

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Speech Act and Topic Introduction

Studies on speech acts have been conducted throughout the world. A speech act is defined as a minimal unit of discourse (Searle, 1969) and it is also the basic and functional unit of communication (Cohen, 1996). Generally, speech acts are seen as acts of communication where they help speakers to use language to perform certain functions. There are various speech acts, for example a request expresses needs, an apology expresses regret and others. In the world of linguistics, speech acts also encompass acts of greetings, compliments, invitations, requests, apologies or refusals. These acts differ in terms of language forms or function performed.

Many studies mentioned that speech acts are difficult to be performed in a second language environment. This is because the speaker may transfer whatever he or she knows in his or her first language to the second language. By doing this, the meaning conveyed through the second language may not be the one he or she intended to. This can also cause a lot of misunderstandings as the hearer may misunderstand the meaning as well. Furthermore, certain expressions may work in one language but not in another language.

Refusals occur in all languages and in all communications no matter what nationality or what ethnicity a person is. This could include refusing a suggestion, an invitation, an instruction and others. Refusals are seen as face threatening act (FTA) as it can be face threatening to the speaker and/or the receiver. According to Brown and Levinson

(1978), in a face-threatening act, the objectives of sending messages across clearly and protecting face are brought into conflict. When one refuses, he or she might offend the initiator. Therefore, he or she might have to prolong the conversation into several turns to ensure the other person is not offended. Because of this, in the speech act of refusals, “some degree of indirectness usually exists” (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

A lot of research has also been carried out on the refusals of second language speakers. A study by Al-Kahtani (2005) points out that second language learners would normally face problems when performing a speech act, in this case, the speech act of refusal. This is mainly due to their different cultural background. Apart from that, second language learners also face difficulties as they are reluctant to use the English Language because they think that they are weak and do not have the confidence to carry out meaningful conversation in the language. In another study, Noonan (2004) claims that 36.36% of the non-successful learners of English are afraid of losing face. Therefore, they would avoid speaking English. Apart from that, 15.15% of the non-successful learners say that their English is so poor that they dare not speak up. Based on this, it is hypothesized that students who are weak in English would use lesser turns to refuse as they try to minimize the time of the conversations.

This study attempts to find out how teenagers refuse and what strategies they would use when they refuse. Apart from that, this study also attempts to find out what determines the strategies that will be used by these teenagers when they refuse.

## **1.1 Statement of Problem**

Politeness is an important aspect for people around the world. Hearing conversations with younger generation being polite to the older generation is common, especially in countries around Asia. However, this trend is disappearing. In the society nowadays, it is common to hear teenagers being direct and to some extent become quite rude when they speak to the elders. In this research, the researcher intends to investigate the strategies used by teenagers when they attempt to refuse.

## **1.2 Significance of the Study**

The findings of this research will provide new information as to how teenagers communicate with other people. Teenagers will understand better on the ways to speak to other people. Using the finding of this research, communication courses can also be introduced to educate these teenagers so that they are more aware of the way they speak and how they could create or avoid misunderstandings. In addition, not many researches have been conducted on refusals which revolve around teenagers, especially teenagers in Malaysia. With this research and its findings, people would understand better on how teenagers interact and what causes them to interact in that manner.

## **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to analyze refusal strategies used by teenagers in Malaysia. It attempts to identify whether the teenagers are direct or indirect when they make refusals.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

Based on the objectives above, the researcher will attempt to find answers to the research questions below:

- i) What direct or indirect strategies are used by Malaysian teenagers to make refusals?
- ii) Does language proficiency have an impact on the strategy chosen?
- iii) Does the number of turns taken reflect the language proficiency?

## **1.5 Limitations**

This study is limited to the analysis of the responses of Malaysian teenagers of one particular private university in Malaysia. The researcher is only looking at the responses of a certain age group, which is from 18 to 19. The collection of data may not be as natural as anticipated because the researcher is aware that the conversations are recorded and therefore the teenagers may not act as naturally as they should. The length of recording for each participant differs from 1 minute to 7 minutes according to the responses as some may be longer than the others.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter provides the background to this study. It is vital to investigate how teenagers refuse, as this would lead to them understanding the appropriate way to refuse. Readers may also gain a better understanding on the ways teenagers refuse. According to Kuang (2009), when a person says no, this may be stretched to include the family members and creates embarrassment for the whole family as well. This means that the offence committed by one individual may affect the good name of his or her whole family. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will provide a useful insight to the readers on the speech act of refusal performed by Malaysian teenagers.