

## **A Study of Complaint Strategies for EFL College Learners**

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the pragmatic proficiency of complaint in certain situations. A discourse completion test (DCT) was administered to 35 Korean college learners enrolled in regular English courses. The results show that complaints are too direct in the EFL cultural context as produced by Korean speakers of English; sometimes these subjects' complaints are actually realized through direct criticism. Most of students fail to demonstrate the high level of pragmatic competence, and they are not able to carry out strategies appropriate to the native speakers. Most learners feel uncomfortable in their attempts to produce appropriate utterances. The learners in EFL situations do not have the linguistic proficiency to attempt this strategy of complaint. The findings indicate that learners should be taught the appropriate use of pragmatic complaint proficiency.

[pragmatic strategy/discourse completion test(DCT)/화용전략/담화완성시험]

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language forms in a wide range of environments, and the study of the relationships between a speaker and a listener in the social and cultural context of the situation (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1999). In the pragmatic speech act, Tanck (2002) argues that speakers who may be considered "fluent" in a second language may lack pragmatic competence. In other words, they may be unable to produce language which is socially and culturally appropriate to the situation. In this view, speakers employ a variety of speech acts to achieve their communicative goals such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals (Kasper & Rose, 2001). A great deal

of research on the speech acts of apologies and requests has been studied (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Fewer studies, however, have focused on complaints (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Chen, 1996; Murphy & Neu, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, 1993) as cited in Tanck (2002). This paper investigates the differences in the complaint speech acts of non-native speakers of English who are college learners. The categorization is based on the intensity of complaint for the scenario by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987).

This study tries to find out complaint production in non-native speakers and compares it with other studies of native speakers who represent a wide range of first languages. That is, this study is able to provide meaningful data for the EFL learners compared with other studies of native and non-native complaints and refusals such as Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), Beebe et al. (1990), Chen (1996), and Murphy and Neu (1996). However, this study does not focus on the semantic formulae that previous studies have found. Instead, this study relies on subjects' level.

The results should provide examples that English teachers in EFL learning situation can use to help develop curricula to address the problems that the learners encounter.

In this study, the researcher has some hypotheses for non-native English speakers' production of the speech acts of complaint as follows:

1. Non-native speakers of English will produce different components depending on the severity of items.
2. The expression of the components of the speech act in some situations is inappropriate according to the learners' pragmatic ability.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The speech act of complaint occurs when a speaker reacts with displeasure or annoyance to an action that has affected the speaker unfavorably (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). Like a refusal, it is also a face-threatening act for the listener, and often realized through indirect strategies (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Tanck, 2002).

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) studied the speech act of complaint as produced

by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. They developed five categories of speech acts that were based on severity of the complaint for a specific scenario, in which one colleague had waited for another colleague, who arrived late to a scheduled appointment. They classified the components of speech act on complaint into five categories: (1) below the level of reproach, "No harm done, let's meet some other time," (2) disapproval, "It's a shame that we have to work faster now," (3) complaint, "You are always late and now we have less time to do the job," (4) accusation and warning, "Next time don't expect me to sit here waiting for you," and, (5) threat, "If we don't finish the job today I'll have to discuss it with the boss."

Boxer (1993) analyzes the speech act sequence of indirect complaint commiseration in conversational interactions between Japanese learners of English as a second language and their English speaking peers. An indirect complaint (IC) is defined as the expression of dissatisfaction about oneself or someone/something that is not present. It differs from a direct complaint in that the addressee is neither held responsible nor capable of remedying the perceived offense.

Murphy and Neu (1996) applied the speech act set to complaints produced by American and Korean speakers of English. The authors identified the semantic formula as (1) an explanation of purpose, (2) a complaint, (3) a justification, and (4) a candidate solution: request. They found a high correlation between native and non-native speakers when producing three of the four speech act components, explanation of purpose, justification, and candidate solution as request. Native and non-native speakers differed in production of the second component, the complaint. The American subjects produced a complaint in each instance: "I think, uh, it's my opinion maybe the grade was a little low." However, most Korean subjects tended to produce a criticism: "But you just only look at your point of view and uh you just didn't recognize my point." Such criticism was reported to have the potential of offending the interlocutor or shutting down the interaction in an American context.

Tanck (2002) classified the complaint into four components, especially in native speakers' production of complaints. These components are: (1) excusing self for imposition: "Excuse me for interrupting," (2) establishing context or support: "I placed an order last week," (3) a request: "Can you please look for it?," and (4) conveyance of a sense of urgency: "I need it right away." Tanck argued that in general, only three of the four components are produced for each prompt, based on the social distance between the interlocutors, one in which the student is in

an inferior position to the professor, the other in which the customer is in a superior role to the shop clerk.

Sang-Yi O (2005) investigated the way in which Korean learners of German and native speakers of Korean and German perform the speech act of complaining, especially with respect to its linguistic realization patterns, frequency and channel of message transmission. By using DCT, the study concludes that Koreans attempt to select more the indirect strategies in order to protect their face and maintain social harmony in the interaction. The Germans prefer to perform the speech act of complaint directly in face to face interaction.

In her study, Kyunghye Moon (2001) compared the complaint strategies of native and non-native speakers. The result showed that nonnative speakers are not always successful in complaint and in communication. She argued that these failures of non-native speakers in complaints are not primarily caused by their grammatical and linguistic limitations, but mainly caused by the limitation of sociopragmatic knowledge. Thus, she suggested that language teachers teach the unmarked forms of native speaker complaints for specific situations.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **1. Participants**

The participants were 35 university students of two classes in Seoul. Subjects' ages ranged from 19 to 27. Of the 35 subjects, 13 were male and 22 were female. All participants were non-native speakers of English, whose first language was only Korean. At the time of this study, most of participants reported that they haven't spent any time in an English-speaking country, while five participants had spent time in an English-speaking country for one and half years.

Each participant was engaged in undergraduate study in Business Administration, Technology, Pharmacy, Sociology, and English. Each subject had studied English in a formal EFL setting for at least six years.

#### **2. Materials**

All participants were given a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in which they were asked to write their responses to four prompts within familiar equal and superior-inferior relationships. The prompts of DCTs in this study followed the

revised items of complaints from Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), Kyunghye Moon (2001), and Tanck (2002).

The DCT was composed of four prompts. The prompts suggested equal or unequal power in the relationships of the speakers; scenarios involved either the subject and another classmate, or the subject and a professor. In each scenario, the subject is familiar with the interlocutor (Tanck, 2002). Each prompt simulated a situation that could occur in a university setting. The subject of each prompt is listed below:

- 1) Complaint made to your close friend for messing your room.
- 2) Complaint made to a stranger for trying to cut in line.
- 3) Complaint made to your professor for giving you a low grade.
- 4) Complaint made to your neighbor for making noise at night.

Each prompt produced speech components based on the social distance between the interlocutors. For example, in the first prompt, the speaker is in a close relationship with the listener. In the second, the speaker is in superior to the listener, while the speaker is in the inferior to the professor in the third prompt. In the fourth prompt, the position between the interlocutors is as close as in the first prompt.

An example of Item 1 is provided below:

You were busy cleaning your home in preparation for your friend's visit. After your friend arrived, you remembered that you had to buy something at a grocery store. So, you asked your friend to wait for a while at your home. When you came back from the grocery store, your friend had left and had made a big mess of your room.

Your answer as complaint: I would like to immediately call my friend. But before I get mad, I would calm down first and ask him what happened when I was not here.

### 3. Procedures

The subjects were provided with a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and responded by writing what they would like to answer to each situation. They were encouraged to read the description of a complaint situation and asked to

write down their responses to match as closely as possible what they might actually say in a real situation. It took about 25 minutes for subjects to finish the test. The collected data was analyzed by the researcher for components of each speech act present in the responses. The presence of each component was calculated for frequency of use. The responses were then reviewed to determine which language forms were present or absent in each item.

#### **IV. RESULTS**

Each of the learners' responses was analyzed for individual speech acts that served to complete the speech act set for each prompt. Based on Murphy and Neu (1996) and Tanck (2002), the revised components of speech act on complaint was used. Therefore, the conveyance can be changed into complaint in this study.

##### **1. Components of Similar Distance between a Speaker and His/her Friend**

The first complaint prompt, in which the speaker is addressing his/her friend, tended to produce the following speech act set: (1) excusing self: "Sorry, but I have to do that. Please forget it," (2) establishing context: "I think that you can understand me because I already asked you to wait for a while," (3) a request: "I can understand you, so let's meet another time," and (4) complaint: "You are so rude that I cannot expect you to do that." Each component depends on the degree of social distance or intimacy between a speaker and a listener.

In this complaint prompt, the speaker complains to a friend about messing up a room. In the power relationship between a speaker and a friend, the relationship is familiar and close in terms of status and social distance. The speakers' complaints to the friend were analyzed for the presence of each component. Table 1 shows the frequency of the individual components of the speech act set for this prompt.

Table 1

*Complaint to His/Her Close Friend*

|     | Excusing self | Establishing context | Request | Complaint | Total |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-------|
| No. | 2/40          | 6/40                 | 13/40   | 19/40     | 40    |

In the context of a complaint made to a friend, the speakers produced the components of the speech act with high frequency in complaint. As the speaker and a friend have an equal social status, the excusing oneself is expected to be a low frequency. The speakers use complaint strategy most frequently because of the high intimacy of their relationship.

## 2. Components of Superior Distance between a Speaker and a Young Boy/girl

The second complaint prompt, in which the speaker is addressing a young boy/girl cutting in line, tended to produce the following speech act set: (1) excusing self: "Excuse me, you'd better keep your turn, please," (2) establishing context: "Hey, look at them standing in line," (3) a request: "Could you go back and keep your line?," and (4) complaint: "You cannot do that, You are so impolite."

Table 2

*Complaint to a Young Boy/Girl*

|     | Excusing self | Establishing context | Request | Complaint | Total |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-------|
| No. | 12/56         | 12/56                | 20/56   | 12/56     | 56    |

As shown in Table 2, in the context of a complaint made to a young boy/girl, the speakers produced the same frequency (12/56) in three situations: excusing self, establishing context, and complaint. The highest rate, request (20/56), indicates that though the listener is rude and is violating the rules, the speakers try to be cautious in complaint. That is, the speakers try to keep polite to a stranger though they are younger than the speaker in social status.

Interestingly, some excerpts in this prompt show the exceptional expression. "There is a line here. Are you blind?" This expression is a kind of sarcasm. Furthermore, "What are you donkey doing in here! You, crazy?" is a kind of

rude expression. It seems that because of a written DCT, the participant somewhat exaggerated his/her utterances to show off.

### 3. Components of Inferior Distance between a Speaker and a Professor

The third complaint prompt, in which the speaker is addressing his/her professor because of his/her low grades, tended to produce the following speech act set: (1) excusing self: "Excuse me. I have tried to do my best, but I got a low grade," (2) establishing context: "I am sorry, but I cannot understand my grade because it's much lower than I expected," (3) a request: "Professor, I would appreciate it very much if you could look through my answers again, Sorry!," and (4) complaint: "I haven't expected the score that you gave me. I don't want to take your course next time." Table 3 summarizes the components of inferior distance between a speaker and a professor.

Table 3

*Complaint to a Professor*

|     | Excusing self | Establishing context | Request | Complaint | Total |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-------|
| No. | 5/55          | 19/55                | 16/55   | 15/55     | 55    |

As showed in Table 3, speakers produced the components with almost the same frequency (19 vs.16 vs.17). Also, the absence of the fourth component, a complaint, is expected because the speaker has asked the professor who is superior to the speaker. In this case, complaint would not be appropriate given the power differential and social and cultural context of the student-professor relationship.

The speakers sometimes made a personal element such as "Professor! I studied for this exam so hard. What was the problem with my answers?" or "Although there are some mistakes on my exam sheet, I studied so hard." Tanck (2002) argues that the personalization of the plight may not be highly valued in American culture, where one's own special circumstances are not considered valid or responsible excuses for late work or tardiness. Thus, personalization in this case may even be considered whining or irritating (Tanck, 2002). Murphy and Neu (1996) found that native speakers tended to depersonalize the problem to transfer blame from the professor to the paper but that the non-native (Korean)



speakers tended to place the blame directly on the professor.

Some interesting answers indicate pragmatic problems and differences. "Professor, Would you have a some time?" shows some problems in terms of grammaticality. In the US, students usually call Dr. \_\_\_\_ or Professor Kim or Brown rather than just calling "professor."

#### 4. Components of Superior Distance between a Speaker and a Neighbor

The fourth complaint prompt, in which the speaker is addressing his/her neighbor for making noise at midnight, tended to produce the following speech act set: (1) excusing self: "Excuse me. I have an important work to prepare tomorrow," (2) establishing context: "Oh, You know that it's so loud that everybody cannot sleep for the rest of the night," (3) a request: "I cannot stand it any more. Could you turn it down a little bit?," and (4) complaint: "Please stop it. you sometimes do that. I will notify the guard." Table 4 shows the components of superior distance between a speaker and a neighbor.

Table 4

##### *Complaint to a Neighbor*

|     | Excusing self | Establishing context | Request | Complaint | Total |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-------|
| No. | 12/64         | 9/64                 | 28/64   | 15/64     | 64    |

In her data, Kyunghye Moon (2001) suggests that most of the native subjects used the structure: 'excuse me' as an initiator of the complaining act. In contrast, 14 non-native subjects used 'I'm sorry' and 'please' as initiators for complaining. The portion of nonnative subjects who used these two forms is compatible with the portion of nonnative speakers who used 'excuse me.' What makes nonnative speakers use 'I'm sorry' and 'please' instead of 'excuse me' as most of the NSs seem to agree on as the appropriate form in this situation? How is 'excuse me' different from 'I'm sorry' and 'please.' In other research, the excusing self strategy shows the same result. In Tanck's study (2002), the difference of 19% between native and non-native speakers producing the component of excusing oneself is less noteworthy than may be expected when it is taken into consideration that less than half of the native speakers produced this component consistently.

In some excerpts, "Hey! Be quiet!... If you still make a noise, I'll call the police!" means that participant didn't use the expression with politeness markers. Instead, he used such as "Hey!" And he also threatened his neighbor with calling the police. Table 5 summarizes the total frequency of components of complaint for this study.

Table 5  
*Complaint in Four Prompts*

|     | Excusing self | Establishing context | Request | Complaint | Total |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-------|
| No. | 31            | 46                   | 78      | 60        | 215   |

In Table 5, the total frequency used by the subjects indicates that the speakers in EFL situation usually rely on the 'request' and 'complaint' rather than 'excusing self' and 'establishing context.' The reasons are the lack of pragmatic elements that allow the face-treating acts to be well received by the interlocutors (Tanck, 2002). This result supports other study. That is, Tanck (2002) indicates that native and non-native speakers produced the components of this complaint speech act with roughly the same frequency, and produced the request component with exactly the same frequency. In request form, however, some non-native request components were less appropriate to the situation.

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has several limitations in the subject pool and the study instrument, the DCT. There are 35 subjects who studied a regular English course. They haven't been instructed in pragmatics in their courses because they had various majors. With the instrument of DCT, subjects contemplated the responses by writing their ideas. Tanck (2002) insists that it is less possible in a naturalistic spoken setting though it is a time-efficient instrument. However, it may be the best way to obtain authentic data within a limited situation. In this study, the DCT tested only four items depending on the social distances represented. Future studies should use DCTs with various prompts for oral interview, recording, or role play activities.

This study shows that the frequency of speech act of complaint is quite similar to the result of other research. Non-native subjects did not always make

complaints following the appropriate ways of complaints. The portion of nonnative subjects who used the unmarked forms in making complaints is considerably lower than that of native speakers. They tended to make complaints in a more explicit way, while native speakers used more implicit ways of complaints (Kyunghye Moon, 2001). That is, a speaker should use an appropriate way of complaining.

In this study, the students used only one or two types of responses as their dominant answers, depending on the situations. The students should be instructed to use a variety of responses in six types of indirect complaint. As a way to teach pragmatic competence in the classroom, Judd (1999) suggested five components of teaching the speech act. The five components are as follows: (1) teacher analysis of speech acts, (2) cognitive awareness skills, (3) receptive/integrative skills, (4) controlled productive skills, and (5) free, integrated practice. Therefore, by adopting Judd's model to Korean EFL classroom, Korean EFL students could have more chances to acquire pragmatic competence on complaints.

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## APPENDIX

### Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

Department:(        ) Grade:(    ) Student No.:(        ) Name:(            )

Directions: Please write your response to the situations as a complaint task as you feel you would like to say it in the situation.

1. You were busy in cleaning your home in order to meet your friend. After your friend

arrived, you remembered that you would buy something at a grocery store. So, you asked your friend to wait for a while at your home. When you came back from the grocery store, your friend left with a big mess in your room.

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2. You were going to a concert with your boy/girl friend on weekend. So, you went to a box office to buy the tickets. There were many people waiting in a long line, and you were waiting in line for almost one and half hours. Then, a young man/woman tried to cut in line.

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3. You studied very hard and took a mid-term exam. After you received your grade report, you found that the professor gave you a grade D in English course. You were very upset.

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4. You went to bed around 12 o'clock at night. You would get up around 5 o'clock tomorrow morning. You could not sleep because you heard a loud music of an audio set from your neighbor. You went out and knocked on the door of your neighbor.

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