CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

For non-native speakers of the English Language, saying "no" is not easy as it may indirectly offend other people. This is because they are affected by their own first language as well as culture. How one says "no" would reflect his pragmatic competence. A direct "no" would be interpreted as rude. Thus, a speaker would have to be really skillful in saying "no" so as not to offend the hearer. This is because the positive or negative face of the speaker or the listener is at risk when a refusal is made. Overall, refusals are seen as complex speech acts that require not only long sequences of negotiation, but also facesaving maneuvers to accommodate the non-compliment nature of the act (Gass and Houck, 1999). In this chapter, the researcher would look at various researches that are related to the topic of refusal. These studies and their findings would validate the current study.

2.1 Relevant Theories

2.1.1 Speech Act Theory

When people speak, the words that they utter do not have meaning by themselves. The meanings are affected by the setting, the situation and even the speaker and the receiver. In other words, the words that people utter do not have a fixed meaning and these words depend a lot on other criterias to make them meaningful. A speech act is a minimal functional unit in human communication. The speech act theory was originally

formulated by a British philosopher, John Austin (1962) who mentioned that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action". This was later developed by John Rogers Searle (1969). Speech act theory attempts to explain how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how receivers infer intended meaning from what is said. Based on this, there are many kinds of speech acts, namely, the speech act of refusals, the speech act of apologies, the speech act of requests and others.

In the Speech Act theory, Austin(1962) introduced the locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. According to his theory, what people say has three kinds of meanings. Locutionary act is propositional meaning which means the literal meaning of the things that are being said. For example, the expression "*it's hot in here*". The person who says this may really feel the heat at the place where he or she is. The illocutionary meaning, on the other hand, refers to the social function of what is being said. For the same expression mentioned above, a person who says that may indirectly be saying it to request someone to open the window. It may also be perceived as an indirect refusal for someone to close the window because he or she is feeling cold. Apart from that, the same statement mentioned above may also be a statement of complaint to someone that he or she should keep the windows closed. The prelocutionary meaning is the effect of what is being said. To the same expression mentioned above, the prelocutionary may lead to someone walking towards the window to open it.

In addition to the above, Searle (1979) also set up a few classifications of illocutionary speech acts which are assertives, directives, commisives, expressives and declaratives. Assertives are speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, directives on the other hand are speech acts which cause the listener to take

a particular action. The speech acts which come under this category are the speech acts of request and command. Commisives are the next category of speech act which includes all the speech acts which commit the speaker to some future action. Expressives are speech acts that express the speaker's attitude and emotions through statements. For example, congratulations, excuses and thanks. The fifth illocutionary speech acts are the declaratives, which include the speech acts that change the reality by what is being said. For example, baptisms or pronouncing someone as husband and wife.

2.1.2 Politeness Theory and Face Threatening Acts

According to Mills (2003), politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts towards another. It is a form of social interaction that is set by the social and cultural norms of a particular society. Therefore, what is appropriate and not appropriate is said to be related to social and cultural norms (Fraser, 1990). The politeness theory was first formulated by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson(1978). They claimed that some speech acts threaten the speakers' face. A person has two faces, which are the positive face and the negative face. Positive face refers to upholding an esteemed self-image. It is threatened when the speaker or the hearer does not care about his or her interactor's feelings. For example, expressions of disapprovals or the misuse of address terms. Both the examples mentioned above would damage the hearer's face. On the other hand, negative face refers to a desire for autonomy (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is threatened when either the speaker or the listener does not avoid or has the intention to avoid the obstructions of their interactor's freedom of action. In short, both these faces represent the different desires in one's life. However, the words that a person utters contain the

possibility of damaging another person's "face". Therefore, if the "face" is damaged, the action is called a face threatening act. Certain speech acts are considered as face threatening acts. These include the speech act of requests, complaints, disagreements and also refusals.

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, it was stated that speakers tend to change the way they use words based on the hearers. This is done so that the speakers are not only helping to protect the face of the hearer but also to make sure that their goals are achieved. Because of this, there are four strategies in helping the speakers to handle face threatening acts. They are listed as:

A. Bald on Record

B. Positive Politeness

C. Negative Politeness

D. Off record/indirect strategy

2.1.3 Refusal as a face threatening act

The speech act of refusal is seen as the most threatening to a person's negative face. It belongs to the category of commissives because it commits the refuser to perform or not perform an action (Searle, 1977). In Asian countries especially, saying "no" is not an easy task. This is because during a course of social interaction, interlocutors engage in a negotiation of face relationships (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). The speech act of refusal is seen as a face threatening act as it affects the speaker's or the listener's positive or negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1978). In looking at the ways of saying "No", Beebe and Takashi, who did several studies in refusals, pointed out that "the

inability to say "no" clearly and politely… has led many non-native speakers to offend their interlocutors"(Beebe & Takashi,1987).

As refusal is a face threatening act, most people, especially language learners would be in the situation of offending their interlocutors without realizing it when they make refusals. This is because more emphasis is put on the grammatical skills than to the pragmatic competence of a language learner. Thomas (1983) viewed that for people to be linguistically competent, they should be grammatically as well as pragmatically competent. Grammatical competence refers to the ability of having the knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax as well as semantics. Pragmatic competence, on the other hand, refers to the ability to use language in a goal oriented speech situation to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer (Leech, 1983). In most cases, language learners often lack pragmatic competence. This is because pragmatic competence develops differently in non-native speaker. Non-native speakers, even those who are regarded as linguistically proficient, often do not know or follow the context-specific constraints (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1991). Furthermore, refusal situations are context-dependant. The learners would not be able to memorize the speech act of refusal as a routine and therefore, it is quite challenging to be carried out.

Apart from that, different cultures view the notion of "face" differently. Although maintaining face when refusing is considered as a universal phenomenon, how "face" is defined differs greatly across all cultures. Nash (1983) pointed out that the Chinese and Americans view the notion of "face" very differently and the failure of understanding it would cause miscommunications and unpleasant situations.

A lot of research has been conducted on refusals. Most of them deal with either English or Japanese speakers. In most of the studies, a discourse completion test was used. Therefore, participants were asked to react to the scenario given by answering some questions instead of engaging in real conversations. This study tries to elicit participants' responses through real conversations. Although the scenario was created by the researcher, the participants were not aware of what was going on. Therefore, data obtained was natural.

2.1.4 Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz's Refusal Strategies

Beebe et al. (1990) came up with a taxonomy in analyzing their data. They categorized refusals into two different categories which are the direct and indirect refusals. Direct refusals include "I refuse", "cannot", " I can't", "I won't" as well as "No". Indirect refusals include statement of regret, wish, excuse, reason, explanation, statement of alternative, promise of future acceptance, statement of principle, statement of philosophy, attempt to dissuade the interlocutor and acceptance that functions as refusal as well as avoidance. The table in the next page shows Beebe et al's classification of refusals:

Table 2.1: Beebe et al's Classification of Refusals

I. **Direct**
   A. Performative (e.g., "I refuse")
   B. Nonperformative statement
      1. "No"
      2. Negative willingness/ability ("I can't," "I won't," "I don't think so.")

II. **Indirect**
   A. Statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry...." "I feel terrible...")
   B. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help you...")
   C. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., "My children will be home at night," "I have a headache.")
   D. Statement of alternative
      1. I can do X instead of Y (e.g., "I'd rather...," "I'd prefer...")
      2. Why don't you do X instead of Y (e.g., "Why don't you ask someone else?")
   E. Set condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have...")
   F. Promise of future acceptance (e.g., "I'll do it next time," "I promise I'll...," "Next time I'll...")
   G. Statement of principle (e.g., "I never do business with friends.")
   H. Statement of philosophy (e.g., "One can't be too careful.")
   I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor

      1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (e.g., "I won't be any fun tonight" to refuse an invitation)
      2. Guilt trip (e.g., waitress to customers who want to sit a while: "I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.")
      3. Criticize the request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack (e.g., "Who do you think you are?" "That's a terrible idea!")
      4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
      5. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., "Don't worry about it," "That's okay," "You don't have to.")
      6. Self-defense (e.g., "I'm trying my best," "I'm doing all I can do," "I no do nutting wrong.")

J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal/disagreement
   1. Unspecific or indefinite reply
   2. Lack of enthusiasm
K. Avoidance
   1. Nonverbal
      a. Silence
      b. Hesitation
      c. Do nothing
      d. Physical departure
   2. Verbal
      a. Topic switch
      b. Joke
      c. Repetition of part of request, etc. (e.g., "Monday?")
      d. Postponement (e.g., "I'll think about it.")
      e. Hedging (e.g., "Gee, I don't know," "I'm not sure.")
III. Adjuncts (which are preliminary remarks that cannot stand alone to function as refusals/disagreement.)
   A. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement ("That's a good idea,..." "I'd love to...")
   B. Statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation.")
   C. Pause fillers (e.g., "uhh," "well," "oh," "uhm")

(Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990)

The analysis of data in this study is done based on the above framework. However, for the purpose of this study, the refusal strategies above have been adapted to accommodate this study. This will be further discussed in chapter 3.

2.1.5 Language Proficiency

Language proficiency plays an important role in the participation of people in conversations. People who do not speak well in certain language would try to abstain themselves from speaking even if they need to because they do not have the command of the language needed . In this context, speakers who do not practice using the targeted language would find it difficult and uncomfortable to communicate and due to this, they

would try to refrain from speaking as much as they can. According to Ma (2007), most of the students in Hong Kong who do not speak the English language were found to be passive and unenthusiastic in speaking the language. She found that these students were shy and unwilling to speak the English Language. In Malaysia, studies have been done on the use of the English Language by the Malaysian students. This includes the reading, listening, writing and also speaking skills. As English is a second language, students in Malaysia find it difficult to communicate in the English Language. Some of the expressions used are translated from their first language. Apart from that, due to the multi language environment in Malaysia, the students become less conscious of the proper expressions to be used. In most cases, the expressions or words used by Malaysian speakers are influenced by the languages around them. Some of the examples are listed below:

1. The expression of *"What la you"* in a rising tone.

   It is used to express *"How could you?"*

2. The expression of *"Got or not?"* in a rising tone.

   It is used to express *"Do you have it?"* or *"Did you do it?"*

3. The expression of *"Sure ah?"* in a rising tone.

   It is used to express *"Are you sure?"*

The above expressions are only some of the many examples. Because of this, researchers have looked into ways to help the students to improve their English Language. It is believed that when students have acquired the proficiency, they can become more sophisticatedly competent.

2.2 Studies which look at refusals

This section will provide a discussion of previous studies in refusals.

Takashi and Beebe (1987)

Takashi and Beebe (1987) did a study on refusals made by Japanese ESL learners. These learners are at low levels of proficiency. From that study, they found that the learners with low levels of proficiency differ in the way they make refusals as compared to those with high levels of proficiency. They found that the learners with low levels of proficiency are more direct when they make refusals.

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1985)

Wolfson (1989) cited a study which was done by Beebe et al in 1985. In their study, they found the strategies or refusals used by the Japanese in English or their mother tongue depended a lot on the status of the addressee. Their findings also revealed that the Japanese do not apologize or express regret to the people who are of lower status. Apart from that, there are also differences in how the Japanese respond to invitations with regard to the status of the host who extends the invitation.

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990)

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study emphasized on Japanese speaking Japanese, Japanese speaking English and American English speakers. They found that there are a lot of differences between Japanese and Americans when they make refusals namely in the order, frequency and content of the semantic formulas. They also found that when the Japanese made refusals, the refusals are based on the social status of the

receivers. The Americans, on the other hand, are influenced more by the degree of familiarity between the speaker and the receiver. Apart from that, the Japanese speakers showed different frequencies of semantic formulas when they speak to people of higher or lower statuses while the Americans do not show that. For example, the researchers also found that the Japanese do not apologize when they make refusals to someone of a lower status. Lastly, the studies also showed that when Japanese make refusals, they would give vague and unclear excuses while Americans gave more specific ones. Based on this study, it is clear that social status plays a vital role when the Japanese make refusals.

Moriyama (1990)

Moriyama (1990) did a study on "Strategies of refusals: Interpersonal adjustments and communication". In this study, questionnaires were distributed to 51 male and 40 female Japanese college students. The refusal strategies that were being looked at were put into four categories which were direct refusal, telling a white lie, postponing a response and making an indefinite response by smiling. The researcher also looked at the closeness, social status and gender of the interlocutors. The researcher found that the direct refusals were normally directed to close friends (approximately 70%) where the interlocutors do not have to hide their true feelings. Apart from that, the researcher also found that males were more likely to make direct refusals compared to females who tended to tell a white lie.

Liao and Bresnahan(1996)

Liao and Bresnahan(1996) did a study to compare American English and Mandarin Chinese refusal strategies. The research was done based on a six-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Based on the study, they found that Americans used more

strategies compared to Chinese when they make refusals. They researchers also found that the Chinese are prone to using the indirect strategy of apology which is followed by a reason. Apart from that, the researchers also found that the respondents from both American English and Chinese cultures chose their refusal strategies based on the status of the requester as compared to them.

Al-Shalawi (1997)

Al-Shalawi (1997)who did a study on Saudi and American undergraduates students' refusals found that the students used similar semantic formulas when they made refusals. However, the content of their explanation showed some values of their cultures respectively. The Saudis showed a more collective culture and the Americans seemed to be more individualistic. The study also showed that the Saudis were not straightforward and they seemed to beat around the bush about the clarity of their explanation as compared to the Americans.

Nelson, Al Batal and El Bakery (2002)

Nelson, Al Batal and El Bakery (2002) looked at refusals in Egyptian Arabic and American English. They compared the similarities and differences between these two. The researchers found that Americans used more direct refusals as compared to the Egyptians. However, both groups tended to use indirect strategies than direct strategies. This research also found that the most common indirect strategy used by both groups was giving reasons. At the end of the research, the researchers found that there were more similarities than differences when both groups performed the speech act of refusal.

Al-Kahtani (2005)

Al-Kahtani (2005) from King Saud University, did a research on "Refusals Realization in Three Different Cultures". This study looked at the Americans, the Arabs and the Japanese. The aim of presenting the three groups was because he wanted to point out that there are differences in the way the people of the three cultures make refusals in the same linguistic code, which in this case, the English Language. The findings showed that there were problems when the subjects, who were second language learners (L2), made refusals. The subjects of the three cultures were also different in the way they made refusals but not across all situations.

Félix-Brasdefer (2006)

In another study, Félix-Brasdefer (2006) from Indiana University looked at linguistic politeness in Mexico with emphasis on refusal strategies among male speakers of Mexican Spanish. The researcher examined the linguistic strategies and perceptions of politeness among male university students in three politeness systems which are solidarity, deference and hierarchy. The study focused on both formal and informal situations where twenty Mexican male university students took part in four role-play interactions. The researcher found that social factors such as power and distance play an important role in depicting an appropriate degree of politeness in the Mexican community.

Oktoprimasakti (2006)

Oktoprimasakti (2006) did a research on "Direct and Indirect Strategies of Refusing among Indonesians". The researcher modified a discourse completion test (DCT) that was developed by Beebe et al. (1990) for the purpose of this study. Based on this study, the researcher found that most Indonesians used indirect refusals when they refuse. This

study also found that the Indonesians employed the indirect strategies to "save face". However, the researcher also found that the strategies used varied according to the status of the requester. More effort of face saving was attempted when the requester was of a higher status and less effort was given when the requester was of lower status.

Kuang (2009)

Kuang (2009) did a research on "Moves in Refusals: How Malaysians Say No". In the research, she focused on how people of all ages and ethnic groups as well as different professions in Malaysia use language to make refusals. The data was analyzed through two main strategies which are direct strategies and indirect strategies. She concluded that Malaysian used both direct and indirect strategies in making refusals but indirect strategies were preferred. This is due to the fact that Malaysians try not to offend the other party so as to avoid misunderstandings.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher has discussed many related studies and findings of the studies on refusals. Takashi and Beebe's (1987) study looked at learners of low proficiency and how they refuse. The researchers concluded that learners with low proficiency were direct in their refusals. In the present study, the researcher looked at both high and low proficiency teenagers in Malaysia and found that the low proficiency teenagers were direct while the higher proficiency teenagers were indirect when they make refusals. The review of the various studies done on refusal and other related topics also indicate that there are various ways of how people refuse. This study hopes to share some input on the areas of how teenagers refuse. This chapter can help readers to enhance their knowledge on refusals. The present study adopts an eclectic approach to

its analysis of refusal expressions using Beebe et al's (1991) classification of refusals. The next chapter discusses the research methodology used in this study.