

Comparative Study on Chinese EFL Learner's Complaint Speech Acts

Yuwei Jiang

Nanning Normal University, Nanning 530100, China

How to cite this paper: Jiang, Y. W. (2025). Comparative Study on Chinese EFL Learner's Complaint Speech Acts. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 2(1), 89-97. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9063>

Published: 2025-07-16

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

Pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in facilitating effective and contextually appropriate communication in real-world interactions. However, existing research has primarily centered on English-major undergraduates or comparative studies with native speakers, leaving other learner groups under-examined. To address this gap, this study investigates complaint speech acts across three distinct groups: Non-English-major undergraduates, English-major undergraduates, and English-major postgraduates. The findings demonstrate that proficiency level significantly influences both the strategic formulation and linguistic realization of complaints. Higher-proficiency learners exhibit greater diplomatic nuance and situational adaptability in their expressions, whereas lower-proficiency learners rely on more direct strategies. These results underscore the importance of proficiency-tailored pedagogical interventions in pragmatic instruction. By aligning teaching methods with learners' developmental stages, educators can more effectively enhance communicative competence in EFL contexts.

Keywords

Complaint Speech Act; EFL Learners; Pragmatic Competence

1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, the importance of English as an international lingua franca has become increasingly prominent. In cross-cultural communication, pragmatic competence, as a crucial component of communicative competence, directly influences the success or failure of interactions. The complaint speech act, a typical face-threatening act, requires not only linguistic accuracy but also the appropriate application of socio-cultural norms for its proper expression. However, Chinese English learners face numerous challenges when performing complaint speech acts. Existing research predominantly focuses on comparisons between English-major undergraduates and native English speakers, with limited attention to the differences between postgraduate students and non-English-major undergraduates. Therefore, this study investigates Chinese English learners, employing the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) method to compare and analyze the strategic choices and

linguistic realizations of complaint speech acts among English-major postgraduates, English-major undergraduates, and non-English-major undergraduates.

To be more specific, the research questions in this study are as follows: First, Are there significant differences in complaint strategy use among English-major postgraduates, English-major undergraduates, and non-English-major undergraduates? If so, how are these differences reflected? Second, Are there significant differences in the lexical and syntactic features when expressing complaints among English-major postgraduates, English-major undergraduates, and non-English-major undergraduates? If so, how are these differences reflected?

2. Literature Review

The speech act theory was initiated by Austin (1962), who pointed out that the smallest unit of human verbal communication is not linguistic sentence patterns, but rather specific speech acts—such as requests, complaints, expressions of gratitude, and others. He reckoned that there are three kinds of acts when one produces an utterance: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. Based on Austin's work, Searle (1969) further divided speech act into five major categories: assertives, directives, expressives, commissives and declarations. This theory fundamentally transformed people's understanding of the nature of language, shifting the view of language from merely a tool for describing the world to a form of social action (Yao, 2023).

As an important branch of speech act research, the complaint speech act has garnered sustained academic attention due to its pervasiveness and complexity in daily communication. Complaining is a common negative evaluative behavior in human social interactions, typically expressing the speaker's dissatisfaction with undesirable events or situations that have occurred or are ongoing (Liu, 2015). Laforest (2002) conducted a detailed study on complaint speech acts within families in Montreal, Canada. Based on the collected linguistic data, complaints were categorized into six types according to the strength of their illocutionary force, ranging from strongest to weakest: (1) Implying the hearer's offensive behavior; (2) Stating the reason for dissatisfaction; (3) Demanding an explanation for the offensive behavior; (4) Mentioning the hearer's offensive behavior; (5) Requesting behavioral change or redress for the offense; (6) Directly criticizing the hearer without referencing the offensive behavior. In previous research, scholars have mainly focused on single native languages. For instance, Geluykens and Kraft (2007) respectively described the influence of social and gender factors on complaining behaviors in English-speaking contexts. Similarly, Murphy and Neu (1996) examined how students in English-speaking environments perceived their learning experiences. In previous studies, some scholars paid attention to the differences and similarities of the complaint speech acts between Chinese students and native English speakers. For example, Anna (2007) conducted a comparative study involving two groups of partic-

ipants—100 Chinese university students (English learners) and 80 American university students—using a DCT questionnaire. The findings revealed differences in the frequency and distribution of direct complaint strategies employed by Chinese and American university students. Chen Ji (2015) and Peng Yingying (2024) adopted the DCT questionnaire method to investigate complaint speech acts and explore pedagogical designs. They proposed that the instructional design for teaching complaint speech acts should incorporate complaint strategies, lexical and syntactic devices as core teaching content for pragmatic instruction.

Current research has predominantly focused on single native language or comparative studies of complaint speech acts between Chinese English majors and native English speakers, while paying insufficient attention to the differences in complaint strategies and their linguistic realizations among Chinese learners across varying proficiency levels. Therefore, this study employs the DCT questionnaire method to conduct a comparative analysis of complaint realization strategies, lexical choices, and syntactic devices among Chinese graduate English majors, undergraduate English majors, and non-English major undergraduates.

3. Method

This study employs a DCT questionnaire to investigate the complaint speech act performance of Chinese English learners. Participants comprise three groups of learners with different English proficiency levels, with six individuals per group: English-major postgraduates, English-major undergraduates, and Non-English-major undergraduates. Selection criteria were: English-major postgraduates having passed the TEM-8 (score ≥ 60), English-major undergraduates having passed CET-6 (scores above 500), and Non-English-major undergraduates having passed CET-4 (score ≥ 425).

Yuan-shan Chen (2011) designs a research questionnaire, covering diverse social relationships (e.g., friends, service staff, colleagues) and conflict levels (e.g., mild dissatisfaction, strong accusations). In this study, Yuan-shan Chen's questionnaire was adapted, participants were required to write the most appropriate English complaint expressions for each scenario.

Data analysis utilized a mixed-methods approach. First, quantitative analysis was conducted: frequencies of direct complaints, indirect complaints, and mitigation strategies across the three groups were statistically analyzed, with chi-square tests applied to compare inter-group differences. Second, qualitative analysis was performed: typical linguistic expressions were contrasted, with particular focus on L1 pragmatic transfer phenomena (e.g., over-reliance on justifications) and expressions approximating native English usage. Through this methodology, the study aims to systematically compare differences in complaint strategy selection, linguistic expression, and pragmatic awareness among learners of varying English proficiency levels, thereby providing empirical evidence for developing pragmatic competence

in English language teaching.

4. Results

4.1. Overall Strategy Use

The results of overall strategy use by three groups were shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Overall Strategy Use by Three Groups

Strategy Pattern	Non-English-major undergraduates	English-major undergraduates	English-major postgraduates	Total (18)
Direct Complaint	83.3% (5)	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	33.3% (6)
Mitigated Complaint	16.7% (1)	66.7% (4)	33.3% (2)	38.9% (7)
Mixed Strategy	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	66.7% (4)	27.8% (5)
Total	100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (18)

The data reveals a clear progression in complaint strategy sophistication across the three learner groups. Non-English-major undergraduates predominantly employed direct complaints (83.3%), with utterances characterized by imperative structures and emotional language (e.g., “You idiot! Clean this now!”). This aligns with lower proficiency learners' tendency toward explicit, face-threatening strategies. Meanwhile, English-major undergraduates showed a marked shift toward mitigated complaints (66.7%), demonstrating pragmatic awareness through modal verbs and indirect requests (“This requires immediate resolution”). Notably, one English major (16.7%) produced compound strategies, suggesting emerging advanced competence.

English-major postgraduates displayed near-native strategic patterns, with 66.7% employing compound strategies that integrated justification, mitigation, and solution proposals (“Perhaps we could explore restorative solutions?”). The remaining 33.3% used mitigated complaints focused on systemic improvement rather than personal redress. Crucially, no graduate employed direct complaints, confirming their mastery of high-variation strategic repertoires. The 16.7% compound strategy use among English majors versus 0% in non-English groups highlights the threshold effect of formal instruction in developing pragmatic competence.

The distribution patterns suggest: (1) direct complaint frequency inversely correlates with proficiency level (83.3% → 16.7% → 0%), (2) compound strategy adoption requires advanced linguistic and pragmatic resources (emerging at B2, mastered at C1), and (3) even within homogeneous groups, individual variation persists (e.g., one English-major undergraduate's direct complaint). These findings underscore how language proficiency mediates pragmatic strategy selection along Brown and Levinson's politeness continuum.

4.2. Individual Strategy Use

The results of individual strategy use by three groups were shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Individual Strategy Use by Three Groups

Strategy Pattern	Sub-type	Non-English-major undergraduates	English-major undergraduates	English-major postgraduates	Total
Direct Complaints	Direct Blame	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.6% (1)

Indirect Com- plaints	Threat	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Expression of Annoyance	50% (3)	66.7% (4)	16.7% (1)	44.4% (8)
	Indirect Accu- sation	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	50% (3)	33.3% (6)
Mixed Strategy Total	Withdrawal	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.6% (1)
	Repair Seeking	0% (0)	0% (0)	33.3% (2)	11.1% (2)
		100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (18)

The data reveals clear differences in complaint strategy preferences among Non-English-major undergraduates, English-major undergraduates, and English-major postgraduates.

Non-English-major undergraduates showed the most varied approach, using three distinct strategies. They were the only group to employ Direct Blame (16.7%), suggesting a willingness to confront issues openly. Their most frequent strategy was Expression of Annoyance (50%), aligning with the overall preference for indirect complaints. Interestingly, they also used Withdrawal (16.7%), indicating a tendency to disengage from conflict situations. This mix of direct, indirect, and avoidant strategies may reflect less developed pragmatic competence in complaint formulation.

English-major undergraduates displayed the most homogeneous pattern, focusing exclusively on indirect strategies. They strongly preferred Expression of Annoyance (66.7%), using it more than any other group, followed by Indirect Accusation (33.3%). Their complete avoidance of direct or mixed strategies suggests a strong adherence to conventional politeness norms in English communication, possibly resulting from their academic focus on language studies.

English-major postgraduates demonstrated the most sophisticated strategy use. While they employed Expression of Annoyance least frequently among the groups (16.7%), they favored Indirect Accusation (50%) and were the only group to use Repair Seeking (33.3%). This combination indicates: 1) a preference for subtle accusation over emotional expression, and 2) a pragmatic orientation toward problem-solving. Their strategic choices reflect advanced pragmatic awareness and ability to navigate complex social interactions.

4.3. Lexical usage

The results of lexical usage by three groups were shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Lexical Usage by Three Groups

Lexical Feature	Sub-type	Non-English-major undergraduates	English-major undergraduates	English-major postgraduates	Total
Downgraders	Politeness markers	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	16.7% (3)
	Downtoners	0% (0)	33.3% (2)	50% (3)	27.8% (5)
	Hesitators	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	16.7% (1)	11.1% (2)
	Minus com-mitators	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	50% (3)	33.3% (6)
	Hedges	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	16.7% (3)

Upgraders	Swears	33.3% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	11.1% (2)
	Overstaters	50% (3)	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	22.2% (4)
	Intensifiers	66.7% (4)	33.3% (2)	16.7% (1)	38.9% (7)
	Plus com- mitors	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.6% (1)
Total		100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (18)

Note: A single student may use both types of lexical items (downgraders and upgraders), and thus be counted in multiple subcategories, resulting in percentage totals exceeding 100%.

The data in Table 3 reveals significant differences in lexical strategy use among non-English-major undergraduates, English-major undergraduates, and English-major postgraduates, particularly in their employment of downgraders and upgraders.

Non-English-major undergraduates relied heavily on upgraders, with frequent use of intensifiers (66.7%) and overstaters (50%), and were the only group to employ swears (33.3%) and plus commitors (16.7%). This suggests a direct, emotionally charged communication style. Their use of downgraders was minimal, limited to a single instance of minus commitors (16.7%), indicating a lack of linguistic mitigation strategies.

English-major undergraduates displayed a transitional pattern, reducing their reliance on upgraders (e.g., 33.3% for intensifiers) while beginning to adopt downgraders such as downtoners (33.3%) and minus commitors (33.3%). Notably, they introduced politeness markers (16.7%) and hedges (16.7%), reflecting a growing awareness of pragmatic norms in English communication.

English-major postgraduates exhibited the most refined lexical choices, prioritizing downgraders like downtoners (50%) and minus commitors (50%), along with higher frequencies of politeness markers (33.3%) and hedges (33.3%). Their near-complete avoidance of upgraders (only 16.7% for intensifiers) underscores their advanced ability to navigate polite and indirect expression.

4.4. Syntactic Usage

The results of syntactic usage by three groups were shown in the Table 4.

Table 4. Syntactic Usage by Three Groups

Syntactic Feature	Sub-type	Non-English-major undergraduates	English-major undergraduates	English-major postgraduates	Total
Downgraders	Past-tense modals	0% (0)	33.3% (2)	66.7% (4)	33.3% (6)
	Progressive markers	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	50% (3)	22.2% (4)
	Consultative structures	0% (0)	16.7% (1)	33.3% (2)	16.7% (3)
Upgraders	Rhetorical questions	50% (3)	16.7% (1)	0% (0)	22.2% (4)
Total		100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (6)	100% (18)

Note: A single student may use either, both, or neither type of syntactic items (downgraders and upgraders), so the total percentage may exceed 100% or may not exceed 100%.

The syntactic analysis in Table 4 reveals a clear developmental progression in how different learner groups employ downgrading and upgrading strategies, mirroring their increasing linguistic sophistication. Non-English-major undergraduates exclusively relied on upgraders, particularly rhetorical questions (50%), demonstrating a direct and confrontational communication style devoid of syntactic mitigation. This pattern aligns with their lexical preferences observed earlier, showing consistency in their direct approach to complaints. English-major undergraduates displayed transitional characteristics, beginning to incorporate past-tense modals (33.3%) and progressive markers (16.7%) while reducing rhetorical questions to 16.7%, reflecting their developing awareness of English pragmatic norms through academic training.

The most striking findings emerge from English-major postgraduates, who demonstrated mastery of syntactic downgrading strategies. Their frequent use of past-tense modals (66.7%), progressive markers (50%), and consultative structures (33.3%) reveals an advanced ability to soften speech acts through grammatical means. Their complete avoidance of rhetorical questions (0%) contrasts sharply with non-majors, highlighting a professional-level understanding of diplomatic communication. This syntactic sophistication complements their lexical preferences observed in Table 3, where they similarly favored mitigating devices over intensifiers.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, The findings of this study reveal clear developmental patterns in how different learner groups formulate complaints, with significant variations emerging across strategic, lexical, and syntactic dimensions. Non-English-major undergraduates demonstrate a preference for direct and emotionally charged expressions, employing confrontational strategies and intensifying language with minimal mitigation. Their approach reflects limited pragmatic awareness and a tendency toward straightforward communication. In contrast, English-major undergraduates show transitional characteristics, systematically avoiding direct complaints while adopting more conventional indirect strategies and beginning to incorporate basic politeness markers and syntactic downgraders. This shift suggests their academic training has introduced foundational pragmatic competence, though their strategic repertoire remains somewhat limited. The most sophisticated patterns emerge among English-major postgraduates, who display nuanced complaint management through strategic indirectness and solution-oriented approaches. Their language use demonstrates mastery of both lexical and syntactic mitigation devices, with near-complete avoidance of confrontational elements. This group's ability to flexibly combine multiple softening strategies indicates advanced pragmatic competence approaching native-like norms. The progression across groups reveals a clear trajectory from directness to indirectness, from emotional expression to strategic fi-

ness, and from simple to complex linguistic realization. In summary, Proficiency level significantly shapes both the strategic approach and linguistic execution of complaints, with higher proficiency enabling more diplomatic and context-appropriate expressions.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the relatively small sample size (only 6 participants per group) may limit the generalizability of the findings. A larger participant pool would strengthen the reliability of the results. Secondly, the study focused exclusively on written discourse completion tasks, which may not fully reflect how learners would perform in spontaneous spoken interactions. Incorporating natural speech data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic competence.

Despite the above limitations, the present study has filled the gap of previous studies by paying sufficient attention to the differences in complaint strategies and their linguistic realizations among Chinese learners across varying proficiency levels. The results have contributed to targeted pragmatic instruction, emphasizing the need to tailor teaching content according to learners' proficiency levels to enhance communicative competence. In addition, future research could address these limitations by expanding the participant pool and including both written and spoken data. Longitudinal designs could track developmental trajectories more effectively. Investigating the role of explicit instruction in complaint strategy development would also be valuable for pedagogical applications. Finally, exploring how these strategies transfer to real-world communicative contexts could yield important insights for language teaching and assessment.

References

- [1] Anna. A Comparative Analysis of Complaint Strategies in Chinese and American College Students' Complaints [D]. Dalian University of Technology, 2008.
- [2] Austin, J. L. How to do things with words[M].Oxford, UK:Oxford University Press,1962.
- [3] Chen Ji. Research on Teaching Design of Complaints Based on a Comparative Study of Complaining Speech Acts [D]. Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, 2017.
- [4] Geluykens R, Kraft B. Gender variation in native and interlanguage complaints. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Interlanguage English*. Lincom-Europa: MUENCHEN, 2007:143-158.
- [5] Lanforest M. Scenes of family life: complaining in everyday conversation[J]. *Journals of Pragmatics*,2002(10):1595-1620.
- [6] Liu Yan. A Review of Studies on the Speech Act of "Criticism/Complaint" [J]. *Modern Chinese*, 2015(10).
- [7] Murphy B, Neu J. My grade's too low. The speech act of complaining. *Speech acts across cultures:challenges to communication in a second language*. Berlin:MONTON DE GRUYTER, 1996:191-216.
- [8] Peng Yingying. A Study on Speech Acts of Gratitude and Complaint and Their Teaching Interventions [D]. Central China Normal University, 2024.
- [9] Searle, J. R. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1969.
- [10] Yao Ziye. A Study on Austin's Speech Act Theory [J]. *Today's Ancient and Modern Crea-*

tive Writing, 2023(22).

- [11] Yuan-shan C, Chun-yin D C, Miao-Hsia C. American and Chinese complaints Strategy use from a cross-cultural perspective[]]. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 2011:253-275.