Will English make you impolite?

A study of the influence of English proficiency level on Chinese students'

performance regarding politeness--taking the speech act of refusal as an example

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Abstract

Politeness theory is well-known in both the fields of communication and linguistics. It was first proposed by Brown and Levinson in 1987 and it has been heatedly discussed by researchers since its initial presentation. The core and base of politeness theory lies in the desire to maintain face. Speaking of face in communication, China cannot be neglected. According to Ho (1975, p. 867), the origin of the word "face" is a Chinese idea referring to the use of "mianzi面子" or "lian脸". The Chinese are famous for their obsession with saving face (爱面子).

Moreover, beginning with the opening-up policy in the late 1980s and its entrance into the WTO, China became more engaged in global affairs. Historically, the importance of learning English has been stressed by all Chinese and in recent decades this has been emphasized even more. Considering these two facts, one may wonder whether the Chinese traditions regarding face and politeness will remain the same under the drastic lash of English language usage?

This study was designed find out how does the English proficiency level of Chinese students affects their way of refusing. To insure the validity of participants' English level, the C-test was designed as part of the survey. The C-test is a method for detecting the real language proficiency level proven to be well-established in linguistics. After finishing the English C-test, participants were asked to complete the Discourse Completion Task to determine their first and most real refusal response to an interaction in a social setting.

The results of this study did not show any significant correlation between English proficiency level and the refusal strategy the respondents chose. However, the current study has found several interesting phenomena that are typical of Chinese users of English. These include not willing to refuse people who are more powerful and initiating a "ritual acceptance" to mitigate the tone of refusal. In conclusion, although English language usage does not change Chinese students' codes of conducts and politeness, preferences for refusal strategies are related to culture and thus politeness is not proven to be universal.

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1. Introduction

In *The Cambridge Dictionary*, the adjective "polite" is defined as " behaving in a way that is socially correct and shows an understanding of and care for other people's feelings" (Cambridge Dictionary). In social interactions, being "polite" is considered in many ways to be the first and foremost standard. Through the ages, a myriad of studies have been done on politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) first proposed a scientific theory known simply as the Politeness Theory, arguing that politeness is about avoidance of threats and the fulfillment of a desire for projecting good face. They categorized the notion of face as of two types: positive face--the desire to be admired by others, and negative face-- the freedom of taking action without impediment. Although they claimed the universal validity of their theory, the perception of "politeness" can vary under different cultures. For instance, Chinese culture is a prominent representative among cultures of Asian countries, which displays distinct differences from western cultures.

China has been called "the country of decorum." The origin of *li*□ (translated as social custom/ manners/ courtesy/ politeness) can be dated back to Zhou dynasty (about 3000 years ago). Being polite is seen as a fundamental trait of an individual. Growing up, Chinese kids are always taught to be respectful and modest toward everyone, but especially to their elders and those have higher social status and power. Nevertheless, for the past few decades, the implementation of reform and opening-up policy has brought tremendous change into every corner of China, including the Chinese's perception towards politeness. Traditions and customs are no longer considered as the primary

criterion of behaviour, especially for the young generation who are more easily and openly to embrace the novelty.

Language and culture are mutually reinforcing. Language is associated with social practices, conventions and in turn, affects individuals' mindset (Chen et. al, 2014). Acquiring a new language offers a brand new mindset for language learners. Along with the opening-up policy of China, the wind of "English fever" swept all over China beginning in 1987. Everyone in China came to regard English as the must-have survival skill for the 21st century. Even now, parents are still striving to send their children to after-school English courses or even to study abroad, mostly in English-speaking countries.

When I was in the USA as an exchange student, a Chinese friend and I were walking on campus. A stranger passed by and complimented my friend's outfit: "Nice dress!". Instead of being modest, as the Chinese way of being polite required, my friend responded as most Americans would--"Thank you!". That experience made me think that besides the input of western values, the acquisition of a new language can contribute to different views on relating to others, politeness in this example.I realized young people's perception and performance towards politeness might change with the acquisition of a new language proficiency.

However, politeness is a broad concept that can be applied to many aspects of life. In this study, the researcher decided to investigate the specific speech act of refusal. Refusal, considered as the most "face-threatening" act in Chinese interpersonal relations, is which one has to reject the interlocutor's request or opinion as the response during an

interaction. Therefore, it can effectively embody how individuals perceive and perform politely. In the previous research, refusals from Chinese native speakers have been distinguished from ones common in English native speakers. The latter are inclined to use more direct refusal strategies and positive feelings than Chinese speakers (Jiang, 2015). Linguists also believe second language proficiency has a significant effect on social interaction. As Chang (2009) put it, a language learner's lack of knowledge of the second language may cause them to depend on their first language when using L2. This study aims at finding out to what extent the level of English language proficiency changes the performance of Chinese students with regard to "politeness," taking the speech act of refusal as an example.

The research consists of five sections. Section one introduces the background of the topic as well as the researcher's motivation in undertaking the study. In part two, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is presented as the base model for this research. The researcher critically looks into essential elements of politeness theory including, positive and negative face, Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. Since Chinese language and practice is taken, politeness in China is also stressed in this section. The author particularly compares the concept of politeness under different historical stages of China and discusses the question of the universality of politeness theory. Moreover, the effect of language on an individual's mindset is mentioned. More background knowledge of the use of language in refusal is discussed as well. The central research questions of the study are set out in this section.

The method that is used in conducting the research is described in section three. The reasons for choosing the mixed method of the research and the process of data

collection are also presented here. For section four, the procedure of analyzing present data is shown in detail. Section five presents the final findings of the present study. The researcher also gives attention to the results and possibilities of future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Politeness Theory

Although there are lots of discussions on politeness among researchers, Brown and Levinson are the two who firstly analyzed it innovatively, systematically, and scientifically. The concept of politeness theory they advanced is now well-known and influential worldwide, offering a base and reference for subsequent researches. The main idea addressed in the theory is the corollary of threatening either the speaker's or hearer's face in speech acts and the need for applying politeness strategies to achieve harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Eelen, 2014). In light of Goffman's (1967) idea of "face", Brown and Levinson defined the concept of "face" as the public self-image of a person and explained its two components: negative face and positive face. Furthermore, they considered face-threatening acts from two angles. To achieve politeness, they defined three politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness. Through the research, Brown and Levinson used the personalized Model Person (MP) for providing "a reference model for the description of culture-specific styles of verbal interaction" in three languages and cultures, namely English, Tzeltal and

Tamil (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 59). They claimed that their model may be universally adapted.

Politeness theory has received a significant amount of attention and criticism. Since some researchers notice that the origin of Brown and Levinson's theory is European Anglo-Saxon culture (Gu, 1990), most of the criticisms come from the Asian world. For example, Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) disproved the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory by shedding light on the use of honorifics in Japanese. Matsumoto (1988) argued that the use of honorifics is for representing different social status which is generated from Japanese vertical society. It has nothing to do with FTA or protecting the hearer's negative face. Ide (1989) claimed that there are two types of politeness-- volitional politeness which is dominated by people's intention to be polite, and discernment politeness which is operated by social norms. Ide argued that honorifics belongs to discernment politeness and cannot be applied to politeness theory.

Chinese linguists raised their objections to Brown and Levinson too. The speech act of refusal serves as a good example here. According to Gu (1990), linguistic acts like inviting or offering in any Chinese context will probably receive a negative reply initially. As Chen, Ye and Zhang (1995) proposed in their article, this practice belongs to "ritual refusal". Chinese frequently respond with a "fake no", even when they are actually willing to accept the speaker's invitation. It is worth noting that this gesture in Chinese language and culture will be evaluated as "polite" rather than maintaining one's freedom of action. This point will be discussed in detail in the following section.

2.1.1 Positive face and negative face

Goffman (1967) proposed the distinction between types of face in his 1967 article. However, the notion of "face" is originally derived from the Chinese ideas *mianzi*□□ and *lian*□ (Ho, 1975, p. 867), even though Brown and Levinson argued that face is an English folk concept (1987, p.61). They defined "face" as "the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61). They held that it consists of two parts--positive face and negative face. Positive face can be explained as "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' claimed by interactants" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61). It shows people's wish to be approved and desired by others. Negative face is defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61). Having a full negative face means interlocutors have the right and freedom to do things without impediment.

Mao (1994) contradicts the universality claims of Brown's and Levinson's definition of "face". He considers examples of Chinese face--*mianzi* and *lian*, and Japanese face *wakimae*. From both of these Asian perspectives, face exists only with the interaction and participation of others. In Chinese and Japanese society, face lies in the evaluation of the community. Having face reflects a person's desire of to acquire respect and prestige from the community. There are no such counterparts to Brown and Levinson's distinction of positive and negative face to be found in the Chinese or Japanese context. For example, instead of employing negative face to achieve freedom of action as in Brown's and Levinson's negative face theory, notions such as "individuals" or "freedom" are not part of the Chinese value of face. Conversely, reputation and prestige are much more important than individualism and freedom of action to the Chinese.

Gu (1990) holds a similar opinion as Mao. He states that the description of the negative face in Brown's and Levinson's theory is not suitable for application to Chinese practice. For instance, behaviours like inviting or offering will be considered as attacking another's negative face because they impede their freedom of action for Brown and Levinson. In contrast, expressing the wish to offer or invite are the basic gestures of politeness gestures in Chinese culture. It can be rude if someone has not done so. Gu concludes that although politeness as a human practice may be universal, while the values and norms behind polite behaviour are culture-specific and language-specific.

2.1.2 FTAs

FTAs is the abbreviation for Face Threatening Acts, which means "those acts that run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.65). FTAs can be divided into two dimensions: positive/negative face and addressee (H)/ speaker (S)'s face.

A) Those acts that threaten negative face desires are presented as impeding each other's freedom of action. Brown and Levinson (1987) listed three categories of action related to negative face including putting some pressure on the future desired action (requests, suggestions…), putting pressure on accepting and rejecting future movements (offers, promises…) and predicting some desire (compliments, envy…). Those acts that threaten positive face lie in not fulfilling each others' appeal of widely-desired public image. There are two categories: negative evaluation of an interlocutor's positive face (disapproval, challenges…)

Fig. 1. Possible strategies for doing FTAs (p. 69)
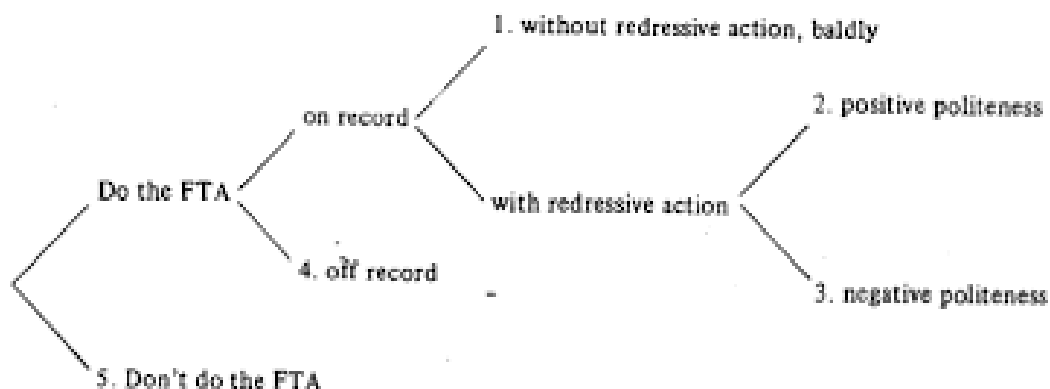
and showing indifference to each other's positive face (violent emotions, taboo topics…).

B) FTAs can be distinguished as primarily threatening S's face or H's face. During a conversation, both sides can be caused face loss of face. However, the principal threatening act can be applied differently. For instance, if S apologies to H, S's positive face would be directly offended, and vice versa.

2.1.3 Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the following schema for possible five strategies handling FTAs according to the four classifications above.

Fig. 1. Possible strategies for doing FTAs (p. 69)

On record means the interlocutors make clear their intentions of action. On the contrary, **off record** includes ambiguous hints including the use of metaphor, irony, and rhetorical questions... while communicating. Doing an off record strategy without redressive action

is the most precise, most direct way. It usually is only used when emergency time or face desires are not needed. Positive politeness and negative politeness are respectively directed towards each other's positive and negative face.

The choices of strategies for doing FTAs will be affected by the payoffs and sociological circumstances. Varieties of advantages can be associated with concomitant different strategies. For instance, by choosing on record behaviour, the speaker will possibly be seen as honest, trustworthy and precise. On the other hand, by doing off record, the speaker may be appreciated as tactful and non-coercive. Apart from the payoffs, Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that three sociological variables play essential roles in the weightiness of FTA-- social distance (D) of S and H, power (P) of S and H, and absolute ranking of impositions in the particular culture (p. 74). They calculated the seriousness of FTA with this formula:

$$W = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R$$

With that calculation, strategies can be chosen under the consideration of the weightiness of FTAs. The more severe face-threats are, the more potent strategies should be used. Yet, some influencing factors are culture-specific so this equation is not universally applicable.

2.2 Politeness Theory in China

Unlike Brown's and Levinson's claim, the concept of face should be traced originally to China (Hinze, 2012). The history of politeness in China is about 3000 years in duration.

For people who come from "the nation of decorum", *Li*☐ or propriety, as translated in politeness behaviour, was relevant to all codes of conduct. For almost every Chinese, maintaining their face is something that they will try their best to do all through their lives. Also, this cultural value has historical force behind it. Politeness is one of the fundamental ethical values in the Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophies which are regarded as forming the canon of Chinese culture all through Chinese history (Kádár & Pan, 2011). *Li* is fundamental to the code of conduct adaptable to every area of relationships. With the development of Chinese politics and economy, an increasing amount of researches has been done on politeness theory in China (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994; Pan, 1995; Gu, 2011; He & Zhang, 2011). In the long course of Chinese history, the way of performing politeness has been adapted to different periods.

A) In ancient China

"Li" (rites of the propriety) formed the Bible of social behaviour in ancient China. There are various classics written to educate people in the rituals of behaving politely in many aspects. These include works such as *Book of Rites (Liji)* which talks about the spirit of Confucian rite and music culture: *Standards for Being a Good Pupil and Child (Dizigui)* which is about how to behave as a disciple or student, and *Lessons for Women (Nvjie) which contains* maxims for women's conduct. Nevertheless, the very first *li* for relationships that came from Confucious is different from modern *li*. According to Gu (1990), this original *li* was designed to reinforce the social hierarchy and slavery system of the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE), while Gu thinks the contemporary concept of *li* as a standard of behaviour is used to denigrate oneself and show extreme respect to others. It is the former *li* that impels the new li, and the latter, in turn, helps to maintain the original

idea of *li* (social hierarchy) (Gu, 1990). Self-denigration and others-elevation is the first and foremost rule of *li* and it is applied to everyone's life in all aspects. For example, the disparaging term *quanzi* (dog son/worthless son) is the expression used in modern Chinese *li* when referring to one's own son. However, when it comes to the other speaker's son, *xianlang* (wise young gentleman) would be the right word to use.

B) The collapse of the historical *li* system and the Communist takeover

The foundation of the People's Republic of China changed the definition of politeness. The Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong (1893-1976), believed that the traditional values and practices of *li* were the remnants of Confucian feudalism meant to preserve the existing unequal classes that the Communist Party wished to overturn. For the sake of building a society with the equality of Communism, the Party launched a series of political campaigns. All the ideologies related to Confucianism were stigmatized as *little bourgeois* and were criticized by the public. The word "comrade" became the omnipotent address to apply to everyone even among people with sharp differences in power and social distance. At the same time, some old traditions (i.e. respecting one's elders) were saved and integrated into new revolution. For example, descriptions employing "old" + addressee's last name (e.g. Old Wang), and "comrade" + addressee's last time (e.g. comrade Wang) were embedded in language practice when addressing someone elderly. In this way, both of the needs to respecting the elder and being politically correct could be met (Kádár & Pan, 2011).

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was the darkest ten years in the history of the People's Republic of China. In this furious political campaign, people were keen on

denouncing each other for behaving in a *bourgeois* way. Traditions such as respecting those who were old and those having higher positions/ stronger power caused. Chairman Mao claimed that revolution had to be violent (Mao, 1927, as cited in Cheek, 2002) and his viewpoint actually encouraged the Communist citizen to be rude. Rudeness somehow became the new polite or "positive face" behaviour. What is noteworthy is that plenty of anecdotes from that period show that Chinese citizens still retained some "traditional civility" in private interactions (Kádár & Pan, 2011).

C) The rise of Deng Xiaoping and contemporary times

Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), a distinct political leader from Mao Zedong, powerfully pursued the "opening up" policy of the new China to open the doors to foreign businesses that wanted to set up in China. This gesture has brought tremendous change. Western politeness became more and more popular, as greater numbers of people accepted western values. For example, Chinese people have abandoned forms of addresses like *tongzhi* (translated as "comrade") and switched expressions that are broadly used in the western world such as Mr./Mrs..(Kádár & Pan, 2011). The level of being modest has decreased in the culture too. Nowadays, actions such as accepting praise from others, talking about love or sexual topics publically, calling the elders or people who have higher power and social status by their personal names are acceptable, while such practices were considered "rude" and "disrespectful" in throughout most of Chinese history. Apart from the changes in linguistic expressions that mirror cultural modifications, of course, some ancient traditions remain. The "ritual refusal" is one of the old traditions that is still practiced. Gu (1990, p. 252-253) cited a revealing conversational example in his study:

[1] A：Mingtian lai chi wanfan(ar). 明天来吃晚饭啊

Tomorrow (you are invited to) come eat dinner tomorrow.

[2] B：Bu lai(le), tai mafan. 不来了太麻烦

(I'd better) not come; (it's) too much trouble.

[3] A: Mafan shenme(ya). 麻烦什么呀

(It's) no trouble.

[4] Cai dou shi xiancheng(de) 菜都是现成的

(The) dishes (are) all ready-made.

[5] B: Na yedei shao(wa) 那也得烧哇

(you) still (have to) cook.

[6] A: Ni bu lai women yedei chifan 你不来我们也得吃饭

(If) you (do) not come we all the same have to eat.

[7] Yiding lai(ar), bu lai wo ke shengqi(le) 一定来啊，不来我可生气

啦

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(you) must come. (If you do not) come I shall feel offended.

[8] B: Hao(ba), jiu suibian yidian 好吧，就随便一点

(all right, just potluck)

[Note: The elements in parentheses are tone softening markers. They create an overall attitudinal warmth of the transaction.] (Gu, 1990)

Next, we will look into the speech act of refusal and compare Chinese refusals and western refusals with the previous research on this practice.

In Chinese culture, as for responding to a request/invitation above, it is polite to make a fake refusal no matter what is the residents' real intention. Even if he/she would like this idea, it will be perceived as rude if one accepts it right away.

2.3 Refusal

2.3.1 Definition of refusal

There are several ways of defining refusal. Based on the concept of "face", Brown and Levinson (1987) concluded four situations that can receive responses as refusal-- a suggestion, an offer, an invitation, and a request. Refusal is considered

as the most face-threatening act since it can easily attack the interlocutor's face.

Beebe et al. (1990) believe that refusal requires interpersonal negotiation. They

hold that it refers to "utterances that the listeners do not want to hear, which

requires the speakers to offer support to help the listeners keep away from

embarrassment" (Beebe et al., 1990, as cited in Jiang, 2015). Other researchers

such as Chen, Ye and Zhang (1995) explain the function of refusal as occurring

when one "denies to be engaged in an action proposed by interlocutor". Gass and

Houck (1999) reckon to see rejection limited to the response. It is not an initiative

act.

2.3.2 Refusal in Chinese and English

Considering the long existence and unshakable position of face in Chinese

culture, one might assume that refusing the other in China might be more difficult

than in different cultures. Previous research shows not only the way to resist but

also the refusal strategies that be used vary sharply from each other between

Chinese speakers and English speakers. Aihua Wang (2004) finds out that her

native American English responders have a more direct way of refusing. She

explains that Americans believe personal thoughts should be expressed clearly.

This idea corresponds to "individualism", "freedom" and "independence" in the

American way of thinking. On the other hand, Chinese respondents are more

indirect in refusal. A Chinese proverb may provide a reasonable explanation: Huo

cong kou chu (i.e., "all his troubles were caused by his tongue"). Chinese

respondents think it is not necessary to express everything; some information can be read beyond the lines. Jun Yao (2003) studied the content of refusal by speakers of Chinese and English. He concluded that English speakers tend to use "I'd like to" to start, followed with a reason and end with an apology, while Chinese speakers prefer addressing their apologies first and mentioning the reasons.

2.4 English proficiency level affect people's mindset

The debate of whether languages have effects on an individual's thoughts and behaviour has been heatedly engaged by psychologists, linguistics, philosophers, and researchers from other fields for several decades. The popular Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the language relativity hypothesis, argues that language influences on how people perceive reality (Whorf, 1956). Accordingly, Pavlenko (2011) proposes that the acquirement of another language offers a new perspective to linguistic relativity.

Chen et al. (2014) believe that culture is inseparable from language. Language is associated with its corresponding cultural practices and norms, which in turn influences people's mindset and performance. Learning a language is also discovering its cultural system. Chen and colleagues conducted four studies to test the Whorfian Hypothesis with Chinese-English bilinguals. They found that the language we speak does shape the way we see ourselves and the world. Chen's and Bond's research (2010) also confirmed that bilinguals behaved differently--but their actions corresponded with the characteristics of the culture behind the language they are using. Their study also showed that language

proficiency has effects on interlocutors too. People who are less fluent in their second language feel inhibited while conversing in that language.

Along with the fast spread of English usage all over China, some people are concerned about the influence of English on the culture. Niu and Wolff (2005) used the metaphor of the Trojan horse for English Foreign Language (EFL), stating there are social and political values behind the language. More and more people in China show solicitude for the possible effects of English on not only China as a country but also the Chinese language and culture. Supporters of EFL believe learning English may boost the Chinese economy and strengthen communication in all fields with the world (Chang, 2006). Opponents argue that the vast demands of learning and using English may cause neglect of Chinese culture itself and lead to its loss it eventually (Gao, 2009; Niu & Wolff, 2003, 2007). Studies have disclosed that there is evidence of Chinese college students failing their Chinese language exams because of putting most of their effort into learning English (Zhou, 2007). English also has earned a place in Chinese morphology and syntax. English originated words have come into Chinese vocabulary in high numbers (Guo & Zhou, 2003; Yang, 2009) and using code-mixing words symbolizes a sense of fashion (Yang, 2009). In research by Fang, Hu, and Jenkins on how Chinese international students perceive the influence of English on Chinese language and culture, the respondents believed English does have specific impacts on Chinese culture, but it is undeniable that some of these are positive and some are negative (2017). Other studies find that while most of the people agree English is influencing China in different facets; it is not seen as a threat (Pan & Seargeant, 2012).

How will the English proficiency level affect a Chinese EFL learner's refusal behaviour? Linguists did their researches mostly on evaluating the correlation between L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer. Jiang's study (2015) show English proficiency has a negative correlation with the pragmatic transfer, namely the higher the English level is, the fewer pragmatic transfers appeared. That results is opposite to Takahashi and Beebe's hypothesis (1987). The relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic transfer remained controversial for a long period.

With all this discussion of politeness in general and its expression in China specifically, the ultimate goal is to determine how English as the foreign language acquisition effects Chinese students as native speakers when refusing people? Will the acquisition of English reflect changed perception and behaviour regarding politeness? And how do the three factors--social distance, power, and relevance function in that politeness situations? Therefore, the main research question of the study is formulated as:

To what extent does the proficiency level of English affect Chinese students' performance of refusal regarding politeness?

To answer the research question, three sub-questions are formulated considering the sociological variables of "Politeness theory" by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely, power, social distance, and ranking:

SQ1: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of differences in power?

SQ2: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of different social distances?

SQ3: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of different rankings?

3. Methodology

3.1 Mixed Method

A mixed-method was used in this research project. The present study sought to find out the influences of English proficiency level on Chinese students' performance of refusal. Background information was collected from the respondents. It provided the researcher with a full picture of all the respondents in the first place. Without these information factors like age, gender, educational background, and experience abroad might have had imperceptible influences on how do respondents perceived the situations and performed in the contexts.

Next, the researcher collected data regarding the participants' English proficiency levels using the C-test developed by Christine Klein-Braley and Ulrich Raatz in 1981. The test is composed of texts with gaps that are intentionally omitted every four words. Participants completed possible words based on the context. The greater the amount of right answers a respondent had, the higher the English level was reflected. Because it is difficult to find a cut-off point among the scores of all the participants, the C-test score was treated as continuous data. The core part of the survey--Discourse Completion Task was employed to find out the most natural reaction of respondents under certain situations.

To narrow down the research scope to a feasible size, the researcher chose the school setting and the speech act of refusal were chosen for the following reasons. A) Since all the respondents were college students. the school setting was more familiar and close to their daily life. B) The speech act of refusal is reflective of the way of behaving politely for its distinguishing features: degree of directness, threat to each other's face, and the sensitivity of interlocutors in terms of politeness. The survey can be found in the Appendix.

All of these procedures were accomplished with no other methods or manipulation. They were designed so to be gather with participants' views, opinions and responses as true data (Dornyei, 2016, p.38).

Once the the data connection was completed, the software SPSS was used to analyze the data and to try to find the correlations between English level and refusal strategy in each situation.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

The very first stage of the analysis was the questionnaire. It was a way of data-collecting for non-evaluative information about the respondents. The questionnaire gathered demographic characteristics, residential location, past experience etc. which is information normally obtained using the form of questionnaire (Dornyei, 2016, p.102-103). For the present study, the researcher gathered background information such as age,

gender, educational background, and the mother tongue.The questionnaire provided a convenient method of both collecting and categorizing this data.

3.2.2 C-test

The C-test is an integrative method for measuring general language proficiency level. The idea behind it is the reduced redundancy principle (Grujić & Danilović, 2013; Khoshdel, 2017). Spolsky states that redundancy is a pervasive characteristic of a natural language that helps one to cope with the interference of noise during information transmission (Spolsky, as cited in Sigott, 2004, p.18). Consequently, advanced language users can recombine words with damaging information. Hence, the language proficiency level of an individual can be measured by the proportional success in restoring fragmentized information. Grounded on this principle, C-test is designed with texts in which every second half of every second word has been removed. The first and last sentence remains in full. One-letter-words, as well as names, are not subject to this rule of "seconds". The whole C-test usually consists of 4-5 texts with 20-25 gaps each. The score of the test is a number from 0 to 100 (Grujić & Danilović, 2013).

The reliability and validity of the C-test has been proven by numerous researchers in the past few decades. However, one of the disadvantages of the C-test, as Raatz and Klein-Braley (2002) put it, is the limitation on areas of writing and reading. The conclusion of Khoshdel's (2007) study also shows the frequency of the words of the gap and the part of speech (i.e. whether it's a function word or content word that is omitted) have correlations with the difficulty of the test.

As for the present study, the English proficiency level was the core variable. At the early stage of designing the methodology, the researcher has considered making use of the score of standardized language tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS or a college entrance exam as the benchmark. However, language ability may alter over a short time. Aiming to collect the most accurate and present data of participants' English proficiency level, the researcher resolved to use the C-test for the freshest data, which can lay a solid foundation for the subsequent parts of the present study.

3.2.3 Discourse Completion Test

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is a type of method using discourse situations and measuring the speech acts elicited (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000). It was first used by Blum Kulka in 1982. Since then, the DCT has become a widely-used method in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. DCT is best suited for collecting data on people's natural reaction to discourse and how do the respondents think it is the most appropriate to react in certain situations (Sweeney & Hua, 2016).

The DCT begins with a description of the situation, which leads the participants to a specific speech act. The description is followed by blanks representing an unfinished conversation. The DCT requires respondents to put themselves in the context and complete the blanks naturally. Researchers broadly accept this method for several reasons. 1) It is convenient and quick to use. By using some sentences, researchers can quickly create an authentic, natural conversation that provides for the reaction of the attendees. Respondents only need to write down (written DCT) or say something (oral

DCT) with simple answers. There are no long and tedious transcriptions waiting for the researcher afterwards. 2) It is easy to control the variables which provide presuppositions for desired data. DCTs have a large designing room compared to other data collection methodologies. Variables like age, gender, and speech acts are easy to be intentionally changed according to the design of the study.

Some researchers, conversely, see responder autonomy as a drawback of DCTs. The enormous possibilities of design may lead to an unsteady efficacy of this method. The validity and authenticity of the DCT method has been questioned as well. Some worry the data may not be natural under certain circumstances. Different languages can have varying effects on respondents' responses. Yuan (2001) found the answers were the least elaborate when his participants answered in Chinese. On the other hand, Golato (2003) investigated the same speech act in German and found the written DCT responses are longer than the oral DCT responses. The respondents explained that they feel the obligation of a longer answer when writing things down (Sweeney & Hua, 2016).

For this study, the chosen situation was the university setting and the speech act was refusal. The variables in the present DCT were the three dimensions proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987)-- power, social distance, and ranking of imposition. The researcher changed each variable for every scenario; there were eight possibilities in total:

Question Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Power	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	+
Social distance	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	-
Relevance	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	-

Table 1: *Possible Combinations of the situation of DCT*

3.3 Procedure

3.3.1 Experimental procedure

The test consisted of three parts: background investigation, C-test, and Discourse Completion Test. All the participants were informed about the purpose of this research and steps taken to insure the confidentiality of their information beforehand. They all agreed to participate in this research anonymously. The first part of the study collected data like age, gender, educational background, experience abroad. The second part administered the C-test for determining respondents' English proficiency levels. The original C-test is comprised of five different texts with 100 gaps in total. However, the researchers have received considerable feedback about the excessive complexity and length of the C-test. A revised version of the C-test was used in this study consisting of two texts with 25 gaps in total. The full score remained the same. The third part of the study was the Discourse Completion Test. The researcher created eight situations based on every possible combination of the three variables (social distance, power, and ranking). Description of the scenario was provided at the beginning of every situation, and each test had only one answer blank to complete. Once the feasibility of the questionnaire was proven, the questionnaire was published on the online questionnaire platform Wenjuanxing. The questionnaire was open for six days (3 April, 2020-Apr. 8th 2020) and there were 68 respondents.

3.3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

First and foremost, answers to the C-test need were coded and calculated. Adopting the centesimal system with 25 gaps in the C-test, each gap has assigned the value of 4. Accordingly, the researcher coded C-test answers as follows (Coding the C-test, 2019):

0 = empty

1 = incorrect lexical stem and incorrect word class

2 = incorrect lexical stem but correct word class

3 = correct lexical stem but incorrect word class

4 = correct lexical stem, correct word class, agreement error

5 = all of above correct, but still slightly wrong

6 = acceptable variant with spelling errors

7 = correct word spelling error

8 = acceptable variant

9 = correct word

Scores in the range of 0-5 received no points, 6-7 got two points, and 8-9 were given full points. A total of 25 questions were calculated as the final score of the C-test.

Secondly, the researcher categorized all the responses of DCT, according to Beebe's et al. (1990)'s classification on refusal. According to him, there are three general categories to describe a refusal--direct, indirect, and adjuncts. The coding system shows as follows, along with participants' responses as demonstrations:

I.   **Direct**

Non-performative statement ("No" or "It's not convenient for me to do so")

II.   **Indirect**

    A. Statement of regret ("I'm sorry")

    B. Excuse/reason/explanation ("I have to do…")

    C. Statement of alternative ("You can ask other students")

    D. Set condition for future acceptance ("I can help you if I have time after finishing my homework")

    E. Promise of future acceptance ("Let's do it tomorrow")

    F. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor

        1. Statement of negative consequences to the requester ("I don't think I can succeed in that job")

        2. Criticize the requester ("Do you think you know me?")

    G. Avoidance

    Postponement ("Let me think about it")

III. Adjuncts

A. Statement of positive opinion/feeling agreement ("I'd love to")

B. Statement of empathy ("I really want to help you")

C. Gratitude/appreciation ("Thank you")

Different responses represent different strategies. The three kinds of refusal strategy have an order in terms of directness when refusing others. Each strategy was assigned worth a certain amount of points. The more direct the strategy, the fewer points assigned (see Table 2). In this way, the directness of refusal can be measured.

Strategy	Direct	Indirect	Adjuncts to refusal
Number	1	2	3

Table 2: *Representative numbers of different strategies*

What called for special attention when interpreting the data was the fact that although an answer to the DCT may seem simple as in a sentence like: "不了谢谢叔叔，我已经找到工作了。"(No, thank you, uncle. I have already found a job), this reply can contain all three refusal strategies-- "No" (Direct refusal), "thank you uncle" (adjuncts to refusals-gratitude), and "I have already found a job" (Indirect refusal-reason). To make the current study less complicated and more operable, the researcher estimated by the

tone of the answer whether is was Direct (as 1), Indirect (as 2) or Adjuncts to refusal (as 3).

Thirdly, the analysis was structured in the following manner. The frequencies and percentages of each strategy used was presented first. After showing the overall results, the correlation between the English proficiency level and the strategy used was explored. Since the C-test score is a continuous variable and types of refusal strategy is an ordinal variable, Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation test was adopted to explore the relation between the English level and chosen refusal strategy.

4. Results

There were sixty-eight participants responded to the questionnaire. However, after a validity check of all data, the researcher discarded data from six respondents due to their invalid answers. Among the rejected group, some did not answer the C-test as they were required (i.e. they put in random letters) and some did not follow the requirements of the DCT (i.e. they responded with abnormal answers). These were all considered as invalid data. In the end, a total of 62 respondents are counted in presented research.

4.1 Background results

All of the respondents are currently students, with ages ranging from 19 to 30. Their educational background varies from a high school certificate to the master's degree. Seventeen of them are male, 44 are female, and one self-identified as other. The places of

origin of the respondents are widely spread over China, representing 17 different provinces. A large portion of them (i.e., 39 out of 62) grew up in Henan province. The number of respondents who have lived in an English-speaking country are grouped in this way: ten for more than three months; four from six months to one year; two from one to three years; and the other four for more than three years. As for mother tongue, 61 of the 62 participants answered Mandarin/Chinese and one responded Wu Chinese-- a dialect used in southeast China.

4.2 C-test results

The researcher used the C-test to rank all the participants according to their English proficiency level. The test contained two texts with 25 blanks in total. The total score possible on this test was 100 and each blank had the value of four points. Results showed that the highest score among the respondents was 88 and the lowest was zero. The

distribution is presented was as follows:
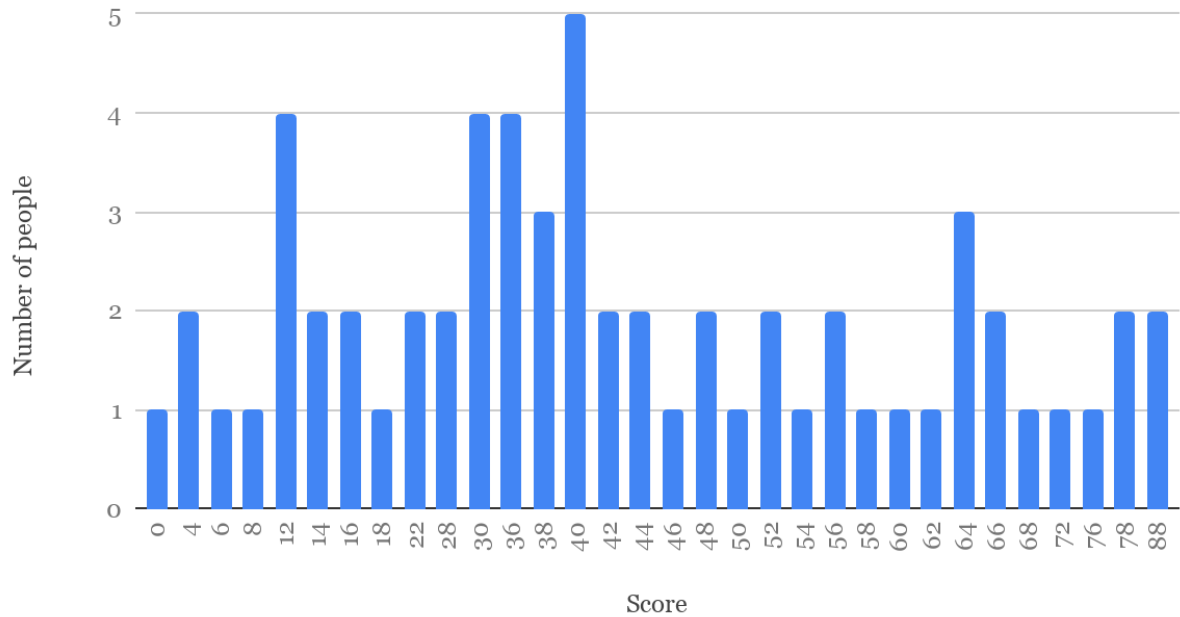
C-test Results

Table 3: C-test results

The column chart reveals the English proficiency level of respondents varied in a wide range (from 0 to 88). The density of participants with a lower English level of 40 or below, is slightly larger than the the number above 40. The intervals between different scores mostly occur in numbers of either two or four people. Moreover, the frequency of variation in each score is typically only one or two person. On the whole, lower English proficiency participants outnumbered higher English proficiency counterparts based on their performances on the C-test provided.

With references to past researches, finding a cut-off point marking high and low English proficiency using the data can be hard to complete with exactitude. Therefore, the

researcher treated the C-test results as continuous variables and try to found correlations between their score and reactions of refusal.

4.3 Refusal Strategy

The responses of each eight discourse situations used in the study were analyzed based on the refusal strategies the participants chose to use. The researcher coded all the answers according to the justified classification system of Beebe et al. (1990) explained in the methodology section of this study.

4.3.1 Discourse Situation 1

The first situation examined was one in which power and relevance are both high and social distance is low. The setting was a big family gathering with relatives all together. The participants were supposed to turn down an invitation in which their uncle offers a job at his own company.

Fifty-one respondents used the Indirect refusal strategy, followed by Adjuncts to refusal eight times and three times for Direct refusal strategy. Most of the participants began by showing appreciation to the uncle and provided a reason or explanation for not accepting the offer to indicate their negative attitude. For example responses included: " 谢谢叔叔！但是我想继续读研究生(Thank you, uncle, but I would like to pursue further education at the moment)." The second most popular strategy used was stating

negative consequences to the requester. "我可能没有办法胜任这份工作(I may not succeed in this position)". Direct expressions of refusal were rarely seen here. Even if the direct strategy was used, it always appeared with either or both the other two strategies.

Next, Spearman's Rank-order Correlation Test was adopted to determine whether there was a correlation between English level and the choice of a politeness strategy. The test showed that there was a strong and positive correlation between the English level and politeness strategy used at the level of 0.05, which was statistically significant (r = .251, n=62, p = .050). The result signifies that the higher the English proficiency score, the less direct when the participants were in refusing others.

4.3.2 Discourse Situation 2

The second discourse situation examined was designed for high social distance and low power and relevance. The setting was on the university campus. Participants were asked to refuse a random student who asked them for a small favour. Remarkably, most of the respondents chose an Indirect strategy in this situation. It was used 59 times which revealed sharp differences between the frequencies of selection of a Direct strategy (0) and Adjuncts to refusal (2). Among all the participants, one replied with a positive answer "yes", which does not apply to the requirement to make a refusal, therefore, this response was discarded.

Moreover, except for the refusal strategy, the patterns of refusal are surprisingly

overlapping. Almost every participant first showed their regret by saying "不好意思(I'm

sorry)" and then by stating a reason why they cannot do the favour: "我上课要迟到了(I'll

soon be late for my class)". Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Test was run to

determine the relationship between participants' English score and refusal strategy.

However, no significant correlation was shown.

4.3.3 Discourse Situation 3

The third situation examined was one in which both power and social distance are high,

and the relevance of the topic is low. It took place in a school setting as well. In this

scenario, without a single penny on them today, the participants had to decline the

mayor's request for a bottle of water after giving a speech to all the students and the

faculty.

The researcher astonishingly found that instead of saying "no" to the mayor as the

context assumed would be done, 32 out of 62 participants responded that they would help

the mayor and explained that they could find ways to solve this problem by themselves.

Although a positive answer should normally be considered as deviant data in the current

study because it is not a refusal, such a large number of participants being unwilling to

reject the mayor required explanation. The researcher suggest that such a response can be

considered reflective of Chinese traditional values and the discipline of being polite.

Respondents felt it more challenging to say "no" to the requester in a situation that combined high power and social distance because it is not considered as "polite" in Chinese society to refuse in that context. To find out whether the English proficiency level affected participants attitude of saying "yes", please consult Table 6:
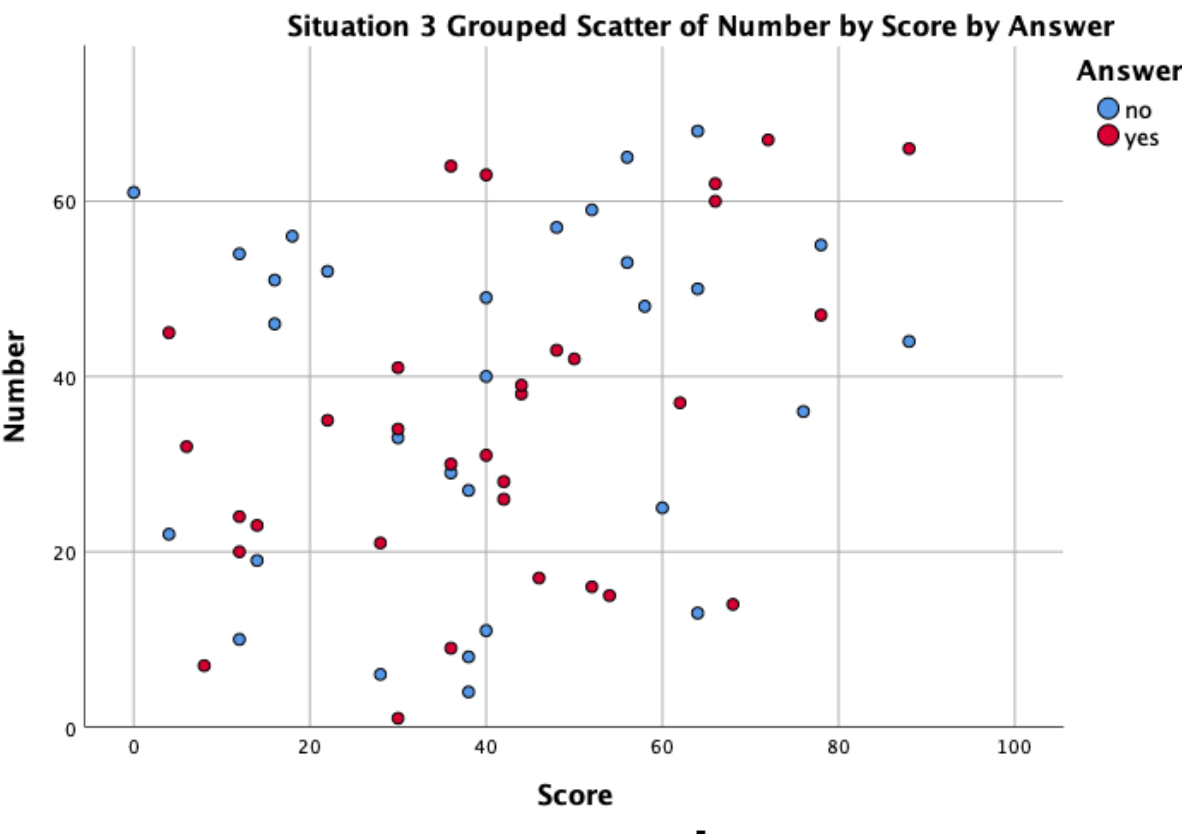

Table 6: Distribution of positive and negative answers in Discourse Situation 3

The scatter plot chart presents that participants who said "yes" and "no" are both widely distributed from lower scores to higher English proficiency scores. Their choices of a refusal strategy seemed not be affected by whether they had abundant English knowledge or not.

For the rest 30 respondents who chose to decline the mayor's request, no Direct refusal strategy was used. The Indirect strategy has appeared for 29 times and Adjuncts to refusal appeared once. Even when they responded with a refusal, most of the respondents tried to find a way out by saying: "我可以去找其他同学借钱(I can borrow money from my other classmates)". It is evident that like those who answered "yes", they did not want to decline the mayor's request determinedly.

4.3.4 Discourse Situation 4

In this situation, each of the variables, namely power, social distance, and relevance, are all high. The case was described as a professor who is not so close to you asks you the big favour of convening 100 participants to participate in his research. Whereas, you have neither time nor responsibility to accept this request. Just as in Situation 3, there were seven people who responded positively to the request. Each participant's responses are shown below:

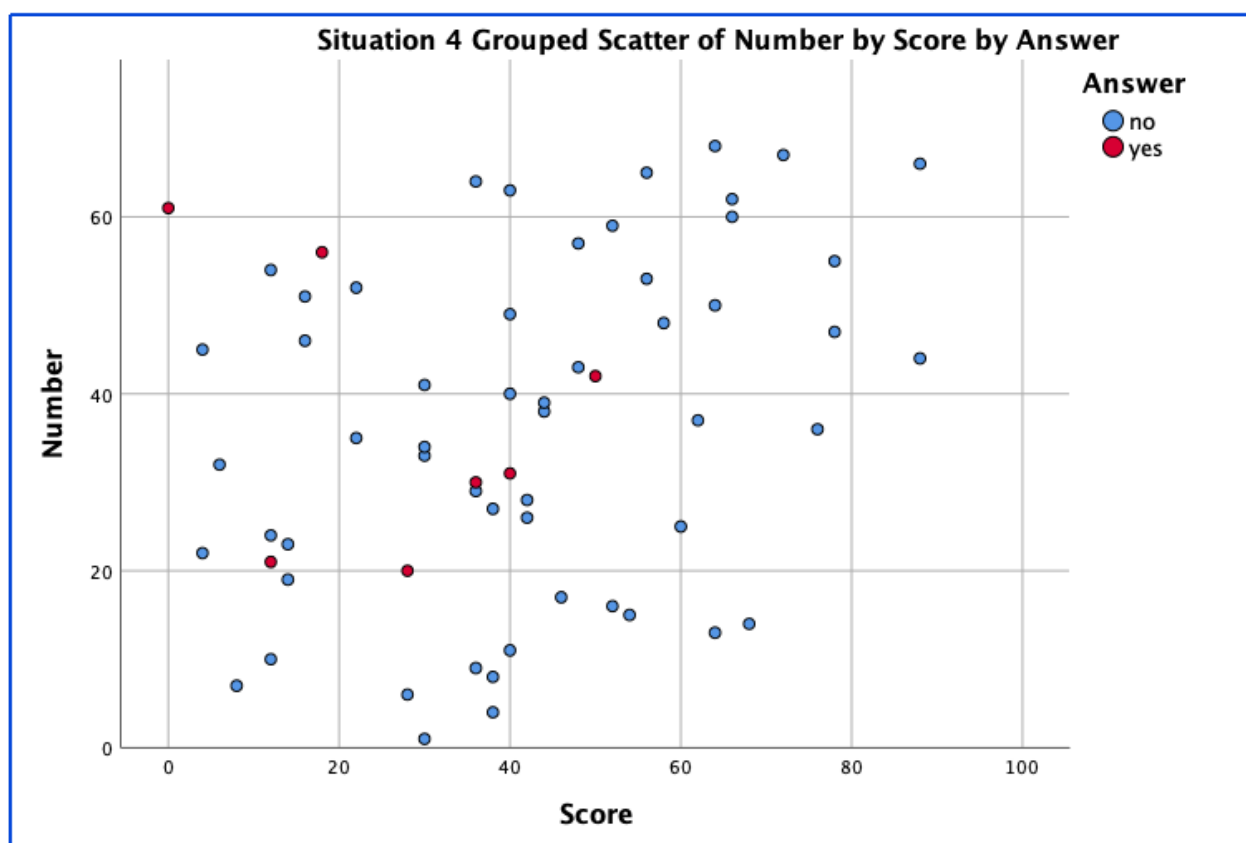Situation 4 Grouped Scatter of Number by Score by Answer

Table 7: Distribution of responses in Discourse Situation 4

The English proficiency test scores revealed that all of the participants with positive answers had a C-test score under 50. No higher scorers said "yes" to the request under this circumstance.

Among those who refused the request, Indirect strategies were chosen by 50 respondents, one chose the Adjuncts to refusals approach, and the Direct strategy was selected by four participants. Within the Indirect strategies that were used, the most typical sub-strategy was the "statement of negative consequences to the requester". Participants used the not resolute refusals. Answers were formulated such as "我可能找不到那么多人 (I may not find that many participants)". But this expression of refusal left

some room for possible action in the future. It can be inferred that these respondents might accept the request but that they can not guarantee finding 100 persons. Strictly speaking, this type of refusal is not a full refusal. It is more like a compromise from both sides. Such an approach conforms to the Chinese politeness standard: "Do not refuse people resolutely. Always save some room for both parties."

4.3.5 Discourse Situation 5

Discourse Situation 5 was one in which power and social distance are low, and relevance is high. The participants were expected to react to his/her roommate's failure to maintain public environmental hygiene. Unfortunately, Situation 5 was not structured to be a refusal speech act. During the process of designing the DCT, the researcher followed the original research idea--to explore English influences on Chinese students' performance of politeness. Later, the speech act of refusal was selected to be used to narrow down the study area. In this case, Situation five no longer fit the focus of the current study. Although it is a pity to discard the data that has been collected, it is not suitable to be discussed here.

4.3.6 Discourse Situation 6

In Discourse Situation 6 comes with all three variables are low. It was a family setting when participants were asked to reject their brother's proposal of going to play basketball. The Direct refusal strategy appeared more often in this situation than in the others.

Sixteen (16) chose that strategy. The Indirect strategy appeared 46 times, and no respondent used the Adjuncts to refusal method. The typical answers were formulated with reasons and alternatives: "今天太累了，我需要休息(I'm so tired today. I need some rest)", "今天太累了，明天打吧(I'm so tired today, let's play tomorrow)". The refusing style was more direct compared to former situations, and the most polite strategy Adjuncts to refusal was not used to mitigate the tone. Spearman's Rank-Order Test was run to determine the relationship between strategy and English level. Still, no significant correlation between these two variables were found.

4.3.7 Discourse Situation 7

To refuse people's request with long social distance, less power, and a comparatively sensitive topic, the Indirect strategy was chosen for 32 times, the Direct strategy for 17 times, and the Adjuncts for 15 times. In this scenario, another person shows an interest in the participant and asks for his/her telephone number. What is worthwhile to note is that a loophole exists in the middle of the description. The setting asked the participant's to assume they were single at the moment. Both this objective fact of being single and personal willingness may affect the participants' attitudes towards refusing or accepting the request. Eighteen participants said "yes" to the request and all of these responses were discarded.

4.3.8 Discourse Situation 8

The last situation documents participants' refusal on a simple subject when the requester ranked high on the power index but low on social distance index. Respondents were expected to turn their favourite professor down when he or she suggests that they go together for a cup of coffee after school. Surprisingly, even though the description of the context indicated that they already have plans after class, 29 respondents still said they were willing to give up their original idea and have coffee with their professor. As before with positive responses to request scenarios, these 29 were discarded. The distribution of all responses is illustrated in Table 9:

Table 9: Distribution of positive and negative answer in Discourse Situation 8

As in Situation 4, there is no sharp correlation between English scores and refusal strategies.

The researcher also found that two participants' answers to Situation 8 to be particularly of interest. For example, someone responded with "有什么事情吗？（Is there anything wrong?)". This responses could be put down to the different models of relationship Chinese and Western students share with their teachers. Typically, it is rare in Chinese society for teachers and students to have personal interactions. All the interactions between students and teachers are formal and they are often hierarchical. Therefore, the student's response may reveal some anxiety that he has done something wrong and that is the reason why the teacher wanted to talk to him.

Some respondents also added their explanations for why they chose to say "yes" to the request. A group of people reckoned that having such an opportunity to communicate with the professor weighs more than other plans, because such opportunities happened. Therefore, they were more than happy to make concessions. Others saw this occasion with a longer-term view. They preferred to see this as a time investment in building relations with their favourite professor. According to them, cultivating this relationship was more significant than trivial things such as going to the library to study. On the other hand, even these positive responses reveal how important the respondents thought it was to behave politely in front of a person with high power who also has a low social distance from them. The thinking seems to have been that even though the respondent made plans beforehand, it was better to be polite by accepting the

professor's suggestion and reaching the ideal harmony, rather than putting themselves in the first place.

Thirty-one of the participants made use of an Indirect strategy, along with one person using Adjuncts to refusal, and one Direct refusal. The most polite strategy-- Adjuncts to refusal are often used. Moreover, participants are apt to add the statement of future acceptance to soften the tone. Typical answers are formulated as: "不好意思老师，我还有事情，下次我请您！(I'm sorry, but I have other plans. I'll treat you a cup of coffee next time.)", "我很开心您邀请我，但是我还有其他事情要做(I'm so happy that you invited me, but I have other plans)".

5. Discussion

The results of the current study are quite different from what the author expected. Although the English proficiency levels of the participants are widely distributed, from the lowest of 0 to the highest of 88, there were not significant correlations with the refusal strategies the participants chose. There is only one significant correlation that has demonstrated among all eight scenarios. Astonishingly, that correlation between the English level and chosen refusal strategies is opposite to the original expectation.

In Discourse Situation 1, the Spearman's test showed a correlation suggesting that the higher the C-test score, the less direct was the refusing strategy chosen by the respondents. One possible reason for this finding could be that the standard used in the

coding system is subjective. In their responses, all participants used a combination of two or even all three refusing strategies. For example, a reply as "不了，谢谢叔叔，我找到工作了(No, thank you, uncle, I have already found a job)" has Direct, Adjuncts to refusal, and an Indirect strategy. In such cases, the researcher had to judge toward which strategy the participant was learning. The interjection of this subjective judgment may result in less accuracy in measuring the respondents' attitudes.

For Discourse Situation 2, when it comes to refusing peer students about a small thing, no one used the Direct strategy. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents used the Indirect strategy. Respondents preferred to express their apology first and follow up with a reason for the refusal. (e.g., "不好意思，我上课要迟到了,I'm sorry, I'll be late for my class"). Since the requester is someone of a similar age and power as the respondents, most of the respondents considered it unnecessary to use Adjuncts to refusals to express extreme politeness or using the Direct strategy to be bad-mannered to a stranger.

Regarding the third situation, the result were unexpected. Instead of refusing the mayor's request, 32 out of 62 participants chose to say "yes". In principle, all 32 participants should be considered as outliers and are not suitable for the correlation test. On the other hand, this is an exciting and valuable phenomenon that needs to be taken into consideration. The respondents explained later that "There is no way to refuse the mayor. I can give him my promise first and solve the problem on my own". In their perspective, the needs of a big shot like the mayor take priority over their own. This response corresponds to how ancient Chinese were accepted to act politely, especially in

front of people who are elder, more knowledgeable, or more powerful. These young participants' responses revealed that the hierarchical and differential pattern is deeply ingrained in Chinese's values. In Chinese culture, trying to fulfil whatever the influential person's needs is a critical way of being polite. Whereas, the idea of 'self' can be easily sacrificed under these circumstances. When comparing the English level of respondents answering both "yes" and "no", no correlation can be detected. These data suggest that the English score may not be an influencing factor in a respondent's attitude in this case.

Discourse Situation 4 showed similar results as Situation 3. A total of seven persons accepted the request instead of refusing it. However, this time, respondents who said "yes" all had a relatively low C-test score (i.e., all of them were under 50). Not refusing others accords with the traditional Chinese politeness standard; it might be the reason behind the 7 respondents who said "yes". This result are in line with Chen & Bond's (2010) claim that language transfer is expected when the interlocutors are less fluent in the second language. Moreover, this can be a case related to 'ritual refusal' as described by Gu (1990), which is a typical Chinese interaction meaning to refuse before accepting an invitation. In Chinese culture, one has to reject the invitation first no matter the real intention behind the refusal. A direct and explicit acceptance is considered 'rude'. Here, when facing a refusal, the respondents seemed to create a 'ritual acceptance' to mitigate the refusal. By saying "I may not find many participants", the respondents altered the power to make further decisions back to the requester. The meaning behind is -- "I'm sorry that I cannot find you 100 participants for your research. But I feel bad for refusing you. It will be a relief for me if you give up since I offered another option and it is you that choose not to take it. If you insist, I can help with finding as much as I can.

Both ways I refused you the request of finding 100 participants." This kind of refusal lies at the boundary of acceptance and refusal, which perfectly expresses the participants' their attitudes and balanced the need to be "polite".

Situation 5 is a pitfall in the current study, for it was not designed for the speech act of refusal. It was discarded because it did not address the research question.

With all three variables of power, relevance and social distance determined to be of low impact, Discourse Situation 6 became the scenario in which the Direct refusal strategy was used most frequently (16 times) and the Adjuncts to refusal strategy was not used at all. The Indirect strategy has appeared in 46 participant responses. For the respondents, the need to be polite is lessened when the requester was someone more equal and relatable to them. The results of this situation suggest may embody that power, relevance, and social distance play decisive roles on which strategy to choose when refusing others.

Discourse Situation 7 contains another pitfall to the study. Again, without the specification of which speech act was to be selected, the setting of this scenario does not imply a need to refuse. While it was supposed to be a perfect topic with high relevance by refusing to give one's phone number to someone the participants did not know, it turned out to be profoundly affected by factors regarding the personal situation and the characters of the participants.

The last situation presented an unexpected result too. Facing the situation of being invited for a cup of coffee by a professor, 29 out of 66respondents accepted it, rather than refusing it. They further explained that such an opportunity is rare and more valuable than

any of their own plans. This large number of acceptances revealed that the relationship between Chinese students and professors (or people with sharp power distances) is distant, and it is more difficult to refuse request from the higher power individual, which is similar to situation 3. Both situation 8 and 3 revealed that Chinese will regard self-needs as lower than the needs of others with more power. This attitude corresponds to how ancient Chinese have to act politely, especially in front of people who are elder, more knowledgeable and more powerful. Trying to meet whatever they need of a higher power individual is an essential way of being polite.

6. Conclusion

This research has investigated how Chinese students with different English level proficiencies refuse the requests of others. Its purpose was to detect whether the acquirement of another language has effects on the practice of refusing. The original research question was proposed in light of the three elements of politeness theory-- power, social distance, and rankings. The study explored how does each of these elements influenced participants' refusal strategies, giving attention to correlations between refusal patterns and English level.

The main research question was:

To what extent does the proficiency level of English affect Chinese students' performance of refusal regarding politeness?

The sub-questions were:

SQ1: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of differences in power?

SQ2: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of different social distances?

SQ3: To what extent does English proficiency level affect Chinese students' performance of refusal in terms of different rankings?

Based on the research conducted, we can answer the main research question. There are no clear and significant correlations found in the current study between English proficiency level and strategies of refusal.

Unfortunately, the sub-questions cannot be answered. During the process of analysis, the researcher and the supervisor realized that the three influence factors of power, social distance and ranking are too complicated for the online administration used in this study. The combinations of the three elements have eight possibilities and the validity of each possibility needs to be tested under three to five situations which is too extensive for the current survey.

Additionally, during the development and implementation of this study the world witnessed an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This delayed the data-collecting period and forced alterations in the initial research plan. However, even given these unexpected happenings, the current study has found several insightful results.

Firstly, despite the fact that this study focused on refusals of request, a considerable number of participants chose to accept the request in several of the test discourse situations. This phenomena often appeared during the test interactions with requesters having more power (e.g., teacher to student, mayor to student). While this represented participants diverting from the object of the study at one level, nevertheless it revealed that no matter how polite the refusal strategy available to them, rejecting powerful people was regarded by the Chinese respondent group as impolite and unacceptable. It also revealed the Chinese's attitude of putting a powerful person's need as a priority and disclosed their willingness to sacrifice their own needs in the process.

Secondly, throughout all the test discourse situations, the Indirect strategy was consistently the most used. It was chosen for 298 times in total or 81% of all choices of refusing strategies available in the study. Both Adjuncts to refusal and Direct strategy refusals were only rarely used individually. Moreover, when they were used they almost always appeared in combination with an Indirect strategy.

Thirdly, as "ritual refusal" is stated in Gu's (1990) article, the research study found a practice of "ritual acceptance" common to the Chinese respondents. When the respondents found the request hard to meet but they do not want to reject the requester bluntly, they mitigated their answers by claiming "I can only satisfy XXX per cent of your needs." While the implication is that they can not meet what is requested, they accept the request with qualification. In this way, the respondents can refuse politely and protect their positive politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) at the same time.

In summary, the acquirement of English language proficiency does not influence Chinese students' way of refusing. Their practice of politeness is still driven by their acculturation. Accordingly, this study lends support to the claim that politeness is not universal.

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Appendix

Survey (translated into English)

Dear participants,

I kindly ask you to participate in this survey. I am a master student from Utrecht University who is conducting research aiming to find a correlation between English proficiency level and types of strategy to choose when refusing others.

Your participation will be anonymous and the results will only be used for this research only. You are not required to complete the survey and you may stop at any time you want.

The survey consists of three parts-- background information, c-test, and discourse completion test. Completing the survey will take approximately 15 minutes.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation!

Kind regards,

Xinyuan Zhang

If you have any questions or would like to know more about this research, please contact Xinyuan Zhang at x.zhang13@students.uu.nl or call 8615713691136.

Part 1 Questionnaire

1. How old are you? (filling gap)

2. Are you male or female?

   A. Male

B. Female

C. Other

3. What's your highest education?

   A. High school

   B. Undergraduate

   C. Graduate

   D. Doctor

4. Where did you grow up? (Country and province) (filling gap)

5. Which country are you currently living in? (filling gap)

6. Have you ever lived in an English-speaking country (at least more than 3 months)

A. Yes

B. No

7. If yes, how long have you lived there?

A. 3-6 months

B. 6 months – 1 year

C. 1-3 years

D. longer than 3 years

8. What is your native language? (filling gap)

Part 2 C-test

(There are 2 paragraphs down below. The second part of some words is omitted. Please complete the word according to context)

1. We met, and then the city shut down. On an early spring d__ that brought Chicago outside, we exch__ numbers at the end of an ulti__ Frisbee game and made pl__

to meet again. But th__ the bars, restaurants and co__ shops closed. So we ad__.
We dated on my couch and across my kitchen table. We picked up takeout, alter__
secret glances over a puz__, ate cinnamon pancakes. We d__ talk about the pan__
until, lying in bed, we lau__ at our sudden and unex__ domestic intimacy,
entwined while qua__

2. The students seem highly a___ of how the world has ch____. In the spring,
Harvard Business School's gr____ class asked professor Clay Christensen to
a____ them—but not on h___ to apply his principles a___ thinking to their future
ca____. The students wanted to k___ how to apply them to th___ personal lives.
He shared w___ them a set of gui___ that have helped him find meaning in his
own life.

Part 3 Discourse Completion Task

(Please write down your first response with the description of the context and the
question)

1 During Chinese New Year, you and all your family members gather around. Your uncle
offered you a job at his company. However, it is something you're not interested in. What
will you react?

Your uncle: You're going to graduate this summer right? I have a perfect position here at
my company. Come and help me after graduation!

You: _____

2 You are walking on a street. A stranger approaches to you asking you to fill a
questionnaire. But you'll be late for class.

Stranger: Excuse me, are you interested in help me with a questionnaire?

You: _____

3 The mayor is going to give a speech at your school. You are the member of the student union and in charge of taking care of him. After the speech, the mayor felt a bit thirsty and asked if there's any water. You happened not having any money that day.

The mayor: Could you please buy me a bottle of water?

You: _____

4 Imagine you came across a professor on campus. You know that he is from your faculty but you never had his class or talk to him before. He asked for a favor but it's not that convenient for you…

The professor: Hi! I have been told that you know plenty of Chinese-English bilinguals. I'm currently conducting research about that and needed more than 100 participants, can you reach out and ask your friends for me?

You: _____

5. You and your roommate share one bathroom. However, he always makes it dirty and messy after using it. You already told him to clean up for several times. Today, when you go to the bathroom, you found that the he messed things up once again. You have to tell him:

You: _____

Your roommate: Yeah, I know. But I was almost late to school today.

6 You went home exhausted after a 4-hour exam and you really wanted to relax for the rest of the night. But your brother asked you to play basketball with him.

Your brother: You're finally home! Let's play basketball together!

You: _____

7. You're heading towards to your classroom when some other student that you don't know stops you… (you're single at the moment)

The student: I'm sorry, you're so cute. Can I have your phone number?

You: _____

8. This is favorite class and you have pretty good relationship with this professor too. When the class is over, your professor asked you to have a cup of coffee with her. But, you planned to finish an assignment afterward…

Your professor: Do you have any plans? Wanna grab a coffee with me?

You: _____