitigated with polite expressions, reflecting a pragmatically cautious but concise communication style [68,69].

These results reinforce the interaction between sociopragmatic variables and cultural value systems in the performance of refusals. They also underscore the importance of functionally and contextually grounded language instruction, one that accounts not only for linguistic accuracy but also for sociocultural appropriateness [47].

These findings form the empirical foundation for the pedagogical implications discussed in Section 5.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer empirical support for Politeness Theory [9], illustrating how cultural norms, hierarchical structures, and interpersonal dynamics shape the realization of refusal speech acts among Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates. Chinese BEMS demonstrated moderate sensitivity to face-threatening acts, especially in hierarchical contexts. This is evidenced by their elevated, yet still relatively restrained, severity ratings for refusals to lecturers, managers, and executives. Their responses frequently incorporated indirect strategies such as excuses, postponements, and vague expressions, reflecting an effort to maintain harmony and avoid overt confrontation.

In contrast, Malaysian BALBAS consistently perceived refusals as more face-threatening across all contexts. This indicates a heightened sociopragmatic awareness and a strong cultural emphasis on face preservation, even in informal interactions. Their responses frequently involved mitigating strategies like expressions of gratitude and alternative solutions, demonstrating a culturally embedded concern for maintaining relational harmony [71].

These distinct patterns align with broader cultural orientations. Chinese students' context-sensitive politeness strategies resonate with collectivist values and a respect for social hierarchy. Meanwhile, Malaysian students' consistent use of face-maintaining tactics in both formal and informal settings reflects high power-distance norms and interpersonal collectivism [71]. The variation in refusal realization strategies, as observed across hierarchical and informal contexts, aligns with the Prague School's framework emphasizing communicative function, context sensitivity, and the functional load of utterances in real-world discourse [72].

These insights have important pedagogical implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs and intercultural communication training. Educators should emphasize both universal and culturally specific refusal strategies. Explicit instruction can enhance students' pragmatic competence, preparing them for effective, context-appropriate communication in global academic and business environments [73]. Integrating real-life scenarios, role-play simula-

tions, and reflective discussions on face management into language curricula can promote greater awareness of sociopragmatic factors. Such approaches can also cultivate learners' ability to adapt their communication strategies based on interlocutor status and relational distance, thereby fostering successful intercultural communication.

6. Conclusions

This comparative study revealed both shared and culturally distinct patterns in the realization of refusal speech acts by Chinese Business English Major students (BEMS) and Malaysian Bachelor of Applied Linguistics and Business Administration students (BALBAS). Chinese BEMS employed context-sensitive, moderately indirect strategies that reflected cultural values of relational harmony and deference to authority, particularly in hierarchical interactions. In contrast, Malaysian BALBAS consistently adopted cautious, face-preserving strategies in both formal and informal contexts, coupled with higher perceptions of offense severity, suggesting heightened face-threat sensitivity aligned with Malaysia's high power-distance, collectivist, and multicultural norms [9,47,71].

The findings contribute to pragmatic theory by demonstrating how sociopragmatic variables, such as social status and social distance, interact with culture-specific norms in shaping refusal behaviors among Asian EFL learners [12]. This culturally contingent adjustment of pragmatic strategies resonates with Politeness Theory and further reflects the Prague School's view of language as a socially situated, functionally oriented system where communicative intent and context jointly determine linguistic form and effect [72]. These insights underscore the dynamic tension between universal politeness principles and culture-bound pragmatic preferences.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study underscores the need for explicit instruction in pragmatic competence within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and intercultural communication curricula. Classroom practices such as role-play simulations, contrastive scenario analyses, and reflective discussions on face negotiation can bridge the gap between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic sensitivity. By equipping learners with both generalizable and culturally specific refusal strategies, educators can foster more effective and context-appropriate communication in international academic and professional settings [12].

Notwithstanding its contributions, the study has limitations. The reliance on hypothetical Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and a small, purposively selected sample constrains ecological validity and generalizability. Future research should consider naturalistic discourse data, longitudinal or experimental designs, and broader demographic representation. Additionally, extending the inquiry to other speech acts, such as apologies, requests, or disagreements, could further illuminate cross-cultural pragmatics in English as a lingua franca context.

In sum, this study advances the understanding of interlanguage pragmatics by revealing how cultural values and social structures shape refusal strategies among Chinese and Malaysian undergraduates. It also provides actionable insights for curriculum designers, language educators, and intercultural communication trainers aiming to cultivate pragmatic competence in globalized educational and business environments.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, G.Y. and S.J.B.; methodology, G.Y.; software, G.Y.; validation, G.Y. and S.J.B.; formal analysis, G.Y.; investigation, G.Y.; resources, G.Y.; data curation, G.Y.; writing—original draft preparation, G.Y.; writing—review and editing, G.Y.; visualization, G.Y.; supervision, S.J.B.; project administration, G.Y. and S.J.B.. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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