

# **Proficiency and Complaints: Analyses of Productions and Perceptions**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the productions and perceptions of complaints of English learners at different proficiency levels in Taiwan. In addition, the interaction between the subjects' use of complaint strategies and two variables – status and social distance— was examined. One hundred undergraduates participated in this study, and they were divided into high- and low-proficiency learners. A written discourse completion task (DCT) and a multiple-choice task were employed to elicit the subjects' complaints. The strategy categories used for coding written DCT data and designing options of the multiple-choice task included opting out, hints, disapproval, requests for repair, explicit complaints, and accusations, with the severity level increasing from hints to accusations (excluding opting out). The results indicated that in the two tasks, the two groups both used requests for repair most often among the six complaint strategies. However, the low achievers' severity was higher than that of their high-proficiency counterparts, possibly as a result of limited English competence or the negative L1 transfer. Moreover, the two social variables, status and social distance, influenced the learners' productions and perceptions of complaints, and the two groups showed similar patterns when the two variables were involved.

**Keywords:** interlanguage, complaints, discourse completion task, multiple-choice task, severity tendency

## **Introduction**

In daily life, people complain a lot—about work, life, and other people, but they rarely complain directly to those who have caused the offense because of the risk of ruining their relationship with the person being complained to. The face-threatening nature makes complaints complicated—they may threaten both the speaker's and the addressee's positive face, which stresses the needs to be appreciated (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In addition, several variables may influence a speaker's complaints, such as cultural backgrounds, conversation participants' status and social distance, and language proficiency if the speakers involved are language learners. These variables affect speech behaviors differently across cultures, and lack of cross-cultural understanding of complaint strategies perceived as appropriate in different contexts often lead to communication breakdowns. This miscommunication could be particularly prominent with learners, who might use a force that exceeds their intentions (Tatsuki, 2000). In other words, there could be a gap between learners' productions and perceptions since their productions can be easily limited by language proficiency, but perceptions are relatively less constrained. An understanding of this gap can provide English practitioners with better insights into learners' difficulties for producing contextually appropriate complaints and where instruction can intervene. Therefore, it would be worth investigating whether there are differences between learners' productions and perceptions of appropriate complaints and what the differences might be, especially for learners of different proficiency levels. This study addresses these issues, beginning with the following review of complaints and cultural differences in the concepts of face.

## **Literature Review**

### **Complaints**

Complaints are a type of expressive (Searle, 1969), in which a speaker “potentially disputes, challenges, or bluntly denies the social competence of the complaine” (Edmondson & House, 1981, p. 145). Some semantic features characterize complaints, including explanations of purposes, complaints, justifications, and candidate solutions (Murphy & Neu, 1995). An explanation allows the addressee to know why there is a complaint, which expresses the speaker's unhappiness towards the addressee or an offense. Complaints might also involve justifications to provide reasons for the dissatisfaction and a candidate solution, requiring the addressee to perform remedial actions. Despite these semantic features, which intend to mitigate the inherent tension, complaints can still threaten the addressee's positive face.

Complaints can be direct and indirect. Comparatively, direct complaints are more

likely to cause face threats than indirect complaints.<sup>1</sup> According to Leech (1983), the directness of a speech act is determined either from the speaker's or the addressee's perspective. From the speaker's perspective, the directness level is decided by how the illocutionary act is connected to its goal. On the other hand, it can also be analyzed from the addressee's view, and the length of the inferential path is the crux. A direct complaint includes direct expressions of unhappiness and can be inferred easily by the addressee, but an indirect complaint may lead to different interpretations and are likely to be regarded as a general statement, and thus face threats can be reduced to a minimum.

Some contextual variables may influence how speakers complain, such as conversation participants' status and social distance. The status difference is vertical distance between conversation participants and dominates how much will a speaker can impose on the addressee. Another variable, social distance, i.e., the degree of familiarity, is related to the conversation participants' in-group or out-group membership. Addressing the effects of these two factors on speech behaviors, Leech (1983) has argued that when the status difference or the social distance between the conversation participants is great, the speaker producing an impositive is likely to be indirect. As a consequence, to complain appropriately, speakers must carefully assess these two variables and then vary the strategy use according to different contexts; otherwise, misunderstandings may arise.

In sum, complainers need to select appropriate strategies with further considerations of the contextual requirements to reduce the face threat. Such complexities make complaints difficult even for native speakers, not to mention second language (L2) learners, who might suffer from insufficient L2 competence, pragmatic competence in particular. Pragmatic competence, following Bachman and Palmer (1996), refers to the ability to produce the utterances that meet the goals for communication and fit the features of the language use setting. It includes not only a speaker's ability to use a language for different purposes but also a listener's ability to understand the speaker's real intentions, which may not be directly conveyed. It also involves the capacity to relate a set of linguistic forms and meanings intended by different forms in specific contexts (Bialystok, 1993). Pragmatic competence can be difficult for language learners because of their restricted L2 linguistic knowledge and limited ability to access the knowledge smoothly (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Edmondson & House, 1981). In addition, pragmatic transfer from learners' L1, which can be further divided into pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer (Kasper, 1992), may also be a factor causing learners' pragmatic difficulty. Whereas the former affects

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<sup>1</sup> The indirect complaints here are different from those of Boxer (1993), who has defined an indirect complaint as the expression of dissatisfaction to an addressee about oneself or someone/something that is not present.

learners' use of conventions of meanings and form, the latter operates on learners' perception of contextual factors and overall politeness styles in a situation. These causes may contribute to learners' failure to be pragmatically competent in L2 and occurrences of pragmatic errors, being negatively interpreted as arrogance or rudeness.

Some second language acquisition research has suggested that there are differences in learners' pragmatic competence and speech behaviors across different proficiency levels. In general, advanced learners tend to be more concerned about politeness than low-proficiency learners by showing greater sensitivity to politeness strategies (Walters, 1979), featured by the overuse of politeness markers and syntactic downgraders (Ellis, 1994). In contrast, low-level learners are constrained by L2 lexical or grammatical knowledge and prefer direct, imperative speech forms to all types of addressees (Scarcella, 1979). The influences of L1 transfer might also vary with learners' proficiency levels, but studies have displayed contrasting tendencies. For example, Taylor (1975), further supported by Takahashi (1984), Major (1986), Wenk (1986), and Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, and Ross (1996), has claimed that lower-level learners' performances reveal more traits of L1 transfer than those of more advanced learners, whose errors reflect overgeneralization of interlanguage features. Focusing on Chinese university students' productions of English complaints, Chen, Chen, and Chang (2010) also have argued that transfer from L1 is closely related to learners' English proficiency. However, some studies, such as Flege and Hillenbrand (1984) and Kellerman (1983), have suggested a negative correlation between transfer and proficiency, i.e., advanced learners rely heavily on their L1 sociocultural features, including tone (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987) and grammatical contrasts of tense, articles, and pronominal systems (Coppieters, 1987) when performing speech acts.

### **Cultural differences in “face”**

Cultural differences might contribute to various ways to produce and interpret speech acts. Conversation participants from different cultural backgrounds need to be cautious about the disparity among norms of appropriate behaviors in different settings of the target culture so as to prevent misunderstandings and even hostility from taking place. Such differences can be especially obvious with Western and Chinese cultures, with the former being individualism-oriented and thus emphasizing the individuality over the group and the latter being collectivism-oriented (Hofstede, 1984), exhibiting more concern for the community.

The face-saving view may have been regarded as representative of Western views of politeness. Face is a person's image, and Brown and Levinson (1987) have distinguished positive face from negative face, referring to an individual's desire to be

liked and claims of the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, respectively. They influence the speaker's choice of politeness strategies, which can be further divided into positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies, usually employed among in-group members, aim at protecting the addressee's positive face and establishing solidarity. On the other hand, negative politeness strategies appeal to the addressee's negative face and show deference, and they are preferred as the power difference between the conversation participants increases.

The concepts of face construct a framework for Western politeness, but they might not perfectly fit other cultures. Mao (1994) has argued that Chinese face emphasizes the harmony of individual conduct with their community values and group members' association with one another, and thus, it is different from Western face, which takes individuals as independent selves and values individual pursuits. Gu (1990) has also claimed that Chinese politeness, a product of traditional feudal hierarchy to stress respect for authorities (Oliver, 1971), is characterized by self-devaluation and admiration of others, and its influence might have extended to the present time. Nonetheless, contemporary Chinese politeness could have altered since at times directness and unmitigated speech styles are preferred (e.g., Hong & Shih, 2009, 2012; Shum & Lee, 2013), which implicitly reflect the changing Chinese attitudes towards other members from the same community.

The Western and Chinese concepts of face are very different, and they may be in conflict with each other and result in Chinese learners' difficulty to develop pragmatic competence in English since they might produce and interpret acts in English based on their L1 socio-cultural norms. As the studies of Yu (2003) and Chen, Chen, and Chang (2011) of American and Chinese speech behaviors have shown, both groups' strategy preferences reflect their culturally specific ways of speaking. Thus, an in-depth analysis is needed to find out whether cultural differences influence Chinese learners' pragmatic performances, especially complaints, an act that can cause face threats to the addressee, to provide instructional assistance and to prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings that might arise from learners' pragmatic errors. This study aims to examine productions and perceptions of complaints of English learners in Taiwan, who were divided into high and low proficiency levels, not only to better understand their complaints but to illuminate the effects of language proficiency on speech act performances. In addition, as a follow-up study of Hong and Shih (2009, 2012), who used the same instruments to study complaints of native speakers of English and Chinese, this study is compared with their findings to explore the transfer effects from the learners' first language (L1) on complaints. Therefore, the research questions were:

1. What are the similarities and differences in severity tendencies in complaint strategies produced by low- and high-proficiency English learners?
2. What are the similarities and differences in severity tendencies in complaints perceived as appropriate by low- and high-proficiency English learners?
3. What are the effects of social status and distance on the two learner groups' severity tendencies in complaints?
4. Are there traits of L1 transfer in the two learner groups' complaints?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred undergraduates participated in this study and formed two proficiency groups: high-proficiency learners (HL) and low-proficiency learners (LL). Each group included fifty participants, who were English majors recruited from universities in Taiwan. The learners' proficiency was determined by their performances in a pre-test, which was a TOEFL paper-based practice test. The mean scores of the HL and LL groups in the pre-test were 591.6 and 428.7, respectively.

### **Instruments and Procedures**

There were two instruments used in this study: a written discourse completion task (DCT) and a multiple-choice task. The written DCT collected the subjects' productions of complaints in different situations with open-ended questions, offering both the scenario and a response. Each scenario involved one variable, either status or social distance. The roles representing different degrees of the variables were teachers, classmates, strangers, neighbors, and siblings. This study did not include lower-status addressees, who were seldom involved in college students' interactions.

The other instrument, the multiple-choice task, examined the subjects' perceptions of appropriate complaint strategies in different situations. Similar to the written DCT, one of the variables, status and social distance, was involved in the scenarios. This task consisted of twenty scenarios, in which the subjects selected the most likely utterances from six options, representing different complaint strategies based on Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) scale with some modifications, including (1) hints, (2) disapproval, (3) requests for repair, (4) explicit complaints, (5) accusations and threats, and (6) opting out<sup>2</sup>. The severity levels of the strategies increased from (1) to (5). These categories were also used by two coders to code the written DCT data.

All of the subjects firstly received the written DCT, which required them to

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<sup>2</sup> Opting out was left out of the severity scale since speakers are likely to keep silent in offensive situations for various and complicated reasons.

assume that they were in the situations as described in the scenarios and to intuitively write down what they would say. After they handed in DCT responses, they were given the multiple-choice task, in which they chose the most likely option for each scenario based on their own perceptions. After the DCT data were categorized, Chi-square analyses were applied to data collected from both tasks to determine whether there were significant inter-group differences in strategy use and then compare the complaint severity.<sup>3</sup>

## Results

### 1. Productions of Complaint Strategies

Among the six complaint strategies, both groups used requests for repair most frequently, which can be further divided into indirect and direct requests<sup>4</sup>. Table 1 shows that high-proficiency learners (HL) preferred indirect requests whereas low-proficiency learners (LL) showed an opposite tendency. Chi-square analyses revealed that the two groups' use of complaint strategies significantly differed ( $\chi^2 = 34.273$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with differences being found in HL employing hints with higher frequency and LL producing more accusations.

Table 1

*The Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of the Two Groups' Strategies in the Written DCT*

Strategy \ Group	HL	LL	Chi-square value
Hint	161 (15%)	82 (8%)	$\chi^2 = 25.683^{***}$
Disapproval	158 (14%)	134 (14%)	$\chi^2 = 1.973$
Request for repair	417 (38%) [IDR: 289 (69%); DR: 128 (31%)]	374 (38%) [IDR: 148 (48%); DR: 196 (52%)]	$\chi^2 = 2.338$
Explicit complaint	252 (23%)	266 (27%)	$\chi^2 = .378$
Accusation	20 (2%)	44 (5%)	$\chi^2 = 9.000^{**}$
Opting out	94 (9%)	72 (7%)	$\chi^2 = 2.916$
Total	1102 (100%)	972 (100%)	$\chi^2 = 34.273^{***}$

*Note.* 1. The percentage is shown in the parenthesis.

<sup>3</sup> The two groups were considered to have obvious differences in severity tendencies to complain on two conditions. One occurred when a group used a strategy lower on the severity scale significantly less often but employed another strategy higher on the scale more frequently than the other group. The other condition took place when the significant difference only existed in two groups' use of a single strategy, which was ranked at the high end of the severity scale, i.e., explicit complaints and accusations in the present study.

<sup>4</sup> Indirect requests for repair usually took the form of "Can/Could you xxx?" whereas direct requests for repair include imperatives and statements such as "You should/ must xxx!"

2. Differences significant at the level of .01 and .001 are indicated by \*\* and \*\*\*.
3. IDR: indirect requests for repair; DR: direct requests for repair

Status appeared to play a role in both groups' selection of complaint strategies. Table 2 reveals that their strategy use in scenarios including addressees of the two status types was significantly different, though they both employed requests for repair most often towards superiors and status equals. Chi-square analyses demonstrated that they were both more likely to express disapproval and opt out of hearer-dominant scenarios, but in status-equal scenarios, the HL group preferred hints and explicit complaints whereas the LL subjects employed more requests for repair and accusations. The patterns showed that both groups' severity tendencies to complain to status equals were higher than to superiors.

Table 2  
*The Two Groups' Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of the Two Groups' Use of Strategies towards Superiors and Status Equals in the Written DCT*

Group	Addressee's Status	Strategy	H (+P) <sup>5</sup>	H (=P)	Chi-square value
HL		Hint	34	54	$\chi^2 = 4.545^*$
		Disapproval	42	24	$\chi^2 = 4.909^*$
		Request for repair	97	82	$\chi^2 = 1.257$
		Explicit complaint	18	76	$\chi^2 = 35.787^{***}$
		Accusation	0	8	(no value) <sup>6</sup>
		Opting out	22	4	$\chi^2 = 12.462^{***}$
		Overall			$\chi^2 = 64.676^{***}$
LL		Hint	26	21	$\chi^2 = .532$
		Disapproval	40	16	$\chi^2 = 1.286^{**}$
		Request for repair	54	80	$\chi^2 = 5.045^*$
		Explicit complaint	41	60	$\chi^2 = 3.574$
		Accusation	0	22	(no value)
		Opting out	21	4	$\chi^2 = 11.560^{**}$
		Overall			$\chi^2 = 52.006^{***}$

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter H (+P) indicates addressees having power over the speaker; i.e. the ones who have higher social status; H (=P) refers to the ones whose social status is equal to the speaker's.

<sup>6</sup> Chi-square analyses cannot be conducted when a zero frequency is involved.



Table 3

*The Two Groups' Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of Strategies towards Addressees of Three Social Distance Types in the Written DCT*

Group	Addressee's Distance	H (+D) <sup>7</sup>	H (-D)	H (~D)	Chi-square value
HL	Hint	30	28	15	$\chi^2 = 5.452$
	Disapproval	20	33	39	$\chi^2 = 6.152^*$
	Request for repair	59	102	77	$\chi^2 = 11.756^{**}$
	Explicit complaint	38	66	54	$\chi^2 = 7.494^*$
	Accusation	0	5	7	$\chi^2 = .333$
	Opting out	37	4	27	$\chi^2 = 25.265^{***}$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 56.735^{***}$
LL	Hint	23	6	6	$\chi^2 = 16.514^{***}$
	Disapproval	17	25	37	$\chi^2 = 7.696^*$
	Request for repair	75	105	60	$\chi^2 = 99.545^{***}$
	Explicit complaint	47	56	62	$\chi^2 = 2.073$
	Accusation	5	7	9	$\chi^2 = 1.143$
	Opting out	20	6	21	$\chi^2 = 8.979^*$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 48.794^{***}$

On the other hand, social distance was associated with significant intra-group differences in the use of complaint strategies. Table 3 suggests that the two groups' strategy distributions in scenarios including addressees of three distance types were significantly different. The HL subjects used requests for repair most frequently towards all three types of addressees, but the frequency occurrences were significantly different across disapproval, requests for repair, explicit complaints, and opting out. In general, they were likely to be the least severe towards strangers, but the differences between their severity tendencies in scenarios involving siblings and neighbors were slight. Similarly, the LL subjects' strategy options were also significantly different when they complained to addressees of the three distance degrees. They gave requests for repair most frequently to strangers and siblings, but to neighbors, they issued explicit complaints most often, closely followed by requests for repair. Like the HL group, the LL subjects tended to be the least severe towards strangers, but the severity differences of their complaints strategies towards the addressees of the three distance

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter H (+D) indicates hearers who are unknown to the speaker; i.e. strangers; H (-D) refers to the ones who are close to the speaker, and H (~D) represents those who are known but not familiar to the speaker.

degrees were slight.

## 2. Perceptions of Likely Utterances

Similar to the DCT productions, the two proficiency groups perceived requests for repair as appropriate with higher frequency than any other strategy in the multiple-choice task. As shown in Table 4, they chose all of the six strategies, but they were significantly different in overall strategy selection ( $p < .001$ ), particularly in accusations, chosen more often by the LL group, and opting out, preferred by the HL group.

*Table 4*  
*The Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of Strategies Preferred by the Two Groups in the Multiple-choice Task*

Group \ Strategy	HL	LL	Chi-square value
Hint	161 (16%)	133 (13%)	$\chi^2 = 2.667$
Disapproval	103 (10%)	111 (11%)	$\chi^2 = .299$
Request for repair	389 (39%)	445 (45%)	$\chi^2 = 3.760$
Explicit complaint	175 (18%)	166 (17%)	$\chi^2 = .238$
Accusation	32 (3%)	80 (8%)	$\chi^2 = 2.571^{***}$
Opting out	140 (14%)	65 (7%)	$\chi^2 = 27.439^{***}$
Total	1000 (100%)	1000 (100%)	$\chi^2 = 54.974^{***}$

In addition, both groups' choices of complaints towards superiors and equals revealed significant intra-group differences. Towards addressees of the two status types, requests for repair were still the best option for both groups, who tended to be severer towards status equals than towards superiors. Table 5 displays that the HL learners tended to be harsher in scenarios involving status equals than in those including superiors because significant differences were found in the selection of accusations, which the learners were more likely to prefer when complaining to status equals. Similarly, LL participants favored disapproval and explicit complaints towards superiors and selected more accusations in scenarios of status equals.

Table 5

*The Two Groups' Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of Strategies towards Superiors and Status Equals in the Multiple-choice Task*

Group	Addressee's		H (+P)	H (=P)	Chi-square value
	Status	Strategy			
HL	Hint		28	43	$\chi^2 = 3.169$
	Disapproval		17	13	$\chi^2 = .533$
	Request for repair		80	69	$\chi^2 = .812$
	Explicit complaint		34	24	$\chi^2 = 1.724$
	Accusation		1	12	$\chi^2 = 9.308^{**}$
	Opting out		40	39	$\chi^2 = .013$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 15.559^{**}$
LL	Hint		19	32	$\chi^2 = 3.314$
	Disapproval		30	8	$\chi^2 = 12.737^{***}$
	Request for repair		95	105	$\chi^2 = .500$
	Explicit complaint		35	20	$\chi^2 = 4.091^*$
	Accusation		4	21	$\chi^2 = 11.560^{**}$
	Opting out		17	14	$\chi^2 = .290$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 32.492^{***}$

Table 6

*The Frequency Occurrences and Chi-square Values of Strategies Selected by the Two Groups towards Addressees of Different Distance Degrees in the Multiple-choice Task*

Group	Addressee's			Chi-square value	
	Distance	H (+D)	H (-D)		H (~D)
Strategy					
HL	Hint	67	4	19	$\chi^2 = 72.200^{***}$
	Disapproval	14	39	20	$\chi^2 = 14.000^{**}$
	Request for repair	66	67	107	$\chi^2 = 13.675^{**}$
	Explicit complaint	23	76	18	$\chi^2 = 52.974^{***}$
	Accusation	8	8	3	$\chi^2 = 2.632$
	Opting out	22	6	33	$\chi^2 = 18.131^{***}$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 173.612^{***}$
LL	Hint	38	13	31	$\chi^2 = 12.171^{**}$
	Disapproval	11	39	23	$\chi^2 = 16.219^{***}$
	Request for repair	86	59	100	$\chi^2 = 1.637^{**}$
	Explicit complaint	27	64	20	$\chi^2 = 3.216^{***}$
	Accusation	23	21	11	$\chi^2 = 4.509$
	Opting out	15	4	15	$\chi^2 = 7.118^*$
	Overall				$\chi^2 = 8.870^{***}$

On the other hand, the multiple-choice data suggested that social distance was related to significant differences in both groups' choices of complaint strategies. Hints, closely followed by requests for repair, were favored by the HL group in scenarios with strangers. Explicit complaints and requests for repair were preferred in those with siblings and neighbors, respectively. Table 6 shows that statistical analyses yielded significant differences in the HL subjects' use of strategies, and they were inclined to be the severest towards siblings among the addressees of the three distance degrees. Similar patterns of strategy selection and severity tendencies were found in LL subjects' perceptions of appropriate complaints, as reflected in the multiple-choice task.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Overall Complaint Behaviors**

This study shows that both learner groups used all of the six complaint strategies, and that the main differences lay in their preferences for strategies of different severity levels. Based on the frequency counts of each strategy preferred in the two tasks, the LL group appeared to be severer than the HL group, and this corresponded to the tendency reported in second language acquisition literature, indicating a trend for advanced learners to overgeneralize the interlanguage features, including the politeness strategies. As Walters (1979) and Carrell and Konneker (1981) have suggested, advanced learners not only perceive the politeness level to different forms of an act in similar ways to native speakers but also exhibit greater sensitivity to politeness strategies than native speakers. It follows that when they complain, they are aware of the face threat that might be caused and would attempt to reduce it. Thus, they avoid direct/ severe strategies that threaten the interlocutor's face and lead to tensions in interpersonal relationships. This tendency also accounts for the relatively low frequency of the high achievers' use of accusations in the written DCT.

In contrast, the LL subjects tended to be severe, probably because of limited proficiency, which restricted their performances. Compared to the other indirect strategies, direct/ severe strategies, such as explicit complaints and accusations, clearly state the offense and make the mapping between the speakers' intentions and linguistic forms of these strategies straightforward and are thus seemingly easier to produce. Since the low achievers are confined by insufficient L2 knowledge, they prefer to carry out speech acts with simple structures and lexical items to reduce their cognitive load.

The tendency for the LL subjects to be severe was manifested in their preference for direct requests for repair as well. On the whole, among the six strategies, both learner groups were most likely to use requests for repair, possibly because they

regarded the purpose of complaining as the attainment of remedial actions, and requests for repair helped them achieve this goal effectively. However, when these requests were further divided into direct and indirect categories, differences between the two learner groups emerged. Whereas the HL group produced much more indirect requests for repair, the LL group used both types of requests with close frequency, with direct requests, as shown by the following examples, being used slightly more frequently.

(LL2)<sup>8</sup> “I think you should do something for this project.” (Scenario 2)

(LL5) “If you want to sleep here, you have to clean the bathroom with me.” (Scenario 2)

(LL32) “Sh! Be quiet, please.” (Scenario 8)

(LL37) “You need to clean the bathroom.” (Scenario 9)

Direct requests for repair, which take the form of imperatives or declaratives often produced as “you should/need to...”, are relatively straightforward and easy to produce. Compared to indirect requests, which require speakers to transform statements into “Could you do X?”, direct requests are cognitively undemanding and appeared to be a better choice than indirect requests to the low achievers. This finding is supported by Scarcella (1979), who has pointed out the low-level learners’ preference for direct forms of speech acts, regardless of the addressee’s status or distance.

A further comparison between the present study and Hong and Shih (2009), a preceding study which utilized the same written DCT to collect complaints produced by the native speakers of English and Chinese, reveals more differences between the two learner groups. Similar to the learners, the two native groups used requests for repair most often among the six complaint strategies. However, the native English speakers and the HL group resembled in their preferences for soft strategies of hints and disapproval whereas the native Chinese speakers and the LL group both tended to use the severe strategies of explicit complaints and accusations with higher frequency than the other strategies. This comparison shows that the LL group seemed to reflect negative pragmalinguistic transfer of complaint severity. In contrast, the high achievers appeared to escape from the influences of negative transfer and thus were close to the native English speakers in complaint severity. This tendency is congruent with previous research that has claimed a negative relationship between proficiency and L1 transfer (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2010; Major, 1986; Takahashi, 1984; Wenk, 1986). Nonetheless, the low achievers’ limited proficiency is also likely to have contributed to their preference for direct and imperative expressions; thus,

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<sup>8</sup> LL: low-proficiency learners; the number: the coding of the subjects

further empirical studies are needed to verify whether the severity was caused by L1 transfer or by limited language competence.

Different from the written DCT findings, another tendency is found when the present study is compared with Hong and Shih (2012), who employed the same multiple-choice task with native speakers of English and Chinese. Among the four groups, the HL group chose accusations with the lowest percentage whereas the native Chinese speakers preferred explicit complaints, indicating that the HL group and the native Chinese speakers appeared to be the most conservative and the severest, respectively, among the four groups. On the other hand, the LL group's strategy selection was close to the native English group's. This finding revealed the disparity between the tendencies displayed in the multiple-choice task and the written DCT, in which the LL group was much severer than the native English speakers.

This discrepancy between the complaint tendencies in the LL group's production and perceptions of complaints may be explained by differences between the two elicitation tasks. According to Hinkel (1997), DCTs require responses that are more linguistically accessible than pragmatically appropriate. As a result, the LL subjects may attempt to avoid complex syntactic constructions in the DCT to ensure that their responses are linguistically correct. Since a lack of L2 knowledge restricts learners in the ways they perform the acts (Blum-Kulka, 1991), the written DCT could have made their priority to be expressing feelings clearly rather than attending to mitigation or politeness, leading to the tendency to be severer than native English speakers in complaints.

By comparison, the multiple-choice task, which needs the subjects to make the most appropriate and perceptually salient choices, is simpler for the low achievers than the written DCT. Therefore, their responses were closer to the native English speakers' than those in the written DCT. It is also possible that the LL group's perceptions of appropriate complaints were similar to the native English speakers'. Therefore, there were discrepancies between their preferences for complaint strategies in the two tasks.

## **2. Effects of Status and Social Distance on Complaint Behaviors**

In general, the two groups demonstrated similar patterns with regard to the effects of social status on their complaints—they both tended to be severer towards status equals than towards superiors since they selected severe accusations more frequently in scenarios including status equals whereas they preferred explicit complaints in those involving superiors. The tendency is found both in the learners' productions in the written DCT and perceptions of likely utterances in the multiple-choice task and is also supported by Leech's (1983) authority scale, which

proposes that the needs for indirectness of an impositive increases with the status of the addressee. This shows that traditional Chinese concepts of respect for authorities still have some influences on contemporary Taiwanese society. As the two subject groups were students, the teacher's authoritative status made them discreet about their speech. In contrast, they might not have been as concerned about their classmates' face and so tended to directly express unhappiness. The straightforwardness might have reflected the learners' attempts to construct identities and solidarity within their own groups, which are also shown in the use of non-standard variants (Eckert, 1997).

In addition, the analysis of the two groups' severity levels of complaints towards addressees of three distance degrees suggests that both groups were similar in their tendency to be severest towards siblings. The high achievers also showed an inclination to be the least severe towards strangers, and this can be found in the low achievers' selection in the multiple-choice task as well. Although the written DCT data showed that both groups were likely to be least severe towards strangers and exhibited slight severity differences towards siblings and neighbors, this tendency appeared to be caused by the subjects' perceptions of the scenarios involving strangers as not so offensive, as informally reflected by some of the informants. However, in the multiple-choice task, the subjects' severity tendencies towards strangers and neighbors were similar while they were severest with siblings. The behavioral patterns roughly supported Leech's (1983) hypothesis about the influence of the social distance on speakers—they can be severe towards siblings or other intimates, but they are reserved when complaining to an unknown addressee. As for those addressees whom they know but are not so familiar with, strategies at the moderate severity level are preferred. On the other hand, the subjects might still have been under the influence of the Chinese tradition, which stresses the importance of being nice to the neighbors. Thus, despite their higher familiarity level with neighbors than with strangers, they still resort to less direct strategies to neighbors.

Different from Trosborg's (1995) study, which revealed that learners at different proficiency levels were unable to adjust speech behaviors to different contexts, the two learner groups were sensitive to the variables of status and social distance and tended to be severer towards status equals and siblings than towards superiors and strangers. The findings of the present study are more likely to support the learners' switch of speech behaviors according to contexts, as revealed by other previous studies such as Lee (1999) and Olshtain and Weinbach (1993). On the other hand, as the sensitivity has also been found in native speakers of English and Chinese of Hong and Shih (2009, 2012), it may indicate that both American and Chinese cultures share the norm of respecting teachers and being polite to strangers by using softer and more indirect expressions, especially when a face-threatening act is involved. Further, the

comparison between the present study and Hong and Shih (2009, 2012) suggests that sociopragmatic errors did not appear to occur to the two learner groups; instead, there could be positive transfer from their native language, which helped them to utilize contextually appropriate strategies in different situations.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the productions and perceptions of complaint strategies of English learners of different proficiency levels and shows that on the whole, the low-proficiency learners tended to be severer than their high-proficiency counterparts. This could be the result of the low achievers' limited L2 competence or negative L1 transfer. High achievers' tendency to overgeneralize the interlanguage features and strategies used to show politeness could also be a factor. In addition, the effects of the two social variables, status and social distance, appeared to be similar on the two proficiency groups. They both tended to be less severe when the status difference or social distance of the addressee was great than they were when complaining to addressees with equal status or a high level of familiarity.

This study implicitly suggests that the higher proficiency a learner has, the more indirect and polite s/he could be. Although the advanced learners might have overgeneralized some pragmatic features and then were even more indirect than native English speakers, they know how to resort to linguistic strategies to avoid face threats that can be caused in the interaction and reduce cross-cultural communication breakdowns. In contrast, the low achievers' preference for direct complaint styles could result in confrontations with the addressee. Therefore, pragmatic instruction and the instructor's intervention could be crucial in guiding learners to use appropriate strategies in cross-cultural communication. Integrating activities with mini lessons to build up learners' repertoire of appropriate strategies for different speech acts and lexical choices to reduce face threats can be helpful. Variables that would incur different strategy use should also be introduced and discussed. In this way, both pramalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors can be minimized.

One major contribution of this study is that it offers a better understanding of the effects of language proficiency and social variables of status and distance on the complaints of English learners in Taiwan. It should be noted that the focus of this study was on the productions and perceptions of complaints of learners whose native language is Chinese, and the results were not specifically geared towards learners from other language and cultural backgrounds. Further, the instruments used in this study collected written data and thus may not authentically reflect what learners say in real situations. The aim of future research can be to include other oral instruments or naturalistic observations on the complaints of English learners with different native



languages so as to extend the scope of interlanguage complaint studies and obtain a fuller picture of learners' pragmatic competence.

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