

Rhetorical Structure and Politeness Strategies in Complaint Letters Used by International Students in a Thai ELF Context

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ABSTRACT

Making a complaint in any language is not an easy task. The complainer might run the risk of impairing the relationship between him/her and the hearer. In Thailand, international students use English as a medium of communication among one another and with local people. This English as a lingua franca (ELF) context was considered appropriate to investigate the rhetorical structure and politeness strategies used in complaint letters written by the international students in order to see their use of polite strategies and the factors influencing their choices. Forty graduate international students were asked to write two complaint letters to local addressees in the university contexts, one to a person of a higher status and the other to a person of equal status. Some of them were also interviewed. Based on Hartford & Mahboob's framework (2004), seventeen moves were found in the rhetorical structure of the complaint letters. As to politeness strategies, more negative strategies were used in the moves of Complaint and Request while more positive strategies were found to set a common ground in Introduction, Attention getter, and Background. The factors influencing the choice of politeness strategies included social status, social distance, pragmatic transfer, and L2 input. The interviews reveal different views between the complainers and the complainees on the effectiveness of politeness strategies adopted.

Keywords: Complaint; English as a lingua franca; rhetorical structure; politeness strategies, communication

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students in Thailand has increased every year. According to UNESCO, 31,571 international students were enrolled in Thai universities in 2016-2017 (Evison, Bailey, Taylor, & Tubpun, 2021). About half of them come from neighboring countries including China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). For international students, English serves as a means of communication among themselves and with faculty and staff, and with local people. The use of English in this context fits the definition of English as a lingua franca (ELF) given by Seidlhofer (2005), in which English is used as a medium of communication between speakers of different first languages (L1s).

To achieve communicative goals, it is necessary that speakers have both linguistic knowledge (correct function in grammar and vocabulary) and pragmatic knowledge (appropriate use of language in different cultural and social contexts) (Tanck, 2002). Lacking either type of knowledge can lead the interlocutors to communication breakdowns. Although the typology of speech acts is deemed universal, how they are verbalized and conceptualized can be different. According to Wolfson (1986), the dissimilarities lie in the way they are realized, distributed, and functioned as well as in the frequency of their occurrence. Compared to other types of speech acts, complaining seems to be more difficult to perform because of its sensitivity and communicative impacts on the emotion and relationship of both the complainer and complainees (Masjedi & Paramasivam, 2018).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), complaint is categorized as one type of face-threatening act (FTAs). It threatens the complainees' positive face of being understood, admired, and respected since the complainer holds the complainees responsible for the offense. It also tends to threaten the complainees' negative face of being unimpeded if the complaint is followed by a request for compensation. The more serious FTAs are, the more likely the speaker is to adopt politeness strategies to alleviate the severity of the threats to the addressee's face, especially when the addressee is at a higher social distance and more powerful than the speaker (Maier, 1992).

Even though politeness is universal, its concept varies across cultures, which may cause misunderstandings between interlocutors of different first languages (Yuan, 2011; Masjedi & Paramasivam, 2018). Therefore, for language learners, showing politeness in complaint is inherently face-threatening, and not easy (Wijayanto, Laila, Prasetyarini, & Susiati, 2013). To understand the acquisition of L2 pragmatics and complaint speech act, a number of research works have been conducted to compare complaints by native and non-native English speakers (Chen, Chen & Chang, 2011; Yuan, 2011; Tabatabaei, 2015; Önalın & Cakir, 2018), or how complaints are performed in ESL/EFL contexts (Yang, 2016). Nevertheless, a limited number of studies have investigated complaint speech act in an ELF context where English is used among non-native speakers from various cultures. In addition, previous studies have investigated complaints in relation to moves and strategies (Hartford & Mahboob, 2004; Decock & Depraetere, 2018), gender influence (Wu, 2013; Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016), differences in L1 and L2 (Bikmen & Martı, 2013), directness and indirectness (Decock & Depraetere, 2018; Depraetere, Decock, & Ruytenbeek, 2021) but it seems that research on politeness strategies used in complaining among ELF users is underrepresented. Moreover, limited studies have taken the complainees' side into balanced consideration. The current study aims to fill in the research gap by exploring the voices of not only the complainer but also the complainees.

The present study involves international students in a Thai context, in which people are deemed to be culturally polite. Living in a different culture, international students unavoidably encounter unsatisfactory situations and need to find strategic ways to deal with the issues. Effective complaint concerns one's language ability and cultural knowledge. Although Asian people share many similar customs and beliefs, they are still different in many ways. The way they complain and the politeness strategies used could be some of them. The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to provide empirical evidence of the rhetorical structure of complaint letters and politeness strategies used by international students. In this context, English is used as a lingua franca between them and the Thai local people. Secondly, this study aims to identify factors influencing their use of politeness strategies. The results will allow for a better understanding of email communication between ELF users, which could be applicable to other similar ELF contexts. The results can also lead to cultural awareness regarding the speech act of complaints in particular.

Actions and measures could then be taken to remedy the situation and conflicts could be avoided or lessened.

Specifically, the current study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the rhetorical structure used in complaint letters written by international students in an ELF context?
2. What are the politeness strategies adopted in the complaint letters?
3. What are the factors influencing their use of politeness strategies?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF COMPLAINING

Previous studies discuss the rhetorical structure of complaining from both oral and written forms of discourse; however, little research has been seen on the rhetorical structure of a written complaint. In Al-Momani (2014), an investigation was carried out into Jordanian university students' letters of complaint in an academic context, with the main moves identified definable as opening, heading, greeting, background information, explanation, request, and closure. However, the study was limited in that the complaints were in Arabic, not English. Hartford and Mahboob (2004) studied the discourse structure of the complaint letters in business contexts, and found a number of moves including introduction, praise, attention getter, background, complaint, appeal to the editor, request for redress, suggestion, justification for the request or suggestion.

POLITENESS STRATEGIES OF SPEECH ACTS

The growth of research on politeness has been significant since the introduction of the face-saving strategy concept by Brown and Levinson (1987). Nickerson (1999) investigated the use of politeness strategies in complaints, requests, offers, apologies, orders, and suggestions included in 82 business letters. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, positive and negative strategies were identified in each act. The findings provide a better understanding of how the relationship between the Sender and the Receiver affects the rhetoric within the letter. Goudarzi, Ghonsooly, and Taghipour (2015) examined politeness strategies in business letters written by non-native English speakers and native speakers. The results show that non-native speakers employed more politeness strategies than native speakers, and more positive strategies were adopted than negative ones. Also, Brown and Levinson's politeness model is confirmed to be applicable to languages other than English, to both oral and written discourse, and by native and non-native English speakers (Maier, 1992).

PRAGMATIC TRANSFER AND SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SPEECH ACT OF COMPLAINING

Pragmatic transfer can be an influencing factor in complaining. If non-native speakers do not know how to complain in L2, they tend to use their L1 strategies; thus, misunderstandings may occur (Yamagashira, 2001). Studies have proved that pragmatic transfer indeed occurs when speakers perform the speech act of complaint (Trenchs, 1995; Yang, 2016; Li & Suleiman, 2017), and the transfer even occurs among advanced learners (Hilliard, 2017). For example, pragmatic transfer is found in the perception of acceptable directness and making use of similar semantic

formulas. Yang (2016) found pragmatic transfer in semantic formulas of complaining which was influenced by the speaker's English proficiency. The findings by Li and Suleiman (2017) also confirmed that the less proficient L2 complainers are, the more likely their L1 negative pragmatic transfer occurs.

Sociocultural factors including social distance, social status, and gender are found to influence the complaining realization patterns (Yuan, 2011; Chen et al., 2011, Wijayanto, Prasetyarini, & Hikmat, 2017; Yang & Wannaruk, 2019). For instance, higher levels of pragmatic competence were reached when the interlocutor was from a lower social distance, such as friends as opposed to acquaintances (Morrow, 1995). Regarding complaining strategies when addressing higher-ups, Chinese university students were found to exhibit greater respect to professors than the Americans did (Yuan, 2011). As to interlocutors of equal status, the level of Americans' complaining shows a gradually descending tendency along the social distance continuum, while the Chinese have intimates and strangers at both rising ends with friends at the bottom in the middle. It can be concluded that social distance holds more importance than social status in private conversation. On the other hand, Chen et al. (2011) found that the Chinese complaints seemed to be more sensitive to social power and they varied according to the interlocutor's status more so than the American complaints did. As for the gender factor, Chinese women seemed to be more polite and considerate when complaining than men did (Wu, 2013).

This study combines the three abovementioned theories to firstly investigate the rhetorical structure of the complaint letters written by international university students to local addressees in a Thai ELF context, secondly identify politeness strategies used in the letters, and lastly shed light on the factors influencing the employment of those politeness strategies.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted at a Thai university with the majority of graduate students coming from four neighboring countries - namely China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia. Forty participants, ten from each country, were selected for the study using convenience sampling. All of them were undertaking either master's or PhD study in different disciplines, had lived in Thailand for 1-3 years, and ranged in age from 25 to 38, the average being 30. Based on the graduate admission requirements, their proficiency ranged from B2 to C1 band of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001).

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

An open-ended questionnaire with demographic information and two writing tasks was assigned via Google Docs. The participants were asked voluntarily to write two complaint emails about any problems they encountered during their stay at the university. One email should be written to a higher status (e.g. advisor, CIA Director) and the other to an equal rank (e.g. CIA official, university hotel staff). They were asked to write as they would in real life.

A semi-structured interview was employed as guidance to the interviewers on what to ask. After primary coding, eight interviewees (one male and one female from each nationality) were purposively selected to participate in the interview. They were asked about the politeness strategies

and lexical choices adopted as well as their perspectives in writing complaint letters in this ELF context. Some example questions include:

1. What are the factors you may consider when you write a complaint letter? For example, different recipients' status, relationship, gender. What do you think?
2. When you were writing the tasks, did you consider the politeness level by choosing words?
3. Are your politeness strategies influenced by anything from your culture, e.g. your lifestyle, your stereotypes, etc. or are they just structures from your L2 learning? [If it's because of culture, how are they influenced?]
4. When you were writing the tasks, did you translate from your L1 or just adopt English structures you learnt before?
5. If you were writing the two tasks in L1, would you adopt the same or different strategies?

In addition, to gain further insight from the complainers, one hotel manager and one CIA official were asked to read the letters addressed to them and share their opinion.

For data analysis, moves were coded using Hartford and Mahboob's (2004) framework. To ensure reliability, an experienced researcher of move analysis and politeness strategies was enlisted as an intercoder. After a hands-on training session, one of the researchers and the intercoder independently coded 10 emails randomly drawn from each corpus. A discussion between the coders was made if there were any disagreements. The move frequency was investigated following with Kanoksilapatham (2015). That is, a move was coded as obligatory (100% of occurrence), conventional (60-99%), and optional (below 60%). In addition, the analysis of positive and negative politeness strategies in complaint letters employed Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. A Chi-Square test was run to determine whether there was an association between the Senders' politeness strategies and the Receivers' status. The qualitative data from the interviews were coded independently to identify factors influencing the use of politeness strategies.

RESULTS

RHETORICAL STRUCTURE IN COMPLAINT LETTERS BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The first research question aimed to identify the rhetorical structure of the complaint letters, including the order of moves and their frequency. The analysis revealed that the complaint letters consisted of 17 moves. In terms of frequency of occurrence, one move was obligatory (*Complaint*), six conventional (*Greeting, Attention getter, Request, Pre-closing, Closing, Signature*), and ten optional, as shown in Table 1. To illustrate how some moves were realized, the expressions used by the Senders were given as examples. At the end of each example, the sources were given. For example, (Ch3-1) means the expression by Chinese3 which was found in complaint letter 1 (written to a higher-up) whereas (V4-2) refers to that by Vietnamese4 in complaint letter 2 (to an equal status person). C and I refer to Cambodian and Indonesian participants respectively.

Greeting was identified in almost all the letters as it begins with "Dear..." followed by a given name, a nickname, or a title that has a function to address the Receiver (e.g., Mr./ Prof./ Dr./ Dean of ...). After *Greeting*, the Sender would introduce her/himself in *Introduction*. However, *Introduction* was much less apparent in use in the second letter (to an equal status), which could

be explained when viewed in contrast to the more formal approach of the first letter, which was to a person of a higher status.

TABLE 1. Rhetorical move structure of complaint letters by international students

Move order*	Frequency (n=80)	Category
Greeting	70 (87.5%)	Conventional
Introduction	29 (36.25%)	Optional
Praise	15 (18.75%)	Optional
Attention getter	59 (73.75%)	Conventional
Background	37 (46.25%)	Optional
Complaint	80 (100%)	Obligatory
Request	70 (87.5%)	Conventional
Suggestion	11 (13.75%)	Optional
Apology	9 (11.25%)	Optional
Informing	7 (8.75%)	Optional
Acknowledgement	9 (11.25%)	Optional
Enclosing	3 (3.75%)	Optional
Confirming	4 (5%)	Optional
Threatening	2 (2.5%)	Optional
Pre-closing	61 (76.25%)	Conventional
Closing	73 (91.25%)	Conventional
Signature	60 (75%)	Conventional

* The order may vary slightly, especially among optional moves.

The next conventional move, *Attention getter*, showed the purpose of the letter. In Hartford and Mahboob's study (2004), the move was identified to give the Receiver some context for the proposition. However, in the current data, it is simply to inform the Receiver of the issue that was going to be talked about, as illustrated in the following examples.

- (1) "Recently, I feel very frustrated with the school regarding the documents about my graduation."
(C2-1)
- (2) "I am writing today to complain of the poor service from CIA." (V1-1)

Examples (1) and (2) show how Senders introduce the issues which will be stated in detail in *Complaint*. In order to soften the complaint, some Senders continued the letter with *Praise*, either by talking about the benefits they had previously received from the university/department, as in example (3) or by mentioning some good points of the individual Receiver, as in example (4). The frequency of *Praise* was not high in total, but its occurrence in the first task doubled that in the second task. Based on the interview, Senders tended to please their higher-position Receivers in order to avoid any confrontation or to develop some rapport.

- (3) "I have been living in this dorm for two years, and I would appreciate that during that time I have never had any serious issues." (I2-1)
- (4) "Thank you for your scholarships offering to the school of Biotechnology. You are doing a great job and kindness." (C3-1)

Background aims to describe the setting in which the complaint is related. This move normally appears right before *Complaint*, as in example (5); however, sometimes *Complaint* may come immediately after *Attention getter*, as in example (6).

- (5) “As a Ph.D. student, I have to read a lot of articles from different journals to gain knowledge related to my field of research.<Background> However, the access to many online journals related to ELS is currently restricted due to the school’s cancellation of the subscription.<Complaint>” (V3-1)
- (6) “I am writing to complain about the poor wireless internet connection at our dormitory <Attention getter>. Recently I can hardly access any website to browse and download journal articles for my study. It is especially serious at night time when getting a Google search result seems to take minutes.<Complaint>” (V5-2)

In cases where *Complaint* came first, *Background* could appear later in the letter to make the complaint clearer. Nevertheless, there were also cases in which the Sender skipped the background and jumped to the *Complaint* directly. This might make the complaint sound too direct, abrupt, or blunt.

Complaint was the central move of the letter. It could be a single issue as in example (7), or a list of troubles as in example (8). It came with details and might entail some emotional expressions including “*unhappy*”, “*uncomfortable*”, “*disappointed*”, “*dissatisfied*”, or even more serious ones such as “*shocked*”, “*astounded*”.

- (7) Several days ago, I got into trouble with the sink in the bathroom, it’s like the channel was deadlocked. I have informed this problem to the front office, but it hasn’t been followed up for 3 days and no technician arrived. I feel uncomfortable with this condition. (I4-2)
- (8) I think the canteen service is really not convenient. There is no meal service in canteen on weekend. What is more, the hygiene condition is not optimistic; [...]. There are too many dogs in school. I think it is not safe for students. (Ch4-1)

Complaint was often followed by *Request* for redress (example 9) accounting for 87.5 percent of the data, or sometimes by *Suggestion* (example 10) as an indirect request for a solution.

- (9) As it is running very slowly and I am facing regular disturbance, I could not download any documents for my study or talk with my parents <Complaint>. Kindly send anyone to check my internet connection <Request>. (Ch8-2)
- (10) [...], we found it really hard to understand the staff who work in the bike service office. As a result, whenever we had a problem with our bike, we just kept using it <Complaint>. In this case, I suggest that the office recruit staff who can understand English Language <Suggestion>. (Ch10-1)

Pre-closing included expressions of thanks, appreciation, respect, and wishes. *Pre-closing*, *Closing*, *Signature* appeared in almost all the letters, yet their usage was not always appropriate. For example, a letter sent to the Rector of the university even had no closing.

POLITENESS STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN COMPLAINT LETTERS

In response to the second research question, politeness strategies were categorized as positive or negative based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model. Although a wide range of strategies was adopted, only some strategies were frequent (See Table 2). The presence of others was not regular, with a low percentage of frequency (around 10%-15%), especially very low in infrequent moves such as *Suggestion*, *Confirming*, *Apology*, *Informing*, *Acknowledgement*, *Enclosing*, *Confirming*, and *Threatening*.

TABLE 2. Politeness strategies used in complaint letters to receivers of different statuses

Politeness Strategies	Frequency in letters to a higher status	Frequency in letters to an equal status	Total
Positive			
Use in-group identity marker	10 (25%)	24 (60%)	34 (42.5%)
Assert/Presuppose/ Raise common ground	37 (93%)	29 (72.5%)	66 (82.5%)
Intensify interest to R	3 (8%)	2 (5%)	5 (6.25%)
Sender asserts knowledge of and concern for R's wants	16 (40%)	8 (20%)	24 (30%)
Avoid disagreement	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (1.25%)
Be optimistic	23 (58%)	14 (35%)	37 (46.25%)
Offer	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (1.25%)
Negative			
Impersonalize S and R	24 (60%)	23 (57.5%)	47 (58.75%)
Give deference	39 (98%)	28 (70%)	67 (83.75%)
Hedged	38 (95%)	32 (80%)	70 (87.5%)
Minimize imposition	5 (13%)	14 (35%)	19 (23.75%)
Nominalize	6 (15%)	4 (10%)	10 (12.5%)
Be conventionally indirect	11 (28%)	12 (30%)	23 (28.75%)
Be pessimistic	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	6 (7.5%)
Go on record as incurring a debt	22 (55%)	23 (57.5%)	45 (56.25%)
State the FTA as a general rule	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	4 (5%)
Give overwhelming reasons	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (1.25%)
Indicate reluctance	1 (3%)	2 (5%)	3 (3.75%)
Admit the impingement	4 (10%)	2 (5%)	6 (7.5%)
Total	40	40	80

In *Greeting*, due to the different nature of the tasks, it is understandable that most of the complainers used negative strategies such as “Give deference” (e.g., “*Dear Prof. Davidson*”) for a higher-up to show their respect and “Impersonalize Sender and Receiver” (e.g., “*Dear receptionist*”) without mentioning a specific name – implying their indifference and distance between them) for a person of an equal position. The finding is not in line with those reported in Goudarzi et al. (2015) that more positive strategies were adopted by non-native speakers in salutation.

The more frequent use of positive strategies in *Introduction*, *Attention getter*, *Background* could be interpreted that the complainers aimed to mitigate the situation by bringing the context to their Receivers before mentioning the main issue. In this way, they claimed “a common ground” by talking about unrelated topics or using terms presupposed to be known to the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, the term *CIA* in “*I am [...] writing to report one problem concerning the transportation service provided by CIA*” indicates that the Sender assumed that s/he and the Receiver shared common ground about *CIA*. Due to this aim, “Assert/Presuppose/Raise common ground” was the most frequently used strategy in the three aforementioned moves.

In *Praise*, the Sender showed her/his appreciation for what the Receiver or the division s/he belonged to had done, e.g., “*we found the school’s short course programs, seminars or workshop are really useful for us to [...]*”; this strategy was coded as “Sender asserts knowledge of and concern for Receiver’s wants”.

On the other hand, in *Complaint* and *Request*, the negative face was paid attention to. “Hedged” (e.g. use of modal such as “would, should, could, might”) was the most frequent strategy used to mitigate the seriousness of the FTAs, followed by “Impersonalize S and R” (e.g., the use of “we” in “*In this last semester, we noted that the school’s Wi-Fi signal became very low*”). “We” was used probably because the complainers did not want to talk about the problem as a personal issue but rather made it a problem of a group in order to get more attention from the Receiver.

Regarding *Pre-closing*, the most frequent strategies belonged to both positive (“Be optimistic”: *I look forward to hearing from you*) and negative categories (“Go on record as incurring a debt”: *I would appreciate it if you could solve the problem quickly*). *Closing* included the phrases that showed deference like “*Sincerely yours*”, “*Best/Kind regards*” for both types of letters, even some complainers started the letter with “Dear + first name” but still ended their letter with “*Sincerely*” which seems inappropriate in the situation. It can be interpreted that the Senders did not care much about consistency of the addresses and signoff or s/he might have no background knowledge of letter writing format. In *Closing* and *Signature*, the reasons for using a negative strategy “Give deference” for a higher-up (e.g. using the full name or title + full name) and a positive strategy “Use in-group identity markers” (e.g. using first name or nickname) for an equal rank were quite obvious. That is, the status difference in the two letters meant more respect paid to the higher-up and less formality to an equal rank. The strategy employed here was quite similar to that used in *Greeting*.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SENDERS’ ADOPTION OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN COMPLAINING

RECEIVER’S STATUS

Based on the quantitative analysis, the Receiver’s status affected the Sender’s choice of politeness strategies. The association of Strategy and Higher status was reported as $\chi^2(18, N=40) = 359.005$, $p < .001$, and Strategy and Equal status as $\chi^2(18, N=40) = 262.821$, $p < .001$. The qualitative data confirmed the quantitative data; that is, complainers agreed that the social status of the Receiver was the first thing they considered when writing the letters. Although people should be polite to each other, social status decided the lexical choice and politeness level. In other words, advanced vocabulary and well-structured sentences were chosen to express the complainers’ professionalism and positive attitudes towards the Receivers and to avoid any conflicts. The complainers wanted to show their politeness to the Receiver whom they might not know in person and show their gratitude to more familiar people. On the other hand, they seemed to be more straightforward when complaining to a person of the same status; hence, they used more direct vocabulary. In particular, most of the interviewees confirmed that they chose formal structures with sufficient explanation when writing to the Director of CIA, some Ajarns (“*teachers*” in Thai), and other people of higher ranks. However, they were likely to tone down the formality when writing to a Receiver of the same or lower rank by using more direct statements. To sum up, the letters to the higher-ups seem to be relatively longer than the equal ones. The results are in line with those by Chen et al. (2011) in that Chinese and American university students varied their complaints according to the

interlocutor's status, and that they paid more attention to the social power of the addressee. This also confirms the study by Tabatabaei (2015), which reported that the choice of complaint strategies was influenced by the social status of the interlocutor.

SOCIAL DISTANCE

Based on the interview, all of the Senders said that they cared for the Receivers' face and imagined themselves in the Receivers' situation when complaining. The intimacy between them seems to influence the way they wrote the letters. For example, when writing to the hotel manager who was from a higher status, most complainers adopted a less formal style. As two students described their reasons, "...because we are close" (Ch22) and "I feel like she is in an equal position to me and another thing is they provide us with service" (C36). As a result, when writing to her, they thought formality was not a requirement. For instance, C36 used "*Best wishes*" instead of "*Sincerely yours*" because she was familiar with the manager. One Cambodian sender also shared a similar point of view. That is, when writing to his supervisor, he did not employ a lot of politeness strategies such as showing high respect in *Greeting* because of their familiarity. However, to the CIA Director, whom the international students hardly met and felt less familiar with, they used more formal structures to make their complaints serious but polite. They described,

I should explain something complete, very holistic, not something like in pieces [...] has to use the more complete explanation, long sentences [...] with complicated words. (Ch23)

If we are not polite, [...], probably he will not solve the problem for us. (C36)

The findings above match the results in the studies by Yuan (2011) and Goudarzi et al. (2015) which found that social distance played an important role in the employment of politeness strategies.

PRAGMATIC TRANSFER

Regarding writing complaint letters in a polite manner, a prominent issue regularly presenting itself was whether it was affected by the Sender's language competence or pragmatic competence. The data reveal that some letters did not include a variety of politeness strategies. Based on the interviews, several participants informed that they were not familiar with the complaining speech act in their culture. By contrast, the participants who had experience in complaining in their L1 seemed to be better at expressing their complaints more gently. The Indonesian interviewees referred to their L1 culture as an influential factor governing their politeness. That is, they were expected to be polite, formal, and indirect when complaining. In short, their L1 cultural experience seems to influence the way they complained in L2.

A few Senders gave examples of L1 transfers. For example, when being asked about the greeting "*Dear Mr. John*", a Vietnamese sender explained that Vietnamese people refer to each other with first names, but he added the title (*Mr.*) before the name to show his respect to the addressee. Other examples of L1 transfer include expressions such as "*Dear respected madam*" which was translated from L1 by an Indonesian student or "*My intention of writing this letter is not to curse you but...*" by a Chinese student. Other cases witnessed the influence of L3 which was Thai. That is, several greetings such as "*Dear Pii (elder)*", or "*Dear Ajarn (teacher)*" were used by the Senders to show respect to the Receivers. Trenchs (1995) also confirms that among EFL Catalan speakers, there were some instances of pragmatic transfer from their L1 into English

although they adopted similar semantic formulas when complaining.

Although previous studies witnessed the influence of complainers' L2 proficiency in their pragmatic competence (Yang, 2016; Li & Suleiman, 2017), the current study revealed that some advanced L2 learners still struggled to write the complaint letters. In sum, there seems to be no relationship between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. L2 proficiency does not affect their politeness level but pragmatic competence does, and the latter is transferred from their L1 cultural experiences.

LANGUAGE INPUT

Classroom instruction seems to play an important role in the use of politeness strategies. Some Senders said that they used formulaic expressions and the format they had learnt to write complaint letters. For example, an Indonesian participant stated that she had been taught to begin a letter with "*I hope this email finds you well*" so she adopted the expressions in both letters. Correspondingly, other interviewees even clarified that they had learnt how to write properly by themselves either from readings or from their work experience. This suggests that language input exposure both in and outside the classroom is important in developing pragmatic competence.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated complaint letters in terms of rhetorical structure, politeness strategies, and influencing factors. As for the rhetorical structure, similar moves confirmed the findings by Hartford and Mahboob (2004). However, *Justification for request/ suggestion* which seemed to be important in Hartford and Mahboob (2004) was almost missing in the current study. That is, the Senders raised a request/suggestion without giving reasons or explanation. For example, V3 wrote to the hotel to complain about the flooded bathroom by saying "I would be grateful if you could fix the drainage system or move us to another room with better conditions" without justifying his request. The missing out of such moves may be due to the nature of the complaint, which seems rather personal. Another explanation is that the issue of his room had already been described in *Background*. On the other hand, some moves including *Apology*, *Enclosing*, *Confirming* came into existence with quite a low percentage of occurrence (less than 11%). In terms of move order, it was found that the move occurrences might vary due to different Senders' writing styles.

Regarding politeness strategies, this study found that more negative strategies were used than positive strategies. The results are not in line with those in Goudarzi et al.'s study of business complaint letters (2015) which report that positive politeness strategies were used significantly more than negative strategies by non-native speakers. It might be explained by the complainers' perceptions that they were international students coming from different cultures and that they wanted their problems to be solved quickly (I17-, C38-, C36-, Ch22-interview). In addition, some complainers wanted to show their politeness at a high level to please the local complainees (I20-, V3-interview). As a result, the strategies "show deference", "hedged", "minimize imposition" and "go on record as incurring a debt" were employed more often. Another possible reason is that the business context in Goudarzi et al. (2015) might lead to the adoption of different types of politeness strategies.

Interestingly, the following strategies were used more in the first letters to a higher-up than in the second letters to an equal. For example, “Give deference” was used 98 percent in the first letters but only 70 percent in the second letters. Similarly, “Hedged” was used 95 percent in the letters to a higher-up but only 80 percent in the letters to an equal. Likewise, “Assert/ Presuppose/ Raise common ground” appeared at 93 percent for higher-ups and 72.5 percent for equals, and “Be optimistic” was reported at 58 percent and 35 percent, respectively. The reason for the frequency difference between the two letters could lie in the different nature of the tasks, which requires the Senders to show more respect to the higher-ups.

In investigating factors influencing the use of politeness strategies, cultural elements seem to play an important role. That is, the complainers’ L1 cultures can be the root of the choice. Among the four groups, Chinese and Vietnamese participants are deemed to belong to collectivist cultures in which more attention is paid to in-group goals and concerns, and obligations and responsibilities to the group are prioritized (Nguyen & Le Ho, 2013; Hosni, 2020). This cultural aspect was presented in the way that the strategy “Impersonalize S and R” was used at quite high frequencies in the data (85% for Chinese and 65% for Vietnamese). For instance, by using “us” or plural form in a complaint “[...], *it will be a big challenge for us, novice researchers, to do research without having complete access to such journals*” (V3-1), the issue stated has become a community concern rather than an individual need and is worthy of attention. On the other hand, China is a large-distance culture; they tend to express their displeasure explicitly to a lower-status acquaintance (Yang & Wannaruk, 2019). This point can be an explanation for a much lower frequency of “Give deference” used in the second letter, compared to that of the other three groups. Regarding Indonesians, they are generally status conscious (Magnis-Suseno, 1997, cited in Wijayanto et al., 2017). Their speech acts are strongly influenced by both social distance and the receiver’s status (Wijayanto et al., 2013). As to Cambodia, although it also belongs to collectivism, there are traits of individualist behaviors (likewise in China), and it is a culture of large power distances (Berkvens, 2017). This low-context communication style was represented in the explicit codes of speech (Hosni, 2020), preferring “I” to “we”. Besides, a complete 100 percent frequency of “Give deference” but a complete zero percent frequency of “Use in-group identity marker” in their letters to higher-ups indicated that they “tend to accept the power differences although they may not appreciate it” (Berkvens, 2017, p. 172).

To fully understand the concept of “politeness”, both Senders’ and Receivers’ views were explored since making complaints seems to be sensitive, especially in an ELF context. Despite the limited number of interviewees, which might hinder generalization, the qualitative data have uncovered different perspectives. That is, although both parties shared similar views on the importance of politeness, their answers yielded different interpretations. The Senders believed that politeness in making complaints will avoid unnecessary conflicts and result in a satisfactory solution. Interestingly, some Receivers emphasized that they focused on the issue stated in the complaint letter without caring much about the politeness level. A CIA official stated the more direct and less polite the letters were, the more urgent she/he considered them. However, the interpretation of the hotel manager relatively matched that of the Senders. For her, the politeness in the complaint letters was important; it made them feel positive about the Senders. She added that some staff members might “*become angry if the complaint was not polite*”. She also suggested that the complaint should include a greeting and common ground before introducing the issue.

Interestingly, though the Receivers are from the same culture, their perceptions seem to be different. The difference can be accounted for by the different functions of the two sectors. As the Center of International Affairs (CIA) aims to support students at the highest level for the best

cooperation among their international networks, they tend to be more flexible and open-minded when serving students of diverse backgrounds. Meanwhile, the target customers of the university hotel are varied, including short-stay university guests who tend to be polite and professional and long-stay international students who might experience more problems related to their living facilities. The hotel staff's exposure to a high level of politeness and formality in the working environment may result in their expectation of everyone to be gentle even in difficult situations. Guests, including international students, are generally expected to follow the cultural norms, which greatly appreciate a high level of politeness. However, international students might consider this context multi-cultural and professional, where people can be direct when following international norms (I2-interview). Thus, the discrepancy in their perceptions might lead to misunderstandings between Thai hotel staff and international students. The explanation confirms Yang and Wannaruk's (2019) observation of cultural differences between Thai and Chinese interlocutors in that disappointment may occur to those who are not aware of them.

In contrast to previous studies, the present research found no influence of the complainer's gender on the use/selection of politeness strategies, although the Receiver's gender might have had some effects. Some Senders admitted that they were more careful choosing words and expressions when writing to a female respondent because women seem to be more sensitive to receiving harsh words. This avenue of consideration could be worthy of further investigation.

CONCLUSION

The present research has investigated the rhetorical structure of complaint letters and politeness strategies employed by international students in a Thai ELF context. Specifically, it was found that more negative strategies were used in the moves of *Complaint* and *Request* while more positive strategies were in use in *Introduction*, *Attention getter*, and *Background*. The level of politeness in complaint letters depends on several factors, including the Receiver's social status, the social distance between the Sender and the Receiver, the Sender's pragmatic transfer from L1, and the L2 input of both parties. The analysis also reveals different views on the effectiveness of politeness strategies, but both Senders and Receivers agreed on the role of politeness in creating rapport and leading to a successful resolution.

The findings carry some pedagogical values as reference materials for teaching students how to write a proper complaint letter, especially in an ELF context. It is abundantly clear that developing students' L2 abilities include close attention to their pragmatic competence (Hilliard, 2017). Therefore, not only a proper format with formulaic expressions but also politeness strategies should be provided for students to raise their awareness in intercultural communication and develop their pragmatic competence to the full. As Morrow (1995) confirms, ESL students are better at performing complaints after being instructed. Besides, the findings interestingly reveal different interpretations of politeness level from the Receivers of the same culture. This indicates that not only inter-cultural but also intra-cultural (situational and individual) differences have an influence on pragmatic perceptions and performance (Nguyen & Le Ho, 2013). The findings could support researchers' intuition of pragmatic appropriateness and acceptability in communication in different sectors within a politeness system. Furthermore, the research sheds light on possible causes of misunderstanding in intercultural communication as communicators are expected to bear in mind that they are involved in a different culture which needs their adjustment for smooth exchanges (Yuan, 2011).

For further studies, it is recommended that other factors - including gender or the intimacy level - between the complainer and the complainee should be taken into consideration. In addition, future studies might interview more Receivers in order to gain valid data regarding their perceptions. The Senders' English proficiency should also be noted, scrutinized, or/and controlled. Last but not least, a study of making complaints in face-to-face conversations should be conducted for comparison with a written mode of communication.

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