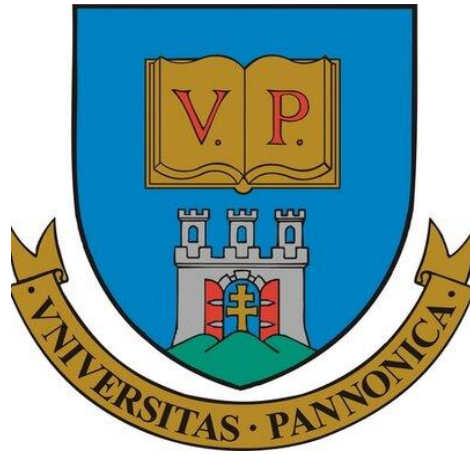


Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation



**Cultural Effects on the Pragmatic Abilities of EFL Production
of Request and Refusal Speech Acts by Multilingual Jordanians in
Jordan and Hungary.**

By:

Ibrahim Rawashdeh

Supervisor:

Prof. Anat Stavans

Multilingualism Doctoral School

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Pannonia

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, is a critical yet complex component of second language (L2) proficiency. While the facilitative role of multilingualism is recognized, the specific mechanisms and predictive factors for this advantage, particularly among Arabic speakers, remain underexplored. This study investigates the pragmatic abilities of Jordanian EFL users, comparing the production of request and refusal speech acts between bilingual (Arabic-English) speakers living in Jordan, and trilingual (Arabic-English-Hungarian) speakers living in Hungary. It examines how a constellation of cultural, individual, and multilingual factors collectively shape pragmatic production in L2 (English).

A sample of 52 Jordanian participants (26 bilinguals, 26 trilinguals) completed an online Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to elicit request and refusal production in L2. Their responses were analyzed for a range of pragmatic variables across textual, linguistic and discursive dimensions. Participants also completed questionnaires assessing self-rated proficiency, language skills, language-use patterns, language attitudes, and the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). Statistical analyses included Pearson correlations, univariable linear regressions, and independent-samples t-tests to identify group differences and predictors of pragmatic behavior.

The results indicate that pragmatic competence is shaped by different developmental systems across multilingual profiles. Bilinguals exhibited a relational, L1-shaped pragmatic ability, prioritizing interpersonal alignment, on endearments, cognitive verbs, and affective mitigation. Trilinguals, by contrast, drew on a structurally explicit, globally aligned system shaped by a wider multilingual experience and more diversified language use, resulting in greater cohesion, clause complexity, and conventional politeness.

The study contributes to multilingual pragmatics by showing that pragmatic competence cannot be reduced to a single pathway of development. Instead, bilingual and trilingual speakers draw on different constellations of linguistic experience, identity, and communicative practice, revealing that pragmatic ability is plural, context-responsive, and shaped by the sociolinguistic environments in which multilinguals participate. Moreover, the findings uniquely address a central gap in Jordanian EFL pedagogy, where pragmatic instruction has typically centered on

prescriptive norms without considering the diversity of multilingual communicative profiles. By demonstrating that bilingual and trilingual speakers build pragmatic competence through distinct structural and interpersonal stances, the study points toward instructional models that integrate a holistic approach for the development of multilingual pragmatic strategies. This moves pedagogy beyond correction toward building purposeful, context-responsive communication.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in social interactions, including performing speech acts such as requests and refusals (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Bachman, 1990). Although pragmatic development has been widely explored in second language (L2) contexts, relatively little is known about how Arabic-speaking multilinguals manage and produce these acts in their L2 English. This study addresses that gap by examining how bilingual and trilingual Jordanians produce requests and refusals in English, offering insight into how their language backgrounds and profiles shape pragmatic performance in an L2.

Requests and refusals are socially sensitive speech acts that often differ across cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In their seminal work, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) emphasized that the realization of such acts is shaped by sociocultural norms, which influence how politeness, directness, and appropriateness are perceived across speech communities. Among bilingual Jordanian speakers who have limited opportunities for authentic English interaction, speech act production may be strongly influenced by native-language conventions. In contrast, trilingual Jordanians living in multilingual environments like Hungary are likely to draw on a wider range of linguistic and pragmatic resources when using English. This variation in speech act realization underscores the influence of language experience, proficiency, and cultural exposure on pragmatic performance, hereafter referred to as pragmatic competence.

Compared to the growing body of research on L2 pragmatic competence, studies focusing on third language (L3) pragmatics remain considerably limited. Much of the existing work has been rather Eurocentric, for example, L1 Catalan, L2 Castilian/Spanish, and L3 English, with findings suggesting that L3 learners may outperform L2 learners in certain pragmatic aspects, including the use of internal and external request modifiers (Safont-Jordà, 2003; Safont-Jordà & Alcón, 2012). However, this literature remains narrow in scope, both geographically and in terms of its analytical focus. Most studies emphasize modifier frequency and appropriateness, often neglecting broader sociopragmatic considerations such as context sensitivity, strategy use, and

individual linguistic profiles. Moreover, very few studies examine L3 pragmatic performance outside the European context or among Arabic-speaking populations. This study addresses these gaps by comparing the production of requests and refusals in English among Arabic-English-Hungarian trilinguals and Arabic-English bilinguals, with particular attention to the pragmatic strategies and modifiers they employ. It also considers how language experience, cultural exposure, and multilingual identity influence their speech act performance.

1.2. Research questions and Hypotheses

Research questions

This study treats pragmatic competence as the ability to plan and realize context-appropriate speech acts by drawing on (i) discourse/textual organization, (ii) pragmalinguistic resources, and (iii) sociopragmatic/strategic choices. To align measurement with theory, we operationalize pragmatic competence through three observable categories in L2 requests and refusals: (1) Text structure (e.g., overall length, expansion/elaboration, openings/closings; (2) Linguistic features (e.g., directness level, internal modification, syntactic and lexical mitigation; and (3) Discursive strategies (e.g., politeness markers, address terms, supportive/justification moves, refusal sequences.

RQ1: (Within speech act associations): Within each group (bilinguals/trilinguals), which pragmatic variables in (i) text structure, (ii) linguistic features, and (iii) discursive strategies co-vary for the speech act of: (a) requests and (b) refusals?

RQ2: (Alignment across speech acts): Within each group (bilinguals/trilinguals), to what extent do an individual's request indicators correlate with their refusal indicators? and does alignment differ by category (text structure vs linguistic features vs discursive strategies)?

RQ3: (External predictors affecting the pragmatic performance): To what extent and in what direction do external factors (i.e., language proficiency, language attitudes, Multicultural Personality traits, Can-Do skills, and language use patterns) predict pragmatic production features in requests and refusals?

RQ4: (Group difference): How do bilinguals and trilinguals differ in their pragmatic production of requests and refusals across indicators of text structure, linguistic features, and discursive strategies?

Hypotheses of the study

Hypothesis 1: (within speech act coherence): In bilinguals, variables such as text structure and discursive strategies will display stronger internal correlations in requests than in refusals. In trilinguals, variables within both requests and refusals will exhibit more consistent and stronger interrelationships than in bilinguals, with greater coherence in refusals due to higher mitigation demands.

Hypothesis 2: (across speech act alignment requests ↔ refusals): Text structure indicators (e.g., length, elaboration) will show little or no cross speech act correlation, whereas discursive strategies (e.g., politeness markers, address terms, justification/support moves) will correlate positively across requests and refusals in both groups.

Hypothesis 3: (Predictors contributing to use of pragmatic indicators): Language use patterns and Multicultural Personality traits (MPQ) will serve as the strongest external predictors of pragmatic production, shaping the structural and strategic realization of requests and refusals.

Hypothesis 4: (Group differences): Trilinguals, on average, will outperform bilinguals in L2 speech-act production (requests/refusals), showing broader strategy repertoires, higher and more context-appropriate mitigation, and more target-like text structuring.

2. Literature review

2.1. Pragmatic Competence in Multilingual Contexts

Studies in applied linguistics have emphasized the significance of multilingualism in shaping pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the speaker's ability to use language appropriately in varying social and communicative contexts, encompassing speech act realization, politeness strategies, implicature, and contextual language use (Kasper & Rose, 2001). Unlike grammatical competence, pragmatic knowledge is context-bound and culturally sensitive, often posing challenges to multilinguals who must negotiate differing sociocultural norms across languages (Taguchi & Roever, 2020).

Research suggests that multilingual speakers benefit from increased exposure to diverse cultural frameworks, which in turn may enhance their sensitivity to pragmatic variation. For instance, Martin-Laguna (2020) and Alcon-Soler (2013) demonstrated evidence for cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer in multilinguals, indicating that pragmatic routines acquired in one language can positively influence performance in others. Van Wonderen et al.'s (2023) meta-

analysis further supports these findings by linking multilingual exposure in childhood to long-term pragmatic development.

These studies lay the groundwork for understanding how pragmatic skills develop in complex linguistic repertoires. Due to this complexity, further research is needed to clarify how the multilingual experience influences pragmatic performance in second language learners. The present study seeks to extend this line of research hopefully with pedagogical and theoretical implications that may clarify the multilingual pragmatic competence.

2.2. The Pragmatics of Speech Acts

Pragmatics has emerged as one of the most dynamic and interdisciplinary fields in modern linguistics, bridging domains such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and language pathology (Huang, 2017). Its relevance extends beyond theoretical linguistics to include practical applications in communication disorders, intercultural exchange, and L2 learning environments. In the study of pragmatic competence, two principal perspectives dominate: the Anglo-American “component view” and the European Continental “functional view.”

From the Anglo-American viewpoint, pragmatics is considered one of the core components of linguistic theory, alongside phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. It is concerned with meaning in context encompassing phenomena such as deixis, implicature, presupposition, reference, and speech acts (Huang, 2017). This approach is influenced heavily by Gricean theories, which introduced the cooperative principle and its maxims Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner as tools for decoding speaker intentions (Grice, 1989). Grice’s model consists of two essential parts: a theory of meaning, where speaker meaning is based on reflexive intention, and a theory of conversational implicature, which posits that listeners infer unstated meanings based on shared conversational norms.

Building on these ideas, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1997) emerged as a competing framework. It maintains the Gricean assumption that communication involves inferring intentions but replaces the cooperative maxims with a single guiding principle: that human cognition and communication are optimized for relevance. In this model, listeners seek the greatest cognitive benefit for the least processing effort. This framework has proved particularly useful in L2 pragmatics, where learners must infer meanings with limited linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Contrastingly, the European Continental tradition, as articulated by Verschueren (1999), views pragmatics as a functional perspective on all language components. Rather than treating it as a separate module, it is seen as a holistic lens cognitive, social, and cultural applied across all linguistic behavior. This tradition emphasizes empirical work in areas such as intercultural communication, interlanguage pragmatics, and socio-pragmatic variation. While the Anglo-American school has advanced philosophical and cognitive models, we believe that the Continental approach has further enriched our understanding of pragmatic behavior across diverse linguistic communities. The current study posits that pragmatics, despite being a fundamental element of linguistic theory, cannot exist in isolation. To better understand its complexities, we need to approach it holistically, hence our utilizing of various pragmatic, linguistic and multicultural assessment tools to achieve that.

2.3. A Comparison Between Speech Acts in Jordanian Arabic and English

Studies on Jordanian Arabic (JA) speech acts are quite rare; JA is a dialect of the Arabic language spoken in Jordan. JA is the native language of over nine million people in Jordan's Hashemite Kingdom. It is a language without a written form; diglossia is a feature of Jordan's linguistic situation. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the widely used variety in education, media, and government communication. There are several sub-dialects of JA: Rural JA, Urban JA, and Bedouin JA (see Al-Wer, 2007).

A growing body of research within the Jordanian context has illustrated marked contrasts in how speech acts are realized in Jordanian Arabic (JA) versus English, particularly among EFL learners. These contrasts are not merely linguistic but sociopragmatic, shaped by culturally grounded communicative norms, values, and role expectations that govern interactional behavior.

In the case of Jordanian Arabic speakers and American English natives for instance, Al Shboul and Huwari (2016) studied the effect of individualism and collectivist cultural factors on refusal productions by Jordanian Arabic speakers (hereafter, JA) and American English speakers (hereafter, AE). The study included 15 native speakers of JA and 15 native speakers of AE. Al-Issa's (1998) Discourse Completion Test (hereafter, DCT) was customized for data gathering. Sequences of semantic patterns and the refusals' taxonomy established by Al-Issa (1998) were employed for data analysis. According to the findings, Americans employed more direct denial methods than Jordanians, who reported more indirect refusals.

The differences between the two selected groups reflect deeply ingrained cultural values. For example, when it came to the content of explanation/excuse, Jordanian participants tended to be less direct and provide explanations other than their own refusal inclination. AE participants, on the other hand, tended to be more direct, and they frequently cited their own preferences as a reason for refusal. Jordanian participants, for example, rarely provide explanations such as "I have to study," whereas AE responses were common. In doing so, Jordanians may feel that studying is under their own control and that they can accept the invitation/offer, request, or suggestion if they truly want to, so such explanations may not be acceptable. This is consistent with (Lyuh, 1992), who associates the less use of such explanations (i.e. I have to study) by Koreans, as a collectivistic culture, to the fact that they may consider studying to be an unacceptable explanation because they can control the situation.

The act of requesting in English by Jordanian EFL learners also reflects significant pragmatic transfer. Al-Ali and Alawneh (2010) found that learners often drew on L1 Arabic structures when constructing requests in English, producing speech acts marked by excessive mitigation or unconventional sequencing. Factors such as limited L2 proficiency, strong L1 pragmatic routines, and an emphasis on status hierarchies contributed to these deviations. Notably, the preference for indirectness was not only retained in the L2 but at times exaggerated due to learners' uncertainty or desire to avoid impoliteness.

A more recent study by Huwari et al. (2023) corroborates and expands on these findings. Their examination of refusal strategies employed by Jordanian and American participants substantiates the assertion that Jordanian speakers are predisposed to utilize ambiguous or subversive expressions when declining offers or requests. This tendency to mitigate directness was particularly pronounced in scenarios involving hierarchical relationships, suggesting that Jordanian speakers are not simply avoiding confrontation but are actively managing interpersonal rapport through culturally appropriate pragmatic strategies. Together, these studies underscore the depth and consistency of L1 influence on speech act realization among Jordanian learners of English.

What emerges from these studies is a complex picture of pragmatic behavior shaped by deep-seated cultural frameworks. Speech acts in Jordanian Arabic reflect a high-context communication style, where meaning is conveyed through implication, shared background knowledge, and relational cues. In contrast, English especially in its American form tends to

favor low-context communication, with an emphasis on explicitness and speaker intention. Jordanian EFL learners must therefore contend with not only linguistic differences but also contrasting assumptions about how meaning is constructed and interpreted.

We bring these studies comparing the speech act realization of Jordanian Arabic with native English speakers to highlight a few key points: first, the high-context nature of the Jordanian community and how it shapes indirectness, justification, and mitigation in L1 speech act production; second, the influence of sociocultural expectations regarding politeness, hierarchy, and group cohesion, which often leads to pragmatic transfer when Jordanians use English.

These cross-cultural contrasts between implicit, relationship-centered strategies of Arabic and the more explicit, autonomy-driven norms of English help contextualize how bilingual and trilingual Jordanian speakers may construct requests and refusals in English. Whether through retained indirectness, overelaboration, or shifts in modal use and justification structures, these pragmatic tendencies are likely to surface in patterned ways across both groups, especially when one of them had acquired and a new third language system such as Hungarian.

2.4. The Pragmatic Competence in English of Two Different groups of Jordanian Arabic L1 (JA) Speakers

The majority of Jordanian scholars have compared how native speakers of Jordanian Arabic produce speech acts with how Jordanian EFL learners and native speakers of American or British English realize similar speech acts. (e.g., Banikalef, Maros, Aladdi, & AlNatour, 2015). Even though Jordanian students begin studying English in Grade 1 (six years old) in primary schools and continue until Grade 12 (18 years old) in secondary schools, they still struggle to communicate effectively with English native speakers. Many researchers have identified this issue, stating that Jordanians lack the necessary pragmatic competence, preventing them from communicating effectively in the target language (Al-Momani, 2009; Al-Shboul, & Maros 2013; Bataineh, 2014).

Much of this pragmatic incompetence in English can be traced back to the domain specific status of the language in Jordan. According to Rababah (2002), students in Jordan learn English in their native Arabic-speaking country because there are few opportunities for them to practice the language in real-world situations. Even English-language graduates in Jordan, he continues, have trouble communicating in English, and they frequently lack the vocabulary needed to fully express themselves while speaking to others.

This lack of knowledge on the practices and sociocultural norms of English has been reported by several Jordanian L2 speech act studies. Al Issa (2003) for instance investigated the realization patterns of refusal strategies by Jordanians and Americans in the Jordanian context. The primary goal of was to determine whether there was evidence of pragmatic transfer from Arabic to English, as well as the reasons for this transfer. Data was gathered using a written DCT. These interviews were conducted to determine the motivators for pragmatic transfer from L1. The findings indicated pragmatic transfer in terms of the frequency, type, number, and content of the semantic formulas used. Furthermore, when compared to American refusals, Jordanian participants tend to refuse in lengthy, elaborate ways and employ less direct strategies, particularly when the interlocutor is of a higher social status.

Moreover, Al-Ali and Alawneh (2010) investigated mitigating devices in requests made by Jordanian English learners. According to them, three major factors influence IL performance: language ability, L2 pragmatic knowledge, and L1 transfer. Pragmatic transfer occurred because of over-initiating requests with expressions such as 'excuse me' (from Arabic *afwan*) and 'hello' (from Arabic *marhaba*). Learners also transmitted certain cultural conventions by using expressions of gratitude, well-wishing, and obligation that are common in Arab culture.

In Jordan, scholars such as Al-Momani (2009) and Al-Shboul (2013) claimed that research on Jordanian L2 speakers' pragmatic competence is sparse, and thus little is known about JL2Ss' pragmatic competence. Many Jordanian students go to England to complete their high school education, according to Al Adaileh (2007). Therefore, the present study enriches an already scarce field of pragmatic studies in the Jordanian context by investigating the pragmatic abilities of bilingual Jordanians living in Jordan in comparison with those of trilingual Jordanians living in Hungary.

3. Methodology

3.1. Description of the research design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental cross-sectional survey design to examine the L2 pragmatic ability of two distinct groups of multilingual Jordanian adults. A bilingual group living in Jordan, and a trilingual group living in Hungary. The design is comparative in nature, this between-subjects design was chosen because participants naturally belonged to the same language-background, but with an additional language for the trilingual population.

The primary data collection instrument was an extensive online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The survey was distributed remotely, enabling participants in both Jordan and Hungary to participate conveniently using their personal devices. It encompassed multiple sections designed to gather information on various dimensions of the participants' experience, including their linguistic background and usage patterns, attitudes toward mono- and multilingualism, self-rated language proficiencies, multicultural personality traits, and pragmatic language skills. Data collection was carried out in two waves: an initial wave from March to September 2022, and a second wave from July to September 2024. This phased approach provided sufficient time to recruit the required number of participants in both groups, especially for the relatively hard-to-reach trilingual group and ultimately yielded a total sample of (N= 52) valid responses (26 participants in each subgroup).

3.2. Participants

The total sample consisted of 52 participants, divided equally into two groups: 26 bilingual participants residing in Jordan and 26 trilingual participants residing in Hungary. For the bilingual group, there were 13 males and 13 females. The age distribution showed that 7 participants were aged 18-24 years, 13 were aged 25-32 years, 5 were aged 33-40 years, and 1 participant was over 41 years old. All bilingual participants were born in Jordan and currently reside there. In terms of education, 17 participants hold a BA degree, 5 hold an MA degree, and 4 are PhD holders. All participants in this group identified Arabic as their first language (L1).

For the trilingual group, 13 were males and 13 were females. The majority of participants (22) were aged between 25-32 years, and 4 were aged 33-40 years. Most trilingual participants were born in Jordan (22), while only (4) were born elsewhere. All trilingual participants resided in Hungary at the time of the study. In terms of educational background, none of the trilingual participants had a BA degree; 14 hold an MA, and 12 hold a PhD. Similar to the bilingual group, all participants in the trilingual group identified Arabic as their first language. See Table (2).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participant groups (counts and percentages).

Participants	Subcategory	Bilinguals_(N)	Bilinguals_%	Trilinguals_(N)	Trilinguals_%
Gender	Males	13	50	13	50
	Females	13	50	13	50
Age	18–24	7	26.9	0	0
	25–32	13	50	22	84.6
	33–40	5	19.3	4	15.4
	41+	1	3.8	0	0

Place of Birth	Jordan	26	100	22	84.6
	Elsewhere	0	0	4	15.4
Education	BA	17	65.4	0	0
	MA	5	19.2	14	53.8
	PhD	4	15.4	12	46.2
L1	Arabic	25	96.2	26	100
	English	1	3.8	0	0

Note. $N = 52$ (26 bilinguals, 26 trilinguals).

This study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants who met specific linguistic and contextual criteria. The purposive element involved the deliberate selection of participants based on their multilingual background and current place of residence, age, and gender which were central to the aims of this study.

3.3. Research instruments

This study utilized an online questionnaire comprising: a multilingual background profile, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), and written discourse-completion tasks eliciting English requests and refusals. The next subsections describes and details each section of the tool.

Multilingual Background Questionnaire

To contextualize participants' linguistic profiles, the study began with a multilingual background questionnaire adopted from Stavans (2020) covering self-assessments of language proficiency, language use, language attitudes, and self-reported abilities ("Can-Do" statements). This instrument was utilized to see if differences in pragmatic performance are predicted by the participant's language background.

This section first assessed the participants' proficiency in each language they speak (e.g. Arabic, English, plus Hungarian) on a 4-point scale from "Extremely poor" to "Native-like," which was converted into a percentage score. They also reported how frequently they use each language with different interlocutors of intimate relationships such as (family, friends etc.) or with people of formal relationships (teachers, strangers etc.) and for various purposes (sustainability, entertainment, work).

The responses were coded on a numeric scale (1 = only L1, up to 4 = only L2/L3) and converted to percentages, indicating the degree of reliance on L2/L3 versus L1 in each context. Moreover, the questionnaire probed language attitudes (positive or negative opinions on being monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual) using a series of Likert-scale statements. These attitudinal measures (e.g. agreeing that "Speaking two languages is not difficult") were averaged into pro-

and con-multilingual attitude scores for each participant. Attitudes data were hoped to create a standpoint into participants' mindset toward language use, which could subtly influence how they perform speech acts or respond to language situations. Finally, a set of "Can-Do statements" assessed the participants' self-rated performance in various communicative tasks (speaking, understanding, reading/writing) in each language.

Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)

MPQ originally developed by (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) was selected to assess participants' personal traits related to multicultural effectiveness. The MPQ is a well-established instrument that measures five multicultural traits critically in cross-cultural contexts: Cultural Empathy, Open-Mindedness, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability, and Flexibility. Each of these traits reflect an aspect of how individuals interact with different cultures for example, cultural empathy gauges the ability to identify with people from other cultures, and open-mindedness assesses openness to new cultural norms.

In implementation, participants rated themselves on a five-point Likert scale for each of the MPQ's statements (e.g. ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with statements like "I enjoy social activities in other cultures"). Following the instrument's standard procedure, we scored each of the five dimensions by averaging the relevant items, then converted these scores into percentages for ease of interpretation. The output is a multicultural personality profile for each participant, indicating (in percentage terms) how high they scored in each trait

Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for Pragmatic Elicitation

To gather data on pragmatic language use, the study employed a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of cross-cultural speech act realization Project (CCSARP) for requests (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) and the refusal DCT format of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). A DCT is a written instrument where participants are presented with situational prompts and asked to respond as if they were in that situation.

This method was chosen as the primary means of eliciting speech acts (specifically requests and refusals) in English, the target language. We built on this framework to create a set of 18 scenarios (9 request prompts and 9 refusal prompts) that are pragmatically appropriate for our context. Each scenario was crafted to reflect everyday interactions relevant to the participants (e.g., making a request to a professor, refusing an invitation from a friend), mirroring realistic social settings in Jordan or similar environments.

3.4. Procedure

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling through email invitations and social media platforms and completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms. Ethical procedures were ensured through an informed consent statement outlining the study's purpose, anonymity, and voluntary participation. The questionnaire, developed in consultation with the research supervisor, was administered in English and followed a fixed sequence covering background information, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), and a Discourse Completion Test (DCT).

Data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase (March–September 2022) involved initial recruitment and data gathering, while a second phase (July–September 2024) targeted bilingual participants to address sample imbalances and ensure data validity, using an improved elicitation tool with identical tasks. Responses were collected remotely without time constraints.

Following data collection, responses were organized, coded, and exported to Excel, with DCT data separated into request and refusal categories. Participants were assigned structured codes reflecting demographic and linguistic variables. After data cleaning, ineligible cases were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 52 participants. The datasets were merged into a single database, and statistical analyses, including correlations and multiple regression, were conducted using SPSS to examine relationships across multilingual profiles and pragmatic performance. Results were then organized for reporting in the Results chapter.

4. Results

The analysis revealed two distinct pragmatic profiles, which we term the Relational System (Bilinguals) and the Structural System (Trilinguals).

This section examines differences in the groups pragmatic production of requests and refusals across indicators of text structure, linguistic features, and discursive strategies. The analysis focuses on identifying significant group contrasts in pragmatic performance, and whether multilingualism contributes to broader coordination or variation across speech acts.

To contextualize the comparative patterns observed in requests and refusals, the section begins with a consolidated profile of the two groups based on their linguistic background and multicultural personality traits. The profile provides an empirical basis for interpreting and discussing the significant group differences that follow. Table 2 compares the participants' scores in terms of their background variable scores.

Table 2. Summary of Bilingual and Trilingual Participants' Background Variable Scores

	Background variable	Bilinguals M (SD)	Trilinguals M (SD)	<i>p</i>
Proficiency	Ar L1 proficiency	3.77 (0.52)	3.85 (0.46)	0.42
	En L2 proficiency	2.73 (0.53)	3.23 (0.51)	< .001
	Hu L3 proficiency	0.00 (0.00)	2.31 (0.75)	< .001
Language use	Intimate I1 use	90.7 (10.2)	60.7 (20.2)	< .001
	Intimate L2/L3 use	9.23 (10.2)	18.4 (16.0)	0.01
	Intimate Bi use	0.00 (0.00)	2.31 (9.24)	0.15
	Intimate Tri use	0.00 (0.00)	5.38 (13.2)	0.04
	Formal I1 use	63.8 (21.9)	14.6 (16.8)	< .001
	Formal L2/L3 use	31.92 (21.9)	67.3 (22.4)	< .001
	Formal Bi use	4.23 (10.3)	18.8 (20.8)	0.01
	Formal Tri use	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	–
	Entertainment I1 use	40.8 (26.1)	8.17 (13.5)	< .001
	Entertainment I2/L3 use	26.5 (23.2)	48.2 (21.1)	0.002
	Entertainment Bi use	32.3 (22.2)	39.6 (18.1)	0.23
	Entertainment Tri use	1.06 (4.16)	4.52 (7.53)	0.04
	Sustainability I1 use	77.6 (18.5)	29.6 (21.7)	< .001
	Sustainability I2/L3 use	19.2 (17.2)	53.8 (23.6)	< .001
	Sustainability Bi use	3.15 (9.12)	16.5 (20.1)	0.01
	Sustainability Tri use	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	–
	Business I1 use	27.5 (24.9)	4.71 (10.5)	< .001
	Business I2/L3 use	34.3 (26.1)	48.2 (25.5)	0.05
	Business Bi use	19.8 (25.9)	12.9 (22.6)	0.28
	Business Tri use	0.00 (0.00)	22.6 (19.3)	< .001
Language attitude	L1+ Attitude	3.54 (0.58)	3.69 (0.75)	0.33
	L1- Attitude	2.73 (0.99)	3.31 (0.97)	0.03
	Bi+ Attitude	3.85 (0.43)	3.92 (0.27)	0.34
	Bi- Attitude	2.50 (0.65)	2.77 (0.81)	0.13
	Tri+ Attitude	2.73 (0.65)	3.31 (0.84)	0.01
	Tri- Attitude	2.31 (0.47)	2.69 (0.80)	0.04
MPQ	Cultural empathy	4.01 (0.72)	4.23 (0.60)	0.22
	Flexibility	3.34 (0.66)	3.04 (0.96)	0.11
	Social initiative	3.35 (0.46)	3.31 (0.50)	0.67
	Emotional stability	3.18 (0.59)	3.24 (0.57)	0.68
	Open mindedness	3.52 (0.74)	3.82 (0.67)	0.09
Can-Do	L1 Understanding	3.79 (0.90)	4.39 (0.61)	< .001
	L1 Speaking	4.24 (0.82)	4.66 (0.55)	0.01
	L1 Reading/Writing	3.83 (0.88)	4.43 (0.70)	< .001
	L2 Understanding	4.88 (0.19)	4.82 (0.40)	0.52
	L2 Speaking	4.78 (0.33)	4.70 (0.49)	0.41
	L2 Reading/Writing	4.66 (0.52)	4.66 (0.55)	0.98
	L3 Understanding	0.00 (0.00)	2.47 (0.88)	< .001
	L3 Speaking	0.00 (0.00)	1.65 (0.87)	< .001

L3 Reading/Writing	0.00 (0.00)	1.77 (0.96)	< .001
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Note: N=52, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, p < .001.

The background profiles of the two groups differed in several key areas. Trilingual participants reported significantly higher English L2 proficiency ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.51$) than bilinguals ($M = 2.73, SD = 0.53$), $p < .001$, confirming a stronger command of the target language. Their language-use patterns also diverged markedly: bilinguals relied far more on Arabic across intimate, formal, entertainment, sustainability, and business domains ($p < .001$), whereas trilinguals showed consistently higher use of English/Hungarian in these same contexts, including intimate ($M = 18.4, SD = 16.0$), formal ($M = 67.3, SD = 22.4$), entertainment ($M = 48.2, SD = 21.1$), sustainability ($M = 53.8, SD = 23.6$), and business domains ($M = 48.2, SD = 25.5$), all $p \leq .05$.

Attitude differences paralleled these patterns. Trilinguals held significantly more positive views of multilingualism ($M = 3.31, SD = 0.84$), $p = .01$, and stronger negative views of monolingualism ($M = 2.69, SD = 0.80$), $p = .04$, as well as more negative attitudes toward L1 (L1- Attitude: $M = 3.31, SD = 0.97$), $p = .03$.

Across multicultural personality traits (cultural empathy, flexibility, social initiative, emotional stability, open-mindedness) and the remaining language-attitude scales, the two groups were broadly comparable, with no statistically significant differences.

We learn from these profiles that, because the two groups view their languages rather differently, inhabit different linguistic environments, and they operate with distinctly different language repertoires, their pragmatic output diverges in some areas. To integrate these patterns more directly into the results, Table 3 presents a single consolidated comparative table summarizing all significant group differences in pragmatic production across textual, linguistic, and discursive dimensions.

Table 3. Summary of Significant Group Differences in Pragmatic Production

Textual structure	Variable	Bilinguals M (SD)	Trilinguals M (SD)	p-value	Direction / Interpretation
Components (Requests)	Core	63.5 (14.9)	72.7 (17.2)	0.044	Trilinguals used more core acts in requests
Connectors (Requests)	Subordinate connectors	0.6 (1.0)	36.3 (41.0)	<.001	Trilinguals employed far more subordinate connectors
	Coordinate connectors	0.5 (0.7)	27.8 (36.9)	<.001	Trilinguals favored coordinate connectors

Connectors (Refusals)	Subordinate connectors	0.3 (1.0)	13.5 (30.2)	0.031	Trilinguals used more subordinate connectors
	Coordinate connectors	2.5 (2.3)	78.8 (40.4)	<.001	Trilinguals used more coordinate connectors
<hr/>					
Text linguistic					
Lexicon – Refusals	Informal titles	5.5 (6.4)	11.2 (10.0)	0.017	Trilinguals used more informal titles
	Endearment terms	1.4 (3.2)	0.0 (0.0)	0.032	Bilinguals used more endearment terms
Verb Type – Refusals	Main verbs	14.1 (3.5)	17.1 (3.2)	0.002	Trilinguals used more main verbs
	Cognitive verbs	2.6 (3.4)	0.8 (2.0)	0.027	Bilinguals used more cognitive verbs
<hr/>					
Discursive strategies					
Politeness Markers	Requests	3.5 (2.7)	19.9 (13.0)	<.001	Trilinguals used significantly more politeness markers
	Refusals	4.3 (2.4)	18.8 (13.0)	<.001	Trilinguals used significantly more politeness markers
Power Relations	Refusals (Less Power)	20.9 (5.5)	26.0 (10.3)	0.03	Trilinguals used more refusals toward lower-power interlocutors

Note: N=52, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, p < .001.

The comparative results indicate that the structural features of requests and refusals produced by bilingual and trilingual participants exhibited similar structural patterns, but several significant contrasts emerged in the use of connectors and in the distribution of core components.

In terms of clause and sentence organization, the two groups produced comparable text lengths and numbers of clauses, indicating equivalent overall elaboration across acts. However, a significant difference appeared in the Requests core component, where trilinguals scored higher ($M = 72.7$, $SD = 17.2$) than bilinguals ($M = 63.5$, $SD = 14.9$), $p = .044$. This suggests that trilingual participants favored structurally concentrated messages focused on the central communicative intent, while bilinguals distributed effort more evenly between elaboration and supportive material.

The most notable differences were found in connector use. Trilinguals employed significantly more subordinate connectors in requests ($M = 36.3$, $SD = 41.0$) than bilinguals ($M = 0.6$, $SD = 1.0$), $t(50) = 6.15$, $p < .001$, and more coordinate connectors ($M = 27.8$, $SD = 36.9$ vs. $M = 0.5$, $SD = 0.7$) $p < .001$. In refusals, trilinguals also exceeded bilinguals in subordinate connector use

($M = 13.5$, $SD = 30.2$ vs. $M = 0.3$, $SD = 1.0$), $p = .031$, and coordinate connectors ($M = 78.8$, $SD = 40.4$ vs. $M = 2.5$, $SD = 2.3$), $p < .001$.

Overall, the structural comparison reveals that while both groups managed comparable text length, trilinguals demonstrated higher syntactic density and greater use of cohesive devices, reflecting advanced clause integration and relational control in English production. Bilinguals, meanwhile, displayed structurally balanced but more linearly segmented production, prioritizing clarity over subordination.

Results in the linguistic dimension show major differences between bilinguals and trilinguals in primarily in refusal productions rather than in requests. Trilinguals used significantly more informal titles in refusals ($M = 11.2$, $SD = 10.0$) than bilinguals ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 6.4$), $p = .017$. In contrast, bilinguals employed more endearment expressions ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 3.2$) than trilinguals ($M = 0.0$, $SD = 0.0$), $p = .032$.

At the verb level, trilinguals produced significantly more main verbs in refusals ($M = 17.1$, $SD = 3.2$) than bilinguals ($M = 14.1$, $SD = 3.5$), $p = .002$, indicating denser syntactic structure. Conversely, bilinguals used more cognitive internal-state verbs ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 3.4$) than trilinguals ($M = 0.8$, $SD = 2.0$), $p = .027$. No other differences reached statistical significance.

The linguistic comparison implies that group differences emerged solely in refusals, where trilinguals relied more on formal lexical precision and syntactic density through main verb use, while bilinguals favored affective and cognitive expression via internal-state and endearment terms. These patterns suggest that trilinguals' refusals exhibit a more structurally grounded and socially moderated lexical style, whereas bilinguals' language choices emphasize emotional resonance and justification. Finally, the results show that trilingual participants demonstrated a significantly more refined discursive profile than bilinguals. They used more politeness markers in both requests ($M = 19.9$, $SD = 13.0$) than bilinguals ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 2.7$), $p < .001$, and in refusals ($M = 18.8$, $SD = 13.0$) compared to bilinguals ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 2.4$), $p < .001$.

These differences suggest that trilinguals relied more on conventional politeness routines to mitigate both initiating and rejecting speech acts. Regarding power relations, trilinguals produced more refusals addressed to interlocutors of lower power ($M = 26.0$, $SD = 10.3$) than bilinguals ($M = 20.9$, $SD = 5.5$), $p = .030$, indicating heightened awareness of social hierarchy and the pragmatic demands of downward communication. In sum, the results indicate that trilinguals exhibit broader pragmatic control, using politeness and power-sensitive strategies to

maintain interpersonal harmony, whereas bilinguals rely on a more direct yet equally stable tone system in managing speech acts across contexts.

4.1. Results summary

As a final synthesis of the results, this section highlights the major empirical outcomes beyond statistical detail, focusing instead on the pragmatic profiles revealed in the data.

The comparative synthesis of bilingual versus trilingual performance drew together these patterns across all dimensions. While both groups produced texts of comparable overall length, trilinguals demonstrated greater syntactic density and more cohesive linking, consolidating information in core components; bilinguals favored more linearly segmented structures that preserved clarity and fostered rapport.

Lexically, group differences were most pronounced in refusals: trilinguals relied on formally precise, structurally grounded verb choices and dense main-verb profiles, whereas bilinguals employed more cognitive and endearment resources to support justification and interpersonal warmth. Discursively, trilinguals deployed conventional politeness routines more extensively and were more attuned to power asymmetries, while bilinguals maintained a steady relational tone and employed directness selectively when appropriate.

Taken together, the results demonstrate the emergence of two coherent, functional, and distinct pragmatic systems. **Bilinguals enact a relational system**, in which L1 based pragmatics is the main performance driver. Their pragmatic choices are stimulated by relational considerations such as maintaining rapport, overt elaboration, ensuring clarity and indirectness through interpersonal cues.

Trilinguals follow a structurally coordinated system, supported by L2/L3 proficiency, regular multilingual use, and positive attitudes toward multilingualism, which together promote cohesive structuring pragmatic components, context-appropriate mitigation and politeness in both requests and refusals.

5. Discussion

This chapter interpreted the findings on bilingual and trilingual Jordanian EFL learners' production of English requests and refusals, situating them within multilingual pragmatics (e.g., Safont-Jordà, 2005; Taguchi, 2019; Shafran & Stavans, 2023). The discussion addressed how pragmatic competence is shaped across multilingual profiles and clarified the study's contribution to understanding L2 pragmatic development.

5.1. Background Predictors of Pragmatic Performance

The analysis of background variables confirmed that pragmatic competence is multifaceted, emerging from the interaction of linguistic, psychological, and experiential factors (Dewaele, 2010; Taguchi, 2011). No single predictor dominated; rather, multiple variables exerted selective influences.

Language proficiency played a limited role. L1 proficiency sometimes constrained L2 discourse choices, supporting cross-linguistic influence accounts (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), though it also reinforced relational softeners such as address terms, reflecting Arabic politeness norms (Farghal & Shakir, 1994). L2 proficiency primarily expanded structural possibilities, enabling greater elaboration and cohesion, but did not guarantee pragmatic appropriateness, consistent with findings that sociocultural knowledge remains central (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). L3 proficiency showed only marginal effects, mainly in supporting clause linkage, possibly reflecting structural transfer from Hungarian (Safont-Jordà, 2005; Kiss, 2002).

Self-perceived language skills (Can-Do abilities) influenced pragmatic choices more directly than objective proficiency. Higher perceived competence was associated with streamlined discourse and reduced reliance on formulaic elaboration, supporting claims that confidence enhances pragmatic efficiency (Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2019).

Language use emerged as the strongest predictor. Frequent use of Arabic in intimate contexts promoted elaborated and polite English refusals, reflecting culturally grounded norms of indirectness and face-work (Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2016; Hammouri & Al-Khanji, 2023). In contrast, use of English in academic and professional domains was associated with greater structural clarity, cohesion, and conventional mitigation, consistent with register-based accounts of institutional discourse (Biber, 2006; Schauer, 2009). These findings support usage-based models, where pragmatic competence develops through repeated contextualized interaction (Ellis, 2008; Barron, 2003).

Language attitudes played a complex role. Positive attitudes toward Arabic were linked to more concise and direct English production, reflecting linguistic self-confidence (Dewaele, 2007; Gardner, 2010). In contrast, negative attitudes toward Arabic or bilingualism led to over-elaboration, increased mitigation, or reduced politeness, reflecting anxiety-driven over-monitoring (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002) and affective constraints on pragmatic processing (Dewaele, 2013). These findings highlight the role of affective filters in shaping pragmatic behavior (Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2019).

Multicultural personality traits, particularly cultural empathy and social initiative, were significant predictors of variation in politeness and mitigation. These results align with research linking empathy to increased use of mitigating strategies (Ruytenbeek, 2025) and with broader accounts of individual differences in L2 pragmatics (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024). However, personality effects remained secondary to language use, reinforcing the primacy of experiential exposure (Ishihara & Cohen, 2020).

Overall, the findings confirmed that experience-based factors (language use) exert the strongest influence, followed by psychological variables (attitudes and personality), while proficiency plays a more limited role.

5.2. The Bilingual–Trilingual Contrast

The final synthesis identified two distinct pragmatic systems: a relational system (bilinguals) and a structural system (trilinguals).

The bilingual system is rooted in Arabic sociocultural norms, characterized by frequent use of kinship terms, endearments, and relational softeners to maintain interpersonal harmony. This aligns with established descriptions of Arabic politeness practices (Al-Khatib, 2001; Jawad, 2023). Their pragmatic choices reflect identity alignment, where L1-based strategies are maintained as markers of cultural affiliation (Dewaele, 2015; Isabelli-García, 2006).

In contrast, the trilingual system reflects structural coordination and adaptability, shaped by multilingual use and positive attitudes toward multilingualism (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). Their performance aligns with research showing that multilingual experience enhances flexibility in discourse management and pragmatic adaptation (Mayo & Agirre, 2019). Regular use of multiple languages in institutional contexts reinforces standardized, cohesive, and context-sensitive strategies.

Importantly, the findings refine the concept of “outperformance.” Trilinguals did not simply perform better; rather, they demonstrated a qualitatively different mode of pragmatic organization, characterized by structural coherence and cross-context adaptability. Bilinguals, by contrast, exhibited strength in relational communication and identity-based pragmatics.

Thus, the study does not establish a hierarchy but identifies two functionally distinct systems, each optimized for different communicative goals: relational continuity versus structural flexibility.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the pragmatic competence of bilingual and trilingual Jordanian speakers in producing L2 request and refusal speech acts, not in terms of superiority, but in terms of underlying linguistic and cultural systems. The findings demonstrate that pragmatic competence develops differently across multilingual profiles. Bilinguals tend to rely on a relational, L1-grounded sociopragmatic system, whereas trilinguals employ a structurally explicit and globally coordinated system shaped by broader multilingual experience.

These results support a theoretical shift away from a single notion of “appropriate” L2 use toward viewing pragmatic competence as a dynamic, resource-based system. Rather than representing stronger or weaker ability, bilingual and trilingual speakers exhibit distinct yet equally valid forms of competence, shaped by their linguistic histories and communicative environments.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings challenge deficit-based models that treat L1-influenced pragmatic strategies as errors. Instead, bilingual speakers’ use of relational strategies (e.g., indirectness, affective softening, and cultural expressions) should be understood as systematic and meaningful, not deficient. At the same time, trilingual experience appears to foster greater structural awareness, adaptability, and coordination in pragmatic production.

Accordingly, L2 instruction should aim to expand learners’ pragmatic repertoires rather than replace existing ones. This involves validating L1-based strategies, promoting comparative pragmatics, and fostering metapragmatic awareness, enabling learners to shift flexibly between relational and structurally explicit communication styles depending on context.

Overall, the study reinforces the view that pragmatic competence is adaptive, multidimensional, and context-dependent, rather than a fixed or uniform outcome.

The study is subject to several limitations. The relatively small and homogeneous sample (N = 52) limits generalizability and statistical power. The reliance on self-reported and unsupervised online data collection introduces potential concerns regarding response authenticity. Additionally, the complexity of the research design, incorporating multiple variables and participant groups, may have affected the clarity and focus of some findings.

Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples to improve representativeness. Methodologically, greater emphasis on qualitative and performance-based data (e.g., role-plays, natural interactions, standardized proficiency measures) would provide deeper insight into pragmatic behavior.

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