Pragmatic strategies in Vietnamese and Japanese complaints and complaint responses: A World Englishes perspective on learner agency

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Abstract

This study investigates how Vietnamese and Japanese undergraduate learners of English performed *complaints* and responses to *complaints* in a simulated international business exchange project. Drawing on multiple pragmatic research frameworks (three for *compliments*, three for responses to *compliments*, and modality markers), the study analyzed 158 emails exchanged by students from universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Tokyo, Japan. The Vietnamese students performed these speech acts more clearly and directly, flexibly using various strategies. In contrast, the Japanese students showed a strong preference for indirect and face-saving strategies, resulted in their intentions being obscured due to a lack of negative evaluations in their *complaints* as well as both linguistic and sociocultural L1 transfer. Finally, the paper reviews the latest ELF research, providing implications for pragmatic instruction in class particularly how teachers can consider L2 learners' agency from a World Englishes perspective. In conclusion, teachers should encourage L2 learners to become effective ELF users who can make *informed pragmatic choices* (Ishihara & Cohen, 2022) based on knowledge of English culture norms and how they

wish to present themselves in English. By doing so, educators can empower learners to navigate global communication with strategic competence and an authentic voice.

Introduction

According to Kachru and Smith (2008), only over 300 million people used English as their first language, whereas 800 million people lived in the Outer Circle, where English is an official language, or in the Expanding Circles, where English is used as a lingua franca to communicate with foreigners. Jenkins (2015) reported that the number of actual L2 speakers increased "from 235,351,300 in 1997 to over 430 million in 2003" (p. 2), and approximately one to two billion people use English as a Lingua Franca (EFL) or English as an International Language (EIL). Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020) defined EIL as "the status of English as the world's second language and the commonest language utilized for global business, trade, travel, correspondence, and numerous others" (pp. 1-2). Therefore, it is estimated that people living in Kachru's Expanding Circle like Vietnamese and Japanese will have more opportunities to communicate in English with English non-native speakers rather than native speakers. In this context, many scholars have questioned whether English pedagogy based solely on native speaker norms is truly effective in preparing learners for their future English use (Tajeddin and Pakzadian, 2020). This tendency is strong in Asia (Kachuru, 1998) because English is a dominant EIL in Asia (Lam, Cheng, Kong, 2014).

This study has three objectives: first, to provide empirical data on how Vietnamese and Japanese undergraduate learners of English composed *complaints* and *complaint responses*; second, to make pedagogical suggestions for how teachers can teach English norms while respecting non-native English learners' agency; and third, to provide teachers with comprehensive criteria for analyzing learners' *complaints* and *complaint responses* (see Methodology and Appendix). This study aims to contribute to the fields of intercultural pragmatics and TESOL since the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and Japanese English use have been little explored. Also, many native English speakers teaching English to non-native English speakers wonder how they should teach English usage to their students while respecting their identities and agency. This study will provide them with some implications.

Compliments and *responses to compliments* in business settings can be useful materials for teaching pragmatics to university students in terms of polite and effective communication because many of them are preparing to enter the business world. Furthermore, *complaints* are,

among the speech acts, young business persons most wish to have studied during college (Koseki, 2021). Moreover, *complaints* and *complaint responses* occupy the greatest number of pages among speech acts in business English textbooks for CEFR A1–A2+ learners, published by three major global publishers: Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Pearson (Koseki, 2022). These findings suggest that teaching complaint-related speech acts at the university level is particularly relevant for English language learners preparing for professional communication.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics refers to "the ways in which [linguistic forms] are used in a social context to perform a communicative act" (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). The pragmatic meaning of an utterance often depends on its context. For example, the statement "It's cold in here" may function as a suggestion ("Let's eat in the kitchen") or as a request ("James, shut the window") depending on the situation (Peccei, 2007, p. 4). Without an understanding of the illocutionary force and the sociocultural conventions and norms that govern language use, speakers may unintentionally convey meanings that differ from their intended message.

Jenny Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic failure as "the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'" (p. 91), emphasizing that while grammatical errors may signal limited language proficiency, pragmatic failure can negatively affect how a speaker is perceived as a person (p. 97). She further warns that such failures can lead to cross-cultural communication breakdowns and contribute to harmful national stereotypes. These insights underscore the critical role of pragmatic competence in effective and respectful intercultural communication.

Speech acts

John Austin (1962) introduced the concept of speech acts, recognizing that language is not only used to convey information but also to perform actions. For example, the utterance "I do" (p. 5) spoken during a wedding, enacts the social reality that the speaker is marrying his or her

partner. Austin referred to such expressions as a speech-act, which includes acts such as apologizing, begging, criticizing, ordering, praying, promising, thanking, and warning.

Speech acts are inherently relational. As Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021) explain, they "affect the relationship between the person who makes them and their interactional partner" (p. 24). Because speech acts carry interpersonal and sociocultural weight, pragmatic failure in their execution can lead to misunderstandings and potentially damage relationships between interlocutors.

Complaints

Much of the previous pragmatic research on *complaints* used the criteria developed by Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper (1981), Elite Olshtain and Liora Weinbach (1987, 1993), or Anna Trosborg (1995) to analyze the data. House and Kasper (1981) compared German English learners' and British English native speakers' *complaints* and *requests* elicited via role-playing in terms of directness levels and modality markers. They found that Germans used higher levels of directness. Some German learners explicitly condemned the interlocutor's actions or the interlocutor himself or herself whereas English native speakers did not do so. House and Kasper explained that this type of utterance "seems to be taboo in the British cultural context, while it seems perfectly appropriate behavior for Germans under specific interactional conditions" (p. 183). House and Kasper's (1981) comprehensive model of directness levels (see Methodology) as well as modality markers (see Appendix) have been used in much subsequent research of *complaints*.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) analyzed Hebrew *complaints* elicited from 70 university students (35 native and 35 non-native Hebrew speakers) through discourse completion tests in twenty situations. They found that native Hebrew speakers used more severe expressions than non-native speakers, particularly when their interlocutor was of lower status and the contract between speaker and listener was explicit. In their another study (1993), Olshtain and Weinbach compared the *complaint* strategy choices of 25 Hebrew, 23 American English, and 27 British English native speakers using a questionnaire consisting of 20 situations including five distractors to explore their cultural differences. They found a similar tendency in complaint

strategy choice among the three groups even though slightly more American English speakers avoided censure and that slightly more British English speakers chose indirect strategies than Hebrew speakers depending on the contents.

Anna Trosborg (1995) compared English *complaints* created by Danish learners of English at three different proficiency levels with those created by native English speakers as well as with Danish *complaints* created by native Danish speakers. The data were collected from conversations about assigned situations (e.g., The hearer has borrowed the speaker' car and damaged it. [p. 319]). She found that Danish learners of English, regardless of proficiency level, had difficulty making English *complaints* appropriately, particularly in mastering indirect strategies like hinting. However, the results of native Danish speakers' performances in Danish and those of native English speakers' performances in English were similar, showing that Danish learners' difficulty in performing appropriate English *complaints* seemed to derive from their lack of English language proficiency rather than cultural differences.

Beth Murphy and Joyce Neu (1996) analyzed *complaints* directed at a professor from American and Korean graduate students. The results showed that 79% of Korean students' complaints were classified as criticisms (e.g., "But you just only look at your point of view and uh you just didn't recognize my point." (p. 200)) and 21% of their complaints demanded solutions rather than requesting them (e.g., "Your grading is not fair and uh so it must be changed" (p. 203)). Also, they found that American *complaints* typically included four components: (1) an explanation of the purpose of the complaint, (2) the complaint, (3) a justification for the complaint, and (4) a request for a solution.

Responses to complaints

Compared to research on *complaints*, the number of research on responses to *complaints* is significantly limited (Davidow, 2003). Previous research on responses to *complaints* mainly focused on how organizations address their customers' complaints, offering strategies to better satisfy complainants. William Benoit (1997, 2018) proposed a typology of *image restoration strategies* based on his previous studies of major American companies' responses and image restoration strategies during corporate crises. He found that the typical strategies used by major

American companies were denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification (apologies) (Benoit, 1997, p. 179).

On the other hand, Moshe Davidow (2003) identified six dimensions influencing customer behavior after receiving the responses to their complaints by analyzing 57 complaint-handling studies published from 1981 to 2001. The six dimensions of organizational responses identified were timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility, and attentiveness (p. 232).

Sabine Einwiller and Sarah Steilen (2015) analyzed 15,045 complaints and responses to complaints (5023 original complaints, 4153 corporate responses, 3335 follow-up posts by complainants, and 2534 posts by other users) from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of 34 large American companies selected from the Forbes Global 2000 lists (p. 199). They identified Benoit's (1997, 2018) image restoration strategies and Davidow's (2003) six dimensions, complainants' subsequent behavior, and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction (see Methodology). They found that the most appreciated response strategy was redress. Companies rarely offered full financial or material compensation, but promising to correct the problem or to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act led to complainants' satisfaction. Additionally, thanking complainants had a positive effect on satisfaction. Conversely, defensive strategies, such as denial (simple denial or shifting blame to another person or organization) and evading responsibility, were rarely applied and did not lead to complainants' satisfaction. Strategies such as asking for further information, the most common strategies in their data, as well as expressing regret and apologizing, were not appreciated by complainants, either. Therefore, Einwiller and Steilen concluded that "Asking less and assisting more would help win back complainants and potentially win over those who observe the interaction between complainant and organization on SNS" (p. 202).

Politeness on a speech act of complaints

Politeness is a crucial factor to consider when analyzing speech acts, and the theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson' (1978, 1987) has been the most frequently used in pragmatic studies. They argued that "all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) 'face', the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself"

(p. 61). According to their theory, face consists of two components: "negative face," which refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition, and "positive face," which reflects the desire to be appreciated and approved of by others (p. 61). *Complaints* are identified as *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) because they express the speaker's negative evaluation of the hearer's behavior or personality, thereby threatening the hearer's *positive face*.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) explained that speakers or writers making complaints must navigate three strategic choices: (1) whether to make the complaint, (2) whether to express the complaint explicitly or implicitly, and (3) whether to use mitigating strategies to reduce its impact on the hearer. These choices are especially significant in intercultural communication, where norms of politeness and face management may vary widely.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 39 Vietnamese sophomores majoring in English language at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and 38 Japanese sophomores majoring in policy and strategy studies for innovation at a university in Tokyo, Japan. The Vietnamese students were enrolled in a business English course taught by the second author, while the Japanese students attended an academic reading and writing course taught by the first author. All participants had an English proficiency level of CEFR B1–B2.

This study was conducted as an enrichment component of the coursework. All student participants were informed about the joint project and provided informed consent for participation and data collection; all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Data collection

Data were collected through an international business email exchange project implemented by the authors in 2022 and 2023. In the 2022 project, 23 Vietnamese and 22 Japanese students participated in the project whereas the 2023 project contained 16 Vietnamese and 19 Japanese students. Different cohorts of students participated in each iteration, comprising all students enrolled in the respective courses. Due to differences in class sizes, some volunteer students were asked to correspond with two partners. While some wrote unique emails to each partner, others reused the same complaint email.

In total, 80 complaint emails were collected: 39 from Vietnamese students and 41 from Japanese students. Each student was asked to write two responses: one treating their partner's complaint as justified and another treating it as unjustified. However, some students did not submit responses to the unjustified complaints, likely due to the difficulty of the task. Ultimately, 46 responses to justified complaints (23 Vietnamese and 23 Japanese) and 32 responses to unjustified complaints (16 Vietnamese and 16 Japanese) were collected.

Exchange business email project

This study was part of a joint international business email exchange project in which Vietnamese and Japanese students role-played as sales representatives of their own country, chosen by their foreign partners. The project aimed to provide students with authentic communicative experiences by engaging them with real international correspondents.

All activities were conducted online via a dedicated Google Classroom managed by the authors. Instructions, announcements, teaching materials, assignment submission spaces, journal entries, and questionnaires were posted on the platform, allowing students to access and participate at any time. Each week, students studied a specific email function in class using example texts from the *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence* (2003), a required textbook for the second author's course, then composed and posted their own emails. Afterward, they read and responded to their partner's email. In the first writing project, students wrote seven types of emails:

- Inquiry
- Response to inquiry
- Order
- Response to order and invoice
- Complaint
- Response to justified complaint
- Response to unjustified complaint

In the second writing project, students wrote only three types of emails—enquiry, response to enquiry, and complaint—due to scheduling constraints stemming from differences in academic calendars between Vietnam and Japan. Additionally, Zoom meetings were held during each project to facilitate student socialization and intercultural engagement.

Complaint analysis criteria

Three frameworks were used to analyze students' complaints: House and Kasper's (1981) directness levels and modality markers, Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987, 1993) severity of complaints, and Murphy and Neu's (1996) characteristics of complaint versus criticism.

House and Kasper's (1981) directness levels and modality markers.

House and Kasper's (1981) eight-level directness model and their classification of modality markers (see Appendix) were used to analyze the data. The eight-level directness criteria are:

- Level 1: By performing the utterance in the presence of the hearer (Y), the speaker (X) implies that he/she knows that the offensive act (P) has happened and he/she implies that Y did P.
- Level 2: By explicitly asserting that P, X implies that Y did P.
- Level 3: By explicitly asserting that P is bad for him/her, X implies that Y did P.
- Level 4: By explicitly asking Y about the conditions for the execution of P or stating that Y was in some way connected with the conditions for the doing of P, X implies that Y did P.

- Level 5: X explicitly asserts that Y did P.
- Level 6: By explicitly asserting that the action P for which Y is agentively responsible is bad or explicitly stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by Y, X implies that Y is bad/or X asserts explicitly that Y did P and that P is bad for X, thus also implying that Y is bad.
- Level 7: X asserts explicitly that Y's doing of P is bad.
- Level 8: X asserts explicitly that Y is bad (p. 160).

They also introduced modality markers—downgraders and upgraders—that influence the politeness and impact of the complaint (see Appendix). Although Trosborg (1995) later developed similar criteria, this study adopts House and Kasper's original framework.

Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987, 1993) severity of complaints.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) developed a scale with five major categories to evaluate the severity of complaints in terms of the speaker's position with respect to the hearer's face.

- Below the level of reproach: The speaker completely avoids direct or indirect reference to either the event or the hearer.
- Expression of annoyance or disapproval: The speaker avoids direct and explicit mention of the event or the hearer but gives very obvious hint at the fact that the hearer considers the event offensive.
- Explicit complaint: The speaker openly threatens the hearer's face by referencing either the hearer or the offensive action, or both. However, no sanctions are instigated.
- Accusation and warning: The speaker openly threatens the hearer's face by using the first-person (the speaker) reference and the future tense and even implies potential sanctions for the hearer.
- Immediate threat: The speaker openly attacks the hearer's face. This can be an ultimatum with immediate consequences (pp. 199-201).

Murphy and Neu's (1996) complaint versus criticism characteristics.

Murphy and Neu (1996) identified characteristics for differentiating between complaints and criticisms.

Characteristics of complaints:

- Use of Pronoun "we" to indicate that both parties share the blame or to negotiate the problem.
- Depersonalization of the problem.
- Use of questioning to ask for advice, for permission to explain oneself, or to get the listener to reconsider or discuss the problem (e.g., "Do you have a minute so that we could go over the paper together?" [p. 204]).
- Use of mitigators to soften the complaint (e.g., just, a little, kind of, perhaps, really, you know, I don't know).
- Acceptance of partial responsibility for the problem.

Characteristics of criticisms:

- Use of the second person with the modal "should" that indicate that the speaker is in a position to dictate the behavior of the listener.
- Personalization of the problem, placing the blame on the other.
- Refusal to accept responsibility for the problem (pp. 204-205).

Analysis criteria for responses to complaints

To analyze students' responses to both justified and unjustified complaints, three frameworks were used: Benoit's (2015,2018) image repair strategies, Davidow's (2003) dimensions of organizational responses, and Einwiller and Steilen's (2015) empirical findings.

Benoit's (2015, 2018) image repair strategies.

Benoit's (1997, 2018) Image Repair Strategies consist of the following five strategies:

(1) Denial:

    (a) Simple denial of the charges.

    (b) Shift the blame to another person or organization.

(2) Evasion of responsibility:

    (a) Provocation: Claiming that the act was a reasonable response to another offensive act.

    (b) Defeasibility: Blaming a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation.

    (c) Accident: Claiming that the offensive action occurred by accident.

    (d) Good intention: Saying the offensive behavior was performed with good intentions.

(3) Reducing the offensiveness of the event

    (a) Bolstering: Strengthening the audience's positive feelings toward oneself.

    (b) Minimization: Trying to minimize the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act.

    (c) Differentiation: Insisting that the act is distinct from similar, more offensive actions.

    (d) Transcendence: Placing the act in a more favorable context.

    (e) Attacking the accuser

    (f) Compensation

(4) Corrective action: Promising to correct the problem and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act.

(5) Mortification: Confessing and begging for forgiveness, an apology

Davidow's (2003) dimensions of organizational responses to complaints.

Davidow (2003) identified six dimensions of organizational strategies in response to customer complaints that affect customers' subsequent activities.

(1) Timeliness: The perceived speed with which an organization responds to or handles a complaint.

(2) Facilitation: The policies, procedures, and structure that a company has in place to support customers engaging in complaints and communication.

(3) Redress: The benefits or response outcome that a customer receives from an organization in response to a complaint.

(4) Apology: An acknowledgement by the organization of the complainant's distress.

(5) Credibility: The organization's willingness to explain or account for the problem.

(6) Attentiveness: The interpersonal communication and interaction between the organizational representative and the customer. (p. 232)

Attentiveness was defined as "the care and attention that the customer gets from the organization or its representatives," including respect, effort, empathy, and willingness to listen (p. 243).

Einwiller and Steilen (2015)'s empirical findings.

The strategies identified by Einwiller and Steilen (2015) through their analysis of corporate responses to social media complaints were also used as reference points to analyze student responses to complaints.

(1) Inquiring further information

(2) Gratitude

(3) Regret

(4) Corrective action

(5) Explanation

(6) Active transfer

(7) Passive transfer

(8) Apology

(9) Understanding (p. 200)

Results

Complaints

Directness levels of complaints and modality markers.

The analysis based on House and Kasper's (1981) directness levels revealed similar tendencies between Vietnamese and Japanese students. Both groups predominantly (83.8%) used Level 2 strategies (explicitly mentioning the offensive act) and Level 3 strategies (explicitly asserting

that the offensive act is bad for the speaker). Specifically, 46.2% of Vietnamese and 61.0% of Japanese students used Level 2, while 33.3% of Vietnamese and 26.8% of Japanese students used Level 3, showing Japanese stronger preference for Level 2, avoiding expressing negative consequences for themselves. No participants in the present study used Level 1, Level 4, or Level 5 strategies. Hinting at a complaint indirectly (Level 1) seems to have been too difficult for L2 students, as indicated by Trosborg (1995).

While most students avoided highly face-threatening strategies, a small number used more direct forms. Nine students used Level 7 (explicitly asserting that the hearer's action is bad), and one Vietnamese student used Level 8 (explicitly asserting that the hearer is bad). This dichotomy—between face-saving and face-threatening approaches—may reflect the influence of textbook examples studied in class. Of the four example emails used, two modeled Level 2 strategies and two modeled Level 7 strategies.

Modality markers—linguistic devices that mitigate or intensify the impact of a complaint (see Appendix)—used in students' complaints were also analyzed. Vietnamese students used 126 downgraders and 5 upgraders, while Japanese students used 140 downgraders and 4 upgraders. Students' preferred downgraders were *grounders* (100% of both groups), *agent avoiders* (Vietnamese: 76.9%; Japanese: 87.8%), modals such as *would* and *could* (Vietnamese: 48.7%; Japanese: 65.9%), and *steers* (Vietnamese: 43.6%; Japanese: 31.7%). The high frequency of *grounders* and modals may have been influenced by the text examples.

Severity of complaints.

The analysis based on Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) severity framework revealed notable differences between Vietnamese and Japanese students. Japanese students overwhelmingly favored the explicit complaint strategy (90.3%) while Vietnamese students demonstrated greater variation in strategy use (expression of annoyance or disapproval: 12.8%; explicit complaint: 64.1%; accusation and warning: 23.1%). Interestingly, the distribution of textbook examples mirrored this range: one modeled *expression of annoyance*, one modeled *explicit complaint*, and two modeled *accusation and warning*. This suggests that instructional materials may influence learners' strategic choices, particularly when modeling more assertive complaint

styles. Both groups avoiding the extremes of complaint severity such as *below the level of reproach* (completely avoiding reference to the offensive event or the hearer) or *immediate threat* (issuing ultimatums with immediate consequences).

Characteristics of complaints and criticisms.

Murphy and Neu (1996) distinguished complaints from criticisms. In the present study, 12 complaints (10 Vietnamese and 2 Japanese) were classified as criticisms. Among these, 8 used direct blame with "you," and 2 contained demands rather than requests (e.g., "I agree to receive your discount so as to adopt for a more professional attitude."). However, the majority of the students' complaints contained the four structural elements of American complaints identified in Murphy and Neu's study, though only one-third included an explanation of purpose: (1) explanation of purpose: 37.5% (Vietnamese: 33.3%; Japanese: 41.5%); (2) complaint: 85% (Vietnamese: 74.4%; Japanese: 95.1%); (3) justification: 98.8% (Vietnamese: 97.4%; Japanese: 100%); (4) request for solution: 90% (Vietnamese: 81.2%; Japanese: 92.7%). Students also favored depersonalization in describing the problem (Vietnamese: 82.1%; Japanese: 87.8%). These patterns suggest a general awareness of politeness strategies, though occasional criticisms indicate areas for pedagogical attention.

Other strategies.

In addition to the strategies identified through formal frameworks, students employed a range of other pragmatic devices to mitigate the face-threatening impact of their complaints, including:

- Seeking guidance from the interlocutor on how to handle damaged products (6 Vietnamese, 6 Japanese).
- Suggesting third-party responsibility, such as compensation by a shipping company (5 Vietnamese, 2 Japanese).
- Showing consideration for the interlocutor's perspective (e.g., "I think the reason that the wrong sizes have been sent to me is because I'm ordering US sizes, and you're sending measurements in Japanese sizes." [Vietnamese; problem: wrong size]; "We

understand that it is slightly confusing because VinFast sells several alike cars."
[Japanese; problem: wrong car design for a video game]).

Analysis of responses to complaints

Responses to justified complaints.

Vietnamese and Japanese students employed similar strategies when responding to justified complaints. Drawing on Benoit's (2015, 2018) image repair strategies, Davidow's (2003) dimensions of organizational responses, and Einwiller and Steilen's (2015) findings (see Methodology), the most frequently used strategies included:

- Gratitude: 93.5% (Vietnamese: 87%; Japanese: 100%).
- Apology: 78.3% (the same number from both groups).
- Redress: 71.7% (Vietnamese: 70%; Japanese: 73.9%).
- Timeliness: 43.5% (Vietnamese: 47.8%; Japanese: 39.1%).
- Regret: 37% (Vietnamese: 34.8%; Japanese: 39.1%).
- Credibility: 37% (Vietnamese: 43.5%; Japanese: 30.4%).
- Bolstering: 34.8% (Vietnamese: 30.4%: Japanese: 39.1%), highlighting positive traits or past actions.
- Shift Blame: 32.6% (Vietnamese: 26.1%; Japanese: 39.1%), attributing issues to third-party entities such as shipping companies.

Additionally, 41.3% of responses (30.4% Vietnamese, 52.2% Japanese) included a request for the complainant's preference regarding resolution (e.g., refund or replacement). This strategy, though not explicitly discussed in the cited frameworks, reflects attentiveness and a customer-oriented approach.

A notable cultural difference emerged in the content of the redress strategy. Japanese students exclusively offered refunds or replacements, while Vietnamese students demonstrated greater variety: eight offered discounts on future purchases, and one offered a free gift (two packs of coffee). This suggests that Vietnamese students may be more flexible or creative in their approach to compensation.

Responses to unjustified complaints.

Responses to unjustified complaints involved a wider range of strategies, likely due to the increased face-threatening nature of the interaction. Fourteen students (7 Vietnamese, 7 Japanese) were unable to complete this task and were excluded from the analysis. The most frequently used strategies included:

- Gratitude: 78.1% (Vietnamese: 68.8%; Japanese: 87.5%).

- Simple Denial: 71.9% (Vietnamese: 75%; Japanese: 56.3%).

- Apology: 50% (Vietnamese: 56.3%; Japanese: 43.8%).

- Regret: 31.3% (the same number from both groups).

- Attentiveness: 28.1% (Vietnamese: 25%; Japanese 31.3%).

- Attack Accuser: 28.1% (Vietnamese: 25%; Japanese: 31.3%), pointing out the complainant's mistakes.

- Shift Blame: 25% (Vietnamese: 18.8%; Japanese: 31.3%), attributing responsibility to third parties.

- Corrective Action: 21.9% (Vietnamese: 31.3%; Japanese: 12.5%), including commitments to prevent recurrence.

These findings highlight the complexity of responding to unjustified complaints and the pragmatic balancing act students performed. While denial and defense were common, many students also employed strategies to preserve the relationship and demonstrate empathy—underscoring the importance of teaching nuanced response techniques in EFL contexts.

Discussion

Transfer of L1 connotations

One of the learners' pragmalinguitic challenges that we identified in our students' performances was transferring L1 connotations, resulting in readers' confusion. For example, many Japanese learners (8 Vietnamese, 24 Japanese) used *as soon as possible* when asking their foreign partners to take immediate action. In Japan, *as soon as possible* often implies immediate action, since punctuality and promptness are important social norms in Japan. In other cultures,

however, this phrase may be interpreted more loosely because it does not include a specific deadline.

Similarly, many Japanese students (3 Vietnamese, 12 Japanese) ended their requests for solutions with the phrase, *thank you in advance*, probably as a translation of the Japanese phrase *yoroshiku onegaishimasu*. This phrase is widely used in everyday life in Japan. Its literal meaning is "(I humbly) request (you) to do (something) appropriately," and it is interpreted as "I wish you to treat the matter well" (Obana, 2012, p. 1535). In Japan, it is a strategy to request the listener's or reader's endorsement, when used at the end of a request. While this usage is appropriate in Japanese culture, it may sound pushy in English culture, where gratitude is typically expressed after a favor is granted. Thus, teachers should help L2 learners realize that many customary expressions may carry cultural connotations and therefore, may not convey the same meaning in other cultures.

Transfer of L1 socio-cultural norms

Another major problem found in many students' emails was a lack of clarity probably because their choice of polite strategies reflecting their L1 socio-cultural norms was wrong. For instance, 90% of students' complaints (87.2% Vietnamese, 92.7% Japanese) did not contain any expressions of annoyance or disapproval of the offensive act. In addition, 25 (61%) of Japanese students' complaints (28.2% of the Vietnamese) did not contain any negative evaluation of the offensive act. These results may reflect Japanese culture preference to avoidance of confrontation to save both their interlocutor's and their own faces (Ohbuchi and Atsumi, 2010). However, since expressing a negative evaluation of an offensive act seems to be a necessary component of English complaints (House & Kasper, 1981; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Decock & Depraetere, 2018), these students' choice of strategies obscured their intentions, probably resulting in unintended miscommunication in English-speaking cultures. Similarly, many complaints in both groups (Vietnamese: 33.3%; Japanese: 41.5%) lacked an explanation of purpose in their emails probably due to mitigating the face-threatening impact on their readers. These violates both Grice's (1975) Quantity Maxim (The speaker/writer's contribution to the interaction should be neither more nor less than required.) and Manner Maxim (Messages

should be clear.). Although these problems were found in both cohorts, they were more serious in Japanese performances.

The most significant problem found in some students' emails was that eight students (2 Vietnamese, 6 Japanese) offered compensation, such as replacements or discount coupons to unjustified complaints, despite having already defended themselves or pointed out the complainers' mistakes in the former part of the emails. This problem may have stemmed from their strong desire to avoid confrontation and maintain good relationships with their readers to save both complainers' and self's positive face, even when the complaint was perceived as unjustified. However, in real business situations, it is impossible to respond to unjustified complaints this way. Therefore, this content violates Grice's (1975) Quality Maxim (Messages should be truthful with adequate evidence.) and Manner Maxim. On the other hand, the high frequency of use of *agent avoiders* among Japanese responses may be an L1 influence because null subjects are permitted in the Japanese language (Liceras & Diaz, 1999; Wakabayashi and Negishi, 2003). To conclude, teachers should help their students understand that their sociocultural norms may not apply to L2 communication.

The impact of samples in the textbook

One of our major findings from this study was the significant impact of sample emails taken from *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence* (2003), the textbook used in the second author's course. Although both Vietnamese and Japanese students aimed to mitigate face-threatening force in their complaints, their strategy choices were significantly influenced by the instructional materials, some of which model confrontational styles. For instance, some sample complaint emails from the textbook threaten the reader by mentioning the possibility of suing them in the first contact to report the problem. We included these examples in our teaching materials to provide our students with a variety of references, but students seemed to view them as models to imitate. This finding indicates that teachers should thoughtfully select their teaching materials, taking into account the desired learning outcomes of the activity.

Teaching native speaker norms from the World Englishes perspective

One of the latest trends in World English research is the study of multilingualism and multiliteracy. Leung (2025) highlights *continua of biliteracy*, a framework originally introduced by Hornberger (1989), "dealing with the fluid and nonbinary nature of language and literacy development and use involving two or more languages" (p. 3). He discusses how users of English as a lingua franca (ELF) actually "make use of all of their available linguistic resources flexibly and contingently to meet their communicative needs without regard to language boundaries" (p. 6). Furthermore, he discusses that native speaker models are "a selective assemblage of the type of socially "safe" polite language usage associated with public and professional interactions" (p.11), and therefore, social and pragmatic conventions of language use such as politeness are negotiable in EFL communication. Similarly, House (2024) summarizes the latest pragmatic research on English as a lingua franca and illustrates how EFL users jointly and successfully negotiate meaning and achieve "a semblance of normality" (p. 2) in their interactions. However, House (2024) did not mention what language culture norms we should teach to L2 learners.

Should teachers of English language teach native English speakers' norms in this globalized world where English is mostly used between non-native speakers? Ishihara and Cohen (2022) recommend "an informed pragmatic choice" (p. 107), whereby speakers or writers choose their language and strategies with a full understanding of target language norms and the consequences of their choices. Since L2 learners are social beings with their own cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews, they may deliberately want to resist adapting to the norms of the target language culture in some contexts. Therefore, they recommend English teachers instruct learners in "commonly-shared pragmatic interpretations and potential consequences of their pragmatic behavior" (Ishihara and Cohen, 2022, p. 108) without imposing these interpretations on them. In other words, teachers should help their students communicate their intentions while fully understanding the possible impressions and consequences of their linguistic and strategic choices. Furthermore, Ishihara and Cohen (2022) recommend that L2 learners use "relatively straightforward expressions" (p. 108) and "avoid elaborate politeness or indirectness, idioms, and cultural innuendos" (p. 108) when interacting in this globalized world where it is quite difficult to infer their interlocutors' cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion and implications

This study investigated how Vietnamese and Japanese undergraduate learners of English composed *complaints* and *complaint responses* in a simulated international business exchange. The analysis using multiple frameworks revealed both shared pragmatic tendencies and culturally shaped differences between Vietnamese and Japanese performances. Most students' *complaints* complied with English norms, but some were analyzed as criticisms. Regarding responses to *complaints*, Vietnamese students adopted more extensive strategies such as providing readers with benefits to compensate negative consequences on readers. However, further analysis revealed some linguistic and sociocultural divergence from English norms probably due to linguistic and sociocultural L1 transfer. This divergence was typically seen in Japanese students' emails, resulting in obscuring their intentions.

These results yielded some implications for foreign language teachers. First, foreign language teachers should explicitly teach the target language cultural norms rather than focusing solely on linguistic aspects. It helps their students avoid communicating unintended implications resulting in negative evaluations against them. However, teachers should also be sensitive to their students' identity and agency as social beings. Therefore, a goal of pragmatic instruction is to foster L2 learners who can make informed pragmatic choices. To avoid unintentional misunderstandings due to cultural differences, teachers should encourage students to use straightforward language to clearly express their intentions. Finally, to teach L2 learners successful and effective cross-cultural communication, collaborative online international learning projects, such as the one implemented in this research, should be promoted more. It is quite easy in this digitized world where students are good at and like communicating online. In such projects, students can develop both linguistic and sociocultural skills as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills by communicating with real partners in an authentic setting (Ryabova, 2020).

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Appendix

Modality markers (House & Kasper, 1981, pp. 166-170)

X: the complainer.

Y: the complainee.

P: the action which X interprets as bad for him.

Downgraders

1. Politeness marker

Optional elements added to an act to show deference to the interlocutor and to bid for cooperative behavior (e.g., please).

2. Play-down

Syntactical devices used to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the addressee.

(a) past tense (e.g., I wondered if…)

(b) durative aspect marker (e.g., I was wondering…)

(c) negation (e.g., Mightn't it be a good idea.)

(d) interrogative (e.g., Mightn't it be a good idea?)

(e) modal (e.g., mightn't)

3. Consultative device

Optional devices by means of which X seeks to involve Y and bid for Y's cooperation; frequently these devices are ritualized formulas (e.g., Would you mind if…?).

4. Hedge

Adverbials – excluding sentence adverbials – by means of which X avoids a precise propositional specification thus circumventing the potential provocation such a specification might entail; X leaves the option open for Y to complete his utterance and thereby imposes his own intent less forcefully on Y (e.g., kind of, sort of, somehow, and so on, and what have you, more or less, rather; Could you kind of lend us some records?).

5. Understater

Adverbial modifiers by means of which X underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition (e.g., a little bit, a second, not very much, just a trifle; I'm a little bit disappointed in you.).

6. Downtoner

Sentence modifiers which are used by X in order to modulate the impact his utterance is likely to have on Y (e.g., just, simply, possibly, perhaps, rather; Couldn't you just move over a bit?).

7. – ("minus") Committer

Sentence modifiers which are used to lower the degree to which X commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition. (e.g., I think, I guess, I believe, I suppose, in my opinion; I think you've made a mistake.).

8. Forewarn

A kind of anticipatory disarmament device used by X to forewarn Y and to forestall his possible negative reactions to X's act. Typically, a forewarn is a metacomment about what X is about to do, a compliment paid to Y as a preliminary to a potentially offensive utterance, or an invocation of a generally accepted cooperative principle which X is about to flout (e.g., far be it from me to belittle your efforts, but…, you're a nice guy, Jim, but…, this may be a bit boring to you, but…).

9. Hesitator

Deliberately employed malformulations, used to impress on Y the fact that X has qualms about performing his ensuing act (e.g., erm, er).

10. Scope-stater

Elements in which X explicitly expresses his subjective opinion vis-a vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of his utterance (e.g., I'm afraid you're in my seat; I'm a bit disappointed that you did P; I'm not happy about the fact that you did P.).

11. Agent avoider

Syntactic devices by means of which it is possible for X not to mention either himself or his interlocutor Y as agents, thus, for instance, avoiding direct attack (e.g., passive, impersonal constructions using people, they, one, you as "neutral agents" lacking [+ definite] and [+ specific] reference. This is just not done, Mr. Robinson.).

Gambits (i.e., optional, mostly photic discourse-lubricants)

1. Cajolers

Elements used to increase, establish, or restore harmony between the interlocutors. Their significance may be informally glossed as "please be in agreement with my speech act." (e.g., you know, you see, I mean, actually….).

2. Appealers

Appealers appeal to the hearer and function to elicit a hearer signal, an uptaker (e.g., okay, right, yeah)

Supportive moves

1. Steers

Where X intends to steer the discourse in a certain direction consistent with the fulfilment of his intent (as expressed by his central move) by introducing a topic which has one or more features in common with the business conducted in the central move (e.g., Would you like to put a record on?).

2. Grounders

In which X gives reasons for his intent (as expressed in his central move). Grounders may precede or follow the central move (e.g., God, I'm thirsty. Get me a beer, will you? (where the grounder precedes the central move).

3. Preparators

X indicates or suggests what type of an intent he is going to make manifest without, however, specifying the nature of the proposition following the preparator (e.g., I would like to ask you a question.).

Upgraders

1. Overstater

Adverbial modifiers by means of which X overrepresents the reality denoted in the proposition in the interests of increasing the force of his utterance (e.g., absolutely, purely, terribly, frightfully; I'm absolutely disgusted that you left the bathroom in such a state.).

2. Intensifier

Adverbial modifier used by X to intensify certain elements of the proposition of his utterance (e.g., very, so, such, quite, really, just, indeed; I'd be really pleased if you could help me.).

3. + ("plus") Committer

Sentence modifiers by means of which X indicates his heightened degree of commitment vis-a-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition (e.g., I'm sure, certainly, obviously, really).

4. Lexical intensifier

Lexical items which are strongly marked for their negative social attitude (e.g., swear words. That's bloody mean of you.).

5. Aggressive interrogative

Employment by X of interrogative mood to explicitly involve Y and thus to intensify the impact of his utterance on Y (e.g., Why haven't you told me before?).

6. Rhetorical appeal

In using a rhetorical appeal, X attempts – by claiming or implying the non-possibility of not accepting that P – to debar Y from not accepting that P (e.g., You must understand that, anyone can see that, It's common knowledge that).

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