

Pragmatic Competence and Transfer in Requests and Refusals: A Study of EFL University Students in Southern Thailand

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Article information	
Abstract	This study investigated Thai EFL learners' pragmatic competence with a particular focus on requests and refusals, the face-threatening acts that require careful considerations for selecting specific strategies. The learners' use of speech act strategies and the negative pragmatic transfer were examined. Data was collected from 28 English-major students at a public university in southern Thailand using a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). Native and non-native raters quantitatively scored the expressions based on a pragmatic scoring rubric and the pattern of pragmatic transfer was qualitatively analyzed through directed content analysis. It was found that indirect strategies were dominated in both speech acts and the Thai EFL learners were more capable in managing refusals than requests. Negative pragmatic transfer was observed through the overuse of intensifiers in grounders, Thai kinship terms, and apologetic expressions in requests. In refusals, learners frequently employed downgraders, provided excuses or explanations related to family commitments, and used vague promises of future acceptance. These patterns suggest negative transfer may stem from the interference of learners' first language (L1), cultural norms, and inadequate English proficiency. Based on the findings, pedagogical implications for pragmatic instruction are discussed.
Keywords	pragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer, Thai EFL learners, requests, refusals
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1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence contributes to successful communication, especially among the learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Shu, 2018), since it involves the ability to create meaning through both verbal and non-verbal communication within interactive situations and requires understanding others' messages and expressing oneself appropriately in social contexts (Ishihara & Cohen, 2022). However, developing pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms appears challenging due to several factors, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and teachers' reluctance to teach pragmatics (Prasatyo et al., 2023; Sharif et al., 2017). This can hinder effective communication since it can lead to pragmatic failure which leads to significant misunderstandings and hinders successful cross-cultural communication (Hamdani, 2019). EFL learners with limited pragmatic

competence often experience communication breakdowns and conflicts (Ding, 2022; Thomas, 1983).

The speech acts of requests and refusals are considered face-threatening to both the speaker and the listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Making a request may threaten the listener by imposing on their freedom of action, while refusing a request may threaten the requester by rejecting their desire for approval or cooperation (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2025). Performing both requests and refusals appears to pose challenges for EFL learners, as both speech acts entail awareness of the roles of social distance and power relations in a communicative encounter (Mohammad & Allo, 2021). Handling a request demands careful attention to strategy selection, as it inherently risks threatening the addressee's face (Blum-Kulka & Oshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Likewise, mitigators, justifications, or excuses are commonly used to minimize the potential offense of a decline to a request (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2025; Johnson et al., 2004).

Previous studies have demonstrated that Thai EFL learners encounter considerable challenges when managing face-threatening acts (FTAs) with pragmatic transfer and variations in politeness strategies observed (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Chiravate, 2011; Rasameekunwit & Sungkaman, 2023; Kasemsin, 2006; Wannaruk, 2008). For instance, Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023) found deviations from L2 speech act norms in Thai EFL learners' requests. Similarly, Chiravate (2011) asserted that EFL learners employed fewer politeness strategies compared to the natives and that different proficiency levels played roles in their L2 request production. Meanwhile, existing literature has revealed variations in how Thai EFL learners and native speakers manage refusals. For example, Boonsuk and Ambele (2019) observed limited pragmatic choices and the omission of mitigating devices in Thai EFL learners' refusals, in contrast to those of native speakers, who used adjuncts and indirect strategies. Moreover, pragmatic transfer from the influence of L1 and low proficiency was evident in direct translation from L1 in Wannaruk (2008)'s study. Kasemsin (2006) supported the issue of proficiency level explaining that advanced EFL learners were more competent to manage FTAs and possess wider ranges of refusal expressions.

These empirical studies broaden our understanding of EFL learners' pragmatic competence in dealing with requests and refusals, negative pragmatic transfer, and speech act strategies. However, the three aspects were often studied in isolation. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies have explored how they interrelate. Examining these three aspects of pragmatics together would offer a more comprehensive insight into interlanguage pragmatics which would provide valuable implications for pragmatic instruction in EFL contexts. Moreover, little attention has been paid to tertiary-level students in southern Thailand, where frequent multicultural interactions with neighboring countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, reflect pragmatic challenges in cross-cultural communication. This research addresses these gaps by investigating pragmatic competence through requests and refusals of Thai EFL learners in a public university in southern Thailand aiming to address the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent do Thai EFL students demonstrate pragmatic competence in managing requests and refusals?
- (2) What strategies do Thai EFL students use when managing requests and refusals?
- (3) What negative pragmatic transfer is evident in Thai EFL students' requests and refusals?

2. Literature Review

This section reviews pragmatic competence and transfer, the speech act of requests and refusals, and pragmatic transfer in EFL learners' requests and refusals.

2.1 Pragmatic Competence and Transfer

2.1.1 Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context, focusing on how language users produce and interpret meaning beyond the literal meanings of words (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 2013) and examining how speakers convey intentions and how listeners infer meanings based on social and situational contexts (Thomas, 2013; Yule, 1998). Building on this perspective, Jenny Thomas (1983; 2013) defines pragmatic competence as consisting of two components including: 1) pragmalinguistic competence referring to the ability to use linguistic resources such as speech acts, implicatures, and politeness strategies appropriately in each language. It focuses on the grammatical and lexical choices that convey a particular pragmatic function, e.g. how to request, apologize, or refuse politely and 2) sociopragmatic competence concerning the social and cultural factors that influence language use, including politeness, power, and contextual appropriateness. It deals with understanding what is considered polite or impolite, formal or informal based on cultural norms.

2.1.2 Pragmatic Transfer

In intercultural communication, pragmatic competence is essential because pragmatic failure is often considered more serious than linguistic failure (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Bing, 2019). Learners with a limited understanding of the target language and culture may struggle to comprehend, produce, and acquire the sociocultural aspects of the language (Kasper, 1992). This can result in pragmatic transfer, whereby learners apply first-language pragmatic norms to a second language (Kasper, 1992; Qian et. al., 2024). Owing to differences in “interpretive biases,” such transfers may convey unintended pragmatic force in the target language (Thomas, 1983, p. 101).

Pragmatic transfer can be classified according to the consequences of pragmatic failure into two areas including pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. Pragmalinguistic transfer occurs when L2 interlocutors misunderstand the illocutionary force of a message or fail to grasp the communicative intention of L1 speakers' messages. This transfer reflects an inability to interpret and use conventional linguistic forms correctly. For example, an L2 learner might interpret the English request expression “Can you...?” literally as a question about someone's ability, rather than recognizing it as a polite request, illustrating pragmalinguistic transfer resulting from the learner's misunderstanding of the pragmatic force of the message carried by the expression.

Sociopragmatic transfer occurs when an L2 speaker violates pragmatic norms because he/she is unaware of what is appropriate to say in specific situations. This type of failure often arises from misunderstandings of another culture (Thomas, 1983). For example, a learner might transfer the use of formal address terms, honorifics, or levels of register from their L1 into English, even though such distinctions are not used in the same way. This mismatch reflects differences in sociocultural expectations rather than linguistic form (Kasper, 1992).

Previous contrastive studies on pragmatic transfer in various speech acts, such as requests and refusals, in the Thai EFL context have established frameworks at multiple levels

of transfer. At the pragmalinguistic level, Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023) compared the requests of native speakers and Thai EFL learners and identified evidence of L1-to-L2 transfer. At the discourse level, pragmatic transfer in Thai EFL learners' requests includes:

(a) intensifiers in grounder, i.e., “very” “lots of” “really” or “too” which are common in the Thai language, i.e., “มาก” (mak), “จริงๆ” (ching ching) or “เยอะมาก” (yoe mak) to intensify the request (p.101);

(b) formulaic expressions when checking on availability, i.e., “Are you free?” from Calques ' translation of a Thai expression, “เธอว่างไหม” (Thoe wang mai), which is not found in the English natives (pp. 103-104); and

(c) expressing temporal meaning when checking on availability, i.e., directly translating “จะ” (ja) to “will” from Thai to English when referring to a certain future action, which is uncommon in English (p.108).

Regarding sociopragmatic transfer, the influence of Thai cultural norms on address choices in English is a common phenomenon. Han (2020) notes that Thai kinship terms operate along six dimensions: paternal/maternal, age, gender, lineal/collateral, consanguinity/affinity, and social context of use. These sociolinguistic choices mirror how Thai people value hierarchy, intimacy, seniority, and marital status, while reflecting their assessment of social parameters such as familiarity and social distance. Tingsapat and Prasithrathsint (1989) point out different degrees of respect and intimacy through three features of Thai addressing terms including: name, prenominal name, and pronominal. On the contrary, a single second-person pronoun is the most common in English-speaking countries (Zainal & Dewa, 2021). Balint (2017) argues that kinship terms such as brother and sister are used exclusively among siblings, whereas Thai people may address strangers with these terms.

Moreover, apologies serve a wider function in the Thai context. For example, apologies maintain politeness and social harmony in Thai contexts (Mekthawornwathana, 2010). Whereas apologies often signal responsibility for mistakes in Western and Japanese cultures (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). Thus, the continued use of apologetic language in Thai communication and its transfer into L2 as a strategy to avoid confrontation might result from the cultural foundation rooted in collectivist values that remain central to Thai society (Pimpa, 2012).

Finally, considering three different levels of English proficiency among Thai EFL learners, Wannaruk (2008) compared refusals by native Thai and EFL learners. The researcher found similar refusal strategies used among the three groups. In addition, pragmatic transfer was evident in the application of downgraders such as explanations or downplaying their ability and through their use of “future acceptance” to maintain rapport which were absent in the natives' refusals.

The present study relied on the previous studies mentioned earlier to examine Thai EFL learners' requests and refusals. The literature served as a frame of reference for the analysis of pragmatic transfer in the two speech acts.

2.2 Speech Acts of Request and Refusal

A speech act, a verbal or non-verbal communicative behavior serving a specific purpose, requires both linguistic competence and cultural awareness (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2025). Among speech acts, requests and refusals are

particularly challenging for EFL learners. Making requests requires sensitivity to politeness, power relations, and cultural expectations, as well as managing potential threats to the interlocutor's face (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Likewise, refusals often require excuses (Beebe et al., 1990; Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2025) and may threaten the face of both parties involved (Johnson et al., 2004). Consequently, the complexity of requests and refusals demands a high level of pragmatic competence.

Through empirical research, scholars have proposed classifications for requests and refusals. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 202) categorize request strategies into two sub-groups: direct and indirect strategies as follows:

1. Direct strategies

1.1 Mood derivable: The grammatical mood of the verb marks its illocutionary force as a request. (e.g., "Leave me alone.")

1.2 Explicit performatives: The illocutionary force is explicitly named by the speakers. (e.g., "I am asking you not to park the car here.")

1.3 Hedged performative: Utterances embedding the illocutionary force. (e.g., "I would like you to give your lecturer a week earlier.")

1.4 Locution derivable: The illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution. (e.g., "Madam, I will have to move your car.")

1.5 Scope stating: The utterance expresses the speaker's intentions or desire about the hearer to do X. (e.g., "I really wish you would stop bothering me.")

1.6 Language specific suggestory formula: The sentence contains a suggestion to X. (e.g., "How about cleaning up?")

1.7 Reference to preparatory conditions: Utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability or willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language. (e.g., "Would you mind moving your car, please?")

2. Indirect strategies

2.1 Strong hints: Utterances contain a partial reference to an object or to elements needed for the implementation of the request. (e.g., "You've left this kitchen in a right mess.")

2.2 Mild hints: Utterances that make no reference to the request proper but are interpretable through the context. (e.g., "I am a nun." In response to a persistent boy.)

Similarly, refusals may occur in response to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Beebe et al. (1990, pp. 72-73) classify refusal strategies into two types: direct and indirect.

1. Direct strategies

1.1 Performative (e.g., "I refuse.")

1.2 Nonperformative statement: "No," Negative willingness/ability (e.g., "I can't.")

2. Indirect strategies

2.1 Statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry. . .")

2.2 Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help you. . .")

2.3 Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., "My children will be home that night.")

2.4 Statement of alternative (e.g., "I can do X instead of Y.", "Why don't you do X instead of Y?")

2.5 Set condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have. . .")

- 2.6 Promise of future acceptance (e.g., “I’ll do it next time”)
- 2.7 Statement of principle (e.g., “I never do business with friends.”)
- 2.8 Statement of philosophy (e.g., “One can’t be too careful.”)
- 2.9 Attempt to dissuade interlocutor (e.g., “I won’t be any fun tonight.”, “I’m doing all I can do.”)
- 2.10 Acceptance that functions as a refusal
- 2.11 Avoidance: nonverbal and verbal

In this study, the request strategy classification of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and the refusal strategy framework of Beebe et al. (1990) were used to examine southern Thai EFL students’ use of request and refusal strategies.

2.3 Pragmatic Transfer in EFL Learners’ Requests and Refusals across Comparative Contexts

Previous studies have identified pragmatic transfer in EFL learners’ requests and refusals, with pragmatic competence influenced by factors such as linguistic proficiency, cultural transfer, awareness of social norms, and sensitivity to contextual factors. In terms of requests, Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023) found negative transfer among Thai EFL learners in the use of intensifiers in grounders, formulaic expressions for checking availability, and temporal markers, reflecting language-specific influences that diverge from native speaker norms. Similarly, Onchaiya and Phimsawat (2021) reported that Thai teachers employed a balanced mix of direct and indirect strategies, whereas Filipino teachers favored indirect strategies, highlighting the roles of proficiency and pragmatic awareness. Likewise, Chiravate (2011) suggested that L1 transfer and limited proficiency contributed to Thai EFL learners using less polite request strategies than native speakers.

Cultures, linguistic proficiency, and communicative contexts also influence refusal strategies. The frequent use of indirect refusals among Thai learners reflects the cultural value of respect and harmony (Jeenmuang, 2022; Wannaruk, 2008; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016). However, despite these cultural influences (Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016), learners may be unintentionally direct due to limited English proficiency. Wannaruk (2008) noted that L1 influence is often evident in the structure, content, and length of refusals. Accordingly, Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023) emphasized the need to develop Thai learners’ pragmatic competence for effective communication in English.

This study examined the pragmatic competence of Thai EFL students in managing requests and refusals, focusing on their speech act strategies and instances of negative pragmatic transfer.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to control any other variables that would affect the study (Stratton, 2024). The participants in this study were 28 third-year English major EFL learners enrolled in an English for Entrepreneurship course at a public university in southern Thailand. Consisting of 20 females and 8 males, they all aged between 20 and 21 years. None of the participants had ever traveled to or lived in any English-speaking countries. As a part of their academic program, these students were required to achieve at least a B2 level (upper-intermediate) according to the Common European Framework (CEFR) before

graduation. Data collection was conducted independently of their course schedule and was not connected to any of their academic coursework.

3.2 Research Instruments

This study utilized two research instruments: a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) and a pragmatic scoring sheet, as described below.

3.2.1 Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT)

Data were collected using a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). Despite concerns about not capturing the most authentic language use (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013), WDCT can generate large volumes of contextually varied speech act data across languages (AYAR, 2021; Ishihara, 2010; Ogiermann, 2018). Initially, an extensive literature review was conducted to examine how request and refusal scenarios were formulated from studies of requests by Akmal et al. (2022), Noonkong et al. (2017), and Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023), as well as those on refusals by Byon (2002), Jalilifar (2009), Noonkong et al. (2017), and Wannaruk (2008). Six scenarios were selected and moderately revised, ensuring that all situations involve interactions between unfamiliar individuals, with one non-Thai interlocutor of higher status and the other of lower status, at an average level of imposition. To assess the naturalness of each scenario, second-year English major students were asked to share their opinions in a focus group session. As a result, two scenarios for each speech act were selected for their clarity and relevance as perceived by the students, yielding a total of four scenarios. Next, to ensure content validity, three English lecturers were asked to perform an Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) evaluation, with an overall IOC of 0.82 and each scenario higher than .05, indicating valid and practical items (Turner & Carlson, 2009). Finally, the scenarios were refined based on the experts' comments and the final version of the WDCT included two scenarios for each speech act as shown below.

Table 1

WDCT Scenarios

Scenarios	Requests	Refusals
1	Requesting enrollment in a full course from a lecturer (- power)	Refusing a higher-status lecturer's request to move offices (- power)
2	Requesting to jump ahead in line at the airport from a high school student (+ power)	Refusing an interview request from high school students (+ power)

3.2.2 Pragmatic Scoring Sheet

A scoring sheet proposed by Duan (2008), Hudson (2001), and Noonkong et al. (2017) was adapted for this study. It comprises two main components of pragmatic competence: 1) pragmalinguistic ability referring to the students' ability to provide an appropriate amount of information, consisting of two criteria, "Correct expressions" and "Quality of information," and 2) sociopragmatic competence are assessed through the other two criteria of "Strategy choices" and "Politeness" involving the ability to use appropriate strategies and maintain a suitable level of politeness. Each criterion was rated on a five-point rating scale: not appropriate (1), not very appropriate (2), moderately appropriate (3), mostly appropriate (4), and completely appropriate (5).

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection followed three steps. First, each student received a consent form along with a WDCT form. The researcher then explained the purpose of the study and obtained consent. Then, the participants were informed that a careful reading of the scenarios was required, and the interlocutor was non-Thai. Finally, the allotted 30 minutes were communicated, and they were also informed that their performance on the WDCT would not affect their course grades.

3.4 Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in analyzing the pragmatic competence and transfer of southern Thai EFL learners as outlined below.

3.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

In this study, the participants' pragmatic competence was quantitatively scored by two English lecturers, one native and one non-native. Each of them had over five years of teaching experience at a university level. A pragmatic scoring rubric with a 5-point Likert scale (Duan, 2008; Hudson, 2001; Noonkong et al., 2017) was employed during this phase.

Reliability was ensured through two different protocols. At the beginning, the two raters were trained to score the language use through a calibration session in which the researcher showed them how to use the scoring sheet and some scoring examples. In addition, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was assessed to reassure inter-rater reliability with an average ICC of .72, indicating moderate-to-good agreement between raters (Koo & Lee, 2016). However, the ICC for refusal, Scenario 1 was .31, with some responses showing substantial discrepancies between raters. To address this issue, a calibration session was conducted in which the raters and the research head reviewed and evaluated the responses as well as resolved the discrepancies.

The analysis of participants' pragmatic competence involved four steps. First, the raters independently scored WDCT responses using a scoring sheet covering two components of pragmatic competence: (a) pragmalinguistic competence, which included "Correct expressions" and "Quality of information," and (b) sociopragmatic competence, which encompassed "Strategy choices" and "Politeness". Second, the mean scores for pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence were calculated for each participant. Third, each participant's mean scores for pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence were aggregated to obtain a group-level mean score for overall pragmatic competence for each scenario. Finally, the criteria presented in Table 2 below were used to interpret the mean scores.

Table 2
Criteria Used to Interpret the Mean Scores

Mean scores	Interpretation
4.21-5.00	Completely appropriate
3.41-4.20	Mostly appropriate
2.61-3.40	Moderately appropriate

1.81-2.60	Not very appropriate
1.00 -1.80	Not appropriate

The examination of frequencies of request and refusal strategies involved four steps. First, the two researchers held a calibration session to determine the classification of request and refusal strategies, adopting the approaches of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Beebe et al. (1990). A coding protocol was developed. The researchers agreed that grammatical errors would not be considered and that a single response could be classified under more than one strategy. For example, the response, “I would like to register in your class. Is it possible if I need to register in this subject,” was divided into two strategies: the statement “I would like to register in your class was classified as “Hedged performative,” while the inquiry “Is it possible if I need to register in this subject?” was categorized as “Query preparatory.”

3.4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

To address the third research question, which investigated pragmatic transfer, a directed content analysis, a deductive approach (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), was applied. During this phase, the researchers applied the concept of negative pragmatic transfer proposed by Kasper (1992, pp. 213-216) and Thomas (1983, p. 101) which allows categorization of the transfer into two types: pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic. The analysis was on both the head acts and supportive moves of each speech act following Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023). The analysis involved three steps. First, the responses were segmented into two parts: supportive acts and head acts, using the classification of request strategies by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and the classification of refusal strategies by Beebe et al. (1990). Each researcher then independently read and coded the semantic formulas, including both their content and co-occurrence patterns, and organized the data into a table. Based on the work of Rasameekunwit & Sungkaman (2023), this study analyses pragmlinguistic transfer in Thai EFL learners’ requests and refusals, specifically examining their use of intensifiers, calques, and temporal markers. Additionally, sociopragmatic transfer influences communicative choices, such as the application of kinship terms in address forms (Han, 2020; Tingsapat & Prasithrathsint, 1989). Research also identifies cultural variations in addressing protocols and the contextual application of apologies (Zainal & Dewa, 2021; Balint, 2017; Mekthawornwathana, 2010; Pimpa, 2012; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981).

3.5 Protection of Participants’ Rights

This study was approved by the university’s institutional review board (Approval Code: PSU IRB 2020-PSU-L 007). Participants’ rights were explained during data collection. Only students who gave informed consent to participate in the study were included.

4. Results

4.1 Requests by Thai EFL students

This section presents Thai EFL learners’ pragmatic competence in requesting enrollment in a full course from a lecturer and requesting to jump ahead in a line at the airport from a school student.

4.1.1 Pragmatic Competence in Requests

As shown in Table 3, participants' requests to a higher-status lecturer in Scenario 1 were rated as moderately appropriate with an overall pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence score of 2.95. The mean scores for pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence were 2.96 and 2.95, respectively. The pragmalinguistic score indicates that participants generally used grammatically acceptable language with a fairly adequate amount of information. Similarly, the sociopragmatic score demonstrates moderately appropriate use of request strategies, although some participants employed direct requests when addressing a higher-status individual, resulting in overly direct expressions.

In Scenario 2, a request to a lower-status school student, the expressions used were "Mostly appropriate" with the overall pragmatic competence score of 3.46, suggesting better performance in this scenario. It was found that both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence were scored as "Mostly appropriate," with the mean scores of 3.44 and 3.48, respectively. Regarding sociopragmatic competence, the students were able to use more appropriate strategies with acceptable politeness levels.

Table 3

Pragmatic Competence in Requests

Scenarios	Pragmalinguistic competence	Pragmalinguistic competence	Sociopragmatic competence	Sociopragmatic competence	Overall pragmatic competence	Overall pragmatic competence
(N=28)	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation
1	2.96	Moderately appropriate	2.95	Moderately appropriate	2.95	Moderately appropriate
2	3.44	Mostly appropriate	3.48	Mostly appropriate	3.46	Mostly appropriate

4.1.2 Request Strategies

In the two scenarios involving a student's request for late registration from an unfamiliar lecturer, direct strategies were slightly more frequent than indirect ones (Table 4), accounting for 51.60% of all requests. The most common direct strategies were "Mood derivation: (17.21%), "Hedge performative" (17.20%), and "Want statement" (17.19%), exemplified by "Please allow me to register for this course" and "I would like to talk to you about adding my name for this course." Indirect strategies accounted for 48.40% of requests, all of which were classified as "Query preparatory" such as "Could you help me to register my name in this subject?"

In contrast, Scenario 2 revealed a strong preference for indirect strategies, the opposite of the pattern observed in Scenario 1. The indirect strategy, "Query preparatory" accounted for 96.31% of the responses, as illustrated by expressions such as "Excuse me, would you mind if I have to cut the line?" or "I'm sorry. Do you mind if I cut in line?" In comparison, the direct strategy "Want statement" accounted for only 3.69% of responses, as exemplified by "Please don't upset me."

Table 4
Frequencies of Request Strategies

Scenario (Number of expressions)	Direct strategies	Direct strategies	Direct strategies	Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
Scenario (Number of expressions)	Mood derivation (%)	Hedge performatives (%)	Want statement (%)	Total frequency	Query preparatory (%)
1 (29)	17.21.	17.20	17.19	51.60	48.40
2 (27)	-	-	3.69	3.69	96.31

4.1.3. Pragmatic Transfer in Requests

Data analysis revealed both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer across the two request scenarios. Initially, the pragmalinguistic transfer in the semantic formula content was evident in the use of request intensifiers in grounders across the two request scenarios. These included “really,” “very,” and “too” with the intention to mitigate the requestive force to both the higher and lower social power interactants as shown below.

(1) “Sorry, I’m very hurry now. I have to check-in now for being on board in time in 10 minutes. Can I come first?”

(2) “Excuse me, now my flight is taking off. Could I check-in first? I’m too late because I had accident during I go here.”

In Examples (1) and (2), “very” and “too” were used in requests to interrupt the queue from an unfamiliar teenage girl, reflecting pragmatic variation between L1 and L2.

Moreover, sociopragmatic transfer was found in both request scenarios, in the choice of address terms and in the overuse of apologetic expressions. To begin, the use of address terms like “teacher,” “girl,” and “little girl” in the requests reflects a clear example of interpreting linguistic actions in a second language through the lens of their native Thai language and cultural norms. The examples are below.

(3) “Hello teacher, I would like to register in your class.”

(4) “I’m really sorry, little girl, but I’m in a hurry.”

The use of “teacher” in Example (3) reflects how the lecturer was honored by the participants. Likewise, in Example (4), the application “little girl” was from a direct translation of the kinship term “น้อง” (nong) in the L1 context (Tingsabadh & Prasithrathsint, 1989).

Another sociopragmatic transfer of Thai cultural norms in the request was the overuse of apologetic expressions across the two communicative situations, specifically in interactions with a lower-status school student, as seen in the expression listed below.

(5) “Sorry teacher, I want to study at this course...”

(6) “Sorry, I’m very hurry now.”

As shown in Example (5), the participants apologized to the unfamiliar lecturer while asking for additional registration. Likewise, they apologized and asked for permission to skip the queue at the airport for a young schoolgirl through Example (6). This illustrates Thai cultural norms in which apologies serve to preserve politeness and social harmony (Mekthawornwathana, 2010).

4.2 Refusals by Thai EFL Students

In this study, two refusal scenarios were analyzed: (1) refusing a lecturer's request to move items, and (2) refusing a student's request for an interview.

4.2.1 Pragmatic Competence in Refusals

Table 5 below shows the participants' pragmatic competence across two refusal scenarios. Results revealed mean scores of 4.26 and 3.84 in interactions with a higher-status lecturer in Scenario 1 and a lower-status school student in Scenario 2, respectively. The high pragmalinguistic mean score (4.27) in Scenario 1 indicated that the expressions were grammatically correct and contained a highly adequate amount of information. Likewise, the mean score for sociopragmatic competence (4.26) reflects the participants' ability to employ fully appropriate refusal strategies with an acceptable level of politeness. Likewise, in Scenario 2, the overall mean score was slightly lower, at 3.84, corresponding to "Mostly appropriate." The mean score for pragmalinguistic competence (3.90) indicates refusals that were generally appropriate, with mostly acceptable expressions and sufficient information. Similarly, the mean score for sociopragmatic competence (3.79), rated as "Mostly appropriate," reflects participants' ability to employ appropriate refusal strategies and maintain an adequate level of politeness.

Table 5

Pragmatic Competence in Refusals

Scenarios	Pragmalinguistic competence	Pragmalinguistic competence	Sociopragmatic competence	Sociopragmatic competence	Overall competence	Overall competence
N=28	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation	Mean (5 scores)	Interpretation
1	4.27	Completely appropriate	4.26	Completely appropriate	4.26	Completely appropriate
2	3.90	Mostly appropriate	3.79	Mostly appropriate	3.84	Mostly appropriate

4.2.2 Refusal Strategies

Table 6 summarizes the participants' refusal strategies. In Scenario 1, indirect strategies were used more frequently than direct strategies. The most preferred strategy was "Excuse/reason/explanation" (30.09%), exemplified by "I have to work with my family." "Statement of regret" (27.68%), i.e. "I'm really sorry teacher" was the second most frequent strategy, followed by the direct strategy "Negative willingness/ability" (18.12%), as in "I afraid I cannot stay to help you."

Similarly, indirect strategies predominated in Scenario 2 (87.53%). "Statement of Excuse/reason/explanation" (31.28%), as in "I have to attend class at 1 p.m." "Negative willingness/ability" ranked 3rd (12.47%), exemplified by "I'm willing to help you but I have 10 minutes for your interview."

Table 6
Frequencies of Refusal Strategies

Scenario (Number of expressions)	Direct strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies	Indirect strategies
Scenario (Number of expressions)	Negative willingness/ability	Statement of regret	Wish	Excuse/reason/ explanation	Statement of alternative	Promise	Acceptance that functions as a refusal	Total indirect frequency
1 (n=83)	18.12	27.68	1.21	30.09	15.71	2.38	4.81	81.88
2 (n=80)	12.47	35.01	3.71	31.28	6.30	4.99	6.24	87.53

4.2.3 Pragmatic Transfer in Refusals

The data analysis revealed both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer across the two refusal scenarios. In the first refusal scenario, the pragmalinguistic transfer emerged in the use of refusal downgraders as a strategy to soften the impact of their decline in the following examples:

(1) “I’m so sorry teacher. This weekend I might not help you because I have to go with my family.”

(2) “I am really sorry to say that because I have important things to deal with at my home.”

As seen in Examples (1) and (2), “so” and “really” were applied to preserve the face of both interactants and mitigate the refusals.

Moreover, sociopragmatic transfer was evident in family-related obligations to justify and soften the refusal to a higher-status individual as illustrated in Examples (3)– (4) below.

(3) “I got plan with my family.”

(4) “This Saturday I have some personal issue/business with my parents.”

In Example (3), the participants were not specific about which family member they committed to, whereas in Example (4) they appeared more specific.

In addition, another sociopragmatic transfer observed was nonspecific future acceptance when the students declined a lower-status high school student’s request for an interview. The examples are below.

(5) “Would it be possible if I help you later?”

(6) “Could we do it another time?”

In Examples (5) and (6), the participants expressed a willingness to assist the school student in the future without specifying a particular time.

5. Discussion

5.1 Requests of Thai EFL Students

Overall, the results indicate that Thai EFL students’ requests in this study were pragmatically acceptable at different levels, with some strategy choices and expressions deviating from native-speaker norms, demonstrating negative pragmatic transfer across both scenarios.

Remarkably, the students were more successful requesting a lower-status teenage student, probably resulting from the common use of indirect strategies which aligns with native English speakers' norms where indirect strategies are preferable to enhance politeness (Blum-Kulka & Oshtain, 1984; Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2025; Jalilifar, 2009; Onchaiya & Phimsawat, 2021).

However, the lower acceptability of overly direct requests made to a higher-status lecturer may stem from the students' limited linguistic competence, which prevents them from aligning their language use with the cultural norm of indirectness typically observed in hierarchical Thai society (Kuwinpant, 2002). The occurrence is congruent with Onchaiya and Phimsawat (2021), who examined request strategies used by Thai and Filipino teachers and found that Thai teachers used both direct and indirect request strategies equally, while Filipino teachers primarily used indirect requests. They attribute this to Thai teachers' limited English proficiency and the influence of pragmatic proficiency, pragmatic awareness, and interlanguage competence on their choice of strategies. Likewise, Chiravate (2011) explains that the unconventional use of direct request strategies among Thai learners may stem from insufficient linguistic resources, as low-proficiency learners tend to deviate from native-speaker norms more significantly than high-proficiency learners.

Moreover, pragmalinguistic transfer from the overuse of intensifiers in grounders and the distinctive use of Thai kinship terms reveals a reliance on EFL learners' mother tongue in their semantic choices. Rasameekunwit and Sungkaman (2023) indicate that Thai speakers often use intensifiers, i.e. “มาก” (mak), “จริงๆ” (ching ching) or “เยอะมาก” (yoe mak) to soften the imposition and appear more polite, the same way Indonesian English learners frequently use horrific terms, such as “pardon me!” and “oh my God,” to create a warm conversational atmosphere (Akmala et al., 2022). This contrasts with native English norms, where intensifiers are less commonly used to mitigate low-imposition requests (Rasameekunwit & Sungkaman, 2023), reflecting a more straightforward communication style (Akmala et al., 2022).

Likewise, the sociopragmatic transfer of the choice of address terms in Thai, i.e. “อาจารย์” (ajarn) to “teacher” and “น้อง” (nong) to “girl” or “sister” reflects that role of relationship between the people in Thai society has influence on the choices of terms of address (Tingsabath & Prasithrathsint, 1989) emphasizing the importance of Thai perspective on the differences between hierarchy, age relations, familiarity, and distance in social interactions in Thai culture (Han, 2020; Prasithrathsint, 2001) contrast to the L2 community, where the use of kinship terms has become more limited in specific contexts (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2016).

Finally, Thai EFL students exhibit sociopragmatic transfer in their requests through the overuse of apologetic expressions, even when holding a higher status. This reflects Thai cultural norms, in which apologies maintain politeness and social harmony rather than indicate wrongdoing, unlike in Western and Japanese cultures, where they often signal responsibility for mistakes (Cohen & Olshtain, 2006; Mekthawornwathana, 2010). While economic and global effects have rendered traditional Thai hierarchical structures less rigid (Wanarat et al., 2023), evidence suggests that younger generations still have collectivist values (Pimpa, 2012).

5.2 Refusals of Thai EFL Students

Overall, the results revealed that the students' refusals are acceptable at a high level, particularly when interacting with a higher-status individual. However, some divergence from native English norms exists and is likely influenced by Thai linguistic and sociocultural norms.

To begin, the high acceptance of refusals directed toward the higher-status lecturer in Scenario 1 may be attributed to the students' strong pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. This suggests that they used grammatically correct expressions while also employing appropriate refusal strategies and levels of politeness. Specifically, the preference for indirect strategies aligns with the norms of native English speakers (Beebe et al., 1990; Jeenmuang, 2022; Wannaruk, 2008). As supported by Wannaruk (2008), indirect strategies are generally favored when interacting with interlocutors of higher, equal, or lower status.

Considering the high pragmatic competence score, negative pragmatic transfer might not adversely affect the refusals of Thai EFL students. In other words, the use of refusal downgraders may reflect the influence of collectivist values prevalent in Thai culture (Ongwuttawat, 2017), rather than a threat to the hearer's face. Specifically, students in subordinate social positions tend to use downgraders in their refusals to mitigate the impact of declining a request. This incident appears to stem from the use of adverbs in Thai, “มาก” (mak mak) and “จิงจิง” (jing jing), which reduce illocutionary force and increase politeness, similar to Thai customs of indirectness, especially towards higher-status individuals. Using a family commitment as an excuse for refusal avoids a direct “no”, preserving face for both parties (Bangkok Post Editorial, 2024).

In summary, language- and culture-related factors contribute to the lower pragmatic competence observed in Scenario 2 (interaction with a lower-status interlocutor). Grammatical errors and insufficient information to decline a request may be due to limited pragmalinguistic competence. Additionally, nonspecific future acceptance is closely tied to Thai cultural avoidance of direct refusals (Wannaruk, 2008). The choice of indirect refusal strategies among Thai speakers is a Thai cultural trait, whereas native speakers are likely to be more explicit and direct (Kasper, 1992).

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to four key limitations. First, from a methodological perspective, incorporating interview sessions along with pragmatic competence assessments by raters would provide deeper insights into Thai EFL learners' requests and refusals and pragmatic transfer. Second, future research should include more scenarios that vary across sociological factors to capture how these factors shape learners' pragmatic choices in different communicative settings. Third, the relatively small sample size in this study limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, gender was not systematically considered, and the sample was predominantly female, which may have influenced the results. Future studies should recruit larger and more diverse participant groups, including learners with different proficiency levels, and account for gender when analyzing data to yield more comprehensive insights.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the study indicates that southern Thai EFL learners are more proficient in managing refusals than requests, with high acceptance rates for the former and only moderate acceptance for the latter. Indirect strategies predominated across both speech acts. Evidence of pragmatic transfer was observed in both requests and refusals. In requests, pragmalinguistic transfer was reflected in the overuse of intensifiers in grounders and Thai kinship terms, while sociopragmatic transfer appeared in the choice of address terms and excessive use of apologetic

expressions. In refusals, the use of refusal downgraders and family commitments as excuses also reflected L1 influence.

These findings highlight the need to raise learners' awareness of how L1 linguistic and cultural norms influence L2 use and affect the appropriateness of speech acts in intercultural communication. Pedagogically, ELT in EFL contexts should integrate pragmatic instruction and intercultural communication training alongside linguistic development. This study shows that English Language Teaching (ELT) in EFL settings requires specific pedagogical changes. Educators must prioritize equipping students with pragmatic and intercultural competence while improving their linguistic proficiency.

Explicit pragmatic teaching is an effective approach, particularly in EFL tertiary-level classrooms. Instruction should address grammar and vocabulary and social and cultural dimensions of language use, which are required for learners to avoid pragmatic failure arising from miscommunication. Explicit instruction should expose EFL learners to culturally informed materials, with teacher feedback. This feedback helps learners effectively manage face-threatening acts and enhances their awareness of the influence of their first language (L1) on their second language (L2) use. Pragmatic consciousness-raising (PCR) is effective in helping EFL learners to be aware of and internalize pragmatic features of a language (Noonkong et al., 2017). Active awareness is critical for effective intercultural communication, echoing the principles of Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis.

This study highlights the need to develop Thai EFL learners' linguistic competence, particularly among low-proficiency learners, by improving their pragmalinguistic competence and raising awareness of the transfer of linguistic choices from their first language (L1) when making requests and refusals. Previous research shows the significant influence of language proficiency on learners' ability to convey politeness appropriately and on the extent of pragmatic transfer (Chiravate, 2011; Pathanasin & Eschstruth, 2022; Wattananukij & Pongpairoj, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to equip EFL learners with adequate linguistic competence before further developing their pragmatic competence.

Finally, the findings underscore the need to equip teachers with greater pragmatic competence to effectively guide EFL learners in real-world communication. This need is particularly urgent, as pragmatics is often neglected in training programs for EFL teachers. Consequently, many of them may lack the competence necessary to provide explicit pragmatic instruction and be reluctant to teach this aspect of language in their classrooms (Sharif et al., 2017).

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10. Declaration of AI Use

The authors declare that ChatGPT was used in the preparation of the manuscript only for language refinement.

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