Unveiling the Academic Job Rejection Strategies in an English as an International Language Context

Mohammad Reza Ghorbani [*1] , Farhad Ghiasvand [2] , Reza Ahmadi [3]

[1] *Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University of Bojnord, Bojnord, Iran*

[2] *Postdoctoral Research Fellow of Applied Linguistics, Department of English Language and Literature, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran*

[3] *English Language Teaching Department, Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi University, Borujerd, Iran*

Abstract: Many researchers have explored the speech act of refusals across various genres, languages, and contexts. However, little is known about how refusals are conveyed in academic job applications by Asia-Pacific and European institutions. To address this gap, the current cross-cultural study analyzed a corpus of naturally occurring academic job rejection emails from different universities. Using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy of refusals, a total of 85 rejection letters was collected and examined. The results revealed that while both Asia-Pacific and European universities employed similar refusal strategies, the frequency differed significantly: European universities used 219 refusal strategies, compared to only 60 by Asia-Pacific institutions. Both regions primarily relied on "indirect" refusal strategies and "adjuncts" to protect the applicant's face. Interestingly, "direct" refusal strategies, which are more face-threatening, were notably more common in European universities' responses. The study concludes with insights and recommendations for making the academic job application process more considerate for both applicants and institutions.

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[*] **Corresponding Author.**

Authors' Email Address:
[1] **Mohammad Reza Ghorbani** (ghorbani@ub.ac.ir), [2] **Farhad Ghiasvand** (f.ghiasvand70@yahoo.com), [3] **Reza Ahmadi** (rezaahmadi7080@yahoo.com)

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the cross-cultural and rapidly expanding use of English has solidified its role as a lingua franca, facilitating intercultural communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Ghiasvand, 2022; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016). In light of this, examining pragmatic competence across cultures offers insights into how cultural differences among English users shape their communication patterns and strategies (Su, 2020).

As the need for intercultural competence grows in the context of world Englishes (Heggernes, 2021), extensive cross-cultural and intercultural research has highlighted that individuals from different cultural backgrounds adopt varied pragmatic norms in performing speech acts (Al-ghamdi & Alrefaee, 2020; Estaji & Ghashghaei Nejad, 2021). Thus, for academicians communicating in English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or English as a Second Language (ESL), intercultural competence is essential to effectively use speech acts, which are fundamental components of second-language communication.

While speech acts may be rooted in universal principles, their expressions differ widely across cultures in terms of "frequency, distribution, and functions" (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Aghbari, 2016, p. 2). This variation has spurred debate on whether speech acts, including requests, advice, apologies, and refusals, are universally understood or culturally specific. Given its face-threatening nature, the speech act of refusal has been extensively studied from a cross-cultural perspective, exploring its application across various languages and contexts.

Studies have focused on refusals in monolingual settings, such as in Indonesian (Oktoprimasakti, 2006) and Mexican Spanish (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). In addition, researchers have examined EFL learners' refusal strategies in countries like Turkey, China, and Iran to assess their pragmatic competence in English (e.g., Chunli & Nor, 2016; Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016; Tabatabaei, 2019). Comparative studies have also analyzed refusals across languages, such as American English versus Jordanian Arabic (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2016) and Saudi Arabic versus American English (Al-ghamdi & Alqarni, 2019).

The rise of EIL and the internationalization of higher education have positioned academic job applications as a critical venue for intercultural pragmatics. Acceptance or rejection in this context can depend on the linguistic and intercultural awareness displayed by candidates in their application emails or letters. Given that refusals can be challenging to convey and interpret appropriately, especially in a second language, they may evoke strong emotions in the recipient (Kreishan, 2018).

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This study investigates the speech act of refusal in the context of academic job rejection emails, focusing on how refusals are produced in response to offers, suggestions, invitations, and requests by Iranian Persian speakers using naturally occurring English interactions. While prior studies on refusals have largely relied on hypothetical data collection methods, such as Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) (see Balan et al., 2020; Fitri et al., 2020; Mendoza & Berowa, 2017) or role plays (Hariri & Moini, 2020; Saad et al., 2019), this study leverages authentic, natural data to delve into the socio-pragmatic nuances influencing refusals. Given that the genre (Thominet, 2020) and mode of communication (such as emails) can impact how refusals are expressed (Moaveni, 2014), this research seeks to explore how academic job rejections are conveyed in emails by institutions in the Asia-Pacific and European regions.

Addressing these gaps, this study examines academic job refusals in the EIL context, particularly within Asian and European institutions. Unlike mono-lingual or mono-cultural settings, this research context encompasses multilingual and multicultural dimensions. With the exception of the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Singapore - where English serves as the primary language - English is typically a second or foreign language in the countries investigated in this study. The aim is to shed light on how institutions in these regions employ refusal strategies in academic job rejections, offering a comparative perspective on pragmatic norms in the EIL context.

Literature Review

Refusal is commonly recognized as a "face-threatening act (FTA) that requires strong pragmatic competence" (Dewi, 2020, p. 89). In communication, "face" refers to the social value a person claims for themselves in an interaction, with "negative face" indicating a desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. When issuing a refusal, the speaker inherently risks damaging the other person's face, as the act of saying "no" directly contradicts the recipient's expectations or desires. If not carefully expressed, a refusal can easily harm the speaker's own image and threaten the negative face of the recipient by making them feel dismissed or undervalued (Qadi, 2021, p. 39). This risk is especially pronounced in intercultural and professional contexts, where misunderstandings or unintended offenses can arise due to differences in norms around politeness and face-saving.

To address the complexity of refusals, Beebe et al. (1990) proposed a taxonomy that has become foundational in studies of pragmatics and speech acts. Their taxonomy categorizes refusal strategies into two main types - semantic formulas and adjuncts - which

help speakers manage the potentially face-threatening nature of refusals by providing a variety of ways to soften or mitigate the impact.

Semantic formulas in Beebe et al.'s taxonomy include direct and indirect refusal strategies:

• **Direct refusals** are explicit statements of rejection. They can be performative, where the speaker directly states their refusal using phrases like "I decline" or "I refuse," or non-performative, where the refusal is implicit but clear, using phrases such as "No" or "I don't think so". Although direct refusals are often efficient, they are typically considered blunt and potentially impolite, particularly in cultures where indirectness is valued as a sign of respect or consideration. Direct refusals tend to be used more sparingly in professional and intercultural settings, where a straightforward "no" might be perceived as overly abrupt or even rude. For this reason, many speakers prefer indirect strategies, especially when the stakes are high, such as in job rejections or other formal refusals.

• **Indirect refusals**, on the other hand, are strategies that convey the refusal implicitly, allowing the speaker to soften the impact of the rejection. This category includes strategies such as stating a reason or explanation, offering an alternative, expressing regret, and demonstrating goodwill. For example, rather than directly saying "no," an indirect refusal might involve explaining that "We have received many qualified applications for this position," subtly implying that the candidate was not selected without stating it outright. Indirect refusals are particularly valuable in intercultural contexts because they are less confrontational and reduce the likelihood of offending the recipient. By providing explanations or alternatives, indirect refusals help the speaker appear empathetic and considerate, acknowledging the effort or expectations of the person being refused. This softer approach reflects a sensitivity to the recipient's face and shows respect for their feelings, thus reducing the social friction that could arise from a direct refusal.

The second major category in Beebe et al.'s taxonomy is adjuncts to refusals, which are supportive expressions that accompany the main refusal but do not stand alone as refusals themselves. **Adjuncts** include expressions of empathy, positive statements, and appreciation:

• **Empathy statements** recognize the emotional impact of the refusal on the recipient and show understanding. For example, a rejection letter might say, "We understand that this may be disappointing," to acknowledge the applicant's emotional investment.

By expressing empathy, the speaker aims to soften the blow of the refusal, demonstrating that they are not indifferent to the recipient's feelings.

• **Positive statements** are used to maintain goodwill by highlighting positive aspects of the recipient's qualifications or efforts. For instance, an adjunct in a job rejection letter might say, "Your application was impressive, and we appreciate your interest in our organization". Positive statements help preserve the recipient's dignity and can mitigate the disappointment of the refusal by acknowledging the value of their contribution.

• **Appreciation** is another common adjunct, used to express gratitude for the recipient's interest, time, or effort. In academic or professional contexts, a refusal letter might include, "Thank you for your application and the time you invested". This type of adjunct aims to convey respect and gratitude, suggesting that, even though the person was not successful, their interest was valued.

These adjuncts, while not refusals on their own, play a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of refusal. By cushioning the refusal with positive language and empathetic expressions, adjuncts help preserve the social harmony of the interaction, reducing the likelihood of conflict or resentment. In professional settings like academic job applications, where maintaining a positive reputation is essential, these adjunct strategies are particularly valuable. They allow institutions to convey respect and maintain goodwill with applicants, even when delivering disappointing news.

In sum, Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy of refusal strategies provides a structured approach to understanding how speakers manage the potentially face-threatening act of refusal. By combining direct and indirect strategies with adjuncts, speakers can tailor their refusals to be both clear and considerate, balancing the need to convey a negative message with the desire to maintain a positive interpersonal relationship. Table 1 summarizes Beebe et al.'s taxonomy, illustrating the range of refusal strategies and examples from the corpus used in this study:

Table 1. Beebe et al.'s (1990) Taxonomy of Refusal Strategies

Refusal Strategies	Description	Example (from our corpus)
Direct		
Direct 'no'	Straightforward refusal without moderation	"The committee found you not qualified for the position" (Letter 26)
Negative willingness or ability	Using phrases like "I can't," "I won't"	"We are unable to provide specific feedback at this stage" (Letter 31)
Indirect		
Reason/Explanation	Providing reasons to soften refusal	"We received many applications for the position" (Letter 11)
Regret	Expressing regret to mitigate rejection	"Unfortunately, you were not shortlisted for this position" (Letter 26)
Alternative	Offering alternatives to lessen the impact	"We encourage you to explore new opportunities on our website" (Letter 43)
Wish/Goodwill	Expressing goodwill to ease disappointment	"We wish you every success in your future career" (Letter 51)
Adjuncts		
Positive opinion/feeling	Expressing positivity to reduce damage	"Feel free to reach out with questions" (Letter 20)
Empathy	Showing understanding of the applicant's disappointment	"We understand this may be disappointing" (Letter 53)
Gratitude/Appreciation	Expressing thanks for the applicant's interest	"Thank you for your interest in working with us" (Letter 58)

Refusal strategies are influenced by factors like gender, age, situation, communication mode, relationship, distance, power, and social status. For example, Balan et al. (2020) found that female college students tend to be more polite and indirect, while male students often use more direct refusal strategies. Power dynamics also play a role, as higher-status individuals may use direct refusals, while those with lower status tend toward indirect strategies. Alrefaee et al. (2020) demonstrated this dynamic among Yemeni EFL learners, showing that participants used more adjuncts and indirect strategies when refusing individuals of higher status.

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In a similar study, Chojimah (2015) examined Indonesian university students' refusals in response to offers and suggestions. The findings indicated that Indonesian students preferred indirect refusals and often combined strategies to mitigate face threats, especially when interacting with higher-status individuals. This highlights that social status influences the degree of politeness in refusal strategies, with higher-status interlocutors generally receiving more polite responses.

Although social status impacts refusal strategies, broader sociocultural factors also shape how refusals are expressed. In many cultures, speakers tend to save face by favoring indirect strategies, even when they have higher status. For example, Rodiah et al. (2019) found that high-status figures, like political leaders, often use indirect refusals to soften the impact of their responses. This suggests that refusal acts are a "sensitive pragmatic act" (Fitri et al., 2020), where context, culture, and social dynamics determine the appropriate language.

Studies examining refusal strategies in varied cultures also reveal cultural differences in how refusals are performed. Wijayanto (2019) compared refusal strategies among Javanese speakers in Indonesia and English speakers in the UK, finding similarities in the use of indirect strategies but differences in frequency due to social status. Similarly, Thominet (2020) analyzed 131 academic job refusal letters in the US and found consistent use of indirect strategies, although applicants' perceptions of rejection varied. Moaveni (2014) explored refusal strategies in emails among American and international college students, finding that Americans preferred gratitude and positive opinions, while international students leaned towards expressions of regret and excuses.

These findings emphasize that cultural norms and social status play critical roles in shaping refusal strategies. Without understanding these cultural nuances, interactions may lead to misunderstandings. Shishavan and Sharifian (2016) noted that local refusal norms, such as those in Iran, can lead to intercultural miscommunication when interacting with speakers from different backgrounds, like in Australia.

Despite these insights, there is limited research on academic job rejection strategies within an EIL context, particularly across countries and institutions. To address this gap, the present study examines naturally occurring job application refusals from an Iranian L2 speaker applying to Asia-Pacific and European universities. It investigates how these institutions use refusal strategies to convey rejections while minimizing face threats to applicants.

This study aims to contribute to intercultural pragmatics and advocate for a more human-centered approach in the academic job application process by addressing the following research question:

Which refusal strategies are more frequently used by Asia-Pacific and European universities in rejecting academic job applications?

By examining the cultural nuances in these rejection strategies, the study seeks to shed light on how universities in different regions handle the sensitive act of refusal, aiming to foster greater understanding and empathy in the application process.

Method

Corpus

The data for this study were drawn from a corpus of 85 academic job rejection letters that the first author, an associate professor of applied linguistics, personally received. These letters were responses to the author's applications for part-time and full-time lecturer and research associate positions across various universities in Asia-Pacific and European countries, including China, Japan, Singapore, Australia, England, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Belgium. All responses were written in English, and the corpus was collected over a period of 2.5 years, from February 26, 2020, to August 26, 2022. The letters originated from different individuals holding various academic and administrative positions within their institutions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Description of the Collected Corpus

Corpus Description	Frequency (%)
Location of Universities	
Asia-Pacific	19 (22%)
Europe	66 (78%)
Type of Position	
Part-time	20 (24%)
Full-time	65 (76%)
Time of Refusal	
Before Interview	75 (88%)
After Interview	10 (12%)
Sender of Refusal Letter	
Human Resources Department	50 (58%)
Academic Department Chair	20 (24%)
Representative of Academic Dept	15 (18%)
Position Applied	
Lecturer/Professor	70 (82%)
Research Associate	15 (18%)

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

This descriptive single-case study aimed to explore the refusal strategies employed by universities across Asia, Australia, and Europe in responding to academic job applications. The data were gathered through naturally occurring academic job rejection letters received by the first author, an associate professor of applied linguistics, over a period of 2.5 years. Unlike hypothetical methods often used in pragmatic research, such as Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) or role-play scenarios, this study's methodology involved the intentional submission of actual job applications to obtain authentic, unsolicited rejections. This approach allowed for a real-world examination of pragmatic features in professional academic communication.

From February 26, 2020, to August 26, 2022, the first author systematically applied for various academic positions, including lecturer and research associate roles, at universities in multiple geographical regions. This extended timeframe enabled the collection of a substantial dataset, totaling 85 response letters, each representing genuine rejections from university departments. The applications were submitted through diverse channels - direct emails, university job portals, and even social media platforms recommended by institutions. This range of submission methods allowed the researchers to capture potential variations in responses based on the application platform, providing a broader view of how universities handle academic job applications in the digital age.

The rejections arrived at various stages of the application process, with some responses received after initial screenings and others after formal interviews. This diversity in response timing offered a comprehensive perspective on how refusal strategies might differ depending on the depth of interaction with the applicant.

Upon completion of data collection, the research team organized online meetings to collaboratively plan the analysis phase. During these meetings, the team outlined a systematic approach for coding and analyzing the corpus using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy of refusal strategies, which classifies refusals into direct, indirect, and adjunct strategies. This taxonomy served as the guiding framework for categorizing the linguistic features within the rejection letters, allowing the researchers to explore differences in rejection tactics across Asia-Pacific and European institutions.

The letters were then organized chronologically based on the date of receipt. This organization helped track any temporal patterns in the responses, potentially revealing shifts in tone, language, or formality over the two-year period. After organizing the data, the researchers prepared it for qualitative analysis by copying each email and letter into a Word

document, ensuring that all personal identifiers were removed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Each letter was carefully examined sentence by sentence, with phrases coded according to Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy.

Data Coding and Analysis

Following Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, each refusal was classified into one of three main categories: *direct*, *indirect*, or *adjunct*. Direct strategies included explicit statements like "we decline," which carry a high level of face-threatening potential. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, involved mitigated language, such as providing reasons, offering alternatives, or expressing regret, to soften the impact of rejection. Adjuncts included additional expressions of empathy, gratitude, and well-wishes that accompanied the refusal, helping to mitigate the potential negative effects of rejection. Each refusal instance was labeled according to these categories, and the frequency of each type was documented across the corpus.

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were then calculated to provide a quantitative overview of strategy prevalence. This statistical analysis offered insights into regional preferences for particular refusal strategies, enabling the researchers to compare patterns across Asia-Pacific and European universities.

Ensuring Reliability and Validity

To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, a second coder with a Ph.D. in applied linguistics was invited to review the data and validate the coding process. This second coder independently analyzed the corpus and cross-checked the initial coding, resulting in a high inter-coder agreement rate of 98%. Such a high level of agreement is generally regarded as a strong indicator of reliability in qualitative research, adding credibility to the study's findings. To further support reliability, a standardized coding manual was used, detailing specific criteria for classifying each refusal strategy based on Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework.

To ensure dependability and transferability, the researchers provided a comprehensive description of the study context, corpus characteristics, and data collection procedures. This level of transparency allows other researchers to replicate the study in different settings, thus enhancing the generalizability of the findings. By clearly documenting each step of the methodology, the researchers aimed to strengthen the study's contribution to the field of intercultural pragmatics.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the researchers were mindful of their positionality and potential biases. As the data were naturally occurring responses to the first author's job applications, the researchers acted as impartial data collectors and analyzers, refraining from influencing the content of the letters. This approach minimized the risk of bias, as the responses reflected genuine institutional communication. However, the researchers acknowledge that complete objectivity in qualitative research is challenging to achieve. To address this limitation, they engaged in reflexive practices, regularly reflecting on their interpretations and consulting each other to avoid imposing subjective judgments on the data.

Methodological Approach

This study's methodological rigor lies in its use of naturally occurring data collected over an extended period, providing an authentic perspective on academic job rejections within a cross-cultural EIL context. By focusing on unsolicited institutional responses, the study sheds light on real-world refusal strategies in high-stakes professional settings, contributing valuable insights to intercultural pragmatics and socio-pragmatic analysis. The application of Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy provided a structured approach to understanding the nuances of politeness, face-saving, and professionalism in rejection letters from universities across diverse cultural contexts.

Using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy as a framework, the researchers were able to systematically categorize and analyze refusal strategies. The collected responses were organized chronologically and examined sentence by sentence, with each instance of refusal labeled as direct, indirect, or adjunct. By employing descriptive statistics to quantify the frequency of each strategy, the researchers could identify significant trends and regional variations in the use of refusal strategies.

Trustworthiness and Objectivity

The high inter-coder agreement rate (98%) between the researchers and the second coder strengthened the study's reliability. Furthermore, detailed documentation of the study's context and methods enhanced its replicability and generalizability. The researchers were careful to maintain objectivity by avoiding influence over the data and engaging in reflexive practices to prevent bias, although they acknowledge that absolute neutrality is challenging in qualitative research.

Contributions to Intercultural Pragmatics

This study's findings highlight key socio-pragmatic norms in professional communication within EIL contexts, providing insights into how universities across different cultural settings manage the sensitive act of rejecting job applications. By identifying patterns and regional variations, the research offers valuable implications for understanding how global English norms shape professional interactions and politeness strategies. This study adds depth to the field of intercultural pragmatics, revealing how academic institutions communicate in ways that balance professionalism and empathy in high-stakes, cross-cultural contexts.

The next sections provide a detailed account of the findings, followed by discussions on their implications for intercultural communication, socio-pragmatic theory, and professional practices in academia.

Results

In this study, the researchers conducted a detailed rhetorical analysis of refusal speech acts in 85 academic job rejection letters received from universities in Asia-Pacific and Europe. Using Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, they categorized and quantified the refusal strategies, which included direct, indirect, and adjunct strategies. The analysis found that indirect strategies were the most commonly used, particularly in European universities, where they accounted for 55% of all strategies. Asia-Pacific universities also relied on indirect strategies but to a slightly lesser extent (47%).

Table 3. Academic Job Application Refusal Strategies in Asia-Pacific and European Universities

No.	Refusal Strategies	N (%)
1	**Direct**	
	Direct 'no'	5 (2%)
	Negative willingness or ability	4 (2%)
2	**Indirect**	148 (53%)
	Stating reason/explanation	38 (14%)
	Stating regret	50 (18%)
	Stating alternative	24 (8%)
	Stating wish/goodwill	36 (13%)
3	**Adjuncts**	122 (44%)
	Stating positive opinion/feeling	5 (2%)
	Stating empathy	4 (2%)
	Gratitude/appreciation	113 (40%)
	Overall	279

The findings revealed that "stating regret," "stating reason/explanation," and "stating alternative" were the most frequent indirect refusal strategies in both contexts. Adjuncts,

particularly expressions of gratitude or appreciation, were also frequently used, accounting for 44% of the overall strategies. Notably, European universities employed a slightly more empathetic approach, occasionally using phrases like "we understand this may be disappointing," which were less common in Asia-Pacific letters.

In the Asia-Pacific context, adjuncts were the most frequent category (48%), with "gratitude/appreciation" as the dominant strategy. Indirect strategies were used in 47% of Asia-Pacific letters, with "stating regret" and "stating alternative" being the most common. Conversely, European universities used indirect strategies more frequently (55%) and showed a higher preference for "stating reason/explanation" and "stating wish/goodwill".

Table 4. Refusal Strategies in Asia-Pacific Job Rejection Letters

No.	Refusal Strategies	N (%)
1	**Direct**	3 (5%)
	Direct 'no'	2 (3%)
	Negative willingness or ability	1 (2%)
2	**Indirect**	28 (47%)
	Stating reason/explanation	4 (7%)
	Stating regret	10 (16%)
	Stating alternative	7 (12%)
	Stating wish/goodwill	7 (12%)
3	**Adjuncts**	29 (48%)
	Stating positive opinion/feeling	1 (2%)
	Gratitude/appreciation	28 (46%)
	Overall	60

Table 5. Refusal Strategies in European Job Rejection Letters

No.	Refusal Strategies	N (%)
1	**Direct**	6 (3%)
	Direct 'no'	3 (1.5%)
	Negative willingness or ability	3 (1.5%)
2	**Indirect**	120 (55%)
	Stating reason/explanation	34 (16%)
	Stating regret	40 (18%)
	Stating alternative	17 (8%)
	Stating wish/goodwill	29 (13%)
3	**Adjuncts**	93 (42%)
	Stating positive opinion/feeling	4 (2%)
	Stating empathy	4 (2%)
	Gratitude/appreciation	85 (38%)
	Overall	219

The following excerpts illustrate the refusal strategies used in job rejection letters from Asia-Pacific and European universities:

1. **Asia-Pacific Example:** "Thank you for your application for the post of Research Associate (Education/Linguistics). After reviewing all the applications, we regret to inform you that we will not be considering you for the above-mentioned post. Should there be any suitable opening in the near future, we will contact you" (Asia-Pacific Corpus, Letter 1).

2. **European Example:** "On behalf of the University, we would like to wish you well with your career" (European Corpus, Letter 1).

3. **Asia-Pacific Example:** "After reviewing all the applications, we regret to inform you that we will not be considering you for the above-mentioned post. Alternatively, you are encouraged to visit our Career Page regularly, as there will be new openings available" (Asia-Pacific Corpus, Letter 15).

4. **European Example:** "Thank you for taking the time to apply for the position of English Teacher (reference: 454636). I am writing to let you know that unfortunately, you have not been successful this time. I will keep your details on file and be in touch if a more suitable position arises" (European Corpus, Letter 17).

5. **Asia-Pacific Example:** "Thank you for your interest in working for the University of Auckland. We have considered your application and regret to advise that your application was not successful on this occasion. On behalf of the University of Auckland, we would like to thank you for the time and effort you took to apply for this position" (Asia-Pacific Corpus, Letter 7).

6. **European Example:** "We realize that this will be disappointing news, and we do hope that you will find an interesting alternative position soon. If you have any questions about the procedure, you can contact…" (European Corpus, Letter 31).

The analysis revealed that European universities used indirect and adjunct refusal strategies more frequently than Asia-Pacific universities. In both regions, "stating regret" and "stating reason/explanation" were the most common indirect refusal strategies, while "gratitude/appreciation" emerged as the most prevalent adjunct. Interestingly, Asia-Pacific letters contained more instances of "direct no," a more face-threatening approach, compared to their European counterparts.

Despite these regional differences, both Asia-Pacific and European universities followed a similar model of academic job rejections within the EIL context. Variations were primarily in the frequency of specific strategies rather than in the types of strategies

used, reflecting subtle cultural preferences in how each region mitigates the impact of rejection on applicants.

This study highlights that while both regions aim to reduce the face-threatening nature of academic job rejections, European institutions tend to employ a more indirect approach. The preference for indirect strategies and adjuncts in European contexts suggests an emphasis on preserving the applicant's face. In contrast, Asia-Pacific institutions, while still using indirect strategies, showed a slightly higher tendency to employ direct refusals.

These findings contribute to our understanding of intercultural pragmatics in academic job rejections. They suggest that, although universities across regions strive for a considerate approach, cross-cultural differences influence the specific language and structure of their refusals. This insight can inform a more empathetic and culturally aware approach to handling academic job rejections in the globalized EIL context.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the refusal strategies that Asia-Pacific and European universities employ when rejecting academic job applications, with a focus on intercultural pragmatic norms within English as an International Language (EIL) contexts. The findings reveal that indirect strategies were the most frequently used approach for refusal in both regions, aligning with prior research (e.g., Chojimah, 2015; Larasati, 2021; Qadi, 2021) that highlights a preference for indirectness in refusal acts. This widespread use of indirect strategies may reflect a universal sensitivity to face-saving in intercultural communication, particularly in contexts where potentially disappointing information is conveyed. As noted by Fitri et al. (2020), refusal is a "sensitive pragmatic act" that often requires careful language to avoid damaging interpersonal relationships.

Dominant Use of Indirect Refusal Strategies

One of the most significant findings was the frequent use of indirect refusal strategies across both Asia-Pacific and European contexts, with "stating regret," "stating reason/explanation," and "stating alternative" being particularly common. This shared pragmatic approach helps soften the impact of rejection and preserve the applicant's dignity. Moaveni's (2014) study found similar patterns, with Americans often using "reasons" and "alternatives" and international students favoring expressions of "regret" and "excuse". This consistency suggests the influence of EIL norms, which promote a universalized approach to polite refusals in professional settings. As Thominet (2020) observed in his study of American

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academic rejection letters, a globalized model of academic rejection letters appears to be emerging, likely as a result of standardization within global academic environments.

The widespread use of indirect strategies may also reflect a shared institutional goal of maintaining reputation while minimizing negative reactions from applicants. By using indirect language, universities can acknowledge the applicant's effort and potential without explicitly denying their qualifications, thereby cushioning the emotional impact of the rejection. This preference for indirectness supports the notion that EIL contexts are increasingly converging in their use of polite refusal strategies, influenced by shared professional standards and norms.

Prevalence of Adjunct Strategies, Particularly "Gratitude/Appreciation"

Another significant finding is the frequent use of "adjuncts," especially expressions of "gratitude/appreciation," which emerged as the second most common category of refusal strategies in both regions. This aligns with Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy, which includes adjuncts as a core component of refusal strategies. However, this finding contrasts with studies like Musniati (2019) and Su (2020), which do not classify adjuncts as primary refusal strategies. The frequent use of "gratitude/appreciation" suggests that universities aim to soften the impact of rejections by acknowledging the applicant's interest and effort, thus fostering an empathetic tone that could mitigate potential disappointment and leave a favorable impression of the institution.

In a globalized academic context, this use of adjunct strategies may also serve an additional function. As institutions strive to compete for top talent and maintain positive reputations, projecting warmth and respect in rejection letters can contribute to long-term goodwill. This aligns with broader professional communication trends, where maintaining positive relationships (even with unsuccessful candidates) is increasingly valued as a strategic approach.

Regional Differences in Refusal Strategy Preferences

While both Asia-Pacific and European universities primarily relied on indirect strategies and adjuncts, the analysis revealed subtle regional differences. European universities were more likely to use indirect strategies, while Asia-Pacific universities showed a stronger preference for adjuncts in their rejection letters. This distinction mirrors Wijayanto's (2019) observations, which highlighted variations in adjunct use between Javanese speakers in

Indonesia and English speakers in the UK. Such regional differences may be linked to cultural preferences and social norms around politeness and face management.

In European contexts, the higher frequency of indirect strategies could reflect a cultural emphasis on socio-pragmatic awareness and an advanced understanding of politeness norms. As Chojimah (2015) and Rodiah et al. (2019) have observed, social status and the relative power dynamics between interlocutors can influence refusal strategies. The preference for indirectness by European universities might also indicate a heightened awareness of intercultural communication norms, particularly in professional and academic environments where respect for hierarchy and formality is often prioritized.

Conversely, Asia-Pacific universities' greater use of adjuncts may reflect a cultural inclination to maintain harmony and express empathy in professional communications. The frequent use of adjuncts, particularly gratitude, in Asia-Pacific letters could stem from a desire to balance the face-threatening act of refusal with positive language that fosters interpersonal harmony. This aligns with the politeness norms prevalent in many Asian cultures, where explicit expressions of respect and appreciation are often used to soften potentially harsh messages.

Unexpected Use of Direct Refusal Strategies by European Universities

An unexpected finding was the higher use of "direct" refusal strategies by European universities compared to their Asia-Pacific counterparts. Direct refusals are generally more face-threatening and can be perceived as less culturally sensitive. However, this preference in European universities could be attributed to cultural norms that emphasize transparency and straightforwardness, as suggested by Shishavan and Sharifian (2016). This preference for clear, unambiguous communication, even if face-threatening, may reflect a European value for directness and honesty.

In contrast, Asia-Pacific universities' lower use of direct refusals may reflect a stronger adherence to intercultural pragmatic norms that discourage face-threatening acts, especially in rejection contexts. The more cautious approach in Asia-Pacific letters may stem from a heightened sensitivity to the potential impact of rejection on the applicant, resulting in a preference for indirect and adjunct strategies that preserve the applicant's dignity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable theoretical insights for the fields of intercultural pragmatics and socio-pragmatic theory. The observed convergence in refusal strategies across

Asia-Pacific and European contexts highlights the influence of EIL norms and the role of English as a lingua franca in shaping professional communication practices. This convergence suggests that globalized communication standards are increasingly influencing how institutions convey sensitive messages, such as rejections, across cultural boundaries.

Practically, these findings offer guidance for academic institutions and human resources departments in crafting culturally sensitive and considerate rejection letters. By understanding the preferred refusal strategies in different cultural contexts, institutions can improve their communication strategies to maintain a positive reputation and project a respectful image. For instance, integrating expressions of gratitude and regret along with indirect refusals may help institutions soften the impact of rejections and mitigate negative reactions.

These insights are also valuable for EIL and EFL/ESL students, expanding their understanding of intercultural pragmatics, particularly in the context of professional communication. This knowledge can inform their future job applications and professional interactions within international academia. Additionally, the findings may benefit language teachers and teacher trainers in developing curricula that enhance students' socio-pragmatic competence, intercultural sensitivity, and politeness strategies.

Conclusion

This study examined the refusal strategies used by Asia-Pacific and European universities in academic job rejections, with a focus on pragmatic approaches in EIL contexts. The results showed that European universities used significantly more refusal strategies (n = 279) compared to Asia-Pacific institutions (n = 60). Despite this disparity in frequency, both regions displayed a strong preference for "indirect" and "adjunct" strategies, aiming to minimize the face-threatening impact of rejection.

The findings suggest that letter senders in both regions possess intercultural pragmatic competence and an understanding of the socio-pragmatic norms governing polite refusals. This supports the idea that English as a lingua franca (ELF) and global EIL norms are fostering a unified approach to communication in professional contexts, particularly within academia. The higher frequency of refusal strategies in European letters could reflect cultural norms favoring more elaborate and polite refusals.

This study highlights the nuanced use of refusal strategies in academic job rejections, reflecting both universal EIL norms and culturally specific preferences. The findings

underscore the importance of balancing politeness and clarity in professional communication, particularly in high-stakes contexts like job applications.

Future research could expand on these findings by examining larger, more diverse datasets or exploring verbal and non-verbal cues in rejection interactions. Such studies could further deepen our understanding of intercultural pragmatics and contribute to the development of more empathetic and culturally aware communication practices in academia and beyond.

Key Patterns in Academic Job Rejection Letters

The analysis identified a conventional structure in both Asia-Pacific and European universities' rejection letters. Typically, the letters:

1. Thanked the applicant for their interest in the position.

2. Provided an explanation for the rejection, often referencing competition or qualifications of selected candidates.

3. Concluded with positive expressions or well-wishes for the applicant's future career.

These elements reflect a strategic use of language to soften rejection and maintain a positive institutional image, even when delivering disappointing news.

Contributions to the Field and Future Research Directions

This study represents one of the first efforts to investigate cross-cultural refusal strategies in academic job rejections within an EIL framework. By analyzing naturally occurring data over 2.5 years, this study provides a robust examination of academic job rejections and highlights the impact of globalization on communicative practices in academia.

However, the study has limitations. The corpus was relatively small, with 85 rejection letters, and did not control for variables such as the gender, educational background, or cultural origin of letter writers, which could influence refusal strategies. The reliance on written responses also limited the scope of analysis, as verbal or non-verbal cues could yield richer insights. Future studies could expand this research by examining a larger, more diverse sample of rejection letters from different cultural contexts, or by exploring applicants' emotional responses to various refusal strategies.

In conclusion, this study advances our understanding of refusal strategies in EIL contexts, illustrating the importance of balancing politeness and clarity in professional rejections. As global communication practices continue to evolve, these findings underscore

the need for culturally informed strategies in academic and professional settings, promoting a more empathetic and considerate approach to handling sensitive speech acts like refusals.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval Statement

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors. No ethical approval was required as the data consists solely of naturally occurring job rejection letters received by the first author, which were analyzed without the involvement of personal or sensitive information from human participants.

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