



SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN THE HIGH SCHOOL DEPARTMENT: A DOMAIN-BASED STUDY

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Abstract

This study sociolinguistically examines the situation in the High School Department at Jose Rizal Memorial State University in Dapitan City, the Philippines, with a focus on the performance of speech acts such as refusals, compliments, and apologies in English. Using Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs) and closed role plays, the research analyzes how students navigate these speech acts in both formal and informal settings, with an emphasis on politeness strategies and cultural appropriateness. The findings reveal that while students exhibit moderate competence in performing compliments and apologies, they struggle with refusals, particularly in formal contexts where face-saving strategies are required. The study highlights the need for more explicit instruction on sociolinguistic norms in the curriculum, the integration of role plays and context-specific learning materials. By addressing these gaps, the university can better prepare students for real-world communication. The study concludes with recommendations to enhance teaching practices and improve students' ability to use English as a communication medium appropriately across different social and cultural contexts.

Keywords and phrases: *Apologies, Compliments, ESL, Junior High School, Multilingualism, Politeness Strategies, Pragmatic Competence, Refusals, Sociolinguistics, Speech Acts, the Philippines*

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, English has become one of the most essential languages for communication, particularly in academic and professional domains. As a global lingua franca, English is not only taught as a second language in many countries, but it also serves as a key medium of instruction, as is the case in the Philippines. However, mastering the technical aspects of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary, is often not enough. Learners must also acquire sociolinguistic competence or the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts (Taguchi, 2019; Ryan, 2020). Sociolinguistic competence goes beyond grammatical accuracy; it involves the knowledge of when, how, and with whom to use certain forms of language in a socially and culturally acceptable way.

This study focuses on the sociolinguistic situation among junior high school students at Jose Rizal Memorial State University in Dapitan City, the Philippines. Specifically, it examines how these students navigate speech acts such as refusals, compliments, and apologies in English, which are critical elements of everyday communication. These speech acts can be considered face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Alabdali, 2019), and their successful performance requires not only linguistic knowledge but also an understanding of social norms and cultural values.

The Importance of Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence, a key component of communicative competence as defined by Canale and Swain (1980) cited in Ahmed (2023), plays an important role in effective communication, especially for second language learners. It encompasses both the knowledge of linguistic forms and the ability to interpret and use these forms appropriately across various social contexts. For example, in making a refusal, it is not enough to know how to say "no" in English; the speaker must also understand how to soften the refusal to avoid causing offense (Taguchi, 2019). This is particularly important in cultures like the Philippines, where politeness and maintaining social harmony are highly valued (Garcia, 2020).

In their study, Ryan (2020) highlights the role of sociolinguistic awareness in the classroom, arguing that students who lack this competence may struggle to communicate effectively, even if they possess a strong command of grammar and vocabulary. This is supported by Taguchi (2019), who emphasizes that pragmatic competence as an essential part of sociolinguistic competence requires learners to understand the relationship between language and context. This study builds on this understanding by exploring how students perform speech acts in English, examining the extent to which their sociolinguistic competence enables them to navigate various communicative situations.

Speech Acts and Sociolinguistics

The study of speech acts has long been a focal point in the field of sociolinguistics, particularly in second language acquisition research. Speech acts are actions carried out through speech, such as requesting, apologizing, or refusing (Searle, 1976; Mukhroji et al.,



2019). The appropriate use of speech acts is essential for successful communication, particularly in maintaining social relationships. However, second language learners often face difficulties in performing these acts in ways that align with the cultural norms of the target language (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014).

Refusals, compliments, and apologies are among the most studied speech acts due to their social complexity and potential to cause communication breakdowns. Refusals, for instance, are inherently face-threatening because they involve rejecting a proposal or request, which can lead to offense if not handled with care (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Brodecka, 2013). Apologies, on the other hand, are meant to restore social harmony after a transgression, but they require the speaker to acknowledge wrongdoing, which can be difficult in certain cultural contexts (Felix-Brasdefer, 2010; Zerey, 2019). Compliments, while seemingly straightforward, can also be problematic, as they require both the speaker and the recipient to navigate social expectations regarding modesty and self-presentation (Holmes, 1995; Placencia & Lower, 2017).

Garcia (2020) emphasizes that learners' sociocultural backgrounds significantly affect how they perform speech acts. In the Philippine context, where English is taught as a second language but used extensively in formal settings, students are often exposed to multiple linguistic and cultural influences. This multicultural environment can both enhance and complicate the development of sociolinguistic competence, as students must learn to balance the expectations of their local culture with the norms of the English-speaking world.

Sociolinguistic Challenges in ESL Classrooms

One of the central challenges in developing sociolinguistic competence in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms is the lack of explicit instruction on the social and cultural aspects of language use. While grammar and vocabulary are often prioritized, the subtleties of how language varies according to context, power dynamics, and social relationships are frequently overlooked (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). As a result, students may develop high levels of grammatical competence but struggle to apply these skills in real-world interactions, particularly when engaging in face-threatening acts like refusals or apologies (Taguchi, 2019).

Recent studies highlight the importance of integrating sociolinguistic instruction into ESL curricula. Ryan (2020) argues that sociolinguistic competence should be treated as an essential component of language learning, given its critical role in effective communication. Similarly, Taguchi (2019) calls for more research on how learners acquire pragmatic competence in various social contexts, particularly in multilingual settings where learners are exposed to multiple cultural influences.

In the context of this study, junior high school students are often required to use English in formal academic settings but may lack the sociolinguistic competence to navigate more casual or culturally nuanced interactions. For instance, while students may be proficient in using English to answer questions in class, they may struggle when responding to compliments from peers or teachers, or when offering apologies or refusals in a socially appropriate manner.

Despite the growing body of research on speech acts and sociolinguistic competence, there remains a gap in understanding how these skills develop in multilingual environments such as the Philippines. Most studies on speech acts have focused on learners in monolingual or bilingual contexts (Taguchi, 2019; Felix-Brasdefer, 2010), but little is known about how students in multilingual societies, where English is used alongside local languages, navigate the complexities of sociolinguistic competence. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the sociolinguistic behaviors of junior high school students in Dapitan City, Zamboanga del Norte, Region IX, a region where English is learned alongside Cebuano and Filipino.

The primary objective of this study is to assess how junior high school students at Jose Rizal Memorial State University perform speech acts in English, focusing on refusals, compliments, and apologies. The study also aims to identify the sociocultural factors that influence their use of these speech acts and to explore the challenges they face in developing sociolinguistic competence.

Methods

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the sociolinguistic competence of junior high school students. Specifically, the study focused on their use of English speech acts, particularly refusals, compliments, and apologies. These speech acts are commonly examined in the context of communicative competence because they reflect an individual's ability to navigate culturally appropriate interactions (Taguchi, 2019; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). The chosen methodology enabled a deep exploration of the students' sociolinguistic behaviors in both formal and informal settings.

The study followed a descriptive qualitative approach, which Creswell (2017) argues is particularly suited for exploring complex social interactions. This design was used to capture the nuances of students' sociolinguistic competence, focusing on how they adapt their language use in various situations. Qualitative research is ideal for studies that aim to understand phenomena within specific contexts, especially when exploring how social factors, such as culture and identity, influence communication (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Ahmed (2023) citing Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence is one of the essential components of second language proficiency. It involves the knowledge of how to use language appropriately in different social contexts. The study leveraged this model to assess how well the students could navigate different speech acts in English, focusing on their ability to adjust their language based on the formality of the context and the social roles of the interlocutors.

The participants in this study were 169 junior high school students from Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Dapitan City, the Philippines. The participants were purposely selected based on their exposure to English as a medium of instruction. The group consisted of 52 Grade 7 students, 47 Grade 8 students, 41 Grade 9 students, and 29 Grade 10 students. The varied age groups and educational backgrounds provided a diverse sample, ensuring that the findings would reflect a broad range of experiences with English language learning.



The participants' demographic profiles were essential in understanding the sociocultural factors influencing their language use. Data was collected on gender, grade level, religion, ethnic affiliation, the primary language spoken at home, and the educational attainment of their parents. According to Garcia (2020), demographic factors such as home language and parental education play significant roles in the development of second language competence, particularly in multilingual environments like the Philippines.

The study was conducted at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Dapitan City, a public higher education institution where students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds study. The university's diverse student population made it an ideal setting for a study on sociolinguistic competence. English is used as the medium of instruction in most subjects, providing a relevant context for investigating the students' use of English in speech acts.

Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs)

The primary data collection instrument was the Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT). ODCTs have been widely used in sociolinguistic research to elicit naturalistic speech, especially in the study of speech acts (Taguchi, 2019; Felix-Brasdefer, 2010). ODCTs allow researchers to control the context in which speech acts are produced while still capturing the natural language use of participants. This method was chosen because it enables the collection of authentic speech data in controlled settings, allowing for a focused analysis of the students' responses to specific speech acts such as refusals, compliments, and apologies.

The tasks were designed to prompt responses related to these speech acts, which are often considered face-threatening acts requiring sophisticated sociolinguistic competence (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Each ODCT was crafted to simulate real-life situations that the students were likely to encounter in both formal and informal settings. This is crucial as sociolinguistic competence is context-dependent, and the ability to navigate these contexts is a key marker of language proficiency (Taguchi, 2019).

Closed Role Plays

In addition to ODCTs, closed role plays were employed to further investigate the students' sociolinguistic behaviors. Role plays have been widely used in language research to simulate real-life communicative interactions in a controlled environment (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). In this study, the students were paired and given specific roles (e.g., a teacher and a student), along with predefined dialogue prompts. The role plays were designed to mimic real-life interactions, allowing for the observation of both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. Role plays are particularly effective in studying speech acts as they require participants to engage in more complex, dynamic exchanges (Felix-Brasdefer, 2010).

Supplementary Methods: Informal Interviews and Classroom Observations

To supplement the ODCTs and role plays, informal interviews were conducted with the participants. These interviews were used to gather insights into the students' attitudes

toward English language use and their perceived sociolinguistic challenges. Classroom observations were also conducted to provide additional context regarding the students' interactions in real-life settings. Both the interviews and observations served to triangulate the data, ensuring a more robust analysis (Creswell, 2017).

The study was conducted over one academic semester. Permission was obtained from the school administration to conduct the study during class hours. The participants were informed about the study's objectives and assured that their participation was voluntary. All data collection methods adhered to ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for all participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Before the data collection began, the ODCTs were piloted with a small group of students to ensure the clarity of the instructions and the appropriateness of the scenarios. Pre-testing is a crucial step in qualitative research to ensure that the instruments function as intended (Creswell, 2017). Based on feedback from the pilot test, minor revisions were made to the task descriptions to make them more relatable to the participants.

The ODCTs were administered to small groups of students. Each student was provided with a scenario and asked to respond verbally as they would in a real-life situation. The scenarios were randomly assigned to prevent students from preparing scripted responses. The interactions were audio and video recorded, as non-verbal cues such as pauses, facial expressions, and gestures are important in understanding the full scope of sociolinguistic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014).

Following the completion of the ODCTs, the students participated in closed role plays. These role plays were conducted in pairs, and the participants were instructed to perform based on the given prompts. The role plays were conducted in front of their classmates to simulate a more formal setting, and the interactions were recorded for later analysis. Role plays are effective in highlighting how students manage social roles and power dynamics in communicative interactions (Felix-Brasdefer, 2010).

The collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Content analysis was used to examine the sociolinguistic elements in the students' speech. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative content analysis is ideal for identifying recurring patterns in language use. The transcriptions from the ODCTs and role plays were carefully analyzed for instances of politeness strategies, hedging, mitigation in refusals, and culturally appropriate responses in compliments and apologies. Non-verbal cues such as pauses and hesitations were also noted, as they can be indicative of sociolinguistic competence (Taguchi, 2019).

The demographic data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages to determine the distribution of key variables, such as gender, grade level, and home language. These demographic factors were then correlated with the students' performance in the ODCTs and role plays to identify any significant patterns (Garcia, 2020).

ANOVA was conducted to assess the differences in sociolinguistic competence across demographic groups. For instance, the analysis focused on whether there were significant differences in speech act performance based on gender or grade level. ANOVA



is a suitable statistical test when comparing multiple groups and identifying whether observed differences are statistically significant (Creswell, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study on the sociolinguistic competence of junior high school students at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, several ethical considerations were carefully addressed to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants.

1. Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians, as the participants were minors. The consent forms outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the rights of the participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, the consent process was conducted in a language that the participants and their guardians fully understood, ensuring that they were aware of the study's scope and their voluntary participation.

2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly maintained throughout the study. All personal information, including names and demographic details, was kept confidential and was replaced with codes in the data analysis to prevent identification. Audio and video recordings from the Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs) and role plays were securely stored, and only the research team had access to the data. Upon completion of the study, all identifiable data were anonymized and stored according to university policy to protect participant privacy.

3. Minimization of Harm

Every effort was made to ensure that the study posed no harm to the participants. The speech act tasks and role plays were designed to simulate everyday interactions that the students regularly experience in their educational setting, avoiding any potentially stressful or uncomfortable scenarios. The study did not involve any physical or psychological risks, and the interactions between students were monitored to ensure a supportive and non-threatening environment.

4. Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. This right was emphasized during the consent process and reiterated throughout the data collection period. Any student who chose not to participate or who expressed discomfort during the study was immediately excused from further involvement, and their data was not included in the analysis.

5. Data Integrity and Accuracy

To maintain the integrity of the study, data collection and analysis were conducted with transparency and objectivity. The researchers ensured that all data were accurately transcribed, coded, and analyzed without bias. The results were reported honestly and objectively, with no manipulation or misrepresentation of findings. In case of any discrepancies or uncertainties in the data, they were clarified before proceeding with the analysis to ensure that the conclusions drawn were based on valid, reliable data.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The participants of the study included 169 junior high school students from Jose Rizal Memorial State University. The demographic data indicated that 53.85% of the students were female, while 40.83% were male. The remaining 6.32% of participants identified as either gay or lesbian. Additionally, the majority of students (65.09%) reported Cebuano as their first language, while the remainder spoke a variety of local dialects and Filipino at home. A significant proportion of students (78.11%) reported that their parents had completed tertiary education, reflecting a relatively high level of educational attainment within the families surveyed. This demographic distribution allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the sociolinguistic competence across different social variables.

Speech Act Performance: Refusals

The students' ability to perform refusals demonstrated mixed results. When faced with the task of rejecting an invitation or request, 65.09% of the students struggled to employ face-saving strategies, which are crucial in minimizing the negative impact of a refusal. Students frequently used direct refusals such as "No, I can't" or "Sorry, I can't make it," without providing alternatives or expressing appreciation. This directness may have resulted from a lack of exposure to English politeness conventions, particularly those that involve indirectness, hedging, or providing justification (Taguchi, 2019).

On the other hand, 34.91% of the students demonstrated a moderate level of competence, often utilizing strategies such as offering an alternative or expressing regret before refusing. For example, responses such as "I wish I could, but I have a prior engagement" were more indicative of a higher level of sociolinguistic awareness, as these responses acknowledge the social implications of refusal while attempting to mitigate its impact (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Al-Sallal, 2024).

Speech Act Performance: Compliments

The majority of the participants performed relatively well in responding to compliments. Approximately 78.11% of the students appropriately accepted compliments with responses such as "Thank you," or in some cases, offered return compliments. This aligns with Holmes' (1995) and Bibi and Sartini's (2023) findings that, in many cultures, compliment responses tend to focus on acceptance and reciprocity rather than deflection or self-deprecation.

However, 21.89% of students exhibited challenges in navigating compliments, particularly in more formal contexts. These students occasionally mixed formal and informal registers, as in the case of responding to a teacher's compliment with "Thanks, ma'am, you too," which indicates a misunderstanding of the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in formal settings. This inconsistency suggests that while students may be familiar with complimenting in casual settings, they struggle when the social dynamics become more complex (Garcia, 2020).



Speech Act Performance: Apologies

The students performed relatively well in offering apologies, particularly in informal scenarios. About 70.41% of students provided socially appropriate apologies that followed the expected pattern of acknowledging the offense and offering restitution, such as “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” This pattern aligns with findings from Felix-Brasdefer (2010) and Alzeebaree and Yavuz (2017), which suggest that apologies are often one of the first speech acts learned and mastered in second language acquisition due to their frequent use in everyday interactions.

However, in more formal situations, 29.59% of students tended to either over-apologize or fail to offer restitution, which is a critical component of effective apologies. For example, students often expressed regret with “Sorry about that,” but did not follow up with a promise to correct the issue, which reflects a lack of depth in their sociolinguistic understanding of formal apology structures (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the sociolinguistic competence of junior high school students at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, particularly in their performance of refusals, compliments, and apologies. While students demonstrated some competence in these speech acts, there were notable gaps that highlight the challenges of acquiring sociolinguistic competence in a multilingual society.

Refusals and Politeness Strategies

The difficulty students faced in performing refusals suggests a lack of familiarity with indirectness and other face-saving strategies. In Filipino culture, indirectness is often valued in social interactions to maintain social harmony (Garcia, 2020). However, this norm does not seem to have fully transferred to the students’ use of English. This may be due to the fact that English is often used in formal academic settings, where directness is typically encouraged. The findings align with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, which emphasizes the importance of face-saving strategies in potentially threatening speech acts like refusals. The students’ frequent use of direct refusals without mitigation indicates that they have not yet fully internalized these strategies in English (Fang, 2024).

Interestingly, the students who did employ indirect refusals tended to follow the patterns observed in Western contexts, suggesting that they may have been exposed to media or educational materials from English-speaking countries that emphasize these forms. Taguchi (2019) supports this observation, noting that exposure to native speaker norms can influence how second language learners approach face-threatening acts. Therefore, increased exposure to indirect refusals and explicit teaching of these strategies could enhance students’ sociolinguistic competence in English.

Compliments and Cultural Norms

The high success rate in handling compliments suggests that students are relatively comfortable with this speech act, particularly in informal settings. This supports Holmes’

(1995) observation that compliment responses are generally positive and straightforward in many cultures, including the Philippines. However, the students' difficulty in maintaining formal-informal distinctions when responding to compliments from authority figures indicates that they may lack a nuanced understanding of how English speech functions across different social hierarchies.

This finding is significant in the Philippine context, where respect for authority is a deeply ingrained cultural value (Garcia, 2020). The students' use of informal language when addressing teachers or elders suggests that while they may be familiar with the basic structure of compliment responses, they struggle to adapt these responses to formal situations. This finding echoes Ishihara and Cohen's (2014) argument that context plays a crucial role in the performance of speech acts. In this case, students may benefit from more explicit instruction on how formal and informal registers affect speech act performance in English.

Apologies and Sociolinguistic Competence

The relatively strong performance in apology tasks suggests that students are aware of the basic structure of apologies, particularly in informal settings. This aligns with Felix-Brasdefer's (2010) assertion that apologies are a frequently used speech act, making them easier to learn and perform. However, the students' tendency to omit key elements such as restitution in formal apologies indicates that their understanding of apology conventions is somewhat superficial.

Restitution is a critical component of effective apologies, particularly in formal interactions where there is an expectation that the offender will take steps to correct their mistake (Felix-Brasdefer, 2010). The students' failure to offer restitution suggests that they may not fully understand the social implications of formal apologies in English. This is an area where targeted instruction could significantly improve their sociolinguistic competence.

Conclusions

The results of this study highlight the need for more focused instruction on sociolinguistic competence in ESL classrooms. While students are often taught the grammatical and lexical aspects of English, they may not receive sufficient instruction on how to use these forms appropriately in different social contexts (Ryan, 2020). This study suggests that teachers should incorporate more explicit instruction on speech acts and the cultural norms that govern their use.

Role plays, ODCTs, and other interactive teaching methods have been shown to be effective in teaching pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). These methods could be integrated into the existing curriculum to give students more opportunities to practice using English in a variety of social situations. Furthermore, teachers should emphasize the importance of context, particularly the differences between formal and informal interactions, as these distinctions are critical for successful communication in English.



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Disclosure: Use of AI Tools

In compliance with Threshold's guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in academic research, the authors disclose the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT for enhancing the quality and clarity of the manuscript. ChatGPT was utilized to assist in refining the language, structure, and formatting of the text, ensuring a high level of academic rigor and coherence. The authors confirm that all data analysis, critical interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript were conducted independently by the research team. The AI tool was employed strictly for editorial assistance and did not influence the scientific content or ethical considerations of the study. All intellectual contributions from the AI tool are in accordance with the authors' original intentions and have been reviewed and approved by all co-authors. The use of ChatGPT complies with Threshold's ethical standards and guidelines for transparent reporting of AI involvement in research. The authors remain fully responsible for the integrity and accuracy of the content presented in this paper.

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