Pragmatic competence development in refusals by Thai learners of Spanish

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ABSTRACT: FL learners should not only focus on grammatical rules, but they are also expected to have pragmatic competence which refers to the ability to use the language appropriately in different cultural contexts. This present study aims to analyse the development of pragmatic competence in refusals of Thai learners of Spanish by comparing the pragmatic competence of Thai learners of Spanish at different levels. A discourse completion test (DCT) with 12 situations was employed to collect data from 95 participants who are 35 Spanish native speakers and 60 Thai students majoring in Spanish at Khon Kaen University from second year, third year and fourth year. The results of this study can show that pragmatic competence of higher-level students is not significantly improved compared with lower-level students. Since there are many differences between Thai and Spanish cultures, it is necessary for Thai learners of Spanish to have pragmatic competence by learning the appropriate politeness strategies in refusals to avoid communication failures. Refusals are pragmatically sensitive speech acts that can easily cause misunderstandings, so non-native speakers must perform them carefully.
Keywords: pragmatic competence; refusal strategies, Thai learners of Spanish, pragmatic competence development, Spanish as a foreign language

Desarrollo de la competencia pragmática en los rechazos de aprendices tailandeses de español

RESUMEN: Los aprendices de LE no solo deben centrarse en las reglas gramaticales, sino que también se espera que posean competencia pragmática, la cual se refiere a la habilidad para usar la lengua de manera apropiada en diferentes contextos culturales. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática en los rechazos de aprendices tailandeses de español, comparando la competencia pragmática de estudiantes tailandeses de español en diferentes niveles. Se empleó una prueba de completación de discurso (DCT) en español con 12 situaciones para recopilar datos de 95 participantes que son 35 hispanohablantes y 60 estudiantes tailandeses de la carrera de Filología Hispánica de la Universidad de Khon Kaen, de segundo año, tercer año y cuarto año. Los resultados de este estudio podrían mostrar que la competencia pragmática de los estudiantes de nivel superior no ha mejorado significativamente en comparación con los estudiantes de nivel inferior. Dado que existen muchas diferencias entre las culturas tailandesa y española, es necesario que los alumnos tailandeses de español desarrollen competencia pragmática aprendiendo las estrategias de cortesía apropiadas en los rechazos para evitar fallos en la comunicación. Los hablantes no nativos deben ser cuidadosos al realizar un rechazo, ya que este acto de habla se considera una tarea pragmática delicada y puede causar fácilmente malentendidos.
Palabras Clave: competencia pragmática, estrategias de rechazo, aprendices tailandeses de español, desarrollo de la competencia pragmática, español como lengua extranjera.

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language (FL) or second language (L2) learners share the goal of using the target language both correctly and appropriately. That success requires communicative competence, which refers to not only linguistic or grammatical competence (Canale and Swain 1980), but also the ability to use grammatical competence in various communicative situations (Hymes, 1972).

Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a model of communicative competence, which consists of two main components- organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. According to them, pragmatic knowledge refers to abilities of learners for producing and interpreting discourse. This includes two main areas of knowledge. The first one is knowledge pragmatic conventions, which concerns how to express acceptable language functions and to interpret the illocutionary power of utterances. And the other is knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions for producing and interpreting language utterances appropriately in a particular context.

In general, FL/L2 teaching in Thailand, not only at secondary level, but also university level, focuses on grammar and vocabulary or linguistic competence. Srivoranart (2011: 3) observes that although relatively few learners of Spanish are able to attain the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), those who do often demonstrate adequate grammatical proficiency but continue to exhibit deficiencies in their communicative competence. Therefore, it can be observed that Thai learners have a good knowledge of grammar, but they still have difficulties in communication because they don't know how to use this grammar knowledge in a certain situation. Communication failure may occur due to the lack of pragmatic competence, which is one of the important factors in causing problems in communication between FL/L2 learners and native speakers with different cultures (Achiba, 2002; Nouichi, 2015).

1.1. Pragmatic competence

A great number of pragmatic studies have been conducted, and many linguists have defined the term "pragmatic competence". Crystal (1985: 240) as cited in Allami & Naeimi (2011) defines pragmatics as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication". From Fraser (2010)'s point of view, pragmatic competence includes both sides of communication- the expression of the speaker and the interpretation of the hearer. Therefore, it can be explained as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended" (Fraser, 2010: 6).

FL/L2 learners who have pragmatic competence should be able to transmit their intention using the correct and appropriate language and have the ability to interpret the intention in the message of the interlocutor, which can be direct speech and indirect speech (Fraser, 1980; Rintell, 1997). For example, if your friend asks you if you feel cold, he/she may want you to close the window or to turn on the air conditioner.

As mentioned in Fraser's definition of pragmatic competence. The study of pragmatics is related to the culture. Every language has a different convention of means which varies

from one culture to another. Moreover, different concepts of politeness, which is a part of the studies of pragmatics, in each culture can also lead to failings in communication. In some cultures, directness is considered more polite than indirectness while in others it can be rude (Wierzbicka, 1985). For example, if you would like to have a drink in a bar and you use the Imperative to order, this situation in Spanish language is polite (Haverkate, 1995) while in others it may be rude or unacceptable. Therefore, the FL and L2 teachers should include pragmatic knowledge in the activities or exercises they prepare in the classroom, especially if the cultures of FL/L2 and L1 are very different, like Thai and Spanish culture. In the successful cross-cultural communication pragmatic competence is required to avoid misunderstanding, culture shocks, and communication breakdown.

1.2. Speech act of refusal

Refusal is one of the speech acts which can possibly cause communication breakdown or misunderstanding between the interlocutors. It occurs in response to the acts, such as, the offer, invitation, suggestion, and request, initiated by the interlocutor. The speech act of refusal is classified as a *face-threatening act* (FTA) (Brown and Levinson, 1987) because the intention of the speaker is to deny the engagement in the act, which is the opposite of the interlocutor's expectation. If the speaker performs an inappropriate refusal, the relationship with the interlocutor may be harmed. The production of this speech act depends on many social factors of the interlocutor, for example, gender, age, power, social distant (Fraser 1990; Smith 1998).

To refuse, to say "no" directly and indirectly, requires special skill and a certain degree of pragmatic competence of the speaker. Performing a refusal appropriately is difficult, even for native speakers, thus, it is more complicated for non-native speakers due to cultural differences. If FL/L2 learners do not possess ability to refuse properly, misunderstanding will occur, or he/she can be considered impolite or rude in the communication with native speakers. Consequently, this speech act is an outstanding topic for the cross-cultural studies since the politeness strategies of refusals differ in languages and cultures. Non-native speakers, in many cases, apply rules from their culture to FL/L2, denominated *pragmatic transfer* (Beebe *et al.*, 1990).

1.3. Refusals in FL/SL studies

A great number of studies related to the speech act of refusal have been conducted widely in order to compare the performance of refusals between non-native speakers and native speakers. In this section, the summary of important studies about refusals in FL/L2 learners will be presented.

Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990) investigated whether there was evidence of the pragmatic transfer in refusals performed by Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Beebe *et al.* compared refusals made by three groups of participants, Japanese speaking in Japanese, Japanese speaking in English and American speaking in English. Previous research shows that Japanese EFL learners use similar refusal strategies in English and Japanese, modulated by interlocutor status. On the

other hand, Americans are more aware of the degree of the social distance and familiarity of the interlocutor when they have to refuse.

Lauper (1997) compared the patterns of the speech act of refusal in 60 native English speakers and 120 native Spanish speakers (60 responding in English and 60 in Spanish) The data was collected by using a questionnaire and analysed with the taxonomy of refusal strategies of Beebe *et al.* (1990). The results revealed that the three groups performed different refusal patterns. Spanish speakers tended to use similar refusal patterns in Spanish and in English, which suggested that there was pragmatic transfer in Spanish learners of English.

Nguyen (2006) compared the refusal strategy use and the frequency of the speech act of refusal to request made by Australian native speakers of English and Vietnamese learners of English using a questionnaire in the form of DCT based on the Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984) for data collection. The findings showed that Australians tended to use more direct strategies than Vietnamese EFL learners. Moreover, the frequency of the use of the speech act of refusal from both groups was different.

Most studies focusing on Thai EFL learners emphasize the refusal strategies employed by Thai learners of English (Panpothong, 2001; Panpothong & Phakdeephasook 2014; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019, Kasemsin, 2006; Rattanapian, 2019). Wannaruk (2008) investigated whether there are any similarities and differences between refusals made by American native speakers of English and Thai EFL learners. The DCT was employed to collect the data and analysed based on the classification adapted from Beebe *et al.* (1990). It was found that the pragmatic transfer from L1 occurred when Thai EFL learners chose refusal strategies, and the content of refusal strategies was also similar to refusals in their L1.

Regarding Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL), some studies of refusals have been carried out. For example, Martínez (2014) investigated whether high proficiency SFL learners have pragmatic competence in refusals. Data was collected through two tests: an *acceptability questionnaire* and a *role play*. The finding showed that, in the questionnaire, the results of SFL learners and native speaker of Spanish were different and some of them were inadequate. In the *role play*, it was found that SFL learners used refusal strategies excessively in the situation where the interlocutor's status is lower. Moreover, they tended to use the excuse or explanation as refusal strategies in all situations while native speakers of Spanish did not use it in some situations. It can be concluded that in those situations the refusal strategies performed by SFL learners were not appropriate, so they still lack pragmatic competence in refusals.

Moreover, Yin (2022) conducted a contrastive study of pragmatic strategies in refusals used by native speakers of Spanish and of Chinese. The results revealed that both employed more indirect strategies than direct ones. However, the native speakers of Chinese tend to use more explanations or excuses than native speakers of Spanish. Pedrosa García (2024) investigated the refusal strategies employed by advanced Japanese learners of Spanish as a foreign language, comparing them to those used by native speakers of both Spanish and Japanese. The study found that native Spanish speakers tended to employ more direct refusal strategies than the other two groups. In contrast, native Japanese speakers made greater use of excuse and explanation strategies. Additionally, the research indicated that Japanese learners of Spanish often utilized refusal strategies similar to those employed by native speakers of both their first language and the target language, such as avoidance, expressions of positive opinion, and a higher proportion of excuse or explanation strategies. These similarities

suggest that the strategies adopted by Japanese learners were generally appropriate within communicative contexts and may be attributed to positive pragmatic transfer.

There remains a paucity of research on pragmatic transfer and the refusal strategies employed by Thai learners of Spanish. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by contributing to the development of pragmatic studies in SFL in Thailand. The findings are expected to serve as a valuable resource for SFL educators, enhancing their understanding of Thai learners' pragmatic competence and informing more effective teaching practices.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Aims and research questions

This present study aims to analyse Thai SFL learners' development of pragmatic competence in refusals comparing the refusal strategies and the frequency of refusal strategies performed by native speakers of Spanish (NSSs) and three groups of Thai SFL learners with different levels of Spanish knowledge. The results of this investigation will respond to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Thai learners of Spanish differ from native speakers of Spanish in the use of refusal strategies?
2. Does the pragmatic competence in refusals vary according to the level of Spanish language of Thai SFL learners?

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study were organized into two main groups. The first group consisted of 35 native speakers of Spanish. They all had Spanish nationality and were living in Spain. They ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old. The second group was 60 Thai SFL learners, who were undergraduate students of Khon Kaen University, majoring in Spanish. None of them had been in Spanish speaking countries before. They all started to learn Spanish when they were first year university students. The second group was divided into three groups depending on the year in which they studied: the first group was second year students, the second group was third year students, and the third group was fourth year students. They ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. First year students were not included as participants in this research due to their insufficient level of Spanish language to perform the speech act of refusal.

2.3. Instrument and procedure

This study employed a *Discourse Completion Test* (DCT) for data collection. The researcher interviewed participants asking them to make refusals in 12 situations. All participants were told to perform refusals as if these situations really occurred. The DCT was written only in Spanish and there is no difference between the DCT for native speakers of Spanish and three different groups of Thai SFL learners. The participants had to respond

to four kinds of speech acts, which were invitation, request, offer and suggestion. In each speech act, they were asked to respond to the interlocutors of higher (+), equal (=) and lower (–) status. In addition, the familiarity between the interlocutors shown as more (+) or less (–) and the interlocutor's age, for instance, younger (–), same age (=) or older (+), were included since for Thai people these two factors are significant for requesters to choose appropriate politeness strategies, as in the following:

- *Refusals to invitation:*
  Item 1: Social (+) Familiarity (–) Age of requestee (+)
  Item 2: Social (=) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (=)
  Item 3: Social (–) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (–)
- *Refusals to request:*
  Item 1: Social (+) Familiarity (–) Age of requestee (+)
  Item 2: Social (=) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (=)
  Item 3: Social (–) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (–)
- *Refusals to offer:*
  Item 1: Social (+) Familiarity (–) Age of requestee (+)
  Item 2: Social (=) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (=)
  Item 3: Social (–) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (–)
- *Refusals to suggestion:*
  Item 1: Social (+) Familiarity (–) Age of requestee (+)
  Item 2: Social (=) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (=)
  Item 3: Social (–) Familiarity (+) Age of requestee (–)
  Here is an example (translated into English) of the DCT employed in this study.

Refusals to invitation

Item 1: You are an employee in a company. If your boss wants to invite you to his birthday party tonight, but you don't want to go, what would you say to him?

> *Your boss says: Would you like to come to my birthday party tonight?*
> *You say:* _____

The participants could not read the situations before the interview, and they were not given time to think about the answers during the interview. They had to respond to the question in each situation spontaneously as they would in a real conversation.

2.4. Data analysis

The analysis of refusal strategies or semantic formulae was based on the classification of Wannaruk (2008), adapted from Beebe *et al.* (1990) (See Appendix). Data was coded by the researcher and then, the results were re-checked by two native speakers of Spanish to obtain reliable code.

Here is an example of the code of refusal strategies.

"I'm sorry, but I can't go because I have an appointment with the dentist. Thank you for your invitation".

This response consists of four refusal strategies, as follows:

I'm sorry   *but I can't go*
[Regret]   [Negative willingness]
because I have an appointment with the dentist   *Thank you for your invitation*
[Excuse/reason/explanation]   [Gratitude]

For the data analysis, the refusal strategies produced by SFL learners were classified without any consideration of the grammatical errors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 1, the groups of 3rd year and 4th year SFL learners used almost the same refusal strategies as those produced by NSS group. The refusal strategy produced by SFL learners which is different from NSSs is avoidance, to be more particular, pause filler. The pause filler strategy was used at the beginning of the responses, and it was used to respond to the invitations and the suggestions. The second year SFL learners used less refusal strategies than the others. It could be assumed that they didn't have sufficient knowledge of Spanish to produce the variety of refusal strategies as the others did. The following presents the lists of refusal strategies used by each group of participants without any order.

Table 1. *Refusal strategies used by all groups of participants*

NSSs	2 year SFLs	3 year SFLs	4 year SFLs
1. No	1. No	1. No	1. No
2. Negative willingness	2. Negative willingness	2. Negative willingness	2. Negative willingness
3. Regret	3. Regret	3. Regret	3. Regret
4. Excuse/reason	4. Excuse/reason	4. Excuse/reason	4. Excuse/reason
5. Alternative/suggestion	5. Gratitude	5. Alternative/suggestion	5. Alternative/suggestion
6. Future acceptance		6. Future acceptance	6. Future acceptance
7. Letting the interlocutor off the hook		7. Letting the interlocutor off the hook	7. Letting the interlocutor off the hook
8. Gratitude		8. Avoidance (pause filler)	8. Avoidance (pause filler)
		9. Gratitude	9. Gratitude

3.1. Higher status interlocutors

As shown in Table 2, when refusing to the interlocutors with higher status, the most frequently used strategy by NSSs was *'Excuse'* (56.1%) followed by *'Regret'* (11.3%) and *'Gratitude'* (10.4%) strategies. The 2nd year and 3rd year students produced the same strategies as the three most frequently used, which were *'Excuse'* (44.6%), *'Regret'* (17.3%) and *'Negative willingness'* (14.3%) strategies. The 4th year SFL learners also refused by using the same strategies, but in a different order. They also preferred to use 'Excuse' with highest frequency (46%) and followed by *'Negative willingness'* (14.3%) and *'Regret'* (13%) strategies.

In these situations, the findings reveal that all groups tended to use *'Excuse'* with the highest frequency to refuse the interlocutors with higher status. NSSs used direct refusal strategies less often than Thai SFL learners, which are *'No'* and *'Negative willingness'* while all groups of Thai SFL learners frequently used *'Negative willingness'*. In this case, they often used this strategy after the *'Regret'* strategy, for example, *"Sorry, I can't..."*. It could be noticed that the three most frequently used refusal strategies by all Thai SFL learners were the same, which were *'Excuse'*, *'Regret'* and *'Negative willingness'*. Moreover, the NSSs group tended to employ the *'Gratitude'* strategy more often than Thai SFL learners.

3.2. Equal status interlocutors

In the refusals to the interlocutors with equal status, the three most frequently strategies employed by NSSs were the same as those to the higher status interlocutors but in different order, which were *'Excuse'* (54.8%), *'Gratitude'* (10.1%), and *'Regret'* (8.7%) strategies. The 2nd year and the 4th year SFL learners used the same strategies in the same order of frequency, as the following: *'Excuse'* (with the rate of 45.2% and 45.5%, respectively), *'No'* (17.9% and 11.5%, respectively), and *'Regret'* (15.5% and 10.3%, respectively) strategies. The 3rd year SFL learners also employed these three strategies but in different order. The most frequently used was *'Excuse'* (43.5%), followed by *'Regret'* (15.5%) and *'No'* (12.5%), as seen in Table 2.

According to the findings, the refusal strategies used by Thai SFL learners were the same. Similarly to the situation with the higher status interlocutors, native Spanish speakers used *'Gratitude'* more frequently than Thai SFL learners. In addition, NSSs still didn't use any direct strategy while all Thai SFL learners employed a *'No'* strategy when they refused these interlocutors. It could be seen than they tended to use more direct strategies than the NS group.

3.3. Lower status interlocutors

In the situations where the interlocutors have lower status than the speakers, the most frequent refusal strategy employed by the NSSs was *'Excuse'* (58.4%), followed by *'Gratitude'* (12.1%) and *'No'* (6.5%) strategies. The 2nd year SFL learners also preferred to use the *'Excuse'* strategy with the highest frequency (46.6%) and then they used *'Regret'* and *'No'* strategies, at the rate of 19.6% and 15.3%, respectively. The three most frequently used

strategies by the 3rd year SFL learners were *'Excuse'* (46.1%), followed by *'No'* (12.6%), and *'Negative willingness'* and *'Regret'* strategies at the rate of 6.5%. The 4th year SFL learners used the same refusal strategies as those of the 2nd year SFL learners, which were *'Excuse'* (50%), followed *'Regret'* and *'No'* strategies (10.4% and 9.7%, respectively).

When refusing to the interlocutors with lower status, all groups of participants tended to be more direct than in the previous situations because the *'No'* strategy was more frequently used. However, the percentage of the *'No'* strategy used by Thai SFL learners was much higher than by native Spanish speakers. Moreover, the other direct strategy, 'Negative willingness' was also frequently used by 3rd year Thai SFL learners. It could be observed that Thai SFL learners tended to use more direct strategies than NSSs. In these situations, similarly to previous situations, the NSSs still used *'Gratitude'* more often than Thai SFL learners.

Table 2. *The three most frequently used refusal strategies to all eliciting acts*

Status of interlocutor	NSSs	2nd year SFLs	3rd year SFLs	4th year SFLs
Higher	1. Excuse (56.1%) 2. Regret (11.3%) 3. Gratitude (10.4%)	1. Excuse (44.6%) 2 Regret (17.3%) 3. Negative willingness (14.3%)	1. Excuse (44.5%) 2. Regret (18.3%) 3. Negative willingness (15.9%)	1. Excuse (46%) 2. Negative willingness (14.3%) 3. Regret (13%)
Equal	1. Excuse (54.8%) 2. Gratitude (10.1%) 3. Regret (8.7%)	1. Excuse (45.2%) 2. No (17.9%) 3 Regret (15.5%)	1. Excuse (43.5%) 2. Regret (15.5%) 3. No (12.5%)	1. Excuse (45.5%) 2. No (11.5%) 3. Regret (10.3%)
Lower	1. Excuse (58.4%) 2. Gratitude (12.1%) 3. No (6.5%)	1. Excuse (46.6%) 2. Regret (19.6%) 3. No (15.3%)	1. Excuse (46.1%) 2. No (12.6%) 3. Negative willingness/ Regret (11.4%)	1. Excuse (50%) 2. Regret (10.4%) 3. No (9.7%)

4. CONCLUSION

In this present study, the refusal strategies used by 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year Thai university students majoring in Spanish and the refusal strategies used by native speakers of Spanish were compared in order to discover if Thai students' pragmatic competence was developed after taking Spanish courses each year. The findings reveal that the strategies frequently employed by all groups of Thai SFL learners are quite similar, which are *'Excuse'*, *'Regret'*, *'No'* and *'Negative willingness'*. The most frequently used refusal strategies by the group of native speakers are *'Excuse'*, *'Regret'*, *'Gratitude'* and *'No'*. NSSs used direct strategies less frequently than Thai SFL learners.

In relation to pragmatic competence of Thai students in each level, from the results of this study, although the most frequently used refusal strategy by all groups of Thai SFL learners is the same as the group of NSSs, which was *'Excuse'*, we cannot conclude that Thai SFL students have pragmatic competence in refusals. Regarding other strategies, Thai EFL learners tended to use direct strategies more frequently than native speakers of Spanish. For example, in the situation where the interlocutors have higher status, all groups of Thai SFL learners used *'Negative willingness'* with much higher percentage than the NSSs. In addition, it was found that the rates *'Negative willingness'* by all groups of Thai SFL learners were quite high, even the 4th year students who are supposed to have more pragmatic competence than the others. This related to

Focusing on the other direct strategy, NSSs hardly used *'No'* to refuse, especially, when refusing their boss's request and to suggestions from all types of interlocutors. They employed *'No'* to refuse the interlocutors with the lower status more often than others. On the contrary, Thai EFL learners used *'No'* to make refusals to every type of interlocutor, and more often to the interlocutors with equal and lower status. However, the 4th year student tended to use *'No'* less than the other groups of Thai SFL. If we compare between the percentage of *'No'* produced by the 2nd year students and the 4th year students, it can be found that the percentage of the two groups is significantly different. The second group used *'No'* much less than the first one. In this case, the pragmatic competence in refusals of the group of 4th year students is developed but they are not competent since the percentage of *'No'* used 4th year students is higher than that by native speakers.

The fact that SFLs used direct refusal strategies, such as saying *'No'* more frequently than native Spanish speakers (NNSs), may be attributed to their greater comfort in refusing interlocutors of equal or lower social status. In contrast, they tended to avoid using *'No'* when addressing interlocutors of higher status. This pattern suggests that Thai speakers may experience greater difficulty in refusing someone older or of higher social power (Wongsittikan, 2022). This tendency can be explained by the cultural concept of '*kreng jai'*, which refers to a concern about causing discomfort to others through one's words or actions (Intachakra, 2012). This kind of concern is typically reduced when interacting with individuals of equal or lower social status, making direct refusals more acceptable in those contexts. Furthermore, the frequent use of *'No'* among SFLs may also stem from limitations in their linguistic repertoire to express politeness in Spanish, which may lead them to rely more on direct strategies than when they use the refusal strategies in their L1 (Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016).

In the case of the *'Gratitude'* strategy, the findings reveal that Thai SFLs employed this strategy significantly less frequently than NSSs across all interlocutor types. This suggests a clear instance of negative pragmatic transfer from the learners' L1. As Wannaruk (2008) highlights, expressions of gratitude such as *'thank you'* are not commonly used by native Thai speakers when performing refusals, which appears to influence how Thai learners navigate similar speech acts in Spanish. This contrasts with the findings of Pedrosa García (2024), who reported that Japanese SFLs employed the Gratitude strategy quite frequently, likely due to positive transfer from their L1. These cross-linguistic differences underscore the need for greater pragmatic instruction for Thai learners, particularly in the use of politeness strategies such as expressing gratitude. Enhancing learners' awareness and use of such strategies could contribute to greater pragmatic competence and more native-like interaction in Spanish.

Consistent with the findings of Martínez (2014) and Pedrosa García (2024), Thai SFLs most frequently employed the '*Excuse/Explanation*' and '*Regret*' strategies when performing refusals. However, in certain situations—particularly when interacting with interlocutors of equal or lower social status—SLFs tended to use different refusal strategies or overuse them, employing them more frequently than NSSs. As observed in the findings, NSSs did not use the '*Regret*' strategy when refusing requests from interlocutors of lower status, suggesting that Thai learners may struggle to appropriately adjust their level of politeness to match the social context. This pattern indicates a possible lack of sociopragmatic awareness or sensitivity to status dynamics in the target language.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that there is no clear evidence of the development of pragmatic competence in Thai EFLs with different levels of proficiency because they used the same refusal strategies with almost the same rates. All levels of students still need to improve their pragmatic competence in making refusals by reducing the use of direct strategies and adding '*Gratitude*' in their refusal strategies when they have conversation with native speakers of Spanish to avoid misunderstanding or being rude in their culture. To become competent in the target language not only requires linguistic, but also pragmatic competence.

The findings of this study indicated that SFLs exhibited a deficit in pragmatic awareness and cultural realization during their communication in Spanish. For instance, their more frequent employment of direct refusals, such as '*No*', coupled with a less frequent use of expressions of gratitude compared to native Spanish speakers, has the potential to engender misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. Such pragmatic transfer could lead to perceptions of impoliteness or unfriendliness. Pedagogically, it is crucial to instruct learners on contextually appropriate refusal strategies when interacting with native Spanish speakers. Within the SFL classroom, instructors should incorporate a greater number of activities simulating situations that necessitate refusals, thereby fostering the development of their pragmatic competence.

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6. APPENDIX

Classification of refusal strategies

I. Direct
1. Using performative verbs (I refuse)
2. Non performative statement
   - "No"
   - Negative willingness/ability (I can't. /I won't. /I don't think so)

II.Indirect
1. Statement of regret (I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...)
2. Wish (I wish I could help you...)
3. Excuse, reason, explanation (My children will be home that night. /I have a headache)
4. Statement of alternative
   - I can do X instead of Y (I'd rather.../I'd prefer...)
   - Why don't you do X instead of Y (Why don't you ask someone else?)
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance (If you had asked me earlier, I would have...)
6. Promise of future acceptance (I'll do it next time. /I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...)
7. Statement of principle (I never do business with friends.)
8. Statement of philosophy (One can't be too careful.)
9. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
   - Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (I won't be any fun tonight to refuse an invitation)

- ° Guilt trip (waitress to customers who want to sit a while: I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.)
- ° Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/ attack (Who do you think you are? /That's a terrible idea!)
- ° Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
- ° Let interlocutor off the hook (Don't worry about it. /That's okay. /You don't have to.)
- ° Self-defense (I'm trying my best. /I'm doing all I can do.)
10. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
    - ° Unspecific or indefinite reply
    - ° Lack of enthusiasm
11. Avoidance
    - ° Nonverbal
        - • Silence
        - • Hesitation
        - • Doing nothing
        - • Physical departure
    - ° Verbal
        - • Topic switch
        - • Joke
        - • Repetition of part of request (Monday?)
        - • Postponement (I'll think about it.)
        - • Hedge (Gee, I don't know. /I'm not sure.

They also added that these refusals may be preceded by adjuncts like:
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (That's a good idea.../I'd love to...)
2. Statement of empathy (I realize you are in a difficult situation.)
3. Pause fillers (uhh/ well/oh/ uhm)
4. Gratitude/appreciation

Refusals can be seen as a series of the following sequences:
1. Pre-refusal strategies: these strategies prepare the addressee for an upcoming refusal.
2. Main refusal (Head Act): this strategy expresses the main refusal.
3. Post-refusal strategies: these strategies follow the head act and tend to emphasize, justify, mitigate, or conclude the refusal response.