

Language Proficiency and the Speech Act of Complaint of Chinese EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Complaint is an under-researched speech act in the field of interlanguage pragmatics. Making a complaint runs the risk of impairing the relationship between speaker and hearer as it requires the speaker to express displeasure and frustration to what is believed to be the responsibility of the hearer. The speaker, therefore, has to use appropriate linguistic forms bearing in mind social conventions to make the hearer take some action of repair or to avoid interactional conflicts. For L2 learners, making complaints in a second/foreign language is more difficult as they may lack both sociocultural and L2 knowledge. This study investigated the ability of Chinese EFL learners to produce complaints and its relationship with their L2 proficiency. Thirty-two Chinese university students and five native speakers of American English completed a Free Discourse Completion Test (FDCT); English proficiency was measured by learners' performance in TEM-4. Data elicited from the FDCT were analysed using a holistic rating scale for the overall appropriateness of complaints and a coding framework for complaint strategies and modifications. Results showed that learners were unable to produce appropriate complaints and L2 proficiency significantly influenced the overall appropriateness of complaints. Differences were also identified in strategies and external and internal modifications used by learners of different proficiency levels. The study suggested that the production of complaints by Chinese learners is greatly influenced by their native culture. In addition to improving L2 proficiency, lessons on cultural differences should be introduced for them to improve the ability to complain in English.

Keywords: L2 proficiency; speech act of complaint; complaint strategies; Chinese EFL learners; Chinese culture

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the identification of pragmatic competence as an indispensable component of language ability, researchers have directed their attention to second/foreign language (L2) learners' ability to realise communicative functions and how this ability is acquired. A number of studies have been conducted on speech act production with a focus on L2 learners' knowledge of linguistic forms and their knowledge of social and cultural norms to perform different speech functions. Among the speech acts investigated, complaint has been found to be rather complex to produce because making appropriate complaints relies heavily on sociocultural knowledge and flexible selection of linguistic forms to convey disapproval and frustration and to avoid as much as possible impairing the relationship with the hearer. For Chinese learners of English, learning to make complaints may be more difficult as it means breaking the harmonious personal relationship that Chinese culture values.

Researchers in China have started to explore the speech act of complaint since the start of the 21st century. Existing studies have identified differences between Chinese and English speakers in the use of linguistic forms and semantic content and in the choice of strategies when talking to different people, i.e. professors, intimates, friends and strangers (Chen, Chen

& Chang 2011, Yuan 2011). A few researchers are also interested in the influence of L2 proficiency on Chinese learners' ability to make complaints (Hong 2015, Hong & Shih 2013, Yuan 2007). However, these studies are small in number and those on the EFL learners' production of complaints in Mainland China are even fewer given the large number of learners in that area. Moreover, no baseline data from English native speakers were provided for the comparison of complaint components produced by Chinese learners at different proficiency levels. This study intends to address the research gap by examining learners' production of complaints in Mainland China and whether L2 proficiency has an effect on the production in the foreign language learning context of China.

COMPLAINT

A complaint is a face-threatening act. In making a complaint, the speaker expresses dissatisfaction to the hearer of a past action by the hearer that the speaker feels dissatisfied about (Laforest 2002). When a complaint is being made, the negative attitude expressed by the speaker to the hearer threatens the hearer's face, and the speaker runs the risk of losing a friend or causing another person considerable embarrassment or even anger that might affect the hearer's willingness to offer repair. Therefore, the speaker needs to weigh several payoff considerations before performing this face-threatening act (Olshtain & Weinbach 1993). For example, the speaker should consider whether to make a complaint or to opt out, and by opting out the speaker avoids confrontations with the hearer but it may lead to frustration. If a complaint is made, the speaker then has to decide whether to explicitly state the offence or to alleviate the interpersonal conflict by hinting.

Complaints can be made directly or indirectly, and the directness of complaints may be influenced by the contextual variables, such as social power and social distance. Social power indicates whether the complainer is of lower or higher or equal status to the complaine, while social distance refers to the degree of familiarity between the complainer and complaine.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) and Trosborg (1995) have developed two frequently used frameworks of the strategies used to perform complaints. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) studied native and nonnative speakers of Hebrew, and proposed five categories of complaint strategies based on severity of the complaint: below the level of reproach, disapproval, direct complaint, accusation and warning, and threat. Trosborg (1995) compared the complaints produced by native speakers of English and Danish. She identified four common strategies, i.e. no explicit reproach, expression of disapproval, accusation and blame. The four main categories were subdivided into eight sub-strategies, among which hint was the most indirect sub-strategy and explicit condemnation towards person was the most direct one.

In addition to complaint strategies, internal and external modifications have also been found to soften or strengthen the impact of the speech act on the hearer. According to Trosborg (1995), there are two main categories of internal modifications, i.e. downgraders and upgraders and four types of external modifications, i.e. preparators, disarmers, providing evidence and substantiation used to justify the accusation and make the complaint more convincing.

PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND COMPLAINTS PERFORMED BY CHINESE SPEAKERS

Researchers are keen on language learners' ability to perform speech acts and the factors which may influence this ability (Ahn 2007, Kim 2000, Li, Rozina & Szalaniec 2015). One of the factors being investigated is L2 proficiency and it is expected that exploring L2 proficiency may help inform pragmatic developmental pattern since learners' ability to produce appropriate language is an indicator of general language proficiency. However, empirical studies have reported inconsistent findings as to the influence of L2 proficiency on the development of learners' ability to perform different speech acts, such as request, apology and gratitude. Some researchers supported their concurrent progress (Dalmau & Gotor 2007), while some others reported that high L2 proficiency did not guarantee equally high levels of ability to perform speech acts (Farashaiyan & Tan 2012).

The effect of L2 proficiency on the making of complaints has been examined among Chinese EFL learners (Hong 2015, Hong & Shih 2013, Li, Zheng & Yang 2006, Yuan 2007). Li *et al.* (2006) examined the degree of severity in complaints among three groups of Chinese EFL learners in Mainland China (one English major undergraduate group and two non-English major groups that consisted of one graduate student group and one PhD student group) and one group of American native speakers. Among the three learner groups, English majors were found to be closer to English native speakers and the closeness in production was attributed to their high level of English proficiency.

Yuan (2007) compared second and fourth-year university students' production of complaints in Mainland China using a DCT. Not much difference was identified in the semantic components of a complaint, but there was significant difference in the employment of internal modifications and external modifications. Fourth-year students used more downgraders, such as durative aspect marker, consultative device, hesitators, minus committers and hedges, and they were also superior in the number of external modifications, such as sweeteners and thanking.

Hong and Shih (2013) divided the respondents in Taiwan into high and low proficiency groups based on their performance in a paper-based TOEFL test and examined their production and perception of complaint strategies using a written discourse completion task (DCT) and a multiple-choice task. The study found that the low proficiency group produced severer complaints probably due to their limited proficiency, while the high proficiency group tended to over-generalise (use too many) pragmatic features and was more polite. According to Hong and Shih (2013), this result indicated that language learners were more indirect and polite with the increase of their language proficiency.

Hong (2015) examined instructor- and peer-directed emails produced by two groups of Taiwanese students at low and intermediate levels of English language proficiency. The respondents were asked to write four complaint emails, two to the instructor and the other two to the peers. In addition to complaint strategies, supportive moves and internal modifiers were analysed. The study found that the two groups of learners were similar in the use of more explicit complaints and in the use of more supportive moves and downgraders to the instructor. However, the intermediate learners preferred justification to the single use of formulaic expressions of politeness, which, according to Hong (2015), suggested that the intermediate learners were slightly superior to the low proficiency learners in producing complaints.

The studies discussed above have identified similarities and differences in production of complaints between L2 learners of different proficiency levels but such studies are limited in number, especially those in Mainland China, to form some kind of conclusive evidence. When production of complaints was investigated, most studies compared Chinese EFL

learners at different proficiency levels without baseline data from English native speakers for the purpose of comparison. Besides, studies on the EFL learners in Mainland China did not measure the learners' L2 proficiency and only assumed that different education levels, such as second-year and fourth-year university students, represented proficiency levels. In view of the shortcomings mentioned above, this study was conducted to examine the relationship between L2 proficiency and production of complaints.

METHOD

This study investigates Chinese EFL learners' production of complaints and its relationship with their L2 proficiency. It sets out to answer two questions: What is the current level of the ability of Chinese EFL learners' to produce complaints? What is the relationship, if any, between Chinese EFL learners' L2 proficiency and their production of complaints?

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study were 32 Chinese EFL learners and 5 native speakers of American English. The Chinese EFL learners were composed of tertiary level English-major students in the first semester of their third year university education. They were chosen as respondents because the Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (TSEM) stated clearly that English majors, upon completion of their foundation stage of the first two years of learning, should be able to acquire communicative strategies and grasp different communicative functions in order to use appropriate English in different contexts (MOE 2000). Therefore, an investigation of their ability to perform complaints in English could shed some light on how well the respondents had acquired the ability to use English for communication.

The Chinese respondents of the study were between 19-23 years old. There were 29 females and 3 males and they had been learning English between nine to twelve years. None of them had ever had learning experience in an English-speaking country. Five native speakers of American English were invited to participate in the study, and they were also in their twenties.

Chinese respondents were given detailed instructions on how to complete the FDCT in their native language of Chinese, and then each participant was asked to complete the FDCT individually. The responses from the native speakers of English were collected via emails.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The free discourse completion task (FDCT) in written form was used to test how students performed the speech act of complaint. The FDCT was employed for two reasons. The first reason is because making complaints in authentic interactions often involves a number of turns for the speakers to elaborate on their complaints (Korsko 2004) and FDCT provides a form for interactive process in which respondents write a dialogue and they can decide where the conversation is going and what strategies, semantic formulas or forms are preferred to achieve their communicative intentions based on their inner perception and knowledge of what such a process should be like. The other reason is related to Chinese learners' learning environment in which they do not have many communication opportunities to use English in daily life. Since EFL learners are less likely to function very effectively in face-to-face interactions given the accompanying pressures and constraints (Eisenstein & Bodman 1986), FDCT in the written form may be more suitable to gauge their underlying knowledge when they are not overburdened by the need to complain in real time and at the same time allows

sequential aspects of speech acts to occur (Barron 2003). The following is an example of the FDCT used in the study:

It's quite late at night. You have been trying to fall asleep for some time but you cannot because of the loud rock music from your neighbour's room. Besides, it is not the first time that loud music from your neighbour's room has disturbed you at night. Your neighbour, about your age, moved to this place a few days ago but you haven't had a word with him/her. You go over to your neighbour's place, knock on the door and speak to him/her:
 You:
 Your neighbor:
 You:
 Your neighbor:
 ...

Situations in the FDCT were developed based on previous studies, such as Olshtain and Weinbach (1993), Rinnert and Iwai (2003), Sato (2010), and Tanck (2002). Six situations were chosen because they were familiar to Chinese EFL learners. The description of the situation was adapted for a dialogue to take place. Two contextual variables were considered: social power and social distance. The table below provides a general description of the situations:

TABLE 1. General description of the situations in the FDCT

Situation	Social power	Social distance
1. Classmate is late for discussion	Equal	Small
2. Newly-moved neighbour playing loud music	Equal	Large
3. Unsatisfying score	Low	Small
4. Food late	High	Large
5. Recommendation letter	Low	Large
6. Younger brother/sister scratch CD	High	Small

L2 proficiency in this study was based on the participants' performance in the Test for English Majors-4 (TEM-4) of China. TEM is the most influential nationwide test battery in China to evaluate English majors' overall language proficiency and TEM-4 evaluates whether second-year university students meet the required standard set by the TSEM. TEM-4 is administered once a year in April to test students' reading, listening and writing abilities. This test has been reported to have high validity and reliability (Jin & Fan 2011).

DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

Chinese learners' production of complaints was analysed in two ways, i.e. a holistic rating scale to evaluate the overall appropriateness of language use, and a coding framework for the analysis of certain language features with native speakers' responses as the baseline data. The holistic rating scale adopted in the study was developed by Eisenstein and Bodman (1993), and had been used to assess different speech acts such as apology, request, compliment and compliment responses (Ahn 2007, Kim 2000). Following Kim (2000) and Ahn (2007), value labels were used for the measurement of participants' pragmatic production: 1= native or near native, 2= acceptable, 3=problematic, 4= unacceptable, others= resistant, not comprehensible.

The coding framework used in the study consisted of three components: complaint strategies, external modifications and internal modifications. The type of strategy used to complain was adapted based on works by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), Trosborg (1995) and Laforest (2002). The classification of internal modification and external modification was adapted from Trosborg (1995) and House and Kasper (1981). The framework was further modified according to the responses in FDCT. For example, two complaint strategies

(open disapproval and request that contains forbearance) were added to the framework. The strategies listed in the coding framework are:

- 1) Below the level of reproach: This strategy is considered as opting out since the speaker chooses to not complain to the hearer, e.g. *Don't mention it. I have no other meanings.*
- 2) Expression of annoyance and disapproval: vague and indirect realisations of the complaint in which the SUA or the hearer is not specified, but annoyance is expressed at the offence (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).
 - Hint: The speaker implies that he/she knows about the offence and holds the hearer indirectly responsible (Trosborg, 1995). For example, *What happened to my CD?*
 - Consequence: The speaker talks about the outcome due to the SUA. For example, *Now it won't play my favorite songs.*
 - Open annoyance or disapproval: the speaker expresses annoyance and implies that the hearer is responsible for the SUA by expressing the result or consequence of the SUA. For example, *I'm very sad to have this grade.*
- 3) Explicit complaint: a complaint is made by directly referring to the SUA or the hearer, or to both. The speaker will clearly address the SUA.
 - Request for explanation. For example, *Why are you late?*
 - Statement of the problem. For example, *Excuse me, we ordered our food 20 minutes ago and we haven't received it yet.*
 - Request for repair. For example, *Can you turn down the music?*
 - Request for forbearance. For example, *Next time please try to call me or at least answer your phone to let me know what happened.*
- 4) Accusation and warning: an open face-threatening act is performed. In accusation, the speaker explicitly expresses his moral condemnation, implying sanctions against the hearer.
 - Negative assessment of the accused action. For example, *You should take care of other people's belongings.*
 - Negative assessment of the accused as a person. For example, *You are irresponsible.*
- 5) Immediate threat: the speaker chooses to openly attack the hearer by stating the ultimatum with immediate consequences. The speaker sometimes curses, insults or threatens. For example, *If you do not listen to me, I will go tell mom!*

Four external modifications formed part of the framework. They are 1) preparators, used to foreground or warn the complainee about a forthcoming complaint (e.g. *Hello Professor. I am here to see you about my grade.*); 2) disarmers, employed to save the complainee's face and also the complainer's own face (e.g. *I like rock music, but...*); 3) providing evidence, proving that the SUA was actually performed by the complainee (e.g. *You promised to send in a recommendation letter for me over a month ago.*); 4) substantiation, examples to justify the complaint (e.g. *I must go to sleep because tomorrow I need to get up early.*).

Internal modifications were composed of downgraders and upgraders at syntactic and lexical levels. Downgraders are different kinds of mitigating devices. Syntactic downgraders comprised such devices as interrogative (e.g. *Can you/I...? May you/I...?*), past tense modal verb forms (e.g. *Could you...? Would you...?*) and consultative device (e.g. *Would you mind if..., Do you think you could...?*), while lexical downgraders included politeness marker (e.g. *please*), downtoners (e.g. *possibly, perhaps, maybe*), subjectiviser (e.g. *I think, I wonder, I'm*

afraid), and so on. Upgraders intend to increase the complaint force, such as rhetorical questions at the syntactic level and intensifiers (e.g. *very, so, such, really, just*) at the lexical level.

After the collection of data, two native speakers of American English in their twenties were invited to assess the participants' production of complaints. In order to ensure the rating reliability, a one-and-a-half hour rater training was conducted in which the rating purpose and rating criteria were explained followed by an analysis of sample complaints for the raters to have a better understanding of and an agreement on the scales. Besides, the raters were reminded that grammatical mistakes could be ignored if the responses were comprehensible. After the rater training, the two raters worked separately to score and give brief comments on the data elicited from FDCT.

The inter-rater reliability for the raters was examined by Kappa statistic to ensure the consistency between the raters. As a rule, Kappa values between 0.6 and 0.8 are considered good, and values above 0.8 are considered excellent agreement (Landis & Koch 1977). The Kappa statistic for the present study was 0.859 indicating excellent inter-rater reliability.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 was used for the quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics was used to obtain the mean, minimum and maximum values, the standard deviation, and skewness and kurtosis of the data in FDCT. The Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted for the relationship between L2 proficiency and production of complaints. This correlation analysis requires three assumptions: interval or ratio data, linearity, and bivariate normally distribution. A relatively normal distribution is ensured if the skewness and Kurtosis of the variables is between +1 and -1. A scatter plot can be used to determine whether two variables are linearly related. A Pearson correlation coefficient is preferred if they are linearly related, and a Spearman correlation coefficient can be used if not.

Qualitative analysis of the responses in the FDCT followed two steps. The responses were compared first for the similarities and differences between Chinese EFL learners and English native speakers in order to know the current level of Chinese EFL learners' ability to produce complaints. Subsequently, the native speaker group and three learner groups were also compared. The three learner groups were at different proficiency levels with regard their score on the TEM-4, i.e. the top five high proficiency participants ($TEM-4 \geq 70$), five intermediate proficiency participants ($63 \leq TEM-4 \leq 62$), and the bottom five low proficiency participants ($TEM-4 \leq 55$). Kruskal Wallis test showed that the difference in L2 proficiency across the three groups was significant, $p(0.009) < 0.05$, and the differences between any of the two groups were also significant.

RESULTS

CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' PRODUCTION OF COMPLAINTS

Four scales with value labels were used to judge students' responses in FDCT and the following scores were assigned to the responses to accord with the total score of TEM-4 (100 points): native-like (16 points), acceptable (12 points), problematic (8 points), and not acceptable (4 points). Accordingly, the total score for the six situations can be interpreted as follows: 96= native-like, 72=acceptable, 48=problematic, 24=not acceptable.

The total scores that Chinese students obtained in FDCT were analysed. Table 2 presents the result. The result shows that the participants' responses are far from satisfactory, considering that the mean score is 45.625, the minimum score is 30 and the maximum score is 68. In addition, the statistics also shows that the data from FDCT are relatively normally

distributed as the skewness (0.461) and kurtosis (-0.740) are between +1 and -1, satisfying one of the assumptions for the Pearson correlation analysis.

TABLE 2. Statistical results from the FDCT

N	Total score	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness	Kurtosis
32	96	30	68	45.625	10.503	.461	-.740

The participants' responses were also analysed according to the coding framework. A list of similarities was identified in complaint strategies, external modifications and internal modifications by Chinese EFL learners (EFL-L) and English native speakers (NE-S). The two groups most often made explicit complaints, followed by the expression of annoyance and disapproval. Among all the sub-strategies, statement of the problem (hereafter, SP) was the most preferable strategy by the two groups. Among the four external modifications, substantiation was most frequently used by both learners and native speakers.

The variables of social power and social distance showed an effect on the two groups' use of complaint strategies and modifications. More strategies were used with a decrease in social distance and increase in social power. Both EFL learners and native speakers did not use more severe strategies (accusation and warning and immediate threat) when talking to people at a higher social status, such as a professor and deputy dean. More external modifications were used with a decrease in social power, and the speakers resorted to more external modifications when talking to an unfamiliar interlocutor.

However, Chinese EFL learners were found to deviate from NE-S group in the use of strategies and modifications. Out of all strategies used, the EFL group produced 15.37% hints and that more than doubled the same strategy used by the NE-S group (6.94% of all the strategies). Moreover, NE-S group never produced the strategy of below the level of reproach or opting out, and never showed negative assessment of the accused as a person, but some Chinese EFL learners used the two strategies. For example, in the third situation where the speaker expressed his/her dissatisfaction with a score of C, some students chose to opt out, *“this time I got a C for this course. I want to know my disadvantages and to improve it. I really like this course. I want to do my best to learn it well.”*

In addition, request for explanation (hereafter, RE) was the second strategy produced by the EFL group, while the NE-S group used more request for repair (hereafter, RR) than RE. For example, in situation 6 where the speaker is complaining to his/her younger sibling about a scratched CD, three out of five native speakers requested for repair, such as *You need to buy me a new one* or *You should either buy me a new CD, or buy me the songs from I-tunes so I can still listen to them..* However, this strategy was not produced by the learner group in this situation.

When the data from the EFL group were further analysed alongside the raters' brief comments, three problems concerning the inappropriate use of strategies were identified. First, some strategies used by the EFL group, such as accusation and warning and immediate threat, were considered rude. For example,

- Oh god! You are so irresponsible! (Situation 1)
- Be quick! If won't, I will leave there immediately. (Situation 4).
- You made a great loss for me. (Situation 5)

Some hints produced by EFL group were also commented as 'rude' or 'sarcastic' by the raters. For example, in the first situation where a classmate was late for an hour, some Chinese EFL learners chose to start the dialogue with a hint by either saying *“At last you*

arrived” or stating the time (e.g. It is 11:10 now). However, such beginnings were regarded as strange and rude. Similarly, in the second situation where the speaker complained to his/her neighbour about the loud rock music, some students hinted by saying he/she also liked rock music (e.g. I have been trying to fall asleep, but I failed because I like rock music so much that I can’t sleep), but those hints were considered as sarcastic and rather rude.

A third problem was that some strategies produced in certain situations were commented as ‘unrealistic’ by the raters. For example, in situation 6, Chinese EFL learners taught their siblings moral lessons when using the strategy of accusation and warning, such as “*I want to tell you that we should be honest. That’s the lesson which you should learn...I’m glad you’ve learned something important*” and “*You’re a person, you must be honest.*”

As for external modifications, EFL group employed more external modifications ($M = 5.62$) than those used by native speakers ($M = 3.6$). EFL group used more *preparators*, while NE-S group preferred *providing evidence*. However, some of the preparators were used inappropriately according to the raters’ comments. For example, in situation two of a newly-moved neighbour playing loud music, some EFL learners mentioned the interlocutor’s interest in rock music as a warning of the forthcoming complaint (e.g. *You are interested in music, aren’t you?*). However, such preparators were commented as rude and sarcastic in small talks. Besides, the overused preparators as the cushioned beginning of a complaint made the dialogues strange to the raters, as in the following dialogue:

You: Do you like the CD?
Your brother/sister: Yes, it’s wonderful.
You: How often do you usually listen to it?
Your brother/sister: Every day.
You: You see, it is severely scratched at here, here and here...

Variation between the learner group and native speakers was also identified in the employment of internal modifications. EFL group used less internal modifications ($M = 6.1$) than NE-S group ($M = 8.2$). Although the two groups produced more downgraders than upgraders in the FDCT, in the first situation when the speaker was talking to a classmate, EFL group produced more upgraders (68.18%) than downgraders (31.82%), opposite to the NE-S group who produced more downgraders (62.5%) than upgraders (37.5%).

Moreover, Chinese EFL learners had problems in diversifying their language to realise communicative functions. For example, they were less flexible in the use of syntactic downgraders. The consultative device “*Do you think you could...?*” which native speakers used never appeared in the responses of EFL group, and Chinese EFL learners never used past tense modal verb forms in the conditional sentence as was found in native speakers’ data (e.g. “*If you could still write it for me, that would be great*”). When requesting for forbearance, native speakers resorted to past tense modal verb forms to mitigate the complaints, while EFL learners relied much on the politeness marker “please”.

NE-S:

- Next time would you please try to call me or at least answer your phone to let me know what happened?
- It would have been nice if you could have let me know.

EFL learners:

- Please pay attention to it next time.
- Please find another way to contact me next time.

Another example is the use of *subjectiviser* and *durative aspect marker*. English native speakers used the *durative aspect marker* “I was wondering...” at the syntactic level, while some Chinese EFL learners use only the lexical downgrader *subjectiviser* “I wonder”.

- I wonder if you can turn the music down. (EFL-L)
- I wonder if there’s something wrong with the letter. (EFL-L)
- I was wondering why I received a C on my report. (NE-S)

L2 PROFICIENCY AND PRODUCTION OF COMPLAINTS

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between L2 proficiency and production of complaints. The assumption of correlation analysis was tested using descriptive statistics analysis. Results showed that the mean score of L2 proficiency was 62.03, with a standard deviation of 6.95, and the data was normally distributed as the skewness (-.163) and kurtosis (.041) were between +1 and -1.

Pearson correlation coefficient (*r*) was used for the correlation between L2 proficiency and production of complaints when the examination of the scatter plot showed that the two variables are linearly related. Table 3 presents the results. According to Pallant (2007): *r* = 0.10 to 0.29 indicates small correlation; *r* = 0.30 to 0.49 indicates medium correlation; *r* = 0.50 to 1.00 indicates high correlation. According to the interpretations, a medium significant correlation was identified between production of complaints and L2 proficiency (*r* = .454, *p* = 0.009 < 0.05). That is, the more proficient the learners were, the more native-like and appropriate complaints they could produce.

TABLE 3. Correlation between L2 proficiency and production of complaints

	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
L2 proficiency	32	0.454**	.009
Production of complaints	32		

** correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Responses from native speakers and the three learner groups of high, intermediate and low proficiency learners were compared for a better understanding of whether and how proficiency influenced the production of complaints. Complaint strategies were compared first. Table 4 presents the result of the total number of strategies used and the distribution of the three preferable strategies (SP, RR, and RE). The results showed that the NE-S group outperformed the three learner groups in the number of strategies (72), and the low proficiency group produced the least strategies among the three groups (53). In view of the three most frequently used strategies, the high proficiency group may be closer to the NE-S group than the other two groups in that it could produce more RR (20%), the second preferable strategy by native speakers, although it still relied much on RE to make a complaint (20%). The intermediate proficiency group produced mostly RE (23.88%) out of all the strategies, while more RE (20.75%) were used than RR (15.09) by the low proficiency group. At the same time, the high proficiency group deviated from the other participants as they overused hints (20%), and this number exceeded the other two learner groups by 14.93% and 7.55%, respectively and the NE-S group by 6.94%. With regard to the influence of social power and social distance, a similar pattern of strategy use was identified across groups, i.e. between NE-S group and the three learner groups.

TABLE 4. Number of strategies and the distribution of the most preferable strategies across groups

Group	N	Total number of strategies	SP	RR	RE
High-proficiency	5	65	14 21.54%	13 20%	13 20%
Medium-proficiency	5	67	14 20.90%	10 14.93%	16 23.88%
Low-proficiency	5	53	16 30.19%	8 15.09%	11 20.75%
NE-S	5	72	20 27.78%	16 22.22%	11 15.28%

Note: SP= Statement of the problem, RR= Request for repair, RE= Request for explanation

Second, the production of external modifications was examined across groups. The obvious differences were identified in the total number and the distribution of different types of modifications. Table 5 presents the result. The results showed that the three learner groups outperformed native speakers in the number of external modifications, and more proficient EFL learners could produce more external modifications. Besides, the low proficiency group deviated most from the NE-S group in that their most preferable modification was *preparator*, while native speakers favored more *substantiation* than the other external modifications and that they never produced *disarmers*.

TABLE 5. Total number and distribution of external modifications across groups

Group	Total number	Preparator	Disarmer	Providing evidence	Substantiation
High-proficiency	35	13 34.29%	1 5.71%	3 11.43%	18 48.57%
Medium-proficiency	30	11 36.67%	2 6.67%	4 13.33%	13 43.33%
Low-proficiency	21	9 42.86%	0 0.00%	5 23.81%	7 33.33%
NE-S	18	4 22.22%	1 5.56%	5 27.78%	8 44.44%

Third, the use of internal modifications across groups was compared but the results were complex. Table 6 presents the result of the number and distribution of different types of internal modifications. All of the three learner groups could not produce as many internal modifications as the NE-S group, and the less proficient the learners were, the less internal modifications they could produce. As for the distribution of downgraders and upgraders, high proficiency group was closer to the NE-S group in that it produced more downgraders (62.16%) than upgraders (37.84%), while the other two learner groups used more upgraders than downgraders.

TABLE 6. Total number and distribution of internal modifications across group

Group	Total number	Downgraders			Upgraders		
		Syntactic	Lexical	Sum	Syntactic	Lexical	Sum
High-proficiency	43	15 34.88%	14 32.56%	29 67.44%	2 4.65%	12 27.91%	14 32.56%
Medium-proficiency	30	10 33.34%	4 13.33%	14 46.67%	3 10%	13 43.33%	16 53.33%
Low-proficiency	21	8 38.10%	2 9.52%	10 47.62%	1 4.76%	10 47.62%	11 52.38%
NE-S	41	15 36.59%	9 21.95%	24 58.54%	1 2.44%	16 39.02%	17 41.46%

In terms of the two social parameters, NE-S group used more downgraders than upgraders in most situations except when they were talking to interlocutors with relatively

lower social status, such as the younger sibling and a waiter/waitress. However, the three learner groups all reported a different pattern: more upgraders than downgraders were produced when they were talking to interlocutors whom they were familiar with, while more downgraders were employed when they were talking with unfamiliar people; no linear tendency can be identified in the use of downgraders, although more upgraders were produced in high social power situations.

Besides, the increase of L2 proficiency may mean more linguistic forms. A case in point is the use of subjectiviser “I wonder”. None of the low proficiency learners produced this subjectiviser while more “I wonder” was used in the high proficiency group than those in the intermediate proficiency group.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated Chinese EFL learners’ ability to produce complaints and the effect of L2 proficiency on their L2 production. Results showed that Chinese EFL learners were sensitive to social power and social distance. However, they still lacked the linguistic ability to produce appropriate complaints: they obtained rather low score in the FDCT and several problems had been identified in the use of complaint strategies, external and internal modifications when their responses were compared with those by English native speakers, such as the inappropriate use of below the level of reproach and hint and the overuse of preparators and upgraders.

These problems may have much to do with the perceptions of appropriate linguistic behaviour in Chinese and English cultures. Generally speaking, Chinese culture is characteristic of a collectivist culture and wide power differential and it provides individuals a strong sense of belonging to groups and a respect for hierarchy, while the culture of English-speaking countries, such as the United States of America, is individualised with an emphasis on equal rights for each individual (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). These differences impact on Chinese speakers’ L2 learning in the following ways.

First, Chinese culture emphasises interpersonal relationships over individual rights or desires, and the major concern of communication in China is maintaining face and group harmony (Cohen 1997). Accordingly, Chinese speakers try to build up a trusting interpersonal relationship with small talks before getting down to business, and tend to use indirect and implicit ways to realise communicative functions to save face. When producing complaints in English, as was shown in the present study, they sometimes opted out and used many hints; they provided the complainees with chances to justify their unfavourable behavior; they resorted to preparators and small talks to develop trust and understanding with the complainees before making the complaint rather than try to prove that the SUA was actually performed by the complainees.

Second, collectivist culture stresses strong cohesion within groups. Chinese people in a group work towards the same group goals and they are expected to protect and support each other, to be open to share ideas and express true feelings, while overlooking the statements that may generate conflicts. The cohesive tendency is also reflected in Chinese EFL learners’ L2 production. For example, when making a complaint to a classmate who was taken as one of their own, they were more open to express their dissatisfaction and more upgraders were produced than downgraders. On the contrary, native speakers of English still showed much concern about the avoidance of conflicts in this situation by producing more downgraders than upgraders.

Collectivism is also represented in the Chinese family concept. Chinese people believe that family members should take care of each other and share what they have with each other.

Accordingly, they do not request for compensation for the damaged possessions, and what they care about is whether the damage-maker can realise and apologise for his/her unfavourable behavior. This concept influences how they communicate in English. For example, Chinese EFL learners never used RR by asking for a new CD or other compensation when complaining to his/her younger sibling about a scratched CD in Situation 6. On the contrary, 40% of native speakers of English requested for repair in this situation.

Moreover, the hierarchy structure of Chinese society permeates family issues. In Chinese society, every person is prescribed a role to play in social interactions, and people at relatively low social status are expected to show great respect to their superiors. Similarly, senior family members have much say in family issues and they have the privilege to directly point out their juniors' mistakes and to provide moral lessons. Accordingly, in making complaints in English, Chinese EFL learners sometimes explicitly expressed their moral condemnation by teaching their young sibling right from wrong or telling them what they should do as shown in this study. However, moralizing one's juniors is unacceptable in the United States, which emphasises equal rights in every aspect of social life (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005).

In addition to L1 cultural influence, Chinese learners' production of complaints is affected by the limited repertoire of linguistic forms in English. For example, they cannot vary their use of syntactic downgraders as English native speakers. This result is consistent with studies on request speech act which reported that English native speakers produced significantly more syntactic downgraders in request production than L2 learners (Hendriks 2008).

The study showed that there was a medium correlation between learners' production of complaints and their L2 proficiency. This result corroborates other research findings that linguistic knowledge and skills relate with complaint realisation (Hong 2015, Hong & Shih 2013, Li et al. 2006, Yuan 2007). Examination of the strategies and modifications further exemplified the effect of L2 proficiency. On the one hand, the effect of L2 proficiency can be explained from its relationship with L1 negative pragmatic transfer, the use of L1 speech norms in inappropriate L2 contexts. As shown in the previous section, highly proficient students were closer to English native speakers in the production of more RR, while low proficiency students used more preparators. The results suggest that the less proficient L2 learners are, the more likely they will transfer negatively their native social and cultural norms into the target language, and produce inappropriate linguistic forms.

On the other hand, the effect of L2 proficiency on the production of complaints may lie in EFL learners' ability to use linguistic forms. Low proficiency students lacked the linguistic knowledge to realise pragmatic intent. For example, students produced fewer internal modifications with the decrease of L2 proficiency. This result is consistent with Yuan (2007). Only high proficiency learners resembled English native speakers in using more downgraders than upgraders. As for the use of subjectiviser, no low proficiency students produced "I wonder", and more students in the high proficiency group used this mitigating device than those in the medium proficiency group.

Although it was found that L2 proficiency was related to the production of complaints, high proficiency L2 learners tended to be too indirect as they overused hints when compared with native speakers of English. This finding echoes what has been reported by Hong and Shih (2013) that high proficiency group overgeneralised pragmatic features. This finding suggests that to what extent and in what situations those pragmatic features should be applied in communication still remains a problem, and it takes time for L2 learners to fit pragmatic features in various social occasions.

CONCLUSION

This study showed a significant effect of L2 proficiency on the overall appropriateness of complaints produced, and high proficiency students were found to be closer to English native speakers in language use, although they were sometimes over-polite. However, Chinese EFL learners' ability to produce complaints was rather inadequate, and much discrepancy has been identified in the use of complaint strategies and modifications due to cultural influences. These findings suggest that in order to improve their ability for appropriate language use, cultural differences should be introduced to Chinese EFL learners in addition to promoting their L2 proficiency.

The study has some limitations such as the unitary data collection method of FDCT for the production of complaints and a relatively small sample size. Future research needs to collect data through diverse methods, such as role plays and interviews, and a larger sample should be involved. Besides, other speech acts should also be investigated for Chinese EFL learners' ability to realise different communicative functions.

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