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A Cross-Cultural Study of Complaint Strategies by Native Speakers of American English and Vietnamese Learners of English

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Abstract—**This study investigates cross-cultural differences in the realization of complaint strategies between native speakers of American English and Vietnamese learners of English (EFL). Adopting a pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic framework, the research applies Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy of complaints and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to analyze 136 complaint responses from each group, collected via Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal that American participants favored indirect accusations (B3) and requests for repair (A5), often employing a broader range of downgraders and upgraders to navigate face-threatening acts. In contrast, Vietnamese learners preferred indirect complaints (B4) and blaming (A6), with more limited use of internal modifiers. Social distance significantly affected strategy choice in both groups, with higher levels prompting greater use of politeness devices. The findings underscore cultural influences on complaint behavior and suggest that learners' pragmatic performance is shaped by both linguistic proficiency and socio-cultural norms. Pedagogically, the study highlights the need for explicit EFL instruction in strategic politeness, including training on modifier use and contextual appropriateness. This research contributes to intercultural pragmatics by offering insights into how complaints are negotiated across languages, cultures, and social roles.**

Index Terms—**complaint strategies, cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness theory, Vietnamese EFL learners, downgraders and upgraders**

I. Introduction

Complaints are a central type of expressive speech act used to communicate dissatisfaction, request redress, or signal disapproval. As inherently face-threatening acts (FTAs), they carry high potential for social disruption, particularly in intercultural interactions. While native English speakers may express complaints more directly—especially in symmetrical power relationships—learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) from high-context, collectivist cultures such as Vietnam often rely on indirect, deferential, and face-saving strategies to mitigate conflict.

Understanding how complaints are pragmatically realized across cultures is critical to the development of intercultural communicative competence, especially in contexts involving asymmetries of power or distance. Drawing on foundational theories of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and facework (Arundale, 2006), this study explores how complaints function not only as expressions of personal emotion but also as strategic social actions shaped by cultural norms and relational dynamics.

Despite a growing body of research on complaint strategies across languages, there remains a notable lack of empirical comparisons between native speakers of American English and Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly studies that account for both social distance and the use of internal modifiers such as downgraders and upgraders. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a cross-cultural pragmatic approach to examine how complaints are constructed and mitigated in English by these two groups.

By integrating Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, modality analysis, and contrastive pragmatics, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural expectations and interpersonal variables shape pragmatic performance. The findings aim to inform both theoretical discussions in interlanguage pragmatics and pedagogical practices in EFL classrooms where pragmatic competence is a key objective.

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II. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Foundations of Speech Acts and Politeness

The study of complaint strategies is firmly grounded in Speech Act Theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969, 1975), who emphasized the illocutionary and perlocutionary functions of utterances in communication. Complaints, as expressive illocutionary acts, often involve a negative evaluation of another's behavior and are typically classified as face-threatening acts (FTAs) due to their potential to damage interpersonal rapport.

In the realm of politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced the influential notions of *positive* and *negative face*, proposing a model for how speakers mitigate threats to face through redressive strategies. Their framework has served as a universal lens for understanding how communicative acts like complaints are modulated in interaction.

Subsequent scholars have nuanced this model. Arundale (2006) conceptualized face as a relational-interactional phenomenon, emphasizing co-construction over individual face-maintenance. Culpeper (2011) and Haugh (2015) expanded the discussion by examining *impoliteness* as a legitimate communicative strategy rather than simply the absence of politeness. Similarly, Kádár (2017) approached politeness through the lens of rituality and moral order, stressing the cultural embeddedness of pragmatic behavior. Collectively, these perspectives inform the current study's view of complaints as dynamic, socially contingent speech acts.

These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining how speakers navigate complaints through culturally informed strategies, particularly across first and second languages.

B. Contrastive and Interlanguage Pragmatics in Complaint Studies

Building on the foundational theories above, contrastive pragmatics investigates how speech acts vary across cultures, while interlanguage pragmatics explores how second language (L2) learners acquire and adapt such acts. Researchers such as Baumgarten (2022), Verschueren (2022), and Preece (2016) argue that pragmatic norms are deeply shaped by sociocultural expectations and individual identity, resulting in cross-linguistic variability in both form and function.

Within the interlanguage domain, Trosborg (1995) and Taguchi (2017) highlight the gradual development of pragmatic competence in L2 learners, often mediated by L1 influence and varying levels of exposure to the target language's socio-pragmatic conventions.

In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen (2008) found that EFL learners often struggled with directness when performing criticism and complaints in English, tending to rely on L1-based politeness patterns. Similarly, Nguyen (2020) demonstrated that learners' choice of compliment responses depended heavily on perceived social status, underscoring the centrality of socio-pragmatic awareness in strategy selection.

These studies underscore the relevance of investigating how Vietnamese EFL learners navigate complaint speech acts in comparison to native English speakers, especially in relation to social distance and power.

C. Empirical Studies on Complaint Strategies Across Cultures

A substantial body of empirical research has examined how complaints are realized across cultural boundaries. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) found notable differences in complaint behavior between native and non-native speakers of Hebrew, highlighting instances of pragmatic transfer and L2 deficiency. Similarly, Chen et al. (2011) showed that American English speakers tended to use more direct complaint strategies, while Chinese speakers favored indirectness and mitigation.

Comparative studies across languages have yielded consistent findings. For instance, Shabani and Zeinali (2015) and Eslamirasekh et al. (2012) reported that Persian speakers employed more elaborated strategies, including justification and explanation, than English speakers. Yang (2016) found similar divergences between Chinese and British university students, further affirming cultural variation in complaint realizations.

In Southeast Asia, Abdul Razzak and Jamil (2016), as well as Nguyen (2008), noted that Vietnamese EFL learners tend to use less face-threatening strategies, often avoiding direct blame. These tendencies are consistent with collectivist cultural values that prioritize harmony and hierarchical respect. Song (2014) drew relevant parallels through request strategies, showing how Korean and American speakers differed in the level of directness based on cultural expectations. Finally, Kowalski (1996) provided a socio-cognitive interpretation of complaints, arguing that their expression is linked not only to social norms but also to emotional and psychological processing.

Together, these studies build a compelling case for analyzing complaints not only as linguistic phenomena but also as culturally informed social acts.

D. Methodologies in Complaint Research

Across complaint research, the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) has emerged as a primary instrument for eliciting pragmatic behavior. As discussed by Félix-Brasdefer (2010), DCTs offer controlled yet flexible scenarios that allow researchers to examine how speakers respond to socially sensitive contexts. The method enables cross-group comparisons while maintaining standardization.

Lexical coding and categorization often follow Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, supported by consistent definitional sources such as *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995). Recent studies also emphasize the integration of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in EFL contexts (Muhammad et al., 2025), suggesting that pragmatic

instruction should be grounded in authentic, culturally relevant interaction patterns.

This methodological grounding justifies the current study's use of DCTs and cross-cultural participant groups, facilitating both controlled elicitation and authentic comparison.

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Complaints as Expressive and Relational Speech Acts

Complaints are categorized as expressive illocutionary acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) that convey the speaker's negative evaluation of a situation or behavior, often directed toward an interlocutor. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) define complaints as "illocutionary acts in which the speaker expresses disapproval and a negative assessment toward the hearer for a perceived offense." In such contexts, complaints are intrinsically relational: they emerge not only from dissatisfaction but also from an intention to manage and negotiate interpersonal norms and expectations (Arundale, 2006).

Recent work in intercultural pragmatics has emphasized the need to examine complaints as culturally mediated actions (Taguchi, 2017; Chen et al., 2011), whose forms, frequency, and strategic deployment reflect both individual speaker goals and broader sociocultural values.

B. Complaints as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

Complaints are among the most salient face-threatening acts (FTAs), as they challenge the social and psychological needs of the hearer, especially their positive face - the desire to be appreciated and approved by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As acts of disapproval or blame, complaints inherently risk damaging social harmony and may provoke interpersonal conflict. Therefore, speakers often resort to a range of strategies to mitigate the force of the FTA depending on the severity of the offense, the nature of the relationship, and the sociocultural context.

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that when facing the need to perform an FTA, speakers have several options, as illustrated in Figure 1. These options form a hierarchical model based on levels of directness and politeness:

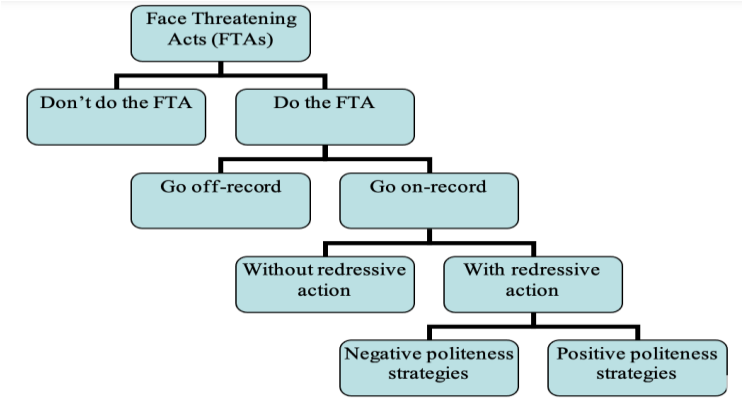

Figure 1. Strategies for Performing Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)
(Adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 68-70)

Drawing upon politeness theory, speakers confronted with the need to express a face-threatening act (FTA) may adopt a range of strategies to minimize its potential social disruption. In some cases, the speaker may opt not to perform the FTA at all, thereby entirely circumventing any potential conflict. When the decision is made to carry out the FTA, it may be executed off record, utilizing indirectness, ambiguity, or allusion, which allows the speaker to retain deniability while transferring interpretive responsibility to the listener.

In contrast, an on-record performance of the FTA involves explicit articulation of the act and can be further categorized into two distinct approaches. The first involves non-mitigated realization, where the speaker conveys the message in a straightforward and unbuffered manner. While this strategy enhances communicative clarity and directness, it carries a greater risk of interpersonal tension. The second approach includes the application of redressive strategies, designed to soften the impact of the FTA. These fall into two major types:

(i) *Negative politeness*, which emphasizes the speaker's awareness of the imposition and appeals to the addressee's desire for autonomy, often through the use of hedges, indirect forms, or apologies.

(ii) *Positive politeness*, which seeks to reinforce social cohesion and shared identity, drawing on in-group markers, expressions of solidarity, or mutual values.

This theoretical framework highlights the nuanced and adaptive nature of communicative behavior, particularly in contexts involving sensitive or potentially adversarial interactions, such as lodging complaints or expressing dissatisfaction.

Within this paradigm, Trosborg's (1995) categorization of complaint strategies aligns closely with the levels of directness described by politeness theory. Indirect complaints, including hints or implications of consequences, typically reflect off-record or negatively polite orientations. In contrast, more assertive forms such as overt blame or accusations exemplify on-record strategies with reduced or absent mitigation.

Such a framework is especially valuable in the analysis of cross-cultural pragmatics, where variation in complaint behavior can reflect broader sociocultural norms. For example, speakers from high-context cultures such as Vietnam tend to prefer indirect or deferential forms of expression, consistent with social values emphasizing harmony and respect for hierarchy (Nguyen, 2008; Linh, 2020). Conversely, American English speakers, operating within more egalitarian and low-context communicative settings, are generally more inclined toward directness in their complaint strategies (Chen et al., 2011; Song, 2014).

By situating authentic complaint utterances within this theoretical schema, the present study seeks to uncover how underlying principles of face management influence the choice of strategy across cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels. This approach not only deepens our understanding of pragmatic competence in second language contexts but also contributes to broader insights into intercultural communication dynamics.

C. Facework and Politeness in Complaints

Complaints constitute a paradigmatic case of speech acts that are intrinsically face-threatening and socially consequential. According to Austin (1962), utterances do not merely convey information but perform actions in the world. Within this framework, complaints are illocutionary acts that express dissatisfaction and hold the hearer accountable, thereby influencing social relations.

Expanding on Austin's foundation, Searle (1969, 1975) introduced the concept of indirect speech acts, wherein the speaker's intended meaning diverges from the literal form. Complaints frequently occur in this indirect mode, requiring the hearer to infer the speaker's grievance implicitly. This indirectness not only complicates interpretation but also intensifies the potential for face-threatening acts (FTAs), particularly when realized through off-record strategies that eschew explicit confrontation while preserving plausible deniability.

The form and function of complaints, however, are far from uniform; they are dynamically shaped by contextual variables such as cultural norms, power asymmetries, and interactional dynamics. To account for this variability, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a foundational framework. Their model identifies strategies such as hedging, mitigation, and redressive action that allow speakers to perform FTAs in socially acceptable ways. These mechanisms enable the expression of criticism while maintaining face and relational equilibrium.

Recent scholarship has further enriched this perspective. Culpeper (2011) reframes impoliteness as a purposeful and contextually motivated strategy in conflictual interaction. Haugh (2015) argues that politeness should be understood not as a fixed system but as interactionally co-constructed, evolving in real time through negotiation between interlocutors. Kádár (2017) emphasizes the ritualized and culturally grounded dimensions of politeness, particularly salient in hierarchical or collectivist cultures. Nguyen (2008) illustrates how Vietnamese EFL learners handle complaints with heightened sensitivity to face, using indirectness and deference as key pragmatic resources. These complementary perspectives collectively reconceptualize complaints as performative acts—not merely expressions of dissatisfaction, but relational tools for managing moral positioning, power relations, and interpersonal alignment.

To provide a structured foundation for coding complaint behavior, the present study draws on Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy of complaint strategies. Her framework outlines a continuum of increasing directness, ranging from non-explicit hints and expressions of concern to explicit accusations and personal blame. This typology is employed as the primary analytical tool for categorizing complaint utterances in this study. Table 1 summarizes Trosborg's classification, serving as the operational framework for the pragmatic analysis.

TABLE 1
COMPLAINT STRATEGIES (ADAPTED FROM TROSBORG, 1995, PP. 311–313)

Complaint strategies (presented at levels of increasing directness)	**Examples**
Cat. I: **No explicit reproach**	
Str. 1. Hints	- My car was in perfect order when I last drove it - There was nothing wrong with my car yesterday.
Cat. II: **Expression of disapproval**	
Str. 2. Annoyance	- There's a horrible dent in my car. - Oh dear. I've just bought it.
Str. 3. Ill consequences	- How terrible! Now I won't be able to get to work tomorrow. - Oh, damn it. I'll lose my insurance bonus now.
Cat. III: **Accusation**	
Str.4. Indirect	- You borrowed my car last night, didn't you?
Str. 5. Direct	- Did you happen to bump into my car?
Cat. IV: **Blame**	
Str. 6. Modified blame	- Honestly, couldn't you have been more careful. - You should take more care with other people's cars.
Str. 7. Explicit blame (behavior)	- It's really too bad, you know, going round wrecking other people's cars. - How on earth did you manage to be so stupid? - Oh no, not again! You really are thoughtless.
Str. 8. Explicit blame (person)	- Bloody fool! You've done it again.

The table indicates, indirect complaint strategies such as hints or mild expressions of disapproval allow speakers to

address a problem while minimizing face-threats, especially in contexts where maintaining harmony is essential. In contrast, blame-oriented strategies, especially those targeting personal character, signal higher emotional involvement and a reduced level of mitigation, often at the cost of interpersonal rapport.

By combining the conceptual depth of recent facework theories with Trosborg's empirically grounded taxonomy, the present study offers a robust framework for analyzing complaint strategies across cultural and linguistic contexts.

D. Modality Markers and Strategic Politeness

Modality markers, particularly downgraders (e.g., *perhaps*, *a bit*, *I think*) and upgraders (e.g., *definitely*, *absolutely*, *really*) play a pivotal role in shaping the pragmatic force of complaints. As Trosborg (1995) observes, such elements function as illocutionary modifiers, allowing speakers to calibrate the strength of their utterance and thereby engage in strategic politeness.

Building on this view, Terkourafi (2005) reconceptualizes modality not merely as a grammatical or semantic feature, but as a context-sensitive resource embedded in culturally informed practices of facework. In other words, modality serves as both a linguistic and sociopragmatic tool for negotiating interpersonal meaning.

In intercultural settings, the choice and frequency of modality markers are often aligned with sociocultural values. For example, Vietnamese EFL learners frequently employ downgraders to minimize imposition and uphold harmony, reflecting cultural preferences for indirectness and conflict avoidance (Nguyen, 2008). In contrast, American English speakers tend to favor more intensified expressions, especially in contexts involving moral evaluation, personal responsibility, or entitlement (Kowalski, 1996; Shabani & Zeinali, 2015). As such, modality functions not only as a politeness indicator but also as a cultural signal of pragmatic orientation.

E. Social Distance, Cultural Norms, and Strategic Variation

The realization of complaints is also mediated by social distance, defined as the perceived degree of familiarity or relational proximity between interlocutors. As Brown and Levinson (1987) argue, greater social distance typically prompts speakers to adopt more face-protective strategies, particularly in hierarchical or formal contexts.

Cultural norms further influence this dynamic. In high-context societies such as Vietnam, where communication is shaped by an emphasis on hierarchy, respect, and indirectness, speakers are more likely to adjust their complaint strategies based on the relative status and closeness of the hearer (Nguyen, 2008; Linh, 2020). In contrast, low-context cultures such as the U.S. may encourage more egalitarian and explicit expressions of discontent (Chen et al., 2011).

Although not all references are explicitly listed in this section, the discussion is anchored in foundational works cited elsewhere, which offer empirical evidence of how social distance and cultural schemas shape strategic variation in complaints.

F. Integrated Framework for the Present Study

This study adopts a theoretically grounded yet methodologically integrative framework to examine the complaint strategies of American native speakers and Vietnamese learners of English. The core analytical lens draws upon Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, which categorizes complaint strategies along a continuum of directness and intensity. To interpret the interpersonal and cultural dynamics of these strategies, the study incorporates insights from politeness theory and facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Arundale, 2006), particularly in accounting for redressive acts and face-threatening intent.

Additionally, modality markers (e.g., hedging and intensifiers) are analyzed using Terkourafi's (2005) framework to capture internal modification strategies. Cultural variables such as social distance and power asymmetries are considered based on sociopragmatic literature (Nguyen, 2008; Chen et al., 2011). This combined approach aligns with Verschueren's (2022) conceptualization of contrastive pragmatics as a dynamic and context-sensitive methodology for cross-cultural inquiry.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study adopts an integrated framework that accounts for both speech act categorization and strategic politeness devices. By examining how complaints are realized across cultural and relational contexts, the study addresses a gap in comparative pragmatics and informs language pedagogy.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

Given the gap in current research comparing complaint strategies between native American English speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly in relation to social distance and internal modifiers, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What types of complaint strategies are used by native American English speakers and Vietnamese learners of English across different social contexts?

2. How does social distance influence the selection and realization of complaint strategies in both groups?

3. How do modality markers (e.g., downgraders and upgraders) function to mitigate the force of complaints across groups?

These questions guide the investigation of both structural and socio-pragmatic dimensions of complaint realization,

with the aim of enhancing understanding of intercultural communicative competence.

B. Research Design

This study adopts a cross-sectional, comparative research design to explore the pragmatic realization of complaints across two cultural groups: native speakers of American English and Vietnamese learners of English. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative frequency counts, in line with Félix-Brasdefer (2010) and Taguchi (2017). This design allows for both interpretive depth and broader generalizability in examining intercultural variation.

C. Participants

Sixty-eight participants were recruited: 34 native American English speakers and 34 Vietnamese EFL learners. Participants ranged from 20 to 72 years old and represented diverse genders, professional backgrounds, and education levels. Sampling was purposeful to reflect sociopragmatic variables (e.g., social distance, power relations, and role dynamics) embedded in the instrument, thus ensuring ecological validity.

D. Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire adapted from Kasper (1993) and Félix-Brasdefer (2010). The DCT included four hypothetical scenarios varying in social distance and power relations:

- Situation 1 (S1): Complaint to a friend (equal power, low distance)
- Situation 2 (S2): Complaint to a stranger (equal power, high distance)
- Situation 3 (S3): Complaint to a boss (low power, low distance)
- Situation 4 (S4): Complaint to a professor (low power, high distance)

Participants were instructed to respond naturally to each situation. The DCTs were administered in person from March to May 2024. Responses were written, untimed, and anonymized prior to analysis.

E. Coding and Analytical Framework

An extended version of Trosborg's (1995) complaint taxonomy was used to code responses. While the original taxonomy includes eight strategy types, this study inductively refined it into twelve sub-strategies based on empirical patterns. These fall into two major categories: on-record and off-record complaint acts. The coding and analysis followed these steps:

- Manual classification of complaint utterances using the extended typology
- Frequency counts and percentage analysis of strategy types by group
- Identification of internal modification strategies (e.g., hedges, downtoners, conditionals)
- Comparative analysis of social distance and power dynamics in strategy selection

Table 2 below outlines the final coding scheme with functions and illustrative examples.

TABLE 2
THE CODING SCHEME OF COMPLAINT STRATEGIES (ADAPTED AND EXPANDED FROM TROSBORG, 1995, PP. 311–313)

Complaint strategy	Functions	Examples
A. On-record the speaker explicitly signals that he/she is performing a complaint.		
A1. Expressions of annoyance S expresses his/her annoyance, or disapproval in the presence of H	Explicitly asserting a deplorable state of affairs.	"Oh look, the jacket has been damaged".
A2. Expressions of ill consequences S expresses the bad result of the offence	Explicitly asserting a deplorable state of affairs.	"How terrible! I won't be able to wear it anymore".
A3. Direct Accusations S directly accuses the H of having committed the offence.	Explicitly Accusing	"Did you happen to tear my jacket?"
A4. Direct complaint S accuses the H of the offence.	Accusing	"You did not take care of my property".
A5. Request for repair S requests that the H makes up for the offense or stops the offence.	Compensating	"Could you please get it fixed or buy me a new jacket?"
A6. Blaming S passes a value judgment on the H in three levels: modified blame; explicit blame of behavior; and explicit blame of person.	Explicitly condemning	"You should take more care with other people's stuff."
B. Off-record S mentions the inconvenience that resulted from the offence, he/she does not explicitly mention either the socially unacceptable act or H.		
B1. Opting out S ignores the offence.	Avoiding conflict	(saying nothing)
B2. Hints S asserts neither the offence nor the H.	Giving general remarks without mentioning the offence	"Never mind." "No harm done." "There's no real damage".
B3. Indirect accusation S questions H about the offence	Interrogating	"Oh, What happened to the jacket?"
B4. Indirect complaint S asserts the offence, but avoids explicit mention of the hearer.	Giving general remarks with the offence	"It's ok". "Accidents happen". "Don't worry about it." "It could happen to anybody."
	Describing annoyance	"My jacket was ragged".
B5. Expressions of worry		"I am worried what I should do now".
B6. Use of irony		"Are there any mice in your house?"

Two trained raters in applied linguistics independently coded all complaint responses. Inter-rater agreement was measured using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a score of $k = 0.84$, indicating high reliability. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and mutual agreement.

Quantitative analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2021 to produce frequency and distribution tables. Additionally, internal modality markers (e.g., *maybe*, *really*, *I guess*) were coded separately to assess their communicative function and relationship to face mitigation across groups.

F. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participation. Confidentiality was maintained, and responses were anonymized for analysis. The study conformed to ethical standards in human subjects research, with procedures approved by the institutional review board.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following results address the study's three guiding questions regarding strategy types, social distance, and internal modifiers. This section presents both quantitative and qualitative findings from the data analysis, structured around the overall use of complaint strategies, modality markers, and the impact of social distance. To contextualize these findings, comparisons are drawn with prior research, thereby grounding the analysis in established cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics.

A. Cross-Cultural Differences in Complaint Realization

Table 3 and Figure 2 provide a comparative overview of the twelve complaint strategies employed by native speakers of American English (AmC) and Vietnamese learners of English (VC), categorized into on-record (A1–A6) and off-record (B1–B6) strategies. The results reveal significant cross-cultural variation in strategic preferences.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF STRATEGIES USED BY GROUPS

Complaint strategies	Native speakers of American		Vietnamese learners of English	
A. On-record				
A1	**8**	**5.9%**	**2**	**1.5%**
A2	4	2.9%	3	2.2%
A3	1	0.7%	1	0.7%
A4	4	2.9%	1	0.7%
A5	32	23.6%	33	24.1%
A6	**7**	**5.2%**	**32**	**23%**
B. Off-record				
B1	12	9.0%	11	8.8%
B2	5	3.7%	6	4.4%
B3	**44**	**32%**	**19**	**14.0%**
B4	**1**	**0.7%**	**11**	**8.8%**
B5	14	10%	14	10.3%
B6	4	2.9%	2	1.5%
Totals of on-record and off-record	136	100%	136	100%

Abbreviations: A1 - Expressions of annoyance, A2 - Expressions of ill consequence, A3 - Direct accusations, A4 - Direct complaint, A5 - Request for repair, A6 - Blaming, B1 - Opting out, B2 - Hints, B3 - Indirect accusation, B4 - Indirect complaint, B5 - Expressions of worry, B6 - Use of irony.

Figure 2 below visually represents the relative frequency of complaint strategies across groups, underscoring cross-cultural patterns.

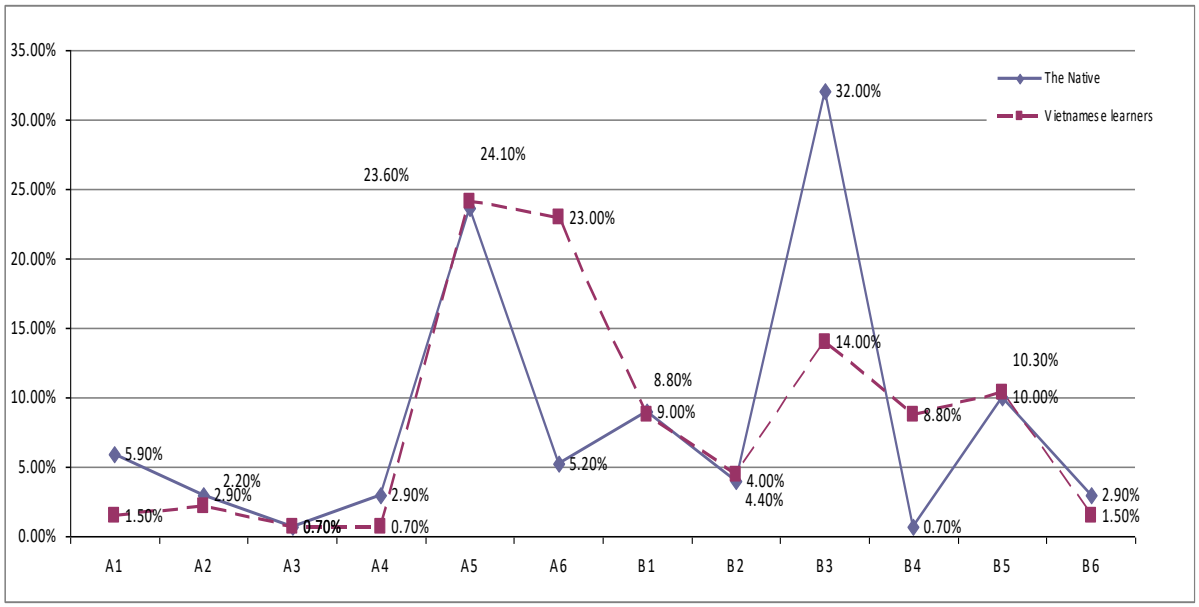

Figure 2. Distribution of Strategies Used by the Native Speakers of American English and Vietnamese Learners of English

Overall, American participants favored Indirect Accusation (B3) and Request for Repair (A5), whereas Vietnamese learners showed a marked preference for Blaming (A6) and Indirect Complaint (B4). The American tendency toward B3 reflects a preference for interrogative forms that enable veiled directness, consistent with their low-context cultural orientation and tolerance for assertiveness in equal-status settings. In contrast, the Vietnamese pattern suggests a dual orientation: while A6 signals a strong stance of responsibility attribution, its frequent co-occurrence with B4 indicates an attempt to preserve relational harmony through softened delivery.

These preferences strongly support Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, particularly in terms of how speakers from different cultural backgrounds mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). American speakers' use of B3 aligns with off-record strategies, utilizing indirectness to maintain clarity while minimizing threat. This supports the notion of negative politeness strategies in contexts of equal power or greater social distance. Vietnamese learners' preference for A6, though seemingly direct, should be interpreted through the lens of pragmatic transfer: moral accountability is culturally encoded, and blame may function less as personal attack and more as social correction within a collectivist system.

Moreover, the findings extend Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy by illustrating how cultural norms influence the co-occurrence of strategies (e.g., B4 and A6 among Vietnamese learners). This dual strategy use demonstrates a hybrid politeness orientation that combines confrontation and relational maintenance. It refines the theory by suggesting that off-record and on-record strategies may be blended to serve nuanced social purposes.

The results also partially align with Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) observations that non-native speakers employ more indirect strategies. However, the present study reveals that the nature of indirectness varies by cultural schema: American indirectness functions as strategic politeness, while Vietnamese indirectness reflects deeper socio-cultural norms of hierarchy and harmony.

Similar tendencies were also reported in the contrastive study by Eslamirasekh et al. (2012) on Persian and American English speakers. Like Vietnamese learners, Persian speakers favored indirect and mitigating strategies, underscoring the role of collectivist and high-context orientations in shaping pragmatic behavior. This convergence across cultural contexts strengthens the view that complaint realization is deeply rooted in broader sociopragmatic values, not merely linguistic proficiency.

In sum, the distribution of strategies reveals not only quantitative differences in frequency but also qualitative differences in interpersonal orientation and face-management priorities. These findings directly address Research Question 1 and provide theoretical confirmation, refinement, and extension of existing pragmatic models in cross-cultural contexts.

B. On-Record Strategy Variation: A1 and A6

Significant variation emerged in the use of on-record complaint strategies, particularly A1 (Expressions of Annoyance) and A6 (Blaming). These two strategies exhibited the largest cross-group differences. American participants employed A1 more frequently (5.9%) than Vietnamese learners (1.5%), suggesting a greater cultural comfort with expressing displeasure directly. Notably, Americans tended to use A1 in conjunction with A5 (Request for Repair) or B3 (Indirect Accusation), supporting Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of combining expressive and redressive acts to minimize face-threat:

(1) (AmC) – "Oh, look, the jacket has been damaged" (A1). "What happened?" (B3)

(2) (AmC) – "Excuse me, that plastic bag is kind of loud" (A1). "Would you mind trying to keep it down a bit?" (A5)

In contrast, Vietnamese learners employed A1 less often and typically embedded it after a prior judgment, which reflects a more deferential sequencing in pragmatic structuring. The emotional expression is subordinated to factual or moral assessment, indicating an effort to soften the FTA through contextual framing - a strategy consistent with collectivist communication norms:

(3) (VC) – "Why is there a hole in the back of my jacket?" (B3). "It's my favorite jacket" (A1).

(4) (VC) – "What did you do with my jacket?" (B3). "It's my favorite one" (A1).

This sequencing - judgment before emotion - highlights differences in pragmatic structuring. American speakers foreground emotional expression; Vietnamese speakers hedge emotion through contextual framing, likely as a politeness mechanism.

Blaming (A6) exhibited the reverse pattern. Vietnamese learners used it markedly more than Americans (23% vs. 5.2%). However, rather than employing A6 in isolation, 70% of VC instances of A6 were paired with B3 (Indirect Accusation) or A5 (Request for Repair), indicating an emergent pragmatic strategy that blends direct and indirect components. This hybridization challenges the strict binary in Trosborg's taxonomy and suggests that learners selectively adapt L1 norms within L2 pragmatic boundaries:

(5) (VC) – "How did this hole get here?" (B3). "Please fix it or buy a new one" (A5). "Don't borrow my stuff if you can't take care of it" (A6).

(6) (VC) – "You are so careless" (A6). "What did you do to my jacket?" (B3)

American uses of A6 were more standalone and less frequently mitigated, consistent with a low-context orientation favoring assertiveness:

(7) (AmC) – "You should take more care with other people's stuff" (A6).

(8) (AmC) – "Is the objective to teach me or punish me?" (A6)

Additionally, American speakers used forceful complaints across power asymmetries. In both high- and low-status interactions (+S and -S), they often employed direct complaints (A4), repair requests (A5), and A1 expressions of annoyance, demonstrating alignment with the principle of clarity emphasized in low-context cultures:

(9) (AmC) – "You didn't take care of my property" (A4). "You are responsible to repair my jacket" (A5).

In contrast, Vietnamese learners displayed reluctance to confront interlocutors, especially superiors. They often resorted to B2 (Hints), B3 (Indirect Accusation), or B4 (Indirect Complaint), and frequently opted out of direct confrontation:

(10) (VC) – "There is a new hole in my jacket" (B4).

(11) (VC) – "I'm sorry for submitting my paper late. I was sick. Could you give me more time?" (A5, with downgraders)

These patterns reinforce Nguyen's (2008) observations regarding Vietnamese learners' tendency to integrate politeness markers and deferential framing when performing direct speech acts. Furthermore, the frequent co-occurrence of A6 with B3 or A5 expands our understanding of how learners navigate politeness and clarity, offering a pragmatic alternative to strictly on-record or off-record choices.

These findings provide further empirical support to Brown and Levinson's theory of redressive action and demonstrate how pragmatic transfer interacts with L2 strategy development. They also suggest a need to revisit Trosborg's framework to account for blended strategies as legitimate forms of pragmatic accommodation.

Pedagogically, this insight calls for the design of instructional materials that train learners to integrate multiple

pragmatic layers (judgment, emotion, mitigation) within a single act. Such instruction can enhance fluency, appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity in EFL contexts. The results contribute directly to Research Question 1 and extend the theoretical discussion on strategic variation in speech act realization.

C. Off-Record Strategy Variation: B3 and B4

The two groups also diverged in their use of off-record complaint strategies. Americans used Indirect Accusation (B3) much more frequently (32%) than Vietnamese learners (14%), while Vietnamese learners used Indirect Complaint (B4) more (8.8%) than Americans (0.7%). This contrast supports prior research by Haugh (2015), Kádár (2017), and Culpeper (2011), which underscores cultural sensitivity in the choice and function of indirectness.

Wh-questions were the preferred form of B3 by both groups, serving as a means to veil blame or gently probe for an explanation. This form allows speakers to preserve plausible deniability while highlighting the issue, an approach aligned with Brown and Levinson's (1987) off-record politeness strategies:

(12a) (AmC) – "What happened to the jacket?"
(12b) (AmC) – "What did I do to get such a review?"
(12c) (VC) – "Why is there a hole in my jacket?"
(12d) (VC) – "What should I do now to have your approval?"
(12e) (VC – S4) – "What should I do now to have your approval?"
(12f) (VC – S2) – "Why did you let the door slam in my face?"

Though both groups used similar syntactic forms, their pragmatic motivations differed. American participants used B3 more assertively and across social contexts, suggesting a cultural preference for directness cloaked in indirect form. In contrast, Vietnamese learners reserved B3 for less face-threatening scenarios, showing hesitation especially in high-status interactions. This cautious use reflects the influence of hierarchical norms in Vietnamese culture.

The higher use of Indirect Complaint (B4) among Vietnamese learners suggests a distinct strategy for expressing discontent while preserving interpersonal harmony. Examples include:

(13a) (VC) – "It's OK."
(13b) (VC) – "Accidents happen. Don't worry."
(13c) (VC) – "It could happen to anyone."
(13d) (VC – S2) – "These things happen sometimes."

By contrast, B4 was rarely used by Americans, and when employed, tended to be curt:

(14a) (AmC) – "Don't worry about it."

These utterances were further classified into three tone-based categories: (1) soft acceptance, (2) neutral normalization, and (3) non-confrontational avoidance. This classification reveals how Vietnamese learners strategically modulate tone to maintain politeness and avoid confrontation, reinforcing Brown and Levinson's emphasis on negative politeness and face protection.

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of internal modifiers. Vietnamese learners used fewer modifiers overall and showed a limited repertoire of downgraders and upgraders.

TABLE 4
DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNAL MODIFIERS ACROSS THE TWO PARTICIPANT GROUPS

Modifier Type	Native speakers	Vietnamese learners	Total
Downgraders	77 (57.46%)	57 (42.53%)	134 (100%)
Upgraders	21 (75%)	7 (25%)	28 (100%)

While Vietnamese learners used common downgraders like "I think" or "maybe," American participants combined them with upgraders to calibrate tone more flexibly:

(15a) (AmC) – "I really don't agree with this review. Please go over it with me."
(15b) (AmC) – "Excuse me, that plastic bag is kind of loud. Would you mind trying to keep it down a bit?"

In contrast, Vietnamese learners tended to rely on less strategically varied forms:

(16a) (VC) – "I think we should talk."
(16b) (VC) – "I'm very sad. What's the reason?"

These patterns affirm Nguyen's (2008) and Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) observations that Vietnamese EFL learners prioritize relational harmony, leading to softer, less confrontational complaint styles. However, this study adds a new dimension by showing how these tendencies translate into specific internal modifier usage and syntactic preference.

Taken together, the findings support and refine Brown and Levinson's framework by revealing how pragmatic choices are not only driven by face concern but also shaped by available linguistic resources and culturally preferred forms. American speakers, with greater lexical and pragmatic flexibility, navigate complaints through calibrated indirectness. Vietnamese learners rely on indirect complaint types and a smaller set of politeness markers, reflecting both cultural norms and interlanguage development.

Pedagogically, these insights point to the importance of teaching learners how to combine downgraders and upgraders strategically, not just to soften messages but to align with contextual expectations. Incorporating explicit practice in these devices within EFL curricula could enhance learners' ability to navigate complaints across diverse social situations. These findings address Research Questions 1 and 3 by revealing how internal modification and indirectness co-construct

pragmatic meaning across cultures.

D. The Use of Downgraders and Social Distance

To further examine how interpersonal dynamics shape complaints, this section investigates the correlation between social distance and the use of downgraders. Four social contexts were examined: a) friend, b) stranger, c) authority figure, and d) professor. Table 5 shows the correlation between social distance and the use of downgraders.

TABLE 5
CORRELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL DISTANCE AND THE USE OF DOWNGRADERS

Context	Friend	Professor	Authority figure	Stranger	Total
Downgraders					
Native speakers	4	21	25	27	77
Vietnamese learners	5	16	17	19	57

As shown in Table 5, both groups increased their use of downgraders as social distance increased. This finding aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which predicts greater use of redressive actions (such as hedging or indirectness) when face threat is higher. However, the degree and flexibility of downgrader use varied between the two groups.

Native speakers not only used more downgraders overall but also displayed context-sensitive modulation. For example, in interactions with strangers or superiors, Americans frequently used prefaces like "excuse me" and embedded hedging expressions to buffer complaints:

(AmC – S2) "Excuse me, that plastic bag is kind of loud. Would you mind keeping it down a bit?"

In contrast, while Vietnamese learners also employed politeness devices in similar contexts, their expressions were less modulated and more formulaic:

(VC – S2) "Please stop making noise." / "I think you're being too loud."

In interactions with professors and authority figures, native speakers commonly used mitigators such as "I'm afraid," "possibly," or "don't you think," demonstrating a pragmatic repertoire attuned to subtle shifts in power:

(AmC – S4) "I'm afraid this review doesn't reflect my actual performance."

By comparison, Vietnamese learners used more conventional and repetitive expressions:

(VC – S4) "I think it is unfair. Please consider it again."

These patterns indicate not only a quantitative difference in modifier use but also a qualitative difference in how linguistic resources are deployed across contexts. Table 6 provides a more fine-grained view of the specific lexical items employed by each group, shedding light on the pragmatic repertoire of native speakers versus learners.

TABLE 6
FREQUENCIES OF SPECIFIC DOWNGRADERS ACROSS THE TWO PARTICIPANT GROUPS

Downgraders	Native speakers	Vietnamese learners
Please	8	9
kind of	4	0
don't you think	5	0
really	9	7
I think	5	6
I'm sorry	5	9
a little	5	3
possibly	4	0
a little bit	4	0
so	7	7
not very much	5	0
I'm afraid	4	6
you know	6	0
excuse me	6	10
Totals	77	57

Table 6 highlights native speakers' broader and more idiomatic range of downgraders, including phrases like "don't you think," "possibly," and "you know," which convey tentative or deferential tones. Vietnamese learners, by contrast, tended to rely on high-frequency but less nuanced modifiers such as "please," "excuse me," or "I think." This confirms Trosborg's (1995) observation that L2 speakers may face lexical and strategic limitations when managing politeness.

These findings strengthen the theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson (1987) by illustrating how cultural expectations and linguistic competence interact to shape politeness performance. They also reinforce that social distance serves as a key trigger for pragmatic adaptation, though native speakers demonstrate a greater range of stylistic flexibility.

Pedagogically, these insights suggest that EFL instruction should incorporate explicit training in the use of downgraders across different social scenarios. Exercises could focus not only on expanding learners' lexical inventory but also on building awareness of how power and distance affect pragmatic appropriateness. This aligns with the goals of intercultural communicative competence and prepares learners for nuanced real-world interactions.

Table 7 below synthesizes key complaint strategies observed in the study. It compares the strategic preferences of

American English speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners, based on Trosborg's taxonomy, while linking them to politeness types and the use of internal modifiers.

TABLE 7
CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF COMPLAINT STRATEGIES BY GROUP BASED ON TROSBORG'S TAXONOMY

Strategy Type	**Trosborg Category**	**Example**	**American English (AmC)**	**Vietnamese Learners (VC)**	**Politeness Type**
Indirect Accusation	B3	"What happened to the jacket?"	✓ Frequent	Moderate	Off-record, face-saving
Request for Repair	A5	"Can you please fix it?"	✓ Frequent	✓ Frequent	On-record, mitigated
Indirect Complaint	B4	"My jacket is ruined…"	Rare	✓ Frequent	Off-record, avoidance
Blaming	A6	"You're so careless."	Low	✓ Frequent	On-record, face-threatening
Hints / Opting Out	B1/B2	"These things happen." / Silence	Moderate	Moderate	Off-record, avoidance
Downgraders Used	–	"I think", "a little", "excuse me"	✓ Rich variety	Limited	Internal mitigation
Upgraders Used	–	"Really", "absolutely"	✓ Used effectively	Rare	Intensification strategy

VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how native speakers of American English and Vietnamese learners of English realize complaint strategies from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective. By applying Trosborg's taxonomy, politeness theory, and sociopragmatic constructs such as facework and internal modifiers, it revealed systematic differences in how each group negotiates face-threatening acts (FTAs).

American participants showed a preference for indirect accusations (B3) and repair requests (A5), often enhanced by a broad range of downgraders and upgraders. Vietnamese learners, in contrast, favored indirect complaints (B4) and blaming strategies (A6), often using fewer internal modifiers. These tendencies reflect deeper cultural orientations: the American speakers' pragmatic flexibility and tolerance for directness, and the Vietnamese learners' collectivist and harmony-driven communication style.

The study extends previous work (Nguyen, 2008; Chen et al., 2011; Trosborg, 1995) by offering a more nuanced understanding of complaint realization, particularly through the detailed coding of downgraders and their correlation with social distance. The findings highlight that even when using the same language, interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds may interpret and perform speech acts in fundamentally distinct ways.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results advocate for the explicit teaching of pragmatics in EFL instruction. Raising learners' awareness of politeness strategies, power dynamics, and context-sensitive use of modifiers can enhance intercultural communicative competence. Practical tools such as discourse completion tasks, role-play, and reflection on L1 transfer should be integrated into curricula to support pragmatic development.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. The participant pool was relatively small and limited to two cultural groups, potentially restricting broader generalizability. The use of written DCTs may not fully capture the spontaneity and dynamic interaction present in authentic communication. Additionally, the study did not explore individual factors such as personality, gender, or educational background, which may also influence pragmatic choices. Future research could broaden the participant base to include other L2 populations, adopt longitudinal designs to track pragmatic development over time, and analyze naturally occurring discourse. Such expansions would enrich the theoretical landscape of intercultural pragmatics and provide stronger empirical grounding for EFL pedagogy.

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