Introduction

Compared to other speech behavior, complaints are difficult not only because they are closely related to the speaker's communicative competence but also because they are face-threatening. Inappropriate complaints are often regarded as rude and therefore lead to communicative problems. Moreover, because of cultural differences in concepts of politeness, speakers may complain in various ways. It follows that second-language (L2) learners may have some problems in making complaints properly if the norms of communication in their native language (L1) differ from those in L2. This study investigated the complaint strategies used by the twenty-five English learners in Taiwan, in comparison with those realized by twenty-five native English speakers. The aim of the present study was to find out whether there were significant differences between the two groups' use of complaint strategies and then to provide some insights into teaching English pragmatics in Chinese-speaking settings.

Thus, the research questions are:

1. What are the similarities and differences between native English speakers' and learners' complaints behaviors?

2. How do the three variables, i.e. status, social distance, and the addressee's gender, influence the native English speakers' and learners' complaint behaviors?

Literature Review

1. Concepts of politeness and face

According to Goffman (1967), face was an image "located in the flow of events, supported by other people's judgments and endorsed by "impersonal agencies in the situation" (p. 5). In the interaction, a speaker constantly attends to both her/his own face and the addressee's. S/he exhibits a defensive orientation towards saving

her/his own face and a protective inclination to the addressee's. Brown and Levinson (1987) further developed the face-saving view of politeness, which associated the politeness with a person's desire to maintain her/his and the addressee's "face". They argued that in order to be polite and to protect the addressee's face, the speaker must carefully assess the situation in which the speech event takes place and then select appropriate strategies. The politeness strategies usually appeal to the addressee's needs to be appreciated or to be free from imposition.

Some researchers have argued that Chinese culture, different from Western culture in many aspects, has its own exceptional politeness system. For instance, Gu (1990) contended that the concepts of *lǐmào,* the Chinese translation for politeness, contained the notion of modesty and was unique to Chinese politeness. It can be divided into two submaxims: denigrating self and elevating other. Denigrating self is a speaker's self-devaluation when s/he mentions herself/himself or anything related to her/him, and elevating other means that the speaker praises or honors the addressee or anything relevant to the addressee. Another researcher, Mao (1994), also pointed out that Chinese politeness placed great emphasis on the harmony of individual conduct with the community values to which they belong. The Chinese face is greatly concerned about group members' association with each other to reach a sense of homogeneity. It views individuals as a part of the social relationship, and the behavior is valued according to their community members' thoughts and feelings. Thus, it is distinct from Western face, which mainly addresses individual freedom and territories.

These differences in concepts of politeness might influence the speech behaviors of Chinese learners of English. It is possible that negative transfer from their native language causes their difficulties in learning English. This could be problematic since inappropriate speech behaviors might lead to communication breakdowns and even negative interpretations.

2. Complaints as a Speech Act

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

Furthermore, complaints can be either direct or indirect. According to Trosborg (1995), the directness level of the complaint can be decided by the following factors.

(1) The complained behavior is or is not mentioned in the propositional content.

(2) The speaker's negative evaluation of the propositional content is implicitly or explicitly expressed.

(3) The agentive involvement of the complainee is ambiguously or straightforwardly conveyed.

(4) The speaker's oppositional attitude towards complainee's behavior is indirectly or directly voiced.

(5) The speaker's adverse opinion of complainee as a person is unclearly or clearly communicated. (p. 315)

3. Variables Determining Realizations of Complaints

People may complain with various strategies in different situations. The selection of complaint strategies can be determined by contextual variables, such as the complainee's status differences, social distance, gender, and so on. These variables are discussed below.

3.1 Social Status

Social status indicates the relative status difference between the speaker and the addressee. It is vertical distance and influences the degree to which the speaker can impose her/his will on the addressee. Therefore, it plays a role in the speaker's choice of ways to talk. Brown and Levinson (1987) put stress on the importance of social status between the conversational participants by pointing out that it is one essential factor to estimate the weightiness of an FTA. When the addressee's status is higher, the weightiness of an FTA will be greater. In addition, according to Leech's (1983) authority scale, the higher status of the addressee, the greater the need for optionality and indirectness of an impositive. It follows that indirect strategies may be preferred in the interaction with a superior.

3.2 Social Distance

Social distance refers to the degree of familiarity between the participants in a conversation. It is also one social variable that determines the degree of politeness. Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995) argued that social distance was related to the conversational participants' in-group or out-group membership, which reflected their affiliation and solidarity. If both of them are members of a particular group, they are closer in social distance than others who do not belong to the same group.

Leech (1983) emphasized the role of the social distance in the interaction. He proposed the social distance scale to stress the relationship between conversational participants, and the greater social distance of the addressee from the speaker, the more optionality would be needed. For example, when conversational participants are mutually unfamiliar, i.e. the social distance between them is great, the speaker

needs to provide more freedom for the addressee. Thus, when a speaker interacts with a person whom s/he does not know well, s/he would be likely to adopt a polite indirect style.

Nonetheless, Wolfson (1988) proposed a different view regarding how social distance influenced interaction. This view is known as "Bulge Theory", which claims that the more status and social distance are seen as fixed, the easier it is for speakers to know what to expect of one another. In the case with strangers and intimates, whose positions are on the two extremes of the social distance scale, the speakers are certain about the relationship. They can predict the interactional patterns, and therefore, they behave similarly in the interaction with strangers and intimates. However, the relationship with acquaintances, whose social distance is between that of strangers and intimates, is relatively obscure. Speakers thus have to be especially careful in the negotiation of meaning to signal solidarity (Brown & Gilman, 1960) and to avoid confrontations (D'Amico-Reisner, 1985). In other words, speakers produce analogous forms of utterances when they interact with people who are close and distant in social distance. Nonetheless, they vary their speech behavior when their addressee's social distance is moderate.

3.3 Addressee's Gender

Lakoff (1977) proposed that politeness was one linguistic feature of women's speech. It is found in women's speech styles, which are generally less direct than men's. In addition, according to Mills (2003), women's linguistic behavior is often characterized as being concerned with cooperation and avoidance of conflict, and thus it shows more politeness than men's. However, little research has focused on the effects of the addressee's gender on the speaker's speech behavior. Whereas Brown (1980) stated that "in most cultures women among women may have a tendency to use more elaborated positive politeness strategies than men do among men" (p. 251), little empirical evidence has demonstrated how speakers interact with addressees of both genders and whether there are any significant differences in

speakers' behaviors towards male and female interlocutors.

To sum up, complaints are complicated even for native speakers as several variables might be involved. It goes without saying that they would cause greater difficulty for English learners because of their limitation in L2 competence. For instance, Tatsuki (2000) has pointed out that Japanese learners complain more severely in English than in Japanese, i.e. their L1. Although the learners can perform the act of complaints, there is a danger of using force that exceeds their intentions and cause cross-cultural misunderstanding. Therefore, learners' complaint behavior is worth investigating in order to find out their problems and then offer insights in pragmatic teaching so that cross-cultural communication breakdowns can be avoided.

Methodology

1. Subjects

Fifty college students participated in this study, making up two groups: a group of native English speakers and a group of English learners in Taiwan. Each group consisted of twenty-five participants. The native English group included ten males and fifteen females, and the mean age was 22.5. They were college students in northeastern America. The learner group was composed of four males and twenty-one females, and their mean age was 20.8. They were English majors who took the second-year English composition class in a private university in Southern Taiwan.

2. Instrument and Procedure

In this study, the instrument used to collect data was a written discourse completion task (written DCT). It was an open task which provided descriptions of situations and required the subjects to write down what they would say. There were ten scenarios, which were designed on the basis of the situations that college students were likely to encounter in their daily life. Three social variables were

investigated in these scenarios, and each scenario consisted of two variables of status or social distance along with the addressees' gender. The characters portrayed in the scenarios were teachers, classmates, siblings, neighbors, and unknown students. The teacher represented an addressee who was higher in status than the complainer, and the classmate stood for an interlocutor who was equal in status. On the other hand, the sibling symbolized an addressee close to the complainer, the neighbor depicted an interlocutor who is moderately socially distant from the complainer, and the unknown student portrayed a socially distant person. The scenarios and the variables contained in them are shown below, with the variables that each scenario investigated being presented in the parenthesis at the end of each scenario[1].

1. A student is upset with a male teacher because s/he finds that the grade of the assignment s/he just got back is much lower than s/he expected. (+status, male)[2]

2. A student is angry at a male classmate with whom s/he is working on a project because this classmate doesn't do anything. (=status, male)

3. A student who wants to withdraw money from an ATM is impatient with an unknown male student because he has been using it for a long time. (+social distance, male)

4. A student cannot concentrate on studying because her/his brother keeps singing loudly at home in the evening. (-social distance, male)

5. A student is upset with her/his male neighbor who lets garbage pile up in his house until it really stinks. (~social distance, male)

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[1] (+status) and (=status) indicate that the addressee has a higher position than the speaker and the addressee is equal to the speaker in status, respectively. (+social distance) shows the addressee is socially distant from the speaker, and (-social distance) demonstrates the addressee is close to the speaker. (~social distance) refers to the addressee who is moderately socially distant from the speaker compared to the other two characters in (+social distance) and (-social distance) scenarios.
[2] The binary variables that are investigated in each scenario are shown in the parenthesis for the explanation here. The actual questionnaires that the subjects received did not show these variables.

6. A student is dissatisfied with her/his female teacher who sets a very tight deadline for a project. (+status, female)

7. A student is upset with her/his female classmate who does not return the novel she borrowed three months ago. (=status, female)

8. A student is annoyed with an unknown girl sitting at the same desk in the library because this girl keeps talking. (+social distance, female)

9. A student is upset with her/his sister who never cleans the bathroom after using it. (-social distance, female)

10. A student is annoyed with her/his female neighbor who has a big dog which barks fiercely at everyone walking by. (~social distance, female)

In the description of the scenarios, the identity and the gender of the addressee were underlined and bold-faced for additional emphasis. Each scenario was presented as follows.

Scenario 1

You just got your assignment back from **your teacher**. When you see your grade, you are shocked because the grade **he** gave is much lower than you expected. You are really upset because you spent much time on it. So you have a conversation with him:

YOU:

_____

Your teacher: Do you think the grade is too low?

YOU:

_____

The written DCT was distributed to the subjects, who needed to respond to the

scenarios with what they thought they would say in these situations. Then, their complaints were categorized into five strategy categories by a native English coder and quantitatively processed by Chi-square analyses. The strategy categories were based on Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) scale of complaint strategies with one strategy being added. They included (1) below the level of reproach, (2) expression of annoyance or disapproval, (3) request for repair or forbearance, (4) explicit complaint, (5) accusation and threat. The degree of severity of the five strategies increased from (1) to (5). The definition and linguistic features of each complaint strategy followed Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) and Trosborg (1995).

(1) Below the level of reproach:

The speaker (S) adopting this strategy tries to minimize the face-threatening level of the complaint on the hearer (H) by avoiding explicit mention of the offensive action (A).

(2) Expression of annoyance or disapproval:

S expresses annoyance and disapproval of A but avoids direct reference to H. The general and vague expression makes the annoyance seem to be directed towards an unknown third party rather than H. There is no open confrontation, but it is clear that there has been an offensive A.

(3) Request for repair or forbearance:

These requests occur when S requires H to remedy the annoyance caused by the behavior or to promise that s/he will never engage in the offending A again.

(4) Explicit complaint:

There is an explicit reference to H, A, or both. There is an open confrontation as well, but no sanctions follow the complaints.

(5) Accusation and threat:

In addition to an open confrontation, this strategy indicates future sanctions

along with the complaint. Explicit references to H and A are typical. Curses are also included in this category.

In addition to complaint strategies, a complainer uses lexical repertoire to intensify or weaken the complaint. Lexical repertoire can be roughly divided into two types: upgraders and downgraders. Upgraders increase the impact of a complaint while downgraders reduce the effect. Based on Trosborg (1995), the categories of the upgraders and downgraders were defined as follows.

Upgraders

(1) Intensifiers:

These are comprised of adverbials or adjectives which intensify the severity of the complaint, e.g. "so", "very", "awfully"

(2) Commitment upgraders:

This group consists of modifiers expressing special commitment towards the proposition, such as "I'm sure", "I'm certain"

(3) Lexical intensifiers:

Lexical intensifiers are the word choices which reveal the speaker's attitude, including swearing words, e.g. "ruin" as in "You've *ruined* my carpet"

Downgraders

(1) Downtoners:

These are adverbial sentence modifiers, such as "just", "simply", and adverbials expressing tentativeness, e.g. "perhaps", "maybe"

(2) Hedges:

They refer to adverbials by means of which the complainee avoids a precise propositional specification, for instance, "kind of", "sort of"

(3) Subjectivizers:

They may indicate the speaker's attitude towards the proposition or make the proposition seem to be the speaker's personal opinion, e.g. "I think", "I am afraid"

(4) Appealers:

These are discourse elements, including tags, used to appeal to the complainee's understanding, such as "ok", "don't you think"

(5) Politeness markers:

They are employed to avoid open confrontations and show the complainer's politeness, e.g. "please", "thank you"

Similar to complaint strategies, the lexical repertoire was examined to see if they have statistical significance. It was quantitatively processed by Chi-square analyses to see whether the two groups differed significantly in the overall use.

Results

As Table 1 indicates, the Americans preferred requests (48%) most among the five strategies while learners favored explicit complaints (37%). Overall, there was a significant difference in the strategy distribution of the two groups (χ^2 (4, N = 847) = 48.436, p < .001). The significance existed in the two groups' use of explicit complaints (p < .001) and accusations (p < .01), which the learners were more likely to use than the native English speakers.

In addition, status appeared to lead to significant differences in the two groups' strategy use (NE[3]: χ^2 (4, N = 142) = 15.551, p < .01; EL: χ^2 (4, N = 199) = 19.833, p < .001). The native English speakers tended to use disapproval (p < .01) more frequently towards superiors but explicit complaints (p < .01) more often towards

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[3] NE stands for the native English group; EL represents the learner group.

status equals. In a similar vein, the learners were more likely to use explicit complaints (p < .01) and accusations (superiors: 0 vs. status equals: 17)[4] towards status equals.

When status interacted with the variable of the addressee's gender, significant differences still existed in both groups' complaints. When the two groups interacted with male addressees, status effectively determined their strategy selection (NE: χ^2 (4, N = 75) = 12.860, p < .01; EL: χ^2 (4, N = 102) = 16.433, p < .01). In such cases, the native English group used explicit complaints (p < .01) towards status equals significantly more often than towards higher-status teachers. On the other hand, the learners were also more likely to use explicit complaints towards equal-status classmates, while they did not use this strategy towards teachers.

Table 1

The Raw Frequency and Percentage of Each Strategy Produced by the Two Groups

Strategy / Group	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	Total
Americans	90	19	172	66	14	361
%	25%	5%	48%	18%	4%	100%
Learners	76	20	171	181	38	486
%	16%	4%	35%	37%	8%	100%
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 1.181$	$\chi^2 = .026$	$\chi^2 = .003$	$\chi^2 = 53.543***$	$\chi^2 = 11.077**$	

Note. 1. S1: below the level of reproach, S2: disapproval, S3: request, S4: explicit complaint, S5: accusation

2. ** p < .01; *** p < .001

[4] Chi-square analyses are not applicable when the frequency is zero.

Distance was also associated with significant differences in the distribution of complaint strategies produced by the two groups (NE: χ^2 (8, N = 219) = 7.030, p < .001; EL: χ^2 (8, N = 287) = 36.745, p < .001). For both groups, the significance was found in the subjects' behaviors with strangers and siblings and with strangers and neighbors. No significant differences existed in the two groups' interaction with siblings and neighbors. Thus, the data did not support the Bulge Theory. In addition, the native English speakers tended to use hints (p < .001) most often but explicit complaints (p < .01) least frequently in scenarios containing the strangers, and they utilized requests (p < .05) with the highest frequency in those including siblings. In light of the learners, they were inclined to employ hints (p < .001) most often in scenarios involving strangers.

When distance interacted with the variable of the addressee's gender, significant differences were still found in both groups' complaints. Statistical significance existed when the native English speakers interacted with addressees of three distance types of both gender (male: χ^2 (8, N = 108) = 84.220, p < .001; female: χ^2 (8, N = 111) = 28.270, p < .001) and the learners complained to female addressees (χ^2 (8, N = 139) = 4.250, p < .001). Towards male strangers, the Americans used hints (p < .001) most often. However, they issued explicit complaints most often to neighbors. In the interaction with female addressees, the Americans employed explicit complaints least frequently with strangers. As far as learners were concerned, they gave hints to female strangers (p < .001) with the highest frequency but requests the lowest.

The third variable, the addressee's gender, also appeared to significantly affect the occurrence frequency of the two groups' of complaint strategies (NE: χ^2 (4, N = 472) = 61.236, p < .001; EL: χ^2 (4, N = 486) = 12.649, p < .05). Overall, the native speakers used hints (p < .05) more often towards males but were more likely to use explicit complaints (p < .001) and accusations (p < .001) towards females. In contrast, the learners employed disapproval (p < .05) more frequently towards

males and were more inclined to issue requests (p < .05) towards females.

Moreover, gender was connected with significant differences when interacting with the variable of status. When the native English speakers complained to status equals, they used explicit complaints more often to males (p < .01) than females. In the learners' complaints, they were more likely to use requests (p < .05) to female teachers than males. If the addressees were classmates, the learners employed accusations (p < .05) more often to males but requests (p < .01) more frequently to females.

The gender of addressees of different distance types also played a role in the subjects' complaint types, and significant differences were found in the two groups' behavior with strangers and siblings. Both groups issued hints to male strangers (NE: p < .001; EL: p < .05) more often but requests (NE: p < .05; EL: p < .01) to females more frequently. In the interaction with siblings, both groups employed requests more often to males (NE: p < .05; EL: p < .05), and the Americans also used explicit complaints (p < .001) more frequently towards female siblings.

Finally, as for the use of lexical repertoire, which is shown in Table 2, intensifiers were the upgraders used most often by both groups (NE: 87%; EL: 84%). On the other hand, politeness markers (33%) were most popular downgraders for the Americans whereas subjectivizers (36%) were favored most by the learners. There was a significant difference between the two groups' production of the two types of lexical repertoire (χ^2 (1, N = 865) = 18.884, p < .001). The significance only existed in the two groups' use of upgraders (p < .001), which were produced more often by the learners.

Table 2

The Raw Frequency and Percentage of Each Type of Lexical Repertoire Employed by the Two Groups

Lexical repertoire	Group	Percentage (%)	
		Americans	Learners
Upgraders	Intensifiers	87 (97)	84 (178)
	commitment upgraders	0 (0)	12 (26)
	lexical intensifiers	13 (15)	4 (8)
Total		100 (112)	100 (212)
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 3.864$***		
Downgraders	Downtoners	26 (71)	17 (46)
	Hedges	12 (33)	3 (8)
	Subjectivizers	28 (76)	36 (98)
	Appealers	.4 (1)	10 (28)
	Politeness markers	33 (88)	34 (93)
Total		100 (269)	100 (272)
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = .017$		

Note. The raw number is indicated in the parenthesis.

Discussion

If the five strategies are divided into two main categories according to their severity levels, the divergence of the two groups' complaint behavior will be clearer. The first three strategies: hints, disapproval, and requests can be categorized as indirect strategies since they implicitly express the speaker's unhappiness. The other two, explicit complaints and accusations, can be classified as the direct strategies as they directly reveal the complainer's annoyance and can cause tension

with the addressee.

The present study demonstrated that overall the learners were severer in complaining than the native English speakers. The learners' frequency of using direct strategies outnumbered the Americans'. It appeared that the learners tended to focus on conveying their dissatisfaction directly without further caring for mitigation or politeness. This is supported by the two groups' use of lexical repertoire— the learners were inclined to use more upgraders to strengthen the effects of their complaints than the Americans.

On the other hand, both groups paid attention to the addressee's social status in the interaction, and they were both severer towards status equals than towards superiors. However, further investigation of the interaction of status and the addressee's gender showed the significant difference was only found in complaints to male addressees. The subjects tended to be severer with the male status equal than with the male superior. Such a tendency implicitly indicated that for both groups, the male authority made the subjects more aware of the status differences, and thus they were more careful while they complained to a male superior.

In addition, both groups exhibited a similar behavioral pattern in the interaction with strangers in that they both gave hints most often in these scenarios. When complaining to the female stranger, both groups tended to use indirect strategies more often than to the female neighbor or sibling. However, the learners did not use significantly different strategies to male addressees of any distance type while the Americans were severer with the male neighbor than with the male stranger. This shows that the learners were still not very stable in appropriately selecting strategies with addressees of different distance types. They tended to use similar strategies in interaction regardless of the social distance of the addressee from them.

Finally, both groups were likely to be severer with male addressees when they were status equals— the subjects used direct strategies more often. This could be

because they viewed male status equals as their peers, with whom they can use casual speech styles, including direct, harsh complaint strategies. Moreover, the occurrence frequency of requests towards females was higher than towards males, though exceptions were found when the addressees were siblings. The subjects seemed to have anticipated that it was more likely to get a response from females than males. This expectation corresponded to women's speech behavior reported in the literature. For instance, West and Zimmerman (1983) have claimed that females are less likely to use silence as a response than males. In addition, female speakers' conversational styles often have exhibited their intent to maintain a conversation, including the use of tag questions and raising intonation, which aim to gain a reply (Lakoff, 1975). These styles lend support for the impression that women are more inclined to be responsive than men and thus may propel the subjects to issue requests to female addressees as a complaint strategy.

The abovementioned results lead to some conclusions in the English learners' complaint behavior. It appeared that in the interaction with females, the learners paid little attention to the addressee's status and used similar complaint strategies to those directed towards status equals. Meanwhile, in the interaction with males, the learners were not fully aware of the influence of social distance on the selection of complaint strategies. The evidence demonstrated that the learners were not really familiar with the politeness level of complaint strategies even when sometimes more polite, indirect ones are preferred.

According to the findings of this study, some insights can be offered for English teaching in Taiwan. Teachers should bring learners' attention to the mitigation strategies and lexical use to make their complaints more polite and thus less threatening. Either explicit or implicit teaching of pragmatic strategies can be helpful. Teachers can teach some politeness formulas in class and make the notions of politeness clearer to the learners. Watching videos based on daily interactions in English speaking countries can help learners know how native English speakers

make complaints less intruding and rude. In addition, role-plays and cloze-type activities are useful in building up learners' lexical repertoire and familiarizing them with appropriate complaints in different situations. For example, they should know that they need to be more polite with superiors, even if the superiors are females. Further, they need to learn that the social distance between them and the addressee is also one variable that they should be cautious about.

Suggestions for Future Studies

There are some suggestions for future studies. Since there were only ten scenarios in the written DCT, it might be difficult to clearly distinguish the effects of the variables from those of the scenarios. In other words, it could be abrupt to say that the subjects' behaviors were caused by the interaction of variables instead of being scenario-specific. Future studies can include more scenarios for each variable under investigation to see whether the results are similar to those in this study. In addition, there are limitations in the use of the written DCT. While some researchers, such as Wolfson (1989) and Cohen (1995), criticized its artificiality and written nature, other instruments can be used in future studies to collect the subjects' oral complaint behaviors to see whether there are different results or not. Naturalistic speech data can also be useful. With more relevant studies, more insights can be gained in English learners' complaints and in the teaching of pragmatic competence to learners in Taiwan.

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