



Complaint Strategies among Moroccan Business English Students: Exploring the Roles of Social Status and Gender

Karim EL Hiani

Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Morocco

Corresponding Author Email: k.elhiani@uae.ac.ma

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the complaint strategies used by Moroccan EFL learners, with a particular focus on two key variables: social status (high, equal, and low) and gender. To collect data, the study used discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and a multiple-choice questionnaire (MCQ), each designed to reflect different social-status contexts. The responses were analysed using Trosborg's (1995) classification of complaint strategies, while cross-tabulation and chi-square tests were applied to explore statistical relationships. The participants consisted of 60 M.A. students enrolled at the Faculty of Economics and Management in Tangier, whose English proficiency ranged between B1 and B2. The results indicated that learners generally used fewer direct complaint strategies when addressing interlocutors of higher social status, but tended to adopt more direct strategies in low- and equal-status interactions. Additionally, a statistically significant association between gender and complaint strategy choice was observed in the high-status situation; however, this finding should be interpreted cautiously given the unequal gender distribution and the expected-frequency limitations of the chi-square analysis. These findings provide exploratory implications for EFL pedagogy and pragmatic research in higher education contexts.

Introduction

The speech act of complaining has been widely examined within the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). Research in this area has approached pragmatics from multiple perspectives, including sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and linguistic orientations, each emphasising different aspects of how meaning is constructed and interpreted in interaction (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Since the present study is concerned with social interaction between speakers, it is primarily situated within a sociolinguistic framework.

Complaints are commonly understood as expressions of dissatisfaction or irritation that arise in response to an action or situation perceived as unfavourable to the speaker, whether ongoing or completed (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). As a communicative act, complaining is complex and influenced by several contextual variables, such as the level of directness employed, the use of politeness strategies, and the relative social status of the interlocutors. From a politeness perspective, Brown and Levinson (1987) classify complaints as face-threatening acts because they inherently involve criticism and potential conflict. Building on this view, Trosborg (1995) suggests that complaints can be realised through either direct or indirect strategies, with degrees of directness ranging from implicit expressions of dissatisfaction to explicit accusations and blame.

The rationale of the present study can be summarised in two motivations. First, complaints represent a particularly challenging speech act in EFL contexts due to their face-threatening nature. The ability to complain appropriately and effectively is therefore a key component of

learners' communicative competence (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Deveci, 2015; Hasyim & Kaharuddin, 2020). Second, previous research has identified gender as a potentially influential variable in the realization of speech acts, particularly in the use of politeness strategies (Baxter, 2000; Miswaty et al., 2019; Irani, 2022).

Although previous studies have examined complaint strategies in relation to social status, gender, and politeness in EFL contexts, less attention has been given to Moroccan EFL learners, particularly students studying Business English. The present study therefore seeks to contribute to this area by examining how Moroccan Business English students realise complaints across high, equal, and low social-status situations; while also considering whether their strategy choices vary according to gender. In this respect, the study provides exploratory evidence from a Moroccan higher-education context and contributes to the broader discussion of contextual variation in interlanguage pragmatic behaviour. Hence, the present study aims to answer two major research questions:

How do Moroccan EFL learners realise complaint strategies across different social-status contexts?

To what extent is gender related to the selection of complaint strategies?

This paper is organised into five sections. The first section outlines the theoretical background, with particular reference to Trosborg's classification of complaint strategies. The second section describes the methodology, including participants, research instruments, and data analysis procedures. The third section presents and discusses the findings in relation to earlier studies conducted in EFL settings. The fourth section addresses pedagogical and research implications, while the fifth section acknowledges the limitations of the study.

Literature review

Research on speech acts has expanded considerably alongside the development of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which has become a key area within second language acquisition (SLA). ILP focuses on how learners use and acquire pragmatic knowledge when performing communicative actions in a second language. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) describe this field as the study of how non-native speakers develop and employ linguistic action patterns in an additional language.

The theoretical foundations of speech act research can be traced back to the work of Austin (1962), who argued that language is not only used to convey meaning but also to perform actions. Austin pointed out that speech acts operate according to socially recognised conventions between three interrelated dimensions. These include the locutionary act, which involves producing meaningful utterances; the illocutionary act, which refers to the intended communicative force of the utterance, such as requesting or asserting; and the perlocutionary act, which concerns the effect the utterance has on the hearer, such as persuading or influencing behaviour.

Building on Austin's framework, Searle (1969) placed particular emphasis on the role of illocutionary acts, arguing that they form the core of communicative activity. From this perspective, locutionary acts are seen as components of illocutionary force rather than independent categories. Searle further classified speech acts into five broad functional types: representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations, a taxonomy that has been widely adopted in pragmatic research. The speech act of complaint is classified under the category of expressive functions. This category of illocutionary acts expresses a judgement about an attitude to a prior or ongoing action. The negative feeling existing in this act makes its content potentially conflictual. According to Trosborg (1995), although complaints are inherently face-threatening acts, speakers may use politeness strategies to mitigate their potential impact.

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that face-threatening acts (FTAs) might be analysed in terms of various steps of decision-making, which can be highlighted in four major strategies.

First, *negative politeness* seeks to avoid any imposition on the H when expressing the act of censure, and the S resorts to minimising the risk of embarrassing the H. Second, the S may opt for the *off-record* strategy by giving the H certain hints about the offending act, which requires the H's interpretation to change or reconsider the act. The S may get credits for not putting the H's face at risk. Third, the S may use the *bald-on-record* strategy when minimizing the degree of imposition is not important. The S, therefore, uses direct ways of expressing his/her complaint. Finally, the speaker may also use positive politeness strategies, which aim to maintain solidarity and reduce the potential threat to the hearer's face. The S, thus, intends to make the H feel good about themselves or their intentions. These strategies appear mainly when the interlocutors know each other very well.

Given the central position of politeness strategies in performing face-threatening acts, Trosborg (1995) argues that the act of censure is subject to the level of directness. Therefore, she sets up four categories of complaint strategies: *no explicit reproach*, *expressions of annoyance or disapproval*, *accusation*, and *blame*. She adds that under each category there are sub-categories, moving gradually from levels of indirectness to directness as outlined below:

1. No explicit reproach
 - a. *Hints*
2. Expression of annoyance or disapproval
 - a. *annoyance* b. *consequences*
3. Accusations
 - a. *Direct accusation* b. *indirect accusation*
4. Blaming
 - a. *modified blame* b. *explicit blame (behaviour)* c. *explicit blame (person)*

The first category *no explicit reproach* represents the highest level of indirectness. By using hints, the content of the complaint is missing altogether. In this case, the complaint remains implicit because no direct reference to the offending behaviour is made. In the second category *expression of annoyance and disapproval*, the S is still in favour of indirectness. In this respect, "a complainer can express his/her annoyance, dislike, disapproval etc, concerning a certain state of affairs he/she considers bad for him/her" (Trosborg, 1995, p. 316). The complainer avoids explicitly attributing responsibility to the hearer. By mentioning consequences, the complainer tries to explain what the act could possibly lead to. The first direct strategy is *accusation*, which can be either direct or indirect. On the one hand, the complaint is deemed indirect if the H is established as a potential agent of the act. This might include questions addressed to the H where some connection to the situation is underlined. Trosborg (1995) provides the following example for illustration:

Look at the mess, haven't you done any cleaning up for the last week? (Trosborg, 1995, p. 317).

The accusation, on the other hand, can be direct by stating explicitly that the H holds full responsibility for committing the offense. That is to say, the complainer declares that the complainees is guilty and the face-threatening act is not taken into account by the complainer. The last category *blaming* represents the highest level of directness. This category is composed of three sub-strategies: modified blame, explicit blame (behaviour), and explicit blame (person). Modified blame is used when the complainer mentions alternative ways of what could the complainees do, or stating preferences of what should be done as the perfect way of dealing with the situation. Explicit blame is divided into two types: behaviour and person. When the blame is on the behaviour of the complainees e.g. *your reaction to the accident is unacceptable at all*. However, when the blame focuses on the person as the source of offense, the blame is oriented towards the person more. e.g. *you are really provocative! Don't behave like that in front of foreigners!*

Importantly, many studies that investigated the strategies of complaints by EFL learners were comparative in nature, stressing the differences and similarities occurring among males and females, and/or investigating the social power dimension when performing complaints

(e.g. Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016; Deveci, 2015; Önalán & Çakır, 2018; Miswaty et al., 2019; Al-Shboul, 2021; Irani, 2022). For example, Deveci's study (2015) investigated performing the speech act of complaining by university students when interacting with their professors. The results, in general, revealed that the majority of students failed to make their complaints appropriate due to the lack of formal instructions. The recommendations, therefore, were in favour of explicit pragmatic instructions, especially face-threatening acts such as complaining and criticizing. Other studies (e.g. Sinuraya & Chairunnissa, 2017; Hasyim & Kaharuddin, 2020) concluded that social class is key in choosing the strategies used when performing complaints. For instance, Sinuraya and Chairunnissa (2017) found out that complainers from working class tend to be more direct in expressing their complaints than those who are from middle class. Hence, the social power dimension played a significant role in choosing the level of directness. Another study by Miswaty et al. (2019) regarding the differences between males and females in complaining strategies revealed that there was no significant difference between them. They concluded that the reasoning of responding to some unpleasant actions was, by and large, the same.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 60 M.A. students enrolled at the Faculty of Economics and Management in Tangier. They were recruited through convenience sampling from two M.A. programmes: Entrepreneurship and Development Economics and Data Science for Economics and Finance. Twenty-eight students were enrolled in the Entrepreneurship and Development Economics programme, while 32 were enrolled in Data Science for Economics and Finance. The sample comprised 22 male participants (36.7%) and 38 female participants (63.3%), indicating an unequal gender distribution. Participants were aged between 21 and 25 years. At the beginning of the study, they took an English-language placement test, which indicated proficiency levels ranging from B1 to B2. This level of proficiency was considered sufficient for completing the tasks used in the study.

Instruments

Discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and multiple choice questionnaire (MCQ) were used as the data collection instruments in this study. Kasper, citing Spencer-Oatey (2008), argues that “the three most widely used types of questionnaire in pragmatics are discourse completion tasks (DCT), multiple choice and rating scale questionnaire” (p. 292). DCTs are generally seen as “written questionnaires including a number of brief situational descriptions, followed by a short dialogue with an empty slot for the speech act under study: subjects are asked to fill in a response that they think fits into the given context” (Kasper & Dahl, p. 1991, 221). The multiple-choice questionnaire presented situations in which participants selected the most appropriate response.

In the present study, three situations (DCTs) were targeted to examine complaint strategies across different social-status conditions: low/ inferior, high/superior and equal rank. Table 1 shows the distribution of the three situations.

Table 1: Contextual Factors of DCTs' Situations

Situation	Addressor	Addressee	Social status
1	Manager	Waiter	Inferior/low
2	Student	University Professor	Superior/high
3	Student	Student	Equal Rank

The first situation is about a manager complaining about the misbehaviour of the waiter who comes late to the restaurant on a regular basis. The second situation is about a university student who feels frustrated because his teammates do not make the same effort for their project. Hence, the student finds the need to complain about the status quo when he meets his

professor. The last situation represents a case of two students participating in a university club. During their meetings, one of them keeps interrupting the other while expressing his thoughts.

Concerning the MCQ, three situations were presented, each with two answer options. The two options exposed two statements (direct and indirect). The aim of this technique was to obtain additional data on the strategies underlying students' choices. While the DCTs allow a certain degree of freedom when expressing the complaints, the MCQ relatively limits the choices by deciding on going direct or indirect in each situation (see the example below).

You are a teacher at a business school. You informed your students to be punctual and manage their time effectively. However, one of your students has been late several times. You say:

When I make rules clear, you must respect them or, at least, give justification when you are late.

Respecting the time is part of a professional profile one should have.

The first choice clearly shows a direct strategy by using the modal 'must', implying a high intensity and obligation. The second choice is made indirect in that the complaine is not clearly declared guilty.

Data analysis

To gather data on the underlying strategies opted by the participants, the present study used Trosborg's classifications of the major strategies of complaints (see the literature review). Thus, frequencies were used to classify the most and the least adopted strategies with regard to the three social statuses (low-, high-, and equal-). In addition, cross-tabulation was used to examine whether complaint strategy choices are associated with gender. Cross-tabulation is a useful analytical tool when the study aims at understanding categorical variables (e.g. male and female) and their relationships. In this respect, the aim is to investigate how complaint strategy choices vary between male and female participants across different situations.

Results & Discussion

Strategies and social status

The results obtained indicate that participants' complaint strategy choices varied across the different social-status conditions. The cross-tabulation analysis (Table 2) shows considerable variation in the strategies used in the three social-status conditions.

Table 2: the participants' strategies vis-à-vis social status

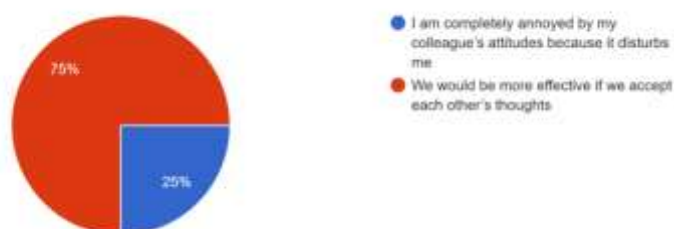
Strategy * Socialstatus Crosstabulation						
			Socialstatus			Total
			Low	High	Equal	
Strategy	Hints	Count	3	6	3	12
		% within Strategy	25,0%	50,0%	25,0%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	4,9%	9,7%	5,3%	6,7%
		% of Total	1,7%	3,3%	1,7%	6,7%
	Annoyance	Count	0	15	1	16
		% within Strategy	,0%	93,8%	6,3%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	,0%	24,2%	1,8%	8,9%
		% of Total	,0%	8,3%	,6%	8,9%
	Consequences	Count	5	6	1	12
		% within Strategy	41,7%	50,0%	8,3%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	8,2%	9,7%	1,8%	6,7%
		% of Total	2,8%	3,3%	,6%	6,7%
	Indirect accusation	Count	14	7	9	30
		% within Strategy	46,7%	23,3%	30,0%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	23,0%	11,3%	15,8%	16,7%

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Strategy * Socialstatus Crosstabulation						
	Direct accusation	% of Total	7,8%	3,9%	5,0%	16,7%
		Count	20	14	13	47
		% within Strategy	42,6%	29,8%	27,7%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	32,8%	22,6%	22,8%	26,1%
	Modified blame	% of Total	11,1%	7,8%	7,2%	26,1%
		Count	10	13	17	40
		% within Strategy	25,0%	32,5%	42,5%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	16,4%	21,0%	29,8%	22,2%
	Explicit blame behaviour	% of Total	5,6%	7,2%	9,4%	22,2%
		Count	6	1	8	15
		% within Strategy	40,0%	6,7%	53,3%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	9,8%	1,6%	14,0%	8,3%
	Explicit blame person	% of Total	3,3%	,6%	4,4%	8,3%
		Count	3	0	5	8
		% within Strategy	37,5%	,0%	62,5%	100,0%
		% within Socialstatus	4,9%	,0%	8,8%	4,4%
		% of Total	1,7%	,0%	2,8%	4,4%

The results indicate that participants tended to use more indirect strategies when addressing interlocutors of higher social status. As a case in point, annoyance was particularly concentrated in the high-status condition, with 15 or the 16 instances of annoyance occurring in that condition (93.8%). Hints and consequences were also relatively concentrated in the high-status condition, with 6 of 12 instances of each strategy occurring there (50%). These three strategies are classified as indirect strategies, suggesting that concerns about face are particularly salient when addressing interlocutors of higher status. A similar pattern emerges in the multiple-choice questionnaire results (figure1).

Figure 1: Direct and indirect complaints in high social status



Interestingly, several participants preferred to suggest alternative solutions in order to preserve the interlocutor's positive face. The following two examples illustrate the rationale behind the participants choice:

To be honest, I will not complain; it is what it is. The professor can do nothing about this, especially if I was the one who chose the team. I should take sole responsibility.

Probably, I won't complain to my professor, my classmates and I should have a serious conversation and make things work.

Additionally, other participants preferred to give hints to express that the situation is uncomfortable as expressed in the following example:

It's preferable for me that you talk with us about the importance and qualities of each one of us regarding this subject so that we seem complementary, and I'm sure it will help us a lot.

However, it turned out that the level of directness went up when the participants addressed interlocutors of lower status. The accusation category marked the choices of the participants in expressing their complaints. The low-status condition was characterised particularly by accusation strategies, with 20 instances of direct accusation and 14 instances of indirect

accusation. These represented (42.6%) and (46.7%), respectively, of all instances of the corresponding strategies across the three conditions. In many cases, indirect accusations were used to get explanations of the problem of punctuality as shown in the example below:

Recently, I've noticed that you've been consistently arriving late to work. I'm interested in understanding the reasons behind this.

Relatively, this affinity of direct and indirect accusations was revealed by the choices made in the MCQ (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Direct and indirect complaints in low social status



Although the MCQ provided only two response options representing direct and indirect complaints, the DCT responses revealed a broader range of complaint strategies that could nevertheless be grouped into two broad levels of directness: direct and indirect.

Compared with the high- and low-status conditions, the equal-status condition showed a greater concentration of the most direct blaming strategies. In this respect, blaming (with the three sub-strategies) was marked as the most used strategy. The participants had to complain about a situation where a friend keeps interrupting them while expressing their thoughts. The explicit blame of the person (62.5%), therefore, was selected as a strategy in many cases. This tendency may reflect the symmetrical relationship between interlocutors, which allows speakers to express dissatisfaction more directly. The participants either blame the person for the act as expressed in the first two examples, or the behaviour as expressed in the last two examples:

Explicit blame (person)

If you have a logical and mature reason for this action then I'm willing to hear you out and accept your opinion, but if it's just for your emotional satisfaction then you are just being childish.

Can you stop and wait for your turn, you're annoying!

Explicit blame (behaviour)

This kind of irresponsible behaviour is unacceptable, if you have an excuse you have to tell us

You must immediately respect the other when he is speaking because the same thing will happen to you.

However, the results of the MCQ showed that the participants opted for an indirect strategy in the equal-status situation. This finding suggests that when participants are more directly involved in formulating their complaints and expressing their disapproval, as in the DCT, they tend to use more direct strategies. By contrast, when response options are provided, as in the MCQ, they tend to opt for more indirect strategies.

Overall, the results indicate a tendency towards greater directness in the low- and equal-status conditions than in the high-status condition. These findings are consistent with the observations of Wijayanto et al. (2013) that the directness of strategies differ based on the social variable. Students tend to employ more direct strategies when addressing interlocutors of lower or equal social status. For instance, hints and annoyance are the most used strategies when performing in high social status. Similarly, Sinuraya and Chairunnissa (2017) found that

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complainers from working class tended to use direct strategies, while those from middle class used less direct strategies.

Gender differences

Concerning the relationship between gender and complaint strategies across the different social-status conditions, the results showed that the differences were not statistically significant in the low- and equal-status situations. As shown in Table 3, the Pearson chi-square test for the low-status situation was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 5.137$, $p = .526$.

Table 3: Gender differences vis-à-vis low social status

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,137a	6	,526
Likelihood Ratio	5,196	6	,519
Linear-by-Linear Association	,075	1	,784
N of Valid Cases	60		
9 cells (64,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,10.			

Similarly, the results revealed no statistically significant association between gender and complaint strategy choice in the equal-status situation (Table 4), $\chi^2(7) = 6.108$, $p = .527$. This indicates that, within the present sample and under these specific conditions, male and female participants did not differ significantly in their selection of complaint strategies in the low- and equal-status situations. This finding is broadly consistent with Kakolaki and Shahrokhi (2016), who found that gender differences in complaint strategies among Iranian EFL learners were not statistically significant. Similarly, Miswaty et al. (2019) reported broadly similar understandings of politeness strategies among male and female participants.

Table 4: Gender differences vis-à-vis equal social status

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,108a	7	,527
Likelihood Ratio	7,733	7	,357
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,450	1	,118
N of Valid Cases	60		
a. 11 cells (68,8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,37.			

However, a statistically significant association was observed in the high-status situation (Table 5). The Pearson chi-square test yielded $\chi^2(6) = 12.806$, $p = .046$, indicating a statistically significant association between gender and complaint strategy choice in this particular condition. Baxter (2000) suggests that gender-related patterns in language use may become more visible in contexts where differences in formality and social expectations are salient. In the present study, however, the observed differences should be understood as patterns within the current sample rather than as general differences between male and female learners. The higher frequency of hints among male participants and modified blame among female participants in the high-status condition may therefore reflect the particular characteristics of the participants and scenario examined.

Table 5: Gender differences vis-à-vis high social status

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12,806a	6	,046
Likelihood Ratio	17,312	6	,008
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,813	1	,028

Chi-Square Tests			
N of Valid Cases	60		
a. 9 cells (64,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,37.			

The responses in Table 6 suggest that the association was particularly visible in the distribution of hints and modified-blame strategies. Male participants in the present sample used hints more frequently than female participants, with 3 male responses (13.6%) compared with 1 female response (2.6%). In contrast, modified blame was used by 13 female participants (34.2%), while no male participant used this strategy. These differences describe the pattern observed in the present sample and should not be interpreted as evidence that male or female learners generally prefer particular complaint strategies.

It is important, however, to interpret the chi-square result with caution. As indicated in Table 5, 9 cells (64.3%) had expected counts below 5, with a minimum expected count of 0.37. This distribution does not fully satisfy the commonly used assumptions for the Pearson chi-square test. Therefore, although the Pearson test reached statistical significance at the .05 level, the finding should be considered exploratory rather than conclusive. A larger sample with a more balanced distribution of participants and fewer response categories would be useful for providing more robust evidence concerning the relationship between gender and complaint strategy choice.

Table 6: strategies of males and females in high social status.

			High							Total
			Hints	Annoyance	Consequences	Indirect accusation	Direct accusation	Modified blame	Explicit blame behaviour	
Gender	Male	Count	3	7	2	3	6	0	1	22
		% within Gender	13,6%	31,8%	9,1%	13,6%	27,3%	,0%	4,5%	100,0%
		% within High	75,0%	46,7%	33,3%	42,9%	42,9%	,0%	100,0%	36,7%
		% of Total	5,0%	11,7%	3,3%	5,0%	10,0%	,0%	1,7%	36,7%
	Female	Count	1	8	4	4	8	13	0	38
		% within Gender	2,6%	21,1%	10,5%	10,5%	21,1%	34,2%	,0%	100,0%
		% within High	25,0%	53,3%	66,7%	57,1%	57,1%	100,0%	,0%	63,3%
		% of Total	1,7%	13,3%	6,7%	6,7%	13,3%	21,7%	,0%	63,3%
Total		Count	4	15	6	7	14	13	1	60
		% within Gender	6,7%	25,0%	10,0%	11,7%	23,3%	21,7%	1,7%	100,0%
		% within High	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	6,7%	25,0%	10,0%	11,7%	23,3%	21,7%	1,7%	100,0%

Implications

The results obtained provide a basis for highlighting a number of implications. First, the participants' use of various strategies suggests that complaining is a sensitive speech act involving context-dependent choices and preferences. Explicit instruction may therefore help raise students' awareness of appropriate ways of dealing with complaints. In particular, exposing students to examples from different contexts may help them understand the underlying pragmatic assumptions involved when performing this face-threatening act.

Second, the degree of formality appeared to be a factor in the selection of particular strategies in the present sample. This suggests the value of drawing students' attention to how pragmatic choices may vary across situations in which differences in social relations and potential conflict can affect communication. Such an approach is consistent with the view that explicit instruction in pragmatics can play an important role in the EFL/ESL classroom (see Faerch & Kasper, 1984).

Third, although some findings were broadly consistent with those reported in other contexts (e.g., Wijayanto et al., 2013; Miswaty et al., 2019), some differences were also observed when compared with previous research, particularly regarding gender-related patterns (e.g., Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016). These similarities and differences highlight the potential variability of pragmatic strategies across contexts and cultures. Some pragmatic patterns may therefore be shared across contexts, whereas others may reflect contextual or participant-related differences. Such findings may help inform the design of instruction targeting the speech act of complaining. Overall, the findings suggest that the teaching of communicative functions can benefit from research conducted across different linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts.

Limitations of the study

As is the case with many empirical studies, limitations are worth highlighting to reconsider many concerns in future research studies. First, the number of participants was relatively small and they were all chosen from two business programs. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to Moroccan EFL learners as a whole or to other educational contexts. Future studies could involve larger samples drawn from different institutions and academic programmes.

Second, the gender distribution of the sample was unequal, with 22 male participants and 38 female participants. This imbalance needs to be considered when interpreting the gender-related findings, particularly the statistically significant association observed in the high-status situation.

Third, the study relied on a limited number of DCT scenarios. Although the three situations represented low, high, and equal social-status conditions, each social-status category was represented by only one main situation. Differences observed across the conditions may therefore be related not only to social status but also to the specific characteristics of each scenario, such as the setting, relationship between the interlocutors, and nature of the offence. Future research could include several scenarios for each social-status in order to separate the effect of social status from the particular features of individual situations.

Another limitation concerns the classification of participants' responses according to Trosborg's (1995) complaint-strategy categories. Although the framework provides a systematic basis for analysing complaint strategies, some responses may contain features that overlap across categories or may require interpretive judgement. This may introduce a degree of subjectivity into the coding process. Future research could strengthen coding reliability by employing independent coders and reporting inter-rater agreement.

Last, the use of DCTs and a multiple-choice questionnaire presents methodological limitations. DCTs provide useful controlled data for comparing pragmatic choices, but the responses are hypothetical and may not fully represent how participants would complain in naturally occurring interactions. Other methods, such as role-plays, interviews, or naturally

occurring interactional data, could provide additional evidence and a greater degree of contextual authenticity.

Conclusion

Research into speech acts has been considered fundamental in deepening our understanding of the functional dimension as an important element in the EFL/ESL classroom. Face-threatening acts, such as complaining, remain central in effective communication due to their conflictive nature. Consequently, this study investigated the strategies used by Moroccan EFL learners when performing the speech act of complaining based on Trosborg's (1995) classification of complaint strategies. The findings revealed that participants in the present sample tended to use more indirect strategies when addressing interlocutors of high social status, whereas greater use of direct strategies was observed in the low- and equal-status situations. In addition, no statistically significant association between gender and complaint strategy choice was found in the low- and equal-status situations, while a statistically significant association was observed in the high-status situation. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously because of the unequal gender distribution, the small sample size, and the expected-frequency limitations associated with the chi-square analysis. Overall, the findings provide exploratory evidence that complaint strategy choices may vary according to social status and, in the specific high-status situation examined, may also be associated with gender. These findings primarily apply to the participants and contexts examined in the present study and should not be generalised to Moroccan EFL learners more broadly. Further research with larger samples, a wider range of scenarios, and complementary research methods is needed to examine these relationships in other Moroccan EFL contexts.

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