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# DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AMONG LEARNERS OF ARABIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAIL: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES AND THEIR CROSS-CULTURAL EFFECTS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the development of pragmatic competence in the speech act of refusal among learners of Arabic as a foreign language at the University of Hail. Aligned with the approved Arabic research proposal, the article examines how proficiency growth, first-language pragmatic transfer, and intercultural adaptation shape refusal behavior in Arabic. Using a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes 780 elicited refusal responses produced by 65 international learners across four proficiency levels through a 12-scenario Discourse Completion Test. Quantitative analysis combines descriptive statistics with chi-square testing and adjusted residual analysis, while qualitative analysis uses thematic coding to identify patterns of transfer, adaptation, and developmental change. The results show a statistically significant association between proficiency level and refusal-strategy choice, with beginner learners overusing direct refusals and upper-intermediate learners showing a marked preference for indirect and socially appropriate strategies. The qualitative findings further demonstrate that pragmatic competence develops through a staged movement from direct, minimally mitigated refusals to more elaborated, culturally aligned responses. The study contributes to Arabic interlanguage pragmatics and supports the inclusion of explicit pragmatics instruction in Arabic language programs for non-native speakers.*

**KEYWORDS:** Interlanguage Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Politeness, Arabic As A Foreign Language, Refusal Strategies, Pragmatic Transfer, Sociopragmatics, And Intercultural Communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary second-language education, successful performance is no longer measured only by lexical range or grammatical accuracy; it is also evaluated by the learner's ability to use language appropriately in real social situations. This broader dimension is typically described as pragmatic competence, a central component of communicative competence in second-language acquisition (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993; Al-Seghayer, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2024). When this competence is underdeveloped, learners may produce grammatically correct utterances that remain socially inappropriate, thereby creating pragmatic failure in intercultural communication (Li and Cao, 2019; Ding, 2022).

The present study focuses on refusals because refusal is one of the most interactionally delicate speech acts in any language. A refusal declines an offer, request, invitation, or suggestion, and therefore inherently threatens interpersonal face and relational equilibrium (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Jasim, 2017). If managed poorly, a refusal may sound abrupt, rude, or dismissive even when the speaker has no such intention. For this reason, refusal behavior has been widely used in interlanguage pragmatics as a sensitive site for examining how learners negotiate social meaning across languages and cultures (Beebe *et al.*, 1990; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Babai Shishavan and Sharifian, 2016).

The issue is especially important in Arabic. Arabic refusals often favor indirectness, supportive moves, religious expressions, and elaborated justification, all of which are closely tied to local norms of respect, modesty, and relationship maintenance (Nelson *et al.*, 2002a; Nelson *et al.*, 2002b; Qadi, 2021). Learners who transfer more direct first-language routines into Arabic may therefore sound pragmatically incongruent even when their grammar is accurate (Alrefaee and Al-Ghamdi, 2019; al Huneety *et al.*, 2024).

At the University of Hail, the Arabic Language Unit for Non-Native Speakers hosts a diverse international student population from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Australia. This multilingual setting offers a productive site for examining how learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds shape refusal choices in Arabic. Although refusal has been widely studied in English and other languages, empirical research on the development of Arabic refusal competence among non-native learners in Saudi higher education remains limited. The present study therefore examines how refusal strategies vary across proficiency levels, how intercultural transfer influences those strategies, and what pedagogical

implications follow for Arabic language instruction.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Pragmatic Competence in Second-language Acquisition

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to interpret and produce language in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate to a given context (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993; Al-Seghayer, 2024). It involves not only knowledge of linguistic form, but also sensitivity to power relations, social distance, degree of imposition, and expectations of politeness. Systematic reviews show that pragmatic ability develops unevenly and does not automatically follow from grammatical growth alone (Brasdefer, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2024).

A recurring finding in the literature is that learners may become fluent while still experiencing sociopragmatic difficulty. Advanced learners can continue to rely on formulaic routines, literal transfer, or culturally mismatched strategies when they have not received focused pragmatic instruction (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Al-Dakhs and Alhaqbani, 2021). This distinction is crucial for Arabic as a foreign language because pragmatic appropriateness often depends on norms that are not transparent to learners from non-Arab speech communities.

### 2.2. Refusal as a Face-threatening Speech act

Speech Act Theory provides the foundational lens for the present study because it treats utterances as social actions rather than as neutral strings of words (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Searle, 1976). Within this framework, a refusal is an action that rejects a prior move and thus risks damaging solidarity unless it is mitigated. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory further explains why refusals are especially delicate: they threaten both the speaker's and the hearer's face needs, which encourages the use of indirectness, apology, explanation, gratitude, or other redressive strategies.

The most widely used analytical taxonomy for refusal is the model developed by Beebe *et al.* (1990), which distinguishes among direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. This taxonomy has remained influential because it is sufficiently stable for quantitative coding while still flexible enough to capture cross-cultural variation in how speakers soften or structure disagreement.

### 2.3. Refusals in Arabic and Intercultural Pragmatics

Arabic refusal practices have been described as comparatively rich in mitigation and relational work. Studies on Arabic and Arabic-English comparisons consistently report the salience of supportive moves such as gratitude, blessings, apologies, lengthy explanations, and other face-saving routines (Al-Kahtani, 2005; Nelson et al., 2002b; Durham, 2019; Qadi, 2021). Direct refusal is not absent, but it is often more constrained by the social relationship and the interactional stakes than in some other linguistic settings.

Cross-cultural research further shows that refusal behavior changes substantially across communities and that learners often interpret appropriateness through the filter of their first language. Comparative evidence from Saudi-English, Jordanian-Malay, Iranian-Australian, Turkish-American, and Yemeni EFL contexts confirms that pragmatic transfer is a major explanatory factor in refusal performance (Al-Shboul et al., 2012; AlBugami, 2020; Babai Shishavan and Sharifian, 2016; Sahin, 2011; Alrefae and Al-Ghamdi, 2019). These studies support the expectation that learners at the University of Hail will not only differ by proficiency, but also by the extent to which their refusal routines remain anchored in prior sociocultural norms.

**2.4. Explicit Instruction and Developmental change**

Another consistent result in the literature is that explicit instruction improves pragmatic performance. Studies on pragmatics teaching show that awareness-raising, guided comparison, and scenario-based practice help learners expand their

strategic repertoire and produce more context-sensitive responses (Rajabia et al., 2015; Fa, 2011; Bounab, 2024). This argument has also been extended to Arabic and adjacent EFL settings, where explicit attention to refusal, politeness, and intercultural variation has been shown to reduce pragmatic failure (Al-Juraywi, 2021; Al-Ban and AL-Sabae, 2025).

Taken together, the literature supports a developmental view in which learners move from relatively direct and transfer-driven refusals toward more mitigated, context-sensitive forms. The present study builds on this literature by testing that developmental pattern in an Arabic-learning environment in Saudi Arabia, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

**2.5. Working Theoretical Model**

The study adopts an integrated theoretical model built from four complementary components: Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993), and the refusal taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990). Speech Act Theory identifies refusal as an interactional act; Politeness Theory explains why refusal tends toward mitigation; interlanguage pragmatics explains how learner language develops between first-language norms and target-language conventions; and the Beebe et al. taxonomy provides the coding scheme for the empirical analysis. Figure 1 presents the article's working model of developmental movement from direct refusal toward context-sensitive Arabic-aligned pragmatic performance.

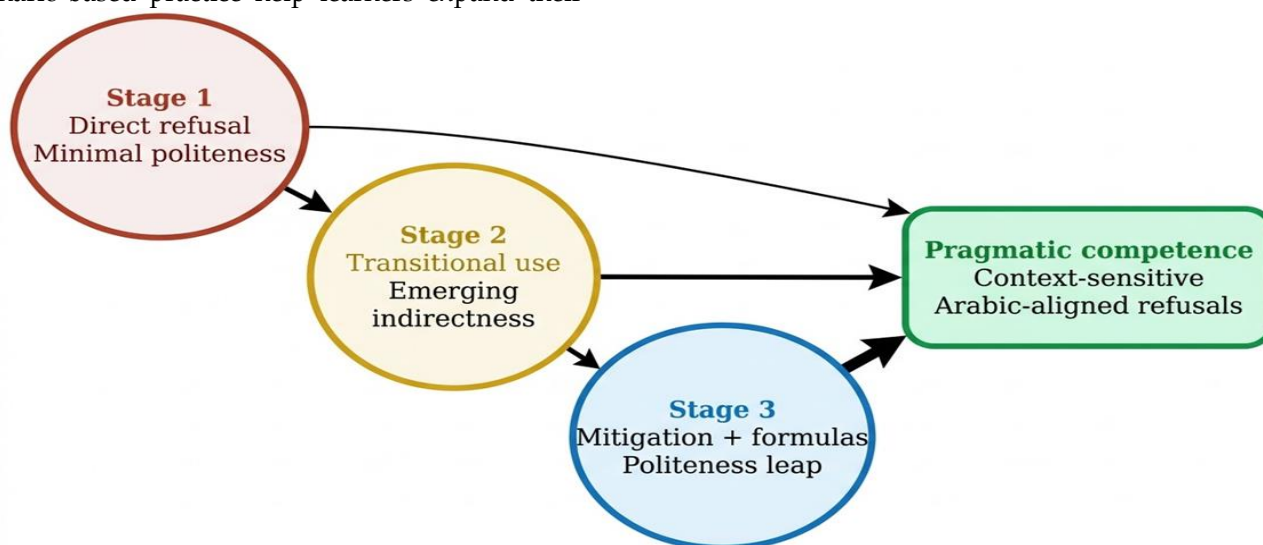


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Model of Refusal-strategy Development.

**3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

**3.1. Research questions**

What refusal strategies do learners of Arabic as a

foreign language at the University of Hail use across different proficiency levels?

How do learners' refusal strategies reflect first-language pragmatic transfer and intercultural background?

To what extent does proficiency level influence the complexity and sociopragmatic appropriateness of refusal behavior?

What pedagogical implications follow for explicit pragmatics instruction in Arabic programs for non-native speakers?

### 3.2. Hypotheses

H1: Lower-proficiency learners will rely more heavily on direct and minimally mitigated refusal strategies than higher-proficiency learners.

H2: Evidence of first-language pragmatic transfer will be strongest in lower-proficiency groups and will decrease as learners gain greater exposure to Arabic sociopragmatic norms.

H3: Upper-intermediate and advanced learners will show increased use of indirect refusals, adjuncts, and culturally appropriate supportive moves.

## 4. METHODS

The study uses a descriptive-analytical mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand identifies the distribution of refusal strategies across proficiency levels, whereas the qualitative strand interprets the pragmatic meanings of those strategies and traces evidence of intercultural transfer and sociopragmatic adaptation. The mixed-methods

design strengthens the analysis through triangulation and better reflects the project's original proposal.

Participants were 65 international male students enrolled in the Arabic Language Unit for Non-Native Speakers at the University of Hail during the 2025-2026 academic year. They represented a wide range of linguistic backgrounds across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Australia and were placed by the university into four proficiency levels. The sample distribution and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

The primary instrument was a 12-scenario Discourse Completion Test designed to elicit refusal responses in Arabic across requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. The scenarios were reviewed by two instructors of Arabic as a foreign language and three advanced learners to improve clarity, naturalness, and cultural appropriateness. A pilot administration outside the main sample supported the instrument's usability, with reported reliability estimates of Cronbach's alpha = .87 and KR-21 = .84.

Responses were coded using the refusal taxonomy of Beebe *et al.* (1990), which classifies strategies as direct refusals, indirect refusals, or adjuncts. Quantitative analysis relied on descriptive statistics, chi-square testing, and adjusted standardized residuals. Qualitative analysis used thematic coding to identify recurrent evidence of pragmatic transfer, adaptation to Arabic sociopragmatic norms, and broader developmental change.

*Table 1: Participant characteristics by proficiency level.*

Proficiency Level	N	% of Total	Mean Age (years)	SD	Countries Represented
Level 1 (Beginners)	5	7.7%	19.4	1.2	Netherlands, Thailand, Benin
Level 2 (Lower Intermediate)	33	50.8%	21.1	2.0	Indonesia, Benin, Gambia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Chad, Sierra Leone, France, Philippines, Afghanistan, Niger, Australia, Singapore
Level 3 (Upper Intermediate)	18	27.7%	22.3	1.6	Gambia, Ivory Coast, Chad, Benin, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Indonesia, China, India, Ghana, United Kingdom
Level 4 (Advanced)	9	13.8%	23.5	1.4	Bangladesh, Gambia, Chad, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Philippines
Total	65	100%	21.6	1.8	Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Quantitative results

The quantitative results show a clear developmental shift in refusal behavior. Level 1 learners relied more heavily on direct refusals,

whereas Levels 3 and 4 produced substantially more indirect refusals. This pattern indicates movement away from minimally mitigated rejection toward more socially appropriate performance. Table 2 reports the frequencies, and Figure 2 visualizes the distribution.

The chi-square test confirms a significant association between proficiency level and refusal-strategy choice, chi-square (6) = 13.821, p = .032. In other words, strategy selection changes systematically as learners gain greater command of

Arabic. Table 3 reports the inferential statistics.

Post-hoc cell analysis clarifies which groups contributed most strongly to that association. Level 1 learners overused direct refusals (adjusted residual = +2.3), whereas Level 3 learners overused indirect refusals (+2.1). Level 4 learners also showed a near-threshold tendency toward indirectness (+1.8), suggesting continued movement toward target-like behavior. Table 4 and Figure 3 summarize these residual patterns.

**Table 2: Frequency distribution of refusal strategy types across proficiency levels.**

Strategy Type	Level 1 (n=5)	Level 2 (n=33)	Level 3 (n=18)	Level 4 (n=9)	Total
Direct	28	105	41	15	189
Indirect	22	185	130	75	412
Adjuncts	10	86	45	18	159
Total	60	376	216	108	780

Figure 2. Distribution of refusal strategies by proficiency level

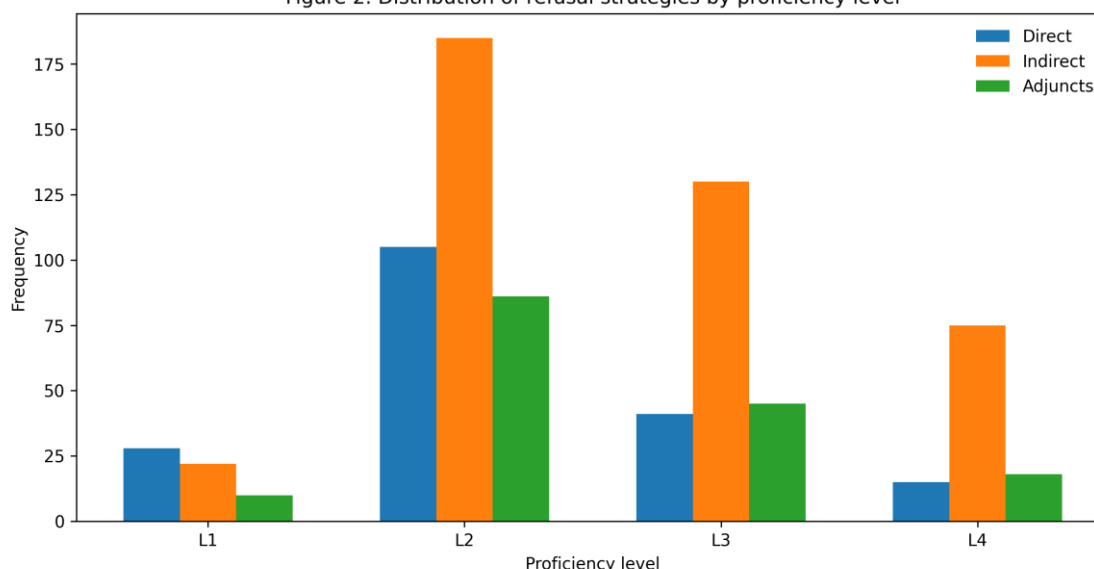


Figure 2: Distribution of refusal strategies by proficiency level.

**Table 3: Chi-square tests for the association between proficiency and strategy choice.**

Test Statistic	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ )	13.821	6	.032*
Likelihood Ratio	13.593	6	.034*
N of Valid Cases	780		

**Table 4: Adjusted standardized residuals by strategy type and proficiency level.**

Strategy Type	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Direct	+2.3	+0.8	-0.9	-1.7
Indirect	-1.6	-0.3	+2.1	+1.8
Adjuncts	-0.4	-0.5	-0.3	+0.7

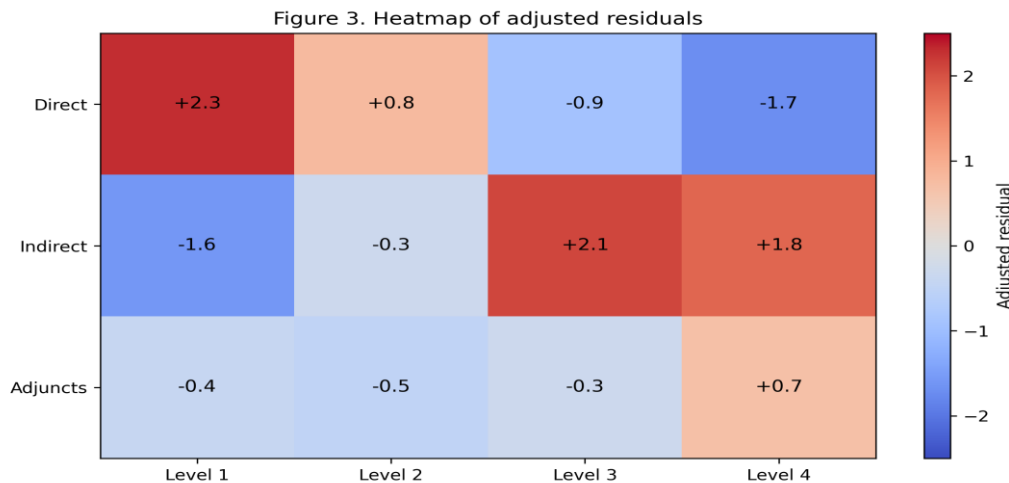


Figure 3: Heatmap of adjusted residuals.

5.2 Qualitative and integrated results

The qualitative strand complements the quantitative findings. Three interrelated themes emerged: first-language pragmatic transfer (18%), adaptation to Arabic sociopragmatic norms (26%), and developmental progression in pragmatic competence (56%). Together, these themes show that

transfer remains visible, but the dominant pattern is gradual movement toward Arabic-aligned refusal routines. Table 5 presents the coding summary.

A joint display was then used to integrate the quantitative and qualitative strands. Across levels, the evidence points to a staged movement from direct, transfer-driven refusals toward more indirect, elaborated, and relationally sensitive responses. Table 6 presents the integrated interpretation.

Table 5: Thematic Coding summary.

Theme	Codes	Example Quotes	Interpretation	Wtd %
1. Pragmatic Transfer from L1	Religious appeals; direct "No"; formulaic excuses	"أستطيع لا الله شاء إن" (If God wills, I cannot); "مشغول" (Busy)	Learners rely on culturally familiar refusal strategies from their L1, often leading to pragmatically inappropriate responses in Arabic.	18%
2. Adaptation to Arabic Sociopragmatic Norms	Politeness formulas; gratitude + regret; positive redress	"خيرأ الله جزاك" (May God reward you); "يوفقك الله" (May God grant you success)	With higher proficiency, learners incorporate culturally specific politeness routines, signaling awareness of Arabic facework norms.	26%
3. Developmental Progression in Pragmatic Competence	Length/complexity of refusals; strategy combination; justification depth	Level 1: blunt "لا" (No); Level 3: "عندي، عذراً، الأخرى التزامات" (Sorry, I have other commitments)	Responses evolve from blunt and simple to nuanced, indirect, and relational, reflecting pragmatic growth.	56%

Table 6: Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings.

Proficiency Level	Quantitative Patterns (Frequencies & $\chi^2$ )	Qualitative Themes (NVivo)	Interpretation
Level 1 (Beginner)	Overuse of direct refusals (Adjusted Residual = +2.3)	Heavy L1 transfer, blunt refusals, minimal softening	Limited linguistic repertoire → reliance on culturally familiar but inappropriate strategies
Level 2 (Lower Intermediate)	Some reduction in direct use; rise in indirect strategies	Emerging awareness of indirectness, but execution awkward	Transition stage: awareness without full competence

Level 3 (Upper Intermediate)	Significant overuse of indirect refusals (+2.1)	Richer use of politeness formulas, alternative offers, longer explanations	Clear developmental leap toward culturally appropriate strategies
Level 4 (Advanced)	Indirect refusals approaching native-like distribution (+1.8 trend)	Sophisticated blending of strategies, nuanced politeness	Pragmatic competence approximates that of native Arabic speakers

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings support a developmental interpretation of pragmatic competence in Arabic as a foreign language. At the lowest proficiency level, learners relied mainly on short direct refusals, formulaic denial, and familiar first-language routines. This pattern is consistent with earlier interlanguage pragmatics research showing that learners initially depend on transfer when their linguistic and sociopragmatic repertoires remain limited (Beebe et al., 1990; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Alrefaee and Al-Ghamdi, 2019).

The upper-intermediate level appears to represent a pragmatic turning point. The overuse of indirect refusals at Level 3, together with richer justifications and politeness markers, suggests that learners begin to internalize Arabic-specific expectations for managing face-threatening acts. This aligns with Arabic refusal research emphasizing the interactional value of indirectness, gratitude, religious softening, and elaboration (Nelson et al., 2002b; Qadi, 2021; al Huneety et al., 2024).

The results also reinforce that grammatical proficiency alone is insufficient. Although higher proficiency correlates with more sophisticated strategy use, pragmatic development is not automatic. This supports calls for explicit pragmatics instruction and guided intercultural awareness rather than assuming that pragmatic competence will emerge incidentally from exposure alone (Rajabia et al., 2015; Bounab, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Pedagogically, the findings justify integrating explicit refusal instruction into Arabic programs for non-native speakers. Useful interventions include contrastive analysis of refusal routines across languages, guided practice with culturally varied

scenarios, and focused feedback on the social effects of directness, apology, justification, and supportive moves. Because the University of Hail attracts learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, such instruction would better align grammatical teaching with intercultural communicative effectiveness.

The study has limitations. The Discourse Completion Test captures elicited written responses rather than naturally occurring interaction, and the cross-sectional design offers only a developmental snapshot. Future research could extend the evidence through role-play, recorded interaction, retrospective interviews, or instructional interventions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The evidence shows that refusal competence in Arabic develops through a staged pattern shaped by proficiency growth, first-language pragmatic transfer, and increasing adaptation to Arabic sociopragmatic norms.

The study contributes to Arabic interlanguage pragmatics by demonstrating that refusal behavior among learners at the University of Hail is both statistically patterned and qualitatively interpretable. It also contributes pedagogically by showing that the movement from direct refusal to context-sensitive refusal is teachable rather than incidental.

In applied terms, the findings support curriculum design that treats pragmatics as a core learning outcome in Arabic programs for non-native speakers. When learners are taught not only what to say but how to say it appropriately in socially sensitive situations, they are better prepared for successful participation in Arabic-speaking academic and community settings.

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