“You Shouldn’t Have Done That!”
—A Cross-Cultural Study of Perceptions of Appropriate Complaints

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Abstract
This study investigated English learners’ perceptions of appropriate complaint strategies in different situations. It also explored the relationship between their choices of complaint strategies and two variables, status and social distance. Strategies selected by the learners were compared to those chosen by native English speakers and native Chinese speakers. The instrument was a multiple-choice task, and the options displayed in each scenario represented six complaint strategies: (1) hint, (2) expression of annoyance or disapproval, (3) explicit complaint, (4) accusation and warning, (5) immediate threat and curse, and (6) opting out. Excluding opting out (silence), the severity level of the strategy categories increased from (1) to (5). The elicited data were processed by SPSS 12, using Chi-square analyses. The results showed that the three groups significantly differed in their strategy selection, and that the learners tended to be severer than the two native groups in their strategy choices. In addition, social status and distance appeared to significantly determine the three groups’ selection of complaint strategies. Finally, possible causes for the findings and inter-group differences are discussed.

Key words: interlanguage, complaint strategies, multiple-choice task

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INTRODUCTION

Complaints are frequently heard in our daily life. However, to complain in a second language (L2) can be difficult. As complaints are a type of face-threatening act, complainers need to consider the severity levels of complaints before they express their dissatisfaction in order not to harm the addressee’s face. This study aims to investigate how Chinese learners of English in Taiwan perceive the appropriateness of complaint behaviors in different types of situations, in comparison with the perspectives of native English speakers and native Chinese speakers. Thus, the research questions are:

1. What are the similarities and differences in native English speakers’, learners’, and native Chinese speakers’ perceptions of appropriate complaint behaviors?²
2. How do the two variables, i.e. status and social distance, influence the selection of complaint strategies?

In the following section, several issues are discussed to offer a theoretical framework for this study. Firstly, interlanguage pragmatics is introduced. Next, Western and Chinese perspectives of politeness are compared and analyzed. Then, complaints as a speech act are presented, including the definition, components, and conditions in which they occur. Finally, previous studies of complaints and data

² Participants of both the learner and the native Chinese groups were native Chinese speakers, and the differences between the two groups were in the participants’ majors and the language of the questionnaire they received. The learner group consisted of English majors, who received the English version of the questionnaire, while the native Chinese speaker group (non-English majors) received the Chinese version.
collection instruments are explored.

**Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Selinker (1972) termed language learners’ second language (L2) system as interlanguage (IL). IL is a creative process, in which learners consciously test and revise their hypotheses about the target language. It refers to the system that a learner has constructed at a particular time. It also signifies the series of interconnected systems that characterize the learner’s progress over time.

Among all aspects, the pragmatics of the learners’ IL system, i.e. interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), has perhaps attracted the most research interest. According to Kasper and Dahl (1991), ILP emphasizes learners’ competence, performance and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in an L2. It compares learners’ IL production and comprehension with their first language (L1) data and the L2 data generated by native speakers. Through the comparison, ILP provides insights into how learners’ pragmatic performance in IL differs from native speakers’ in the L2 and also shows how some IL specific behaviors may be influenced by learners’ L1 knowledge.

Blum-Kulka (1982) and Kasper (1981) claimed that through comparisons of learners’ IL data with their L1 and L2 data produced by native speakers, ILP could help identify which behaviors were IL-specific. The available evidence suggests that learners, regardless of their L1, have access to the same range of realization strategies for a given act as native speakers do. In other words, learners realize the strategies of an act with similar formulae and linguistic devices to strengthen or weaken the act being produced. This proves that learners do not suffer from a lack of knowledge of the strategies or
formulae.

The transfer from L1, either positive or negative, plays a role in learners’ IL system. Kasper (1992) proposed a distinction between pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. Pragmalinguistic transfer happens when “the illocutionary force or politeness value assigned to particular linguistic material in L1 influences learners’ perception and production of form-function mappings in L2” (p. 209). This kind of transfer affects learners’ use of conventions of meanings and form in speech behaviors. Moreover, it plays a role in the illocutionary force and politeness of IL utterances. On the other hand, sociopragmatic transfer is found “when the social perceptions underlying language users’ interpretation and performance of linguistic action in L2 are influenced by their assessment of subjectively equivalent L1 contexts” (Kasper, 1992, p. 209). This form of transfer operates on learners’ perception of contextual factors, assessment of the appropriateness of a particular linguistic action, and overall politeness styles in a particular context.

**Western and Chinese Perspectives of Politeness**

Western and Chinese perspectives of politeness have been indicated to be different, and thus, people from the two cultures might behave differently. Among views about Western politeness, the face-saving view is a widely accepted perspective. According to Goffman (1967), face is an image “located in the flow of events, supported by other people’s judgments, and endorsed by impersonal agencies in the situation” (p. 5). That is, face is a person’s image based on the judgment of her/himself and other people from the same
speech community. Goffman also pointed out that in the interaction, a speaker constantly attended to both her/his own face and the addressee’s face. Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguished two kinds of face based on their functions—positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire of every member to be appreciated and approved of by others. On the other hand, negative face indicates the need of a member not to have her/his actions impeded by others. It also claims the addressees’ rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The two kinds of face influence the strategies that speakers employ in order to be polite. Both the addressee’s positive face and negative face are essential to politeness, but negative politeness strategies, which aim to protect the addressee’s negative face, are often given the priority in the speaker’s strategy selection.

Some acts may at times threaten face. To remedy potential confrontations that an act can cause, speakers use strategies to mitigate the face-threatening level. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers choose strategies based on their own estimation of the risk of face loss depending on their power, the social distance between the speaker and the addressee, and the individual ranking of the particular imposition in the social context. The more face-threatening an act is, the more likely a speaker uses strategies to reduce the negative effect of the act. Brown and Levinson claimed that a person can deal with face-threatening acts using five strategies: (1) avoidance; (2) an off-record strategy (hint); (3) an on-record strategy without redressive action (i.e. without any compensation); (4) an on-record strategy with redressive action appealing to positive politeness; and (5) an on-record strategy with redressive action
addressing negative politeness.

However, Chinese views of politeness are different from those of Western countries in some ways because of cultural divergences. As Hofstede (1984) pointed out, American culture and Chinese culture differ in the amount of stress placed on the individual and the group. American culture gives a higher value to the individual, but Chinese culture puts more emphasis on the group. Owing to the differences in cultural values, Gu (1990) claimed the concept of ǐmào, politeness in Chinese, differed from Western politeness. To support his viewpoint, he proposed four notions: respectfulness, attitudinal warmth, refinement, and modesty. Respectfulness concerns a person’s positive appreciation of or admiration for the addressee’s face and social status. Attitudinal warmth refers to one’s demonstration of kindness, consideration, and hospitality to the addressee. Refinement means that a person’s behaviors towards others must meet certain standards. Finally, modesty indicates self-denigration. Among the four notions, respectfulness, attitudinal warmth, and refinement are universal, whereas modesty is unique to Chinese politeness. The notion of modesty can be further divided into two submaxims: denigrating self and elevating the other. Denigrating self is a speaker’s self-devaluation and degradation of anything related to her/himself. Elevating the other requires the speaker to praise the addressee or anything relevant to the addressee. If a speaker violates the submaxim of denigrating self but denigrates the addressee instead, s/he is thought of as being impolite or rude. On the other hand, if the submaxim of elevating other is breached and the speaker elevates her/himself, then the speaker is considered arrogant or boastful.
Summing up the above points, Chinese politeness is different from Western politeness. Thus, Chinese learners of English might have difficulty in behaving appropriately because of the mistakes caused by negative transfer from their L1, which takes place when the influence of L1 linguistic knowledge produces behaviors different from that in English. This may also be true with their perception of appropriate behaviors in English.

Complaints as a Speech Act

According to Clyne (1994), complaints are a kind of speech act in which a speaker expresses disappointment or a grievance. They often have the potential to cause possible confrontations between the complainer and the complainee. Therefore, complaints are categorized as face-threatening acts. In Searle’s (1969) classification, complaints belong to the category of expressives, where a speaker conveys her/his attitude and feeling. They are usually part of complex interactional sequences, which begin with an explicit or implicit expression of disappointment of the complainee or the behavior. At the same time, they may involve the speaker’s moral judgments and one or more directives. The directive can take the form of a request for action, an order, or a threat. It prevents the repetition of the deplorable act and offers the complainee an opportunity to repair the damages s/he has caused.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) pointed out a number of conditions for complaints as follows:

1. The complainee (C₂) performs a socially unacceptable act (SUA) that is contrary to a social code of behavioral norms shared by the complainer (C₁) and C₂.
2. \( C_1 \) perceives the SUA as having unfavorable consequences for herself/himself and for the general public.

3. The verbal expression of \( C_1 \) relates directly or indirectly to the SUA, thus having the illocutionary force of censure.

4. \( C_1 \) perceives the SUA as:
   (i) freeing \( C_1 \) (at least partially) from the implicit understanding of a social cooperative relationship with \( C_2 \). Therefore, \( C_1 \) chooses to express frustration or annoyance, though the result will be a “conflictive” type of illocution.
   (ii) giving \( C_1 \) the legitimate right to ask for repair in order to undo the SUA, either for her/his benefit or for the public benefit. The main goal of such instrumental complaints is to ensure that \( C_2 \) performs some remedial action as a result of the complaint. (p. 108)

**Discussions on Previous Studies and Data Collection Instruments**

Numerous studies have investigated how speakers complain. With different instruments, these studies explored complaints made by native speakers and English learners from different ethnic groups. Most studies were conducted with two instruments—written discourse completion tasks (DCT) and role-plays.

The written DCT, first developed by Blum-Kulka (1982), takes the form of an open-ended question whereby the discourse is structured—part of it left open and part closed. It offers both the speech act and a rejoinder, i.e. a response, which helps to cue subjects about the nature of the speech act realization, including the level of formality and the relationships of the roles. The reason for the
popularity of written DCTs is its convenience for data collection and variable control. Complaint studies using the written DCT include Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), DeCapua (1988), Du (1995), and Lee (1999). Take Olshtain and Weinbach, who compared the complaints of native speakers of English and Hebrew learners of English, for example. They found that the learners preferred the softer end of the scale while the native speakers favored the severer end. The social obligations of participants toward one another and the degree of the speaker’s frustration both played an important role in the selection of complaint strategies.

Role-plays are also a commonly used instrument for complaint studies, and have been used by House and Kasper (1981), Trosborg (1995), and Shea (2003). Role-plays provide a description of a situation and require subjects to play a particular role with another person in that situation. They collect spoken data and to some degree, preserve the interactive characteristic of natural conversations.

Among the studies conducted that involved using role-plays, Trosborg’s (1995) study was a thorough one that investigated interlangage complaints and their relationship to learners’ proficiency. She explored the complaint strategies used by native English speakers, native Danish speakers, and Danish learners of English, who were further divided into three proficiency levels. The results revealed that learners of all three levels performed differently with regard to the directness level, ability to adequately support the complaint, and the number of upgraders and downgraders. They also seemed to be unable to adjust their speech behaviors according to the contextual factors of dominance and social distance.
Although the two instruments, written DCTs and role-plays, are often used in speech act studies, they have their limitations. Written DCTs have been seriously criticized as the subjects frequently make references to the topic and to the prompts describing the situation in the target language (Wolfson, 1989). Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989) also questioned their written nature because she doubted the possibility that the short, decontextualized written segments were comparable to the longer stretches of oral discourse. As for role-plays, their limitation is the difficulty to create situations that are realistic and meaningful for participants. Furthermore, participants have fixed perceptions of each other, which result in difficulties in assuming the role that the other participant plays. For instance, in a situation with a learner playing the role of a teacher, the produced conversation cannot be authentic since this learner is not a teacher after all.

In addition to written DCTs and role-plays, a multiple-choice task could be a good instrument for data collection. As Rose and Ono (1995) and Hinkel (1997) pointed out, multiple-choice data in their studies were congruent with the sociolinguistic behavior of native speakers of English and other languages reported in the literature. Moreover, compared to written DCTs and role-plays, the multiple-choice task is employed with relatively low frequency in speech act studies, and thus data collected using this approach can be compared with data elicited by the other two instruments to offer additional insights into complaint behaviors.
METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Seventy-five college undergraduates participated in this study, making up three groups: a group of native English speakers, a group of English learners in Taiwan, and a group of native Chinese speakers. Each group consisted of twenty-five participants. The native English group included college students in the northeastern United States, and their mean age was 22.5. The learner group was composed of English majors in a private university in southern Taiwan. Their mean age was 20.8, and they had studied English for 8.8 years on average. The native Chinese speakers, whose mean age was 20.3, were non-English majors in the same university.

Instrument

A multiple-choice task was used to elicit the subjects’ complaint behaviors. In this task, twenty scenarios were designed. The imposition levels of these scenarios were constant: the complaint behavior could be repaired in some ways. Each scenario involved two variables: status of the speaker relative to the addressee and social distance between the conversational participants. The characters included in the scenarios were teachers, classmates, siblings, neighbors, and unknown students. In the multiple-choice task, options for responses were provided for participants to select from.

The twenty scenarios and the variables that each scenario explored are listed below, with the variables being examined shown in the parenthesis at the end of each description. In the actual questionnaire that the subjects received, the variables listed in the parenthesis were not presented.
1. A student is upset with a teacher who talks so fast in class that s/he is unable to understand the lesson. (+P³)

2. A student is irritated by her/his classmate whose cell phone often rings loudly in class and disturbs everyone. (=P)

3. A student is unhappy with a student worker in the campus store who does not let her/him exchange a flawed camera which s/he just bought for another one. (+D)

4. A student is mad at her/his brother because her/his brother carelessly spilled water on her/his homework which is due tomorrow. (-D)

5. A student is annoyed with her/his neighbor who is disturbing the neighborhood by his loud party late at night. (~D)

6. A student is dissatisfied with her/his teacher about a just-held test, which included many theories that she did not cover in class. (+P)

7. A student is upset with her/his classmate who often borrows her/his notes but does not lend her/him class notes this time. (=P)

8. A student is unhappy about a girl s/he doesn’t know who cuts into the line just in front of her/him in a crowded cafeteria. (+D)

9. A student is mad at her/his sister because s/he is waiting for an important call but her/his sister has been using the phone for an hour. (-D)

10. A student is dissatisfied with her/his neighbor in the dorm because the neighbor’s shoes are always scattered carelessly, blocking her/his doorway. (~D)

11. A student is annoyed with a teacher who often dismisses the class

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³ (+P) indicates the hearer having power over the speaker; i.e. the ones who have higher social status; (=P) refers to status equals. (+D), (~D), and (-D) represent hearers of three distance types: strangers, neighbors, and siblings, respectively.
late and makes her/him late for her/his part-time job. (+P)
12. A student is upset with her/his classmate who swears frequently
when talking. (=P)
13. A student is unhappy about a student who smokes next to the
classroom because the smell spreads into the classroom and
makes her/him uncomfortable. (+D)
14. A student is mad with her/his brother who has been using her/his
electronic dictionary without her/his permission. (-D)
15. A student is angry at his neighbor who listens to loud rock music
late at night and wakes her/him up. (~D)
16. A student is mad at her/his teacher who refused to accept her/his
late assignment but accepted other students’. (+P)
17. A student is irritated by her/his classmate who is always late for
meetings with her/him. (=P)
18. A student (when seeing a movie) is annoyed with a girl sitting in
front of her/him who s/he doesn’t know, because the girl keeps
standing up and going in and out. (+D)
19. A student is upset with her/his sister who often comes into her/his
room without knocking. (-D)
20. A student is dissatisfied with her/his neighbor who frequently
cooks food with a disgusting smell. (~D)

In each scenario, there were six options, representing different
complaint strategies. The options were designed according to Olshtain
and Weinbach’s (1987) scale of complaint strategies, with opting out
(silence) being added. In addition, the strategy “below the level of
reproach” was adapted as a “hint” to make the content of the strategy
category clearer. Thus, the categories of complaint strategies utilized in
the multiple-choice task included (1) hint, (2) expression of annoyance or disapproval, (3) explicit complaint, (4) accusation and warning, (5) immediate threat, and (6) opting out. In this task, the subjects had to choose the most appropriate response to the complained behavior for each scenario. Each scenario took the following form:

Situation 2

Your classmate’s cell phone often rings loudly in class and disturbs everyone. Now you are in class and his cell phone is ringing again. You are really irritated, so you talk to him:

“_________________________”

a. ____ It’s hard to concentrate in here.
b. ____ I really hate to be distracted in class.
c. ____ Every time your cell phone rings, it disrupts the class!
d. ____ Next time you’ll be in trouble if your cell phone rings in class again!
e. ____ I’m going to keep standing here until you turn off your cell phone!
f. ____ (Silence)

The severity levels of the strategies were ranked in the following order: hint, expression of annoyance or disapproval, explicit complaint, accusation and warning, and immediate threat. The options representing the complaint strategies of each scenario were carefully designed in consultation with a native English speaker. Then, the back translation technique (Yu, 1999) was employed to render the Chinese version of the multiple-choice task. After the data
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, as indicated in Table 1, the three groups chose explicit complaints most often among the six strategy categories (native English speakers: 38%; learners and native Chinese speakers: 34%). There was a significant difference in the three groups’ selection of strategies ($\chi^2 = 52.348; p < .001$).

Table 1
The Percentage of Complaint Strategies Selected by the Three Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Native English Speaker</th>
<th>Learner</th>
<th>Native Chinese Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hint</td>
<td>108 (22%)</td>
<td>98 (20%)</td>
<td>89 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>102 (20%)</td>
<td>102 (20%)</td>
<td>72 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit complaint</td>
<td>191 (38%)</td>
<td>170 (34%)</td>
<td>170 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusation</td>
<td>11 (2%)</td>
<td>43 (9%)</td>
<td>37 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>17 (3%)</td>
<td>34 (7%)</td>
<td>28 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opting out</td>
<td>71 (14%)</td>
<td>53 (11%)</td>
<td>104 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>500 (100%)</td>
<td>500 (100%)</td>
<td>500 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The percentage is shown in the parenthesis.
Further comparison of the three groups’ frequency of choosing each strategy revealed that the learners opted for accusation and warning (p < .001) and immediate threat (p < .05) significantly more often than the native English speakers\(^4\). The learners also selected disapproval (p < .05) significantly more frequently than the native Chinese speakers, who were more likely to choose opting out (p < .001). Finally, the native English speakers picked disapproval (p < .05) significantly more often than the native Chinese speakers, who were more inclined to prefer accusation and warning (p < .001) and opting out (p < .05). The statistical analyses of the three groups’ strategy selection showed that comparatively, the learners appeared to be the severest in strategy selection among the three groups, and the native English speakers were prone to be least severe. This is also supported by the learners’ higher percentage (16%) in choosing the two severest strategies (accusation and immediate threat) than that of the native Chinese speakers (13%) or native English speakers (5%).

The learners’ tendency to be severer than the other two native groups may be caused by their insufficient mastery over English. They might not fully understand the differences in politeness that strategies connote and thus were more inclined to directly voice their dissatisfaction than the other two groups. On the other hand, the learners’ severity tendency in complaints may be partly influenced by the negative transfer from their complaint styles in their native language since the learner and the native Chinese groups, who were

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\(^4\) Through the statistical examination of the strategy selection in all scenarios and in those where corresponding variables were involved, this study aimed to find out if there were significant differences in the severity level of complaint strategies perceived as appropriate by the three groups.
similar in severity of complaints, tended to be harsher than the native English group. It is interesting to see that the native Chinese speakers were likely to be severer than the native English speakers because this seems to contradict our general assumption that Chinese speakers are more polite and indirect than Westerners. However, the Chinese subjects’ severity can be explained from the perspective of changing society. It is possible some social values of modern Chinese society are different from those of the past, including those relating to concepts of politeness. For example, people’s behaviors in modern Taiwanese society reflect much of individualism, which Hofstede (1984) has claimed to be characteristic of Western cultures. Contemporary Chinese also emphasize “I” over “we” on many occasions, and they may not be as collectivist-oriented as they might have been in the past. In addition, a survey of politeness conducted by Reader’s Digest (2006) indicated that people in representative Asian cities, including Taipei, were more impolite than those in Western ones. Although the claim of the survey needs more empirical studies to support it, it shows that at least Chinese speakers may not be as “polite” and indirect as before. This phenomenon may be obvious in the young generation, college students in particular, who are open to new cultural and value changes.

In addition, status seemed to influence the three groups’ perceptions of appropriate complaint behaviors (see Table 2). This appeared to be associated with significant differences in the three groups’ strategy selection (native English speakers: $\chi^2 = 22.949$, $p < .001$; learners: $\chi^2 = 23.259$, $p < .001$; native Chinese speakers: $\chi^2 = 32.849$, $p < .001$). The native English subjects tended to employ disapproval ($p < .001$) significantly more often in scenarios involving
### Table 2
The Percentage of Complaint Strategies Selected by the Three Groups in Hearer-Dominant and Equal-Status Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Strategy Status</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
<th>S6</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native (+P)</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Speaker</td>
<td>(=P)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner (+P)</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(=P)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native (+P)</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Speaker</td>
<td>(=P)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(27%) (5%) (21%) (11%) (4%) (32%) (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. 1. S1: hint, S2: expression of annoyance or disapproval, S3: explicit complaint, S4: accusation, S5: threat, S6: opting out
2. (+P): higher-status hearers, (=P): status equals
3. The percentage is shown in the parenthesis.*

Superiors than in those including status equals. As for the learners, they were significantly more likely to utilize disapproval (p < .01) in scenarios containing superiors and accusation and warning (p < .01) in those consisting of status equals. Finally, the native Chinese subjects were more inclined to choose disapproval (p < .001) and
explicit complaints ($p < .05$) in scenarios with superiors and to select hints ($p < .01$) and accusation and warning ($p < .05$) in those with status equals.

The significant differences found in strategy selection reflected the three groups’ severity tendencies in complaining to superiors and status equals. While the native English speakers did not exhibit obvious severity differences in complaints towards addressees of two status types, the learners and the native Chinese subjects tended to be severer towards status equals than towards superiors. This corresponds with Oliver’s (1971) claim that the Chinese tradition stresses respect for and subordination to authorities. However, they were also direct with superiors by using explicit complaints with high frequency.

The other investigated variable, social distance, also played a role in the subjects’ perception (see Table 3). It was associated with the subjects’ significant differences in their strategy options in scenarios involving addressees of three distance degrees (native English speakers: $\chi^2 = 65.909$, $p < .001$; learners: $\chi^2 = 28.754$, $p < .01$; native Chinese speakers: $\chi^2 = 37.940$, $p < .001$). For the native English subjects, they tended to select immediate threats significantly more often in scenarios involving siblings than those including strangers ($p < .01$) and neighbors ($p < .01$), in which they were significantly more inclined to choose hints (STRANGER x SIBLING: $p < .001$; NEIGHBOR x SIBLING: $p < .05$) and opting out (STRANGER x SIBLING: $p < .01$; NEIGHBOR x SIBLING: $p < .001$). In addition, the native English subjects were most likely to use hints in scenarios with strangers. In general, the native English speakers were inclined to be severest towards siblings, with no apparent difference in their severity tendency of complaints in scenarios consisting of strangers and neighbors.
Table 3
The Percentage of Complaint Strategies Selected by the Three Groups in Scenarios Involving Addressees of Three Distance Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Strategy Distance</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
<th>S6</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native (+D)</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Speaker (-D)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(-D)</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
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Note. 1. S1: hint, S2: expression of annoyance or disapproval, S3: explicit complaint, S4: accusation, S5: threat, S6: opting out
2. (+D): strangers; (-D): siblings; (~D): neighbors
3. The percentage is shown in the parenthesis.
As far as the learners were concerned, they selected hints with significantly higher frequency in scenarios involving strangers ($\chi^2 = 7.811$, $p < .01$) and neighbors ($\chi^2 = 3.903$, $p < .05$) than in those including siblings. In addition, they chose disapproval more often in scenarios consisting of siblings than in those of strangers ($p < .01$). There were no significant differences found in their preferred complaint strategies in scenarios containing strangers and neighbors. It seems that the learners were a little bit severer towards siblings than towards strangers, but no apparent distinctions were found in severity levels of complaints chosen in scenarios consisting of neighbors and siblings and those involving strangers and neighbors.

Finally, the native Chinese subjects tended to opt for accusation and warning least frequently in scenarios containing strangers (STRANGER x SIBLING: $p < .05$; STRANGER x NEIGHBOR: $p < .01$) and hints least frequently in scenarios involving siblings (SIBLING x STRANGER: $p < .01$; SIBLING x NEIGHBOR: $p < .001$). Moreover, they were also more likely to select disapproval in scenarios including siblings than in those consisting of neighbors ($p < .01$). In other words, the native Chinese subjects were inclined to be least severe towards strangers, then neighbors, and finally siblings.

To sum up the results about the relationship between complaint strategies and social distance, it appeared that to some degree, the three groups tended to be least severe towards strangers and severest towards siblings. This supports Leech’s (1983) hypothesis that the greater social distance of the addressee from the speaker, the more optionality and politeness would be needed. In other words, it is possible for us to be severe towards siblings or anyone whom we are very close to, but we are likely to be more reserved when the
addressees are unknown to us. On the other hand, the native English
speakers and the learners exhibited a similar complaint pattern
towards neighbors to that towards strangers, and the native Chinese
subjects tended to be severer towards the former than towards the
latter. This might reflect that for Americans, neighbors were close in
social distance to strangers, as they might seldom meet or have little
interaction with their neighbors. However, for the native Chinese
subjects, they are familiar with their neighbors and thus complain in a
relatively direct way.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that the learners were the
severest in strategy selection among the three groups, and that the
native English speakers tended to be least severe. In other words, the
choices of complaint strategies appropriate for each scenario reflected
that the learners were more likely to perceive direct, severe strategies
as appropriate than the native English speakers. As discussed
previously, the learners’ severity in complaints might arise because of
their insufficient understanding of the consequences caused by strong,
direct, and severe complaints and because of negative transfer of
complaint styles from their native language. Thus, it is essential for
instructors to bring the learners’ attention to outcomes that different
types of strategies might lead to and offer various complaint strategies
to enlarge learners’ repertoire. With regard to the effects of variables
of status and social distance, the learner group and the native English
group exhibited a similar tendency.

Based on the findings, there are some suggestions for future studies. As the learners in this study were not further divided into proficiency groups, it is hard to know whether learner’s language proficiency will influence their complaints. Thus, future studies can include learners of different proficiency levels and compare their complaints to see if there are any significant differences. In addition, the effects of the subject’s gender were not examined in the present study. However, its influences on complaints would also be worth exploring in future research. Furthermore, the finding that native Chinese speakers tend to be severer than the American subjects might require additional research since this finding is different from what previous research has shown. Finally, studies investigating the differences in native English speakers, learners in Taiwan, and native Chinese speakers can be conducted by using other instruments, such as discourse completion tasks, role-plays, or by collecting naturalistic data to compare with the findings of this study.

REFERENCES


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你不該這麼做！
—對於合宜抱怨的看法之跨文化研究

摘要
本研究探討台灣英語學習者在不同情況中對合宜抱怨策略的看法，以及其策略選擇與兩個社會變項—社會地位與社會距離的關係。此外，英語學習者的策略選擇也與英語母語及中文母語的使用者相比較。本研究所使用的語料工具為選擇題，每題內含代表不同抱怨策略的六個選項：(1) 暗示，(2) 表達不滿，(3) 明確抱怨，(4) 控訴及警告，(5) 威脅與咒罵，以及 (6) 沉默。除去沉默之外，其他抱怨策略的嚴厲程度自 (1) 至 (5) 遞增。以卡方對選擇題組所得到的語料進行量化分析，結果顯示三組受試者的策略選擇有顯著的差異性，且英語學習者傾向比另外兩組母語使用者嚴厲。此外，社會地位與社會距離似乎對三組的策略選擇皆有影響。最後，本論文對於研究結果以及可能造成三組之間差異性的原因也加以討論。

關鍵詞：中介語 抱怨策略 選擇題