Evaluating Impoliteness in Refusals: A Cross-cultural Study on Pragmatic Perception between Javanese Learners of English and Native Speakers of English

Mohammad Ali Yafi[a1]*, Hendi Pratama [b], Widhiyanto Widhiyanto[c]

.

[abC]*Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarangi, Indonesia*

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine and explain how Javanese Learners of English (JLE) and Native Speakers of English (NSE) assess the level of impoliteness in refusal speech acts, as well as to identify patterns of differences in assessment that arise in various social and hierarchical contexts. However, theoretically, impoliteness in refusal speech acts is still relatively underexplored from the perspective of cross-cultural pragmatic meaning and evaluation, because most previous studies have focused more on the production of speech strategies than on the process of social assessment of them. This study employed a quantitative approach using a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) instrument, which contained nine scenarios involving different social relationships. This instrument was chosen because it allows for consistent pragmatic context control to systematically reveal patterns of impoliteness evaluation across groups. JLEs (n=40) and NSEs (n=58) participated in this study. Each participant assessed the level of impoliteness using a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive and inferential analyses were used to examine differences in perception between the two groups. The results of the analysis show that significant differences between JLE and NSE mainly arise in direct refusal without mitigation and in refusal containing personal evaluation, each of which triggers different pragmatic sensitivity in the two groups.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of linguistic (im)politeness has been a significant focus of attention in cross-cultural pragmatics over the past few decades. In communication among speakers from different cultural backgrounds, differences in perceptions of politeness and impoliteness often lead to misunderstandings. Since Brown & Levinson (1987) introduced the theory of politeness based on the concept of face, many studies have highlighted how linguistic strategies are used to maintain or threaten the face of the interlocutor. However, this theory is often debated because it is considered to place too much emphasis on the individualistic Western perspective (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003). In the Asian context, politeness and impoliteness are more often measured based on social norms and hierarchical relationships (Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988). This difference in paradigms shows that understanding (im)politeness cannot be separated from the cultural values that underlie it.

Studies on impoliteness were then developed through the works of Culpeper (1996, 2011), who emphasized the function of impoliteness as a means of attacking someone's face or managing social relations in a manner contrary to politeness. According to Culpeper (2011), impoliteness can arise intentionally or unintentionally, depending on the speaker's perception and intention as well as the listener's interpretation. Spencer-Oatey, (2005, 2015) expanded this framework through the theory of rapport management, which views impoliteness as a violation of social rights and expectations in

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interactions. In this context, politeness theories serve as an analytical basis for research on impoliteness. These theories are used to explain how refusal is perceived as an act that violates face, social rights, and relational expectations. This dimensions analyzed include the level of directness, management of hierarchical relationships, and the use of personal evaluation in refusal utterances (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2015). In a cross-cultural context, understanding of speech that is considered impolite is greatly influenced by the norms, value orientations, and communication styles of a particular society (Alshraah et al., 2023; Babai Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013; Beebe, 1990; Haugh, 2015; Terkourafi, 2008). Hence, the analysis of impoliteness needs to consider both the pragmatic and sociocultural aspects of the speaker.

One of the speech acts that most often causes perceptions of impoliteness is refusal. This speech act inherently has the potential to threaten face because it refuses a request, apology, or invitation from another party (Beebe et al., 1990; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Guo, 2012; Morkus, 2021). Some studies have focused on how speakers express refusal through more subtle or explicit linguistic studies (Chen et al., 1995; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Wijayanto, 2011, 2016). In this research tradition, analysis of refusal is generally focused on speech forms, choice of strategies, and levels of indirectness as indicators of politeness. This approach provides understanding of how speakers realize refusal in various social contexts. However, research in perceptual pragmatics shows that speech forms are not always the main determinant in assessing impoliteness, because that is influenced by social norms, role relationships, and interactional expectations (Culpeper, 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Taguchi, 2008). A number of cross-cultural studies show that the same refusal utterance can be assessed differently by speakers from different cultural backgrounds, even though the context and linguistic form are similar (Tajeddin et al., 2014; Tajeddin & Moqadam, 2023). These findings draw attention to the importance of examining refusal as an evaluative phenomenon, rather than merely as the realization of a linguistic strategy.

In the Javanese context, research on politeness and impoliteness has been accomplished from various perspectives. However, most of these are still focused on the politeness strategy in the context of formal discourse and education (Wijayanto, 2016). Studies examining Javanese speakers' perceptions of impoliteness are still limited, despite their importance for understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural communication. Javanese speakers, as part of a high-context culture, have a complex system of politeness, including a strong social hierarchy and concept of *unggah-ungguhing basa* (linguistic etiquette). This value system influences how they assess utterances that contain refusal, especially in the context of social status relations. Within this framework, Javanese politeness functions as an emic evaluative system that regulates the appropriateness of speech acts based on relational balance and social ethics, rather than solely on the linguistic form of speech (Geertz, 1961; Sukarno, 2010; Wijayanto, 2016).

A recent study by Wijayanto (2025) enriches the understanding of impoliteness in Javanese culture impoliteness arises not only from violations of speech norms, but also from deviations from socially acceptable behaviors such as *andhap ashor* (humility), *lembah manah* (emotional control), *empan papan* (appropriate attitude), and *grapyak* (friendliness). Violations of these principles give rise to the perception of *ora ngerti tata krama* (not knowing manners), which forms the basis for assessing impoliteness in Javanese social interactions. Wijayanto's (2025) findings align with Sukarno's (2010) thinking, which posits that Javanese politeness is normative and rooted in the concept of social harmony, rather than merely being a linguistic strategy. In a similar view, Suseno (1997) emphasizes that Javanese ethics are based on the values of *rasa* (feelings) and *aji* (self-esteem), so that violations of these two elements are considered the most serious form of impoliteness. In the context of this study, understanding impoliteness cannot be separated from Javanese cultural values that emphasize emotional balance, respect for social hierarchy, and the maintenance of harmony between individuals.

Building upon these findings, a comparison between NSE and JLE is important because these two groups represent two different systems of politeness norms and often interact in educational, professional, and international communication contexts. In this study, the term NSE refers to speakers from Anglophone Western contexts, particularly the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Canada, which share relatively comparable academic and professional communications norms. However, this comparison does not treat either group as a homogeneous or essentialized cultural entity, but rather as analytical category used to capture dominant orientations in pragmatic evaluations. Comparing the two allows researchers to identify how strategies of refusal and responses to impoliteness are interpreted differently based on cultural background, and the extent to which these

differences can lead to pragmatic misunderstandings. For Javanese learners of English, the existence of a comparison group of native speakers provides the pragmatic benchmark needed to understand how politeness norms work in the context of global communication. This comparison is not only descriptive but also makes a significant pedagogical contribution in helping learners develop more accurate, adaptive, and culturally sensitive pragmatic competence.

Although a number of studies have examined refusal strategies and politeness level in cross-cultural contexts, most of these studies still focus on speech production and linguistic classification, with limited attention to how impoliteness is perceived and evaluated by speakers from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, comparisons between English learners from a Javanese cultural background and native English speakers are generally still positioned descriptively, without conceptually elaborating on the pragmatic dimensions that are the main source of differences in assessment. Hence, this study fills the conceptual gap by placing the assessment of impoliteness in refusal as an evaluative process influenced by different politeness orientations, social relations, and moral expectations, rather than simply as a cross-group variation among speakers.

Given this backdrop, this study specifically aims to examine the aspect of impoliteness in refusal speech acts by focusing on three main pragmatic dimensions, namely the level of directness in conveying refusal, the management of hierarchical relationships, and the use of evaluations and rhetorical devices such as criticism and sarcasm. With this focus, this study not only compares the level of impoliteness assessment between groups but also examines how these pragmatic dimensions are understood and assessed differently in cross-cultural contexts.

Therefore, this research is driven by the following questions:

1. how JLE and NSE assesses the level of impoliteness in refusal speech acts in various social and hierarchical contexts?
2. in which pragmatic dimensions, such as directness, hierarchical relations, and personal evaluation, are the differences in impoliteness assessment between the two groups most prominent?

2. Methods

This study adopts a quantitative approach within the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, focusing on participants' evaluative judgments of impoliteness in refusal speech acts. This approach was chosen because it can measure differences in perception in a cross-cultural context through systematic numerical data as well as explaining the differences of pragmatic dimensions. The primary focus of this study is not on speech production, but on assessing the level of perceived impoliteness in a specific social context. This approach is also in line with the nature of experimental pragmatic research, which emphasizes comprehension rather than linguistic performance (Xiao et al., 2019). The study participants consisted of two groups: JLE (n = 40) and NSE (n = 58). JLE participants were second- and third-year students from English education study programs in a university in Central Java who had taken courses in pragmatics and cross-cultural communication. Javanese language is the primary language in this province. The NSE group was recruited from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom through online academic networks and language teaching associations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on social background and language skills relevant to the research objective. All participants were aged between 18 and 40 years old, had equivalent higher education backgrounds, and participated voluntarily after signing an informed consent form.

The primary instrument of this study is the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT), which was developed to assess participants' understanding of impoliteness in the refusal speech act. WDCT was selected because it can elaborate a controlled social context while providing space for participants to assess utterances according to their perceptions (Beebe, 1990; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Ogiermann, 2018). WDCT which consists of nine scenarios described a communication situation that ends with a refusal utterance that could be considered impolite. Prior the distribution of the WDCT, an expert in cross-cultural pragmatics has been assigned to judge the applicability of the instrument as well as an English native speaker was also requested to examine in terms of naturalness of the scenarios and utterances. After that, a pilot study involving 10 participants was undertaken. The scenarios in this WDCT are depicted as follows.

Table 1 Matrix of WDCT Scenarios

No.	Context	Type of Refused Act	Social Relation	Brief Scenario Description
S1	Social-Professional	Recreational invitation	Equal	Refusal of a weekend picnic invitation between workplace colleagues
S2	Academic	Academic social invitation	Hierarchical (higher [refusing] lower)	Refusal of a dinner invitation from a student by a lecturer who is occupied with work.
S3	Academic	Academic activity invitation	Hierarchical (lower [refusing] higher)	Refusal of a seminar invitation from a lecturer by a student acting as a research assistant
S4	Academic-Social	Apology	Equal	Refusal to accept apology from a peer in the context of a study group meeting
S5	Professional	Apology	Hierarchical (higher [refusing] lower)	Refusal to accept an apology from an intern by a manager following a missed deadline
S6	Academic	Apology	Hierarchical (lower [refusing] higher)	Refusal to accept an apology from a supervisor following a last-minute cancellation of a thesis consultation
S7	Social	Suggestion	Equal	Refusal of a repeated suggestion to exercise together from a close classmate.
S8	Professional	Proposal	Hierarchical (higher [refusing] lower)	Refusal of a productivity-related proposal from a new employee by a supervisor during a work meeting.
S9	Academic	Academic advice	Hierarchical (lower [refusing] higher)	Refusal of a supervisor's advice to join a study group during a thesis consultation.

Furthermore, respondents rated the level of impoliteness using a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (very polite) to 5 (very impolite). The WDCT design in this study refers to the pragmatic judgment task principle that has been widely used in cross-cultural studies to assess perceptions of politeness and impoliteness (Roever et al., 2023; Tajeddin & Moqadam, 2023; Xiao et al., 2019). The data were compiled through an online platform distributed to potential respondents, categorized into two groups. Each participant was asked to read nine scenarios of WDCT and assign a score to the degree of impoliteness based on the Likert scale. All the data were collected anonymously to avoid social bias. For the illustration, the following is the example of the employed WDCT:

Situation 1:

You are about to leave your office. On the way to parking lot, you meet your colleague, and you stop him/her. You invite your colleague to a weekend outing as it is your first week moving to the city and the office. He/she declines your invitation.
You say: Would you like to join us for a picnic this Sunday?
Your colleague says: I don't feel like socializing this weekend.
Rate the refusal of your colleague:

1	2	3	4	5
Very Polite	Somewhat Polite	Neither Polite nor Impolite	Somewhat Impolite	Very Impolite

To ensure that participants truly reflect their level of understanding of impoliteness, each WDCT scenario is designed to present an explicit social context so that participants must interpret the speakers' intent, social relations, and potential threats to face before giving their assessment. Participants' reflection of understanding is assumed directly through this assessment process, as scoring on a five-point Likert scale requires respondents to identify the linguistic and social elements that make a statement considered impolite. To explore how deeply participants understood these aspects, each WDCT item not only presented a refusal utterance, but also initiating act, power orientation, social distance, and pragmatic implicatures that required inference.

Furthermore, the data were analyzed through two stages, namely descriptive and inferential. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate the mean, median, and distribution of impoliteness scores for both groups. The use of mean values in this study aims to capture the general tendency of respondents' assessment of the level of impoliteness in each scenario. In pragmatic perception studies, mean values are often used as indicators of collective evaluative tendencies, particularly to show whether a statement tends to be perceived as relatively polite, neutral, or impolite in a given context (Taguchi, 2008; Tajeddin et al., 2014). Moreover, further analysis used the Mann-Whitney U nonparametric test to compare the differences in perception between JLE and NSE (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The results of this test were used to assess whether there were significant differences in the level of perception of impoliteness between cultures. Besides, perception scores in this study are not treated as universal cognitive objects, but rather as the result of culturally mediated evaluative process. The statistical analysis is positioned as a tool for identifying trends in differences in assessment, rather than as an absolute representation of cross-cultural individual perceptions (Haugh, 2015; Terkourafi, 2008).

3. Results

3.1 Impoliteness Assessment in Refusal Speech Acts

The results show apparent variations between JLE and NSE in assessing impoliteness in nine situations of refusal. In general, JLE gave higher impoliteness scores in five situations, while NSE gave higher scores in the other four situations. The assessment scale ranges from 1 (very polite) to 5 (very impolite), indicating that higher scores correspond to a greater perception of impoliteness. These differences suggest that the two groups have distinct perspectives on the meaning of politeness and how to assess utterances perceived as threatening to face.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Impoliteness Rating

		Val	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
S1	JLE	40	3.350	0.834	2.000	5.000
	NSE	58	2.776	1.170	1.000	5.000
S2	JLE	40	3.850	0.802	2.000	5.000
	NSE	58	2.948	1.146	1.000	5.000
S3	JLE	40	4.100	1.128	1.000	5.000
	NSE	58	3.724	1.121	1.000	5.000

		Val	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
S4	JLE	40	4.375	0.807	2.000	5.000
	NSE	58	4.448	0.776	2.000	5.000
S5	JLE	40	2.875	1.265	1.000	5.000
	NSE	58	3.638	1.055	1.000	5.000
S6	JLE	40	3.925	0.944	2.000	5.000
	NSE	58	3.776	1.077	1.000	5.000
S7	JLE	40	3.325	1.269	1.000	5.000
	NSE	58	3.483	1.203	1.000	5.000
S8	JLE	40	3.450	0.959	2.000	5.000
	NSE	58	3.690	0.940	2.000	5.000
S9	JLE	40	2.800	1.043	1.000	5.000
	NSE	58	2.431	1.313	1.000	5.000

This section presents general pattern of impoliteness ratings in nine WDCT scenarios based on descriptive statistics between the JLE and NSE groups. overall, the mean rating values show variations in the level of impoliteness between situations, ranging from low to high. In several scenarios, JLE shows a tendency to give higher impoliteness ratings than NSE. This pattern is evident in Situation 1 and Situation 2, where the mean values for JLE are 3.350 and 3.380, respectively. In both situations, the mean values for NSE are lower, at 2.776 for Situation 1 and 2.948 for Situation 2. This difference in mean values indicates that there are variations between groups in certain situations. However, in several other scenarios, the mean values between JLE and NSE are relatively close. This variation indicates that the assessment of impoliteness is not uniform across all refusal contexts tested.

Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney U test results show that there is the significant difference in the assessment between the two groups does not apply in all scenarios. Statistically significant differences were only found in Situation 1, Situation 2, and Situation 5. In Situation 1, the test results showed a U value of 1476.000 with p = 0.017, which indicates a difference in assessment between groups. In Situation 2, the difference was even stronger, with a U value of 1692.000 and $p < .001$. A different pattern emerged in Situation 5, where NSE gave a higher mean value than JLE. In this situation, the mean value of NSE is 3.638, while the mean value of JLE is 2.875. This difference is also statistically significant with p = .002. In the other six scenarios, the test results show that the difference in assessment between groups is not significant even though there are variations in the mean values.

In addition to differences between groups, descriptive statistics also show variations in the distribution of assessments within each group. In some scenarios, the standard deviation of NSE tends to be higher than that of JLE, as seen in Situation 1 to 9. This indicates a wider variation in assessments within the NSE group in certain situations. Conversely, in other scenarios, the standard deviation of JLE is relatively more concentrated. This pattern suggests that the level of internal agreement in impoliteness assessments can vary between groups and situations. However, this tendency does not appear consistently across all scenarios. Overall, these results indicate that both JLE and NSE exhibit assessment patterns that are sensitive to different refusal contexts. These findings provide an initial empirical insight into how impoliteness in refusal is assessed differently or similarly by the two groups.

Table 3. Result of Mann-Whitney U test

	U	df	p
Sit 1	1476.000		0.017*
Sit 2	1692.000		< .001*
Sit 3	1411.000		0.058
Sit 4	1103.000		0.645
Sit 5	747.500		0.002*

	U	df	p
Sit 6	1215.000		0.681
Sit 7	1088.500		0.597
Sit 8	1005.000		0.241
Sit 9	1415.000		0.057

Note. Mann-Whitney U test.

3.2 Differences in Impoliteness Assessment based on Pragmatic Dimensions

3.2.1 The Dimension of Directness in Refusal

This subsection reports assessments of impoliteness in direct and minimally mitigated refusals, as represented in Situation 1, Situation 2, and Situation 3. In Situation 1, the refusal was conveyed by a coworker who declined a colleague's picnic invitation with the statement *"I don't feel like socializing this weekend."* This statement displays directness through the assertion of personal preference and the absence of expressions of regret or interpersonal softening. This form of directness is reflected in the tendency to assess impoliteness at a moderate level, with a mean value of 3.350 in the JLE group and 2.776 in the NSE group. This difference in tendency shows that direct refusal in equal relationships is considered more impolite by JLE than NSE. In Situation 2, the refusal was conveyed by a lecturer who declined a dinner invitation from his students through the utterance *"I can't! See, I have a lot of work to do."* Although accompanied by a reason, this utterance still maintains a direct form because it begins with an explicit refusal and is reinforced with an exclamation mark. The assessment pattern shows a mean value of 3.850 for JLE and 2.948 for NSE, as well as a statistically significant difference.

In Situation 3, direct refusal was expressed by a student acting as a research assistant when refusing a seminar invitation from his supervisor by saying, *"No. I'm not interested in the topic."* This refusal contained a high degree of directness because it began with the explicit refusal marker *"No"* and was followed by a statement of preference that was final in nature. In this situation, both groups gave a high impoliteness rating, with a mean value of 4.100 on the JLE and 3.724 on the NSE. Unlike Situation 1 and Situation 2, the difference in ratings in Situation 3 was not statistically significant based on the Mann–Whitney U test results. These findings indicate that a very explicit refusal by a lower-status party toward a higher-status party is perceived as impolite by both groups in a relatively consistent manner. The variation between situations shows that directness does not always result in differences in assessment between groups in every context. In some contexts, direct refusal gives rise to differences in assessment tendencies, while in other contexts, the assessments tend to converge. These results show that the assessment of impoliteness in direct refusal is influenced by different contextual configurations and speaker roles.

3.2.2 The Dimension of Hierarchical Relation

This subsection reports patterns of impoliteness assessment in refusal that occur in equal and hierarchical social relationships, as represented in several WDCT scenarios. In equal relationships, such as in Situation 1, the refusal is conveyed by a co-worker to a colleague through the utterance *"I don't feel like socializing this weekend,"*. In Situation 4, refusal occurs when a student refuses to accept an apology from a friend in their group through the utterance, *"Oh, you're always like. It was very inconvenient for everyone,"* with high and relatively comparable mean values between JLE (M=4.375) and NSE (M=4.448). In Situation 7, refusal was expressed by a peer who refused a friend's invitation to exercise by saying, *"No, thanks. Stop trying to push me into things,"* with a mean value of 3.325 on the JLE and 3.483 on the NSE. These three situations show that in equal relationships, the assessment of impoliteness tends to be at a medium to high level in both groups. The differences in assessment between groups in these situations are not statistically significant. This pattern shows that equal relationships produce relatively comparable assessments between JLE and NSE. The variation in mean values between situations shows that the context of refusal still influences the perceived level of impoliteness.

In hierarchical relationships, rejection occurs in different relationship configurations, both from higher and lower status parties. In Situation 2, refusal is expressed by a lecturer who declines a dinner invitation from his student by saying, *"I can't! See, I have a lot of work to do,"* with a mean value of 3.850 on the JLE and 2.948 on the NSE, as well as a statistically significant difference. In Situation 5, the refusal was made by a manager who refused to accept an apology from an intern through the utterance *"I expected better from you. I don't think you can manage your time,"* with a mean value of 2.875 on the JLE and 3.638 on the NSE, which also shows a significant difference. In Situation 6, the refusal is conveyed by a student who refuses to accept an apology from his supervisor through the statement *"I have been waiting for you since early morning. Oh, perfect!"* with a mean value of 3.925 on the JLE and 3.776 on the NSE, without a significant difference. A similar pattern was also seen in Situation 8 and Situation 9, where refusal in hierarchical relationships resulted in relatively close mean values between the two groups. These findings indicate that hierarchical relationships do not always result in differences in impoliteness ratings between groups. However, in certain hierarchical contexts, differences in ratings appear clearly and significantly.

3.2.3 Dimension of Personal Evaluation and Rhetorical Devices

This subsection reports on the assessment of impoliteness in refusal that contain personal evaluations and rhetorical devices, as represented in Situations 4 and 5. In Situation 4, the refusal was conveyed by a student who refused to accept an apology from a groupmate through the utterance *"Oh, you're always like. It was very inconvenient for everyone."* This statement contains personal evaluation through generalization of behaviour and attribution of inconvenience to the other party. The respondents' assessment showed a high level of impoliteness in both groups, with a mean value of 4.375 in JLE and 4.448 in NSE. The difference in assessment between the groups in this situation did not show statistical significance. In Situation 5, the refusal was conveyed by a manager who refused to accept an apology from an intern through the utterance *"I expected better from you. I don't think you can manage your time."* This utterance displays a direct personal evaluation of the targeted individual's capacity. The assessment pattern shows a mean value of 2.875 on the JLE and 3.638 on the NSE, with a statistically significant difference.

Rhetorical devices also appear in refusal that contain sarcastic expressions and rhetorical questions, as seen in Situation 6 and Situation 8. In Situation 6, the refusal is conveyed by a student who refuses to accept an apology from his advisor through the utterance *"I have been waiting for you since early morning. Oh, perfect!"*. This statement combines a complaint and sarcasm to indicate dissatisfaction with the situation. The impoliteness rating in this situation is high, with a mean value of 3.925 on the JLE and 3.776 on the NSE, with no statistically significant difference. In Situation 8, the refusal was conveyed by a superior who refused a proposal from a new employee through the utterance, *"Are you reinventing the wheel? I prefer to stick to what we're already using."* This utterance uses a rhetorical question to reject the proposal while limiting the space for dialogue. The mean impoliteness rating in this situation was moderate to high, at 3.450 on the JLE and 3.690 on the NSE. The difference in ratings between the groups in this situation was not statistically significant.

4. Discussion

The results show that differences in the assessment of impoliteness between JLE and NSE do not appear uniformly across all refusal situations. This pattern reinforces the view that impoliteness is a contextual evaluative process that depends on social assessment, not solely on linguistic form of speech (Culpeper, 2011; Haugh, 2015). This finding is in line with the criticism of the speech production approach in cross-cultural pragmatics, which tends to ignore the interpretation process by speakers and listeners (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003). In this context, refusal is understood as a social act that involves moral judgments of the appropriateness of behaviour in a given situation. The differences in judgment that arise in certain situations indicate that JLE and NSE activate different evaluative frameworks when assessing impoliteness. Therefore, this discussion focuses on interpreting how dimensions of directness, hierarchical relations, and personal evaluation shape the assessment process. This approach places the research in the relatively unexplored field of perceptual pragmatics.

Research findings show that direct refusal with minimal mitigation more often leads to differences in the assessment of impoliteness between JLE and NSE. This pattern can be understood through the concept of face-threatening acts introduced by Brown & Levinson (1987), in which refusal inherently threatens the face of the other party. However, criticism of the universality of face theory suggests that the level of threat is evaluated differently across cultures (Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988; Wijayanto, 2019). In the Anglo-English context, directness is often understood as a form of honesty and communication efficiency, so it is not always associated with impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011). In the other hand, in the context of learners with a relational cultural background, direct refusal without mitigation is more easily perceived as inconsiderate of social relationships. These findings are in line with research by Tajeddin et al. (2014), which shows that differences in perceptions of impoliteness often arise in utterances that are formally simple but socially sensitive. The convergence of judgments on highly explicit refusal also shows that a certain level of directness can transcend cultural ambiguity. Hence, directness functions as a sensitive pragmatic trigger, but its impact depends on the context of configuration and evaluative norms used.

The research results also show that hierarchical relationships play an important role in shaping judgments of impoliteness toward refusal. In some situations, refusal from those with higher status is perceived differently by JLE and NSE. These findings can be explained through the rapport management framework, which emphasizes the importance of sociality rights and moral obligations in interactions (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, 2015). For speakers with Javanese cultural background, hierarchical relationships are closely related to the principles of *andhap asor* and *empan papan*, which emphasize the appropriateness of attitudes to social positions (Suseno, 1997; Wijayanto, 2025). In this context, refusal that are considered to ignore these principles are more easily perceived as impolite. Conversely, in the Anglo-English context, hierarchy does not always demand layered linguistic forms as long as professional functions are fulfilled (Culpeper, 2011). This difference explains why some refusals in hierarchical relationships result in significant differences in assessment, while others do not. These findings reinforce the argument that hierarchy is not a single variable but interacts with the content of the refusal and the social context. In this view, judgments of impoliteness in hierarchical relationships reflect different moral expectations between groups.

The dimensions of personal evaluation and rhetorical devices reveal the most sensitive patterns of impoliteness assessment in this study. Refusals that contain personal criticism, behavioural generalizations, or sarcasm tend to be rated as more impolite by both groups. These findings are consistent with Parvaresh & Tayebi's (2018) view that impoliteness increases when speech shifts from refusing actions to judging an individual's character of capacity. In this context, rhetorical devices such as sarcasm and rhetorical questions function as markers of evaluative attitudes that reinforce threat to face. For NSE, personal evaluation is often associated with violations of the principles of individual autonomy and dignity (Spencer-Oatey, 2015). For JLE, this kind of evaluation also has the potential to disrupt the relational harmony and emotional balance that is upheld in social interactions. Similarities in assessment in several situations indicate a cross-cultural common ground in assessing the moral boundaries of communication. However, variations in sensitivity levels are still apparent in certain contexts. These findings indicate that personal evaluation serves as a marker of moral boundaries in the assessment of impoliteness.

The findings of this present study indicate that differences in the assessment of impoliteness cannot be explained solely as differences in linguistic strategies. Instead, these differences reflect orientations toward politeness that are rooted in different moral value systems. In the context of JLE, the assessment of impoliteness tends to be oriented toward social relations and harmony, where the appropriateness of speech is judged based on its impact on interpersonal relationships. In the context of NSE, judgments are more often oriented toward autonomy and clarity of communicative intent. This framework is in line with the ideas that politeness as a social practice rooted in the moral norms of the speech community (Haugh, 2015; Terkourafi, 2008). The approach of impoliteness as the result of competing politeness orientation allows for a deeper understanding of why differences in judgment arise in certain context and not in others. The main contribution of this study lies in reframing impoliteness as a moral-based evaluative process. This perspective, therefore, enriches the study of impoliteness in cross-cultural pragmatics.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to understand how JLE and NSE assess impoliteness in refusal speech acts. Based on empirical findings, this study shows that the assessment of impoliteness is not uniform across groups, but depends on how speakers evaluate the social appropriateness of an utterance in a particular context. The differences in assessment cannot be explained solely by linguistic differences, but are related to politeness orientation and moral expectations that are activated in the evaluation process. In this case, impoliteness in refusal is understood as the result of contextual and interpretive social assessment. These findings emphasize that understanding cross-cultural politeness needs to go beyond the classification of speech strategies. An evaluative approach provides a more adequate perspective for explaining variations in perceptions of impoliteness.

The main contribution of this study lies in its attempt to position impoliteness in refusal as an evaluative process rooted in different politeness orientations. This study shows that are strong relational orientation shapes how JLE assesses the appropriateness of refusal, while an individual autonomy orientation is more prominent in NSE's assessment. This study offers an alternative to descriptive cultural comparison approaches by placing these two orientations as an analytical framework. These findings enrich cross-cultural pragmatic studies with the emphasize of the role of moral values and social expectations in the process of evaluating utterances. In addition, this study contributes to the development of perceptual pragmatic studies, which are still relatively limited. This perspective opens up space to understand impoliteness as a negotiated social phenomenon, not merely a violation of linguistic norms.

Practically, the findings of this study have implications for teaching pragmatics in the context of EFL, particularly in Indonesia. Understanding the differences in politeness orientation can help educators design learning that emphasizes pragmatic awareness and interpretive skills. Pragmatic learning needs to be directed towards the ability to assess the appropriateness of utterances in diverse social contexts. This approach can help learners develop more adaptive communication competencies in cross-cultural interactions. Hence, language teaching should not only focus on the form and strategy of utterances, but also on the social meaning and values behind them.

However, this study has several limitations that need to be considered. The use of WDCT limits the data to assessments of hypothetical situations and does not fully represent the dynamics of real interactions. In addition, the use of a written assessment scale cannot fully capture emotional responses and spontaneity. Future research could combine assessment methods with real interaction data, audio-visual simulations, or reflective interviews to enrich the understanding of the evaluative process. This effort is expected to broaden the scope of impoliteness analysis in the context of cross-cultural communication. Thus, further research can build a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, moral values, and social interaction.

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Ethical Clearance

This study has been ethically approved with the number 5762/B.2/KEPK-FKUMS/VI/2025.

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