

SPEECH ACT STUDY: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIVE AND NONNATIVE SPEAKER COMPLAINT STRATEGIES

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will present a study on speech acts, in particular the speech act of complaints. This speech act is very situation dependent in that speakers should know how to perform the speech act considering such aspects as the hearer, the relationship with the hearer, the topic, the purpose of the speech, and the appropriate linguistic forms for the speech act. Thus, the speaker is required to have sociocultural competence of language use in a language as well as linguistic competence to perform the speech act appropriately. In addition, the speech act of complaining is a face-threatening act when the speaker violates the sociocultural rule of speaking. This can lead to a breakdown in communication and in the relationship with the other participants. In fact, it is frequently observed that nonnative speakers fail in successful communication in a target language.

What, then, is the rule of complaining in English? In order to find out the appropriate ways of complaining, first of all, the utterances of native speakers of English will be studied. Specifically, the unmarked forms (speech act sets) of native speaker utterances in complaint situations will be examined, under the presupposition that native speakers' unmarked forms of complaints are appropriate in specific situations. The utterances of nonnative speakers of English will also be examined in order to find out whether there are any discrepancies between native speakers and nonnative speakers in making complaints and how nonnative speaker performances deviate from native speakers' performance in the speech act of complaints.

BACKGROUND

Ever since Hymes introduced the concept of communicative competence, the importance of communicative competence has been fully recognized as a goal of language teaching and learning in the field of second language acquisition. Hymes maintained that learners (children in his study) must learn to speak not only grammatically, but also appropriately to achieve communicative goals. They must acquire not only linguistic rules such as morphology, syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, but they must acquire sociocultural rules of language use also. (Anderson, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Boxer & Pickering, 1987; Edmondson, 1981; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Murphy & Neu, 1996; Manes, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Wolfson, 1981)

The Speech Act

This approach that linguistic structure and social structure are working together in communication has been reflected most specifically in the concept of the speech act. Hymes (1972) defines it as "the level [which] mediates immediately between the usual level of grammar

and the rest of a speech event or situation in that it implicates both linguistic form and social norms”(Manes, 1983, p. 96).

When we speak, we perform certain acts within a speech event in a situation. For example, if you ask someone the time on the street, you would say, ‘What time is it?’ The response would be ‘It’s X.’ Finally, you would say ‘Thank you.’ Asking the time (speech event) would happen when you don’t know the time and want to know the time (a situation). The participants perform three speech acts in this situation with such language functions as asking the time, giving the time, and thanking (Scollon & Scollon, 1997, p. 19). As shown in this example, speech acts involve certain language functions and speakers in communication perform and transfer language functions through speech acts.

These acts must take place in a specified context of situation in order to be performed successfully (Murphy & Neu, 1996). Let’s look once again at the example (Scollon & Scollon, 1997) above. Someone asks the time using the linguistic form of ‘What time is it?’ and the other participant answers with ‘It’s X.’ This time, however, the first participant says ‘Good job!’ instead of ‘Thank you’ as a response to being told the time. What is different from the previous example? First of all, the two participants are a teacher and a student. The speech event is asking the time and a teacher is checking a student’s ability in reading the time in the classroom. In this situation, the speech acts are asking the time, answering the time, and complimenting.

The two situations seem similar in that the same linguistic forms ‘what time is it?’ and ‘It’s X’ are used. However, the two situations are different even though the same exact linguistic forms are used in both situations. For the first situation, ‘thank you’ is appropriate and in the second situation, ‘good job’ is appropriate. If someone performs complimenting with the linguistic form of ‘good job’ in the first situation, the utterance will not be accepted by the hearer and the relationship with the hearer will be broken.

As presented in these two examples, the same linguistic forms are not always used in the same situations for the same functions. Rather, they are used in various ways, following pragmatic rules of language use. Thus, participants in speech acts should know how certain linguistic forms function differently and appropriately in a specific context for successful communication.

These speech acts also differ cross-culturally (Einstein & Bodman, 1986). The differences can be recognized according to who the participants are, what they are performing specific speech acts for, and how often they do it. To what extent, then, is it possible to specify the particular pragmatic rules of use in a language? How can the appropriateness in use be specified?

These questions can be answered by studying speech acts. The study of speech acts can provide us with a better understanding and new insight into the correlation between linguistic forms and sociocultural context (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). Also, the research on speech acts is crucial in that it can provide the appropriate sociocultural rules surrounding the utterances of native speakers (Murphy & Neu, 1996). This is the most important source and basis for sociopragmatic rules governing speech acts in the language.

Appropriateness

The appropriateness of language use can be recognized by acknowledging the social identity of the listener in terms of the relative social status and the degree of acquaintance between participants. Also, the appropriateness can be given within specific situations and

contents (Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1998; Laver, 1981). Furthermore, specific speech acts are governed by the social norms involved in language use (Manes, 1983). Thus, speakers should know who they are talking to, what the relationship with the listener is, what makes them talk, what they are talking about, and which way of speech fulfills the goal of communication.

Nonnative speakers may not know all these factors governing the appropriateness of speech acts in a target language and in a target community. Inappropriate utterances have been observed in many studies. Einsentein & Bodman (1986) and Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) state that there are a considerable number of studies that present nonnative speakers' failure in communicating in a target language. The studies argue that the pragmatics of learners and native speakers are often quite different. Also, the grammatical competence of nonnative speakers does not reflect the same degree of pragmatic competence that learners should have. The nonnative speakers with a high level of grammatical competence did not always perform target languages appropriately. Rather, they are more varied in their performance of pragmatic competence than native speakers.

The inappropriate use of language by nonnative speakers with high proficiency level may show that it is difficult for nonnative speakers to acquire the appropriate ways to communicate language functions in a target language. What happens when speakers (specifically nonnative speakers) violate the rules of speaking? Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Raynolds (1991) argue, "speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting (p. 4)."

In order not to be 'uncooperative,' 'rude,' or 'insulting,' nonnative speakers' utterances must fulfill the expectations of native speakers of a target language. How can the expectations of native speakers be specified? To examine how nonnative speakers utterances deviate from native speakers, native speakers rated nonnative speakers performances in several studies done by such researchers as Olshtain & Cohen (1983), Cohen & Olshtain (1985) (Murphy & Neu, 1996), Murphy & Neu (1996), and House (1996). In these studies, native speaker raters assessed whether the nonnative speakers data was acceptable or not. According to Wolfson (1983, 1989), however, such sociopragmatic rules of language are so "unconsciously held (Mir, 1992, p. 2)" that native speakers are not aware of "the patterned nature of their own speech behavior (p. 2)" even though they can use their rules perfectly. On the other hand, other studies focus on what the native speakers' conventions are for specific speech acts. The conventions were used as a parameter of appropriateness in performing speech acts and used to compare to nonnative speakers' performance of speech acts.

Each type of research has been of great value in the study of native speakers' speech talk and behavior. Their utterances and behaviors in speech acts are very important not only for establishing a description of how native speakers interact verbally with other native speakers in specific speech acts, but also for the purpose of making a baseline of information for what language learners should be taught in the classroom (Boxer & Pickering, 1995)

COMPLAINTS

The word *complain* is defined as "to say that you are annoyed, dissatisfied, or unhappy about something and someone" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995, p. 270). In the speech act of complaints, "the speaker expresses displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to

past or ongoing action, the consequences of which affect the speaker unfavorably” (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, p. 195).

Sauer (2000) discusses that the speech act of complaints is different from the speech act of criticism. According to her, criticism is stronger than complaints in that the speaker’s responses are much more blunt, contemptuous, and direct.

Olshtain & Weinbach (1987) also discuss the preconditions that are necessary for the speech act of complaints to take place. These factors present well the speech events that indicate what makes the participants talk, what they are talking about, and what the purpose of complaining is. The following four preconditions need to be fulfilled:

- a) The speaker expected a favorable event to occur (an appointment, the return of a debt, the fulfillment of a promise, etc.) or an unfavorable event to be prevented from occurring (a cancellation, damage, insult, etc.). The action results, therefore, in the violation of speaker’s expectations by either having enabled or failed to prevent the offensive event.
- b) The speaker views action as having unfavorable consequences for the speaker. The action is therefore the offensive act.
- c) The speaker views the hearer as responsible for the action.
- d) The speaker chooses to express his/her frustration and disappointment verbally. (pp. 195-196)

The one feature of complaining that is generally agreed on by researchers is that the speech of complaints involves a face-threatening act (Sauer, 2000; Murphy & Neu, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). When the complaint is performed directly, that is, when the speaker makes complaints about someone or something that is present in the speech act scene (Sauer, 2000; Boxer, 1993), the speech act of complaining is inherently face-threatening to the hearer. If the speaker performs complaints, it may impair the hearer’s face and consequently the relationship between participants.

According to Sauer (2000), the directness of complaining can be controlled by the speaker. The speaker can use different linguistic forms and nonverbal signals in order not to threaten the hearer’s face and to remain polite. The perception of threatening and politeness, however, is not always the same. It varies cross-culturally. Thus, nonnative speakers may unintentionally perform inappropriate complaints. They may not know the native speaker’s conventions in complaining and are not able to choose appropriate linguistic forms or nonverbal signals. Thus, performing the speech act of complaining is very challenging for nonnative speakers. Their communication breakdowns are caused by a lack of not only sociocultural competence, but also linguistic competence. This can lead nonnative speakers to be isolated and alienated in the target community.

In order not to be isolated and alienated in the target society, therefore, nonnative speakers should know the native speakers’ conventions in the speech act of complaints and should be able to choose the appropriate linguistic forms. What, then, are native speakers’ sociocultural rules in complaints and the appropriate linguistic forms in complaints? To answer this question is the primary goal of this study. Based on the native speakers conventions in complaints, this study examines how the complaints of nonnative speakers deviate from the complaints of native speakers.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

As a whole, 129 subjects participated in this study. They consisted of 73 native speakers of English (henceforth NSs) and 56 nonnative speakers of English (henceforth NNSs). Regarding the gender, 33 subjects out of 129 were male and 79 subjects out of 129 were female (17 among subjects did not respond to the gender item in the demographic questions). The majority of the subjects (52 out of 129) were between twenty-one and thirty in their age. 29 out of 129 subjects were between thirty-one and forty; and, 21 out of the subjects were over forty in their age. Only 12 out of 129 subjects were under twenty in their age (15 among the subjects did not respond). In sum, the population of NS subjects is larger than that of NNS subjects, and females were the majority among the subjects as a whole. Regarding the age, 40.3 % of the subjects were between twenty-one and thirty years old.

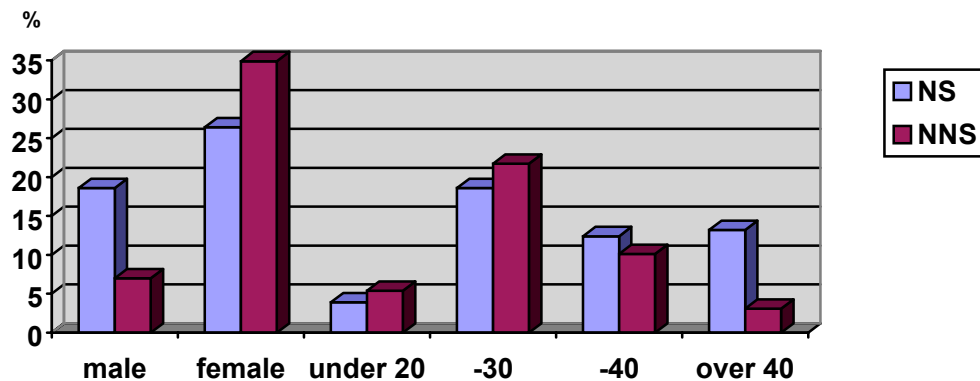
Language backgrounds	<i>NS</i>		<i>NNS</i>	
	73	56.6 %	56	43.4 %

Gender	Male		<i>Female</i>		No response
	33	25.6 %	79	61.2 %	17

Age	Under 20		<i>21-30</i>		31-40		Over 40		No response
	12	9.30%	52	40.3 %	29	22.5 %	21	16.3 %	15

Specifically, NSs subjects (N=73) were composed of 24 males and 34 females (no response: 15). The number of females was slightly higher than that of males. The majority of NSs (24 out of 73 NSs) were ranged between twenty-one and thirty in their age. On the other hand, among NNSs (N=56), 45 NNSs were female (no response: 2) and most of the NNSs (28 out of 56) were ranged between twenty-one and thirty in their age. The following chart shows the distributions of NSs and NNSs in gender and age.

Chart 1. Gender and Age of NSs and NNSs



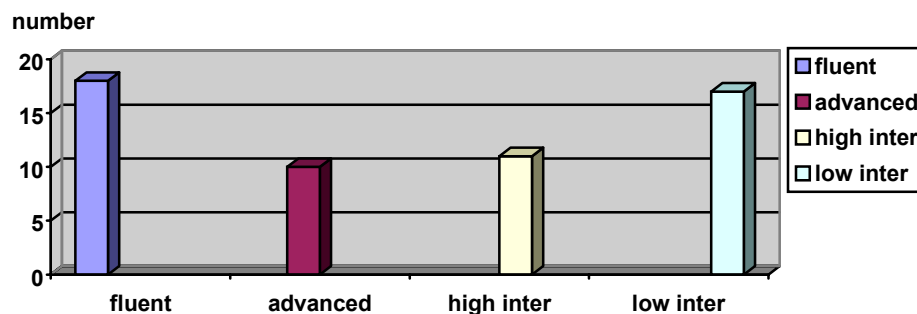
Besides the factors of gender and age, it is necessary to discuss such factors as proficiency level, the length of residence, and native language background, which are only

relevant to NNS subjects (N=56). These factors may affect the utterances of NNS subjects in performing complaints.

First of all, NNSs consisted of four different proficiency levels (no response: 3). 15 NNS subjects were fluent speakers of English. Most of them were international students who were taking academic courses at American University. 10 NNS subjects were in the advanced level of proficiency; 11 were in the high intermediate; and 17 were in the low intermediate. All of the NNSs with the low intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced levels of proficiency were the students who were taking language courses at Montgomery College.

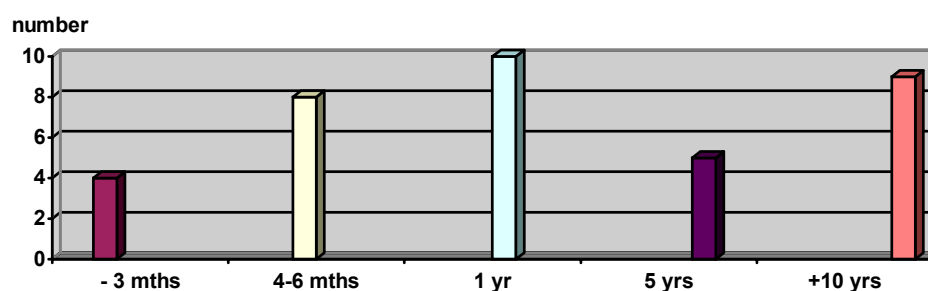
These proficiency levels were measured by asking which courses they are taking in school. The NNS subjects who answered with any academic courses were considered as fluent speakers of English since international students can take academic courses only after fulfilling their English requirements in school. The NNS subjects who answered with *EL 103*, *EL 102* were categorized into the advanced level of proficiency and those who answered with *EL 101* were into the high intermediate level of proficiency. The *EL 103*, *EL 102*, and *EL 101* are the names of credit English courses at Montgomery College. The students can take these courses only after they pass the Michigan test for English language placement based on the criteria of the school. On the other hand, those who answered with *communicative skills II* were categorized into the low intermediate level of proficiency. This course is in the continuing education department at Montgomery College and students can take the course as non-credit. Most of the students in the continuing education courses have either not passed the Michigan test, or they are preparing for the test.

Chart 2. Proficiency Levels of NNS subjects (N=56)



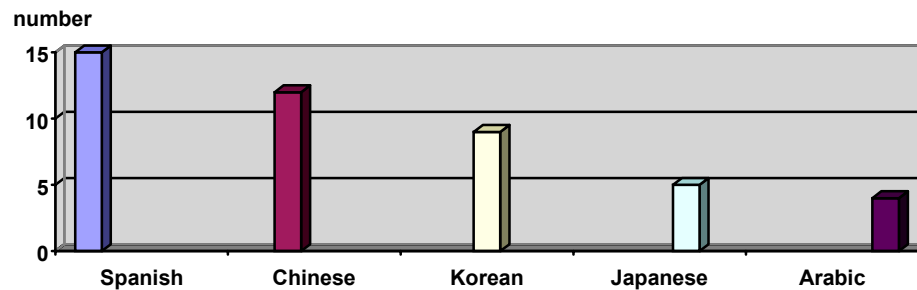
Secondly, regarding the length of residence in the US, many of the NNS subjects had stayed in the US for about one year (10 out of 56) or over ten years (9 out of 56). In the following chart, their length of residence is presented.

Chart 3. NNSs' Length of Residence in the US



Finally, the native language backgrounds of the NNS subjects were widely ranged. There were fifteen kinds of first languages: Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Greek, Japanese, Korean, Nepali, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, Tagalog, Tigrigna, and Vietnamese. Among the NNS subjects, the majority were speakers of Spanish (15), Chinese (12), Korean (9), Japanese (5), and Arabic (4). The portion of the subjects from these language backgrounds was 80.3 % among the whole NNS subjects. The following chart presents the major language background of the NNS subjects.

Chart 4. Major Language Backgrounds



Task

In order to collect data of NS and NNS utterances in complaints, questionnaires were used with a discourse completion task. The questionnaire gave four prompts that provided the subjects with complaint situations. In the questionnaire, subjects were asked to write their responses for each situation.

The prompts were as follows.

Situation #1.

One of your American friends is visiting you for the weekend. Before he/she arrives, you clean the kitchen. Your friend arrives. Then, you need to run to the grocery store because you forgot to buy something. You tell your friend to make him/herself comfortable. When you come back home, you see that your friend has left a big mess in the kitchen.

- Offender: a friend
- Offensive action: messing up the kitchen

Situation #2.

You want to buy tickets for a concert. You go to the ticket office and have to wait in a long line with other people. The tickets are almost sold out. You have been waiting in line for almost two hours. While you are standing in line, a man/woman who is about your age tries to cut in line in front of you.

- Offender: a stranger who is similar to the speaker in age
- Offensive action: cutting in line

Situation #3.

You have worked for your boss since last year. You think you get along well. Every year, your boss writes a review of your job performance. This year, you find out that your boss is giving you a bad review. You think the review is not fair.

- Offender: a boss
- Offensive action: giving a bad annual review

Situation #4.

Last fall, you registered for courses. You went to your academic advisor in order to get advice. That was the first time and the only time you met the advisor. You asked the advisor what courses you should take during the fall semester. The advisor told you what courses to take. After the fall semester, you find out that one of the courses was not necessary for you. Instead, you have to take a different course now during the summer semester in order to fulfill the required courses.

- Offender: an academic advisor
- Offensive action: giving a bad advice on courses

These four situations were set up based on the notion of Scollon & Scollon's (1997) politeness (face) system. There are three main factors involved in this politeness system: power, distance, and the weight of the imposition. Power refers to the social discrepancy in the relationship between participants of a speech act. For example, the relationships between the speaker and the boss (in situation #3) or the academic advisor (in situation #4) are not equal in power. The speakers in both situations occupy a lower position in power than the boss and the academic advisor do. These relationships are indicated by +P. In contrast, the speaker and the friend (in situation #1) or the speaker and the stranger (in situation #2) are equal in social status. These relationships are marked with – P.

Regarding the distance, the relationships between the speaker and the friend (in situation #1) and between the speaker and the boss (in situation #3) are closer than the relationships between the speaker and the stranger (in situation #2) and between the speaker and the academic advisor (in situation #4). The speaker's relationships with the stranger and the academic advisor, who the speaker has met only once in situation #4, may not last for a considerable period of time. On the other hand, the relationships with the friend and the boss may have lasted for a certain period of time and will continue into the future. Thus, the speaker's relationships with the friend and the boss are – D, however, the relationships with the stranger and the academic advisor are + D.

Even though the two participants in situation #1 (the speaker and the friend) and #3 (the speaker and the boss) have a very fixed relationship between them, they will use different strategies for the situations depending on the importance of the topic that they are talking about. The speech event about the bad annual review at work is more important than the event of messing up the kitchen. Also, the event of bad advice on taking a course is much higher than the event of messing up the kitchen and cutting in line in the weight of imposition. Thus, the situation #3 and #4 are + W; and the situation #1 and #2 are – W.

Overall, each of the four situations in the questionnaire can be defined as follows:

Situation #1: - P - D - W
Situation #3: + P - D + W

Situation #2: - P + D - W
Situation #4: + P + D + W

Depending on the face system of each situation, the speakers will use different linguistic forms and different pragmatic rules of complaints.

Frame Work

The data collected from the subjects will be analyzed based on the notion of “severity of the complaint (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, p. 199).” The scale of the severity of complaints consists of five categories: Below the level of *Reproach*, *Expression of annoyance or disapproval*, *Explicit complaint*, *Accusation and warning*, and *Immediate threat*. These are defined in terms of the speaker’s position with respect to the hearer’s face and in terms of its linguistic features. For example:

c. Explicit complaint

When choosing this strategy, the speaker performs an open Face Threatening Act towards the Hearer (H) but no sanctions are instigated.

1. There is explicit reference to H.
2. There is explicit reference to the ACT (A).
3. There is explicit reference to both H or A, or both.

Linguistic features: reference to either H or A, or both.

Examples:

You’re not fair.

You’re inconsiderate.

One should not postpone this type of operation.

I’ve been waiting here for nearly an hour.

You are always late.

I expected different treatment from a physician like you. (p. 200)

These scales used in the study of Olshtain and Weinbach were modified and simplified for this study. The severity of complaints in this study consists of four categories that focus more on the linguistic features of the subjects’ utterances. The specific explanations of each category are as follows:

A. Implicit

A-1. Completely avoid explicit mention of the offensive event or person.

A-2. Express annoyance about the offensive event and person, without direct reference.

B. Explicit

B-1. Explicit reference to the event and person, involving “you” and “I”

B-2. Accusing and threatening

HYPOTHESES

Based on the notions discussed up to this point, the following four hypotheses will be used for analyzing the data.

- I. There will be speech act sets of NSs' complaints that are appropriate for specific situations, identified as the unmarked form for each situation.**
- II. NNS complaints will deviate from NSs' in linguistic forms and appropriateness of complaints for specific situations.**
- III. Among NNSs, the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will make complaints.**
- IV. Among NNSs, the longer their residence in the US, the more appropriately they will make complaints.**

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed by the following steps.

- First examine the complaints of NS subjects for each situation in order to find out linguistic unmarked forms and determine which category of complaints, implicit or explicit, the unmarked forms fall into.
- Then, analyze the utterances of NNS subjects by comparing them to the unmarked forms of NS complaints and the categories in each situation, focusing on deviations from the ways of NS complaints.
- Also, examine the complaints of NNS subjects which followed the ways of NS complaints, with respect to proficiency level and the length of residence

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of the analyzed data will be presented and discussed with respect to the four hypotheses in each specific situation.

Situation #1: complaining to the friend who messed up the kitchen (-P -D -W)

One of your American friends is visiting you for the weekend. Before he/she arrives, you clean the kitchen. Then, You need to go to the groceries store because you forgot to buy something. You tell your friend to make him/herself comfortable. When you come back home, you see that your friend has left a big mess in the kitchen.

➤ The unmarked forms of NS utterances

The unmarked forms were found in the situation of complaining to the friend who messed up the kitchen without permission of the speaker. The unmarked forms that were produced by NNSs are '[what happened \(in\) \(here\)?](#)' and '[what's going on \(here\)?](#)' Twenty six percent of NSs (19 out of 73) made complaints using these forms.

Regarding the severity of the complaints, the linguistic forms are categorized as an implicit way of complaining, specifically A-2: express annoyance about the offensive event and person, without direct reference. The unmarked forms were sometimes combined with

exclamations such as ‘wow,’ ‘hey,’ ‘Gosh,’ ‘my God!,’ and ‘the hell.’ Some utterances were also combined other forms of complaints. Let’s look at the following examples.

NS 12)[¶] Looks like a tornado came through. What happened in here?

NS 16) My God!!! What happened?!? Did something explode in here?

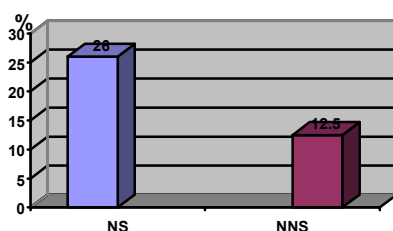
NS 46) What happened? I guess you were a little hungry!

NS 36) What happened here? Do you mind cleaning this up?

NS 43) What happened here? Do you think I have a maid come in everyday to clean up?
(said half-jokingly)

NS 45) What happened here?! I said make yourself comfortable, no make a mess!!

In the first three examples, ‘looks like a tornado came through,’ ‘did something explode in here?,’ and ‘I guess you were a little hungry!’ These ways of complaining are implicit. Even though a certain degree of annoyance and dissatisfaction is expressed, the offender and the offensive action are not referred to in these complaints. ‘What happened in here?,’ however, does not always take place with implicit complaints. In the last three examples, it is combined with a more explicit way of complaining in that the event of messing up or the solution, cleaning up, are directly referred to.



➤ Deviations of NNSs from the unmarked forms

In contrast, the portion of NNSs who made complaints with the unmarked form ‘what happened (in) (here)?,’ only seven out of fifty six NNSs (12.5 %) made complaints with the same linguistic forms, as follows.

NNS FL 1)[¶] What happened? A tornado must have come by my apt.

NNS FL 10) What happen?

NNS FL 16) What happened?

NNS FL 18) What happened?

NNS FL 8) Oh, my god. What’s going on?.

NNS FL 17) What’s going on?

NNS HI 9) What was going on?

Even though these subjects followed NSs’ unmarked forms, there are noticeable differences from NNS utterances. First, in the case of NNS FL 10, the subject said ‘what happen?’ rather than ‘What happened?’ (the unmarked form for this situation)’ or ‘What happens?’ It might not affect the communication with NSs, seriously, however, we need to recognize the linguistic limitations that NNSs have in order to apply them in language teaching. The second noticeable difference is the length of complaints. None of the NNS subjects use ‘in

[¶] NS 12, NS 16 , --- are indicating the utterance of the 12th NS subject and of the 16th NS subject, ---, respectively. It can be tracked down among the attachments: real questionnaires and rearranged data sheets.

[¶] The acronyms mean FL: fluent, AD: advanced, HI: high intermediate, and LI: low intermediate. Thus, NNS FL 1 means the utterance of a nonnative speaker subject with a beyond advance level of proficiency who is marked #1.

here' that one component of the unmarked form in this situation. Related to the length of complaints, only one subject (NNS FL 1) made complaints by combining the unmarked form with another form: A tornado must have come by my apt (implicit way of complaints).

➤ Proficiency level and the length of residence

To prove the third and fourth hypotheses[¶], the proficiency levels and the length of residence of the NNS subjects who followed the NSs' unmarked forms were examined. The following table presents the subjects' proficiency levels and length of residence.

Subject	Proficiency level	Length of residence
NNS FL 1	Fluent	23 years
NNS FL 8	Fluent	One year
NNS FL 10	Fluent	Over 20 years
NNS FL 16	Fluent	No response
NNS FL 17	Fluent	15 years
NNS FL 18	Fluent	21 years
NNS HI 9	High intermediate	4 months

As shown at this table, most of them are fluent English speakers. Four of the seven subjects have stayed over 15 years in the US. Thus, the hypothesis: among NNSs, the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will make complaints and the hypothesis: the longer their residence in the US, the more appropriately they will make complaints were supported in the situation of complaining to a friend for messing up the kitchen without permission.

➤ Inappropriate utterances of NNSs

According to the results above, only seven among fifty six NNSs followed the NSs' way of complaints. How else did other NNSs make complaints for this situation? Let's look at the following examples from NNSs' utterances.

- NNS FL 3) Don't worry. → consoling
- NNS AD 5) That's not right to do. → judging
- NNS AD 9) Clean the kitchen immediately! → ordering
- NNS HI 1) Hey. It's very rude of you. → criticizing
- NNS HI 8) Why did you leave? → unrelated question
- NNS HI 10) In this home, we tried to keep the house clean. → explaining, excusing
- NNS LI 3) No problem at all. → positive answering for asking
- NNS LI 8) You have to clean up please. → imposing

These utterances seem to be used as other functions, rather than as complaints for an offensive event. Some of them may be acceptable as complaints to NSs; however, NSs would

[¶] 3rd hypothesis: Among NNSs, the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will make complaints.

4th hypothesis: Among NNSs, the longer their residence in the US, the more appropriately they will make complaints.

not make complaints for this situation with such utterances as ‘It’s very rude of you,’ ‘That’s not right to do,’ and ‘No problem at all.’ Also, ‘In this home, we tried to keep the house clean’ has nothing to do with complaining. The subject who performed this structure seemed to try to make a complaint; however, this would not work in real communication if follow-up complaints were not performed. Regarding the example of ‘why did you leave?’, it seems that this subject did not understand the question or prompt itself; or the subject must have wanted to say ‘why didn’t you leave?’ or ‘why don’t you leave?’ Both cases are, however, not appropriate in that they seem to be insulting.

Another interesting way of complaining among NNSs were to ‘say nothing.’ The subjects who chose to keep silent were eight out of fifty six (14.2 %). This portion is more than that of the subjects who made complaints following the NSs’ way of complaining. ‘Saying nothing’ is an extreme form of implicit complaints. Even though this is categorized into the same implicit category as the NSs’ unmarked forms of complaining, the degree is not matched.

➤ Overall

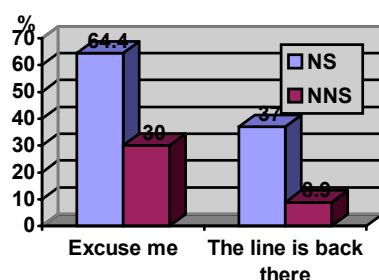
The unmarked forms of complaints for this first situation were discovered. They were ‘what happened (in) (here)?’ and ‘what’s going on (here)?’ Only 12.5 % of NNS subjects made complaints following the NSs’ unmarked forms. The complaints of NNSs deviated from NSs’ complaints with respect to the linguistic structure and the appropriateness. Also, most of the NNS subjects who followed the NSs’ ways of complaining were fluent English speakers and have stayed for a long time in the US. Thus, in the first situation: complaining to a friend for messing up the kitchen without permission, all of the four hypotheses were supported.

Situation #2: complaining to a stranger who tries to cut in line (-P-D-W)

You want to buy tickets for a concert. You go to the ticket office and have to wait in a long line with other people. The tickets are almost sold out. You have been waiting in line for almost two hours. While you are standing in line, a man/woman about your age tries to cut in line in front of you.

➤ The unmarked forms of NS utterances

Most of the NS subjects made complaints with the structure of ‘[Excuse me, the end of the line is back there](#)’ and ‘[Excuse me, the line starts back there](#).’ These complaints can be categorized into A-2[¶]: express annoyance about the offensive event and person, without direct reference. These ways of complaining are implicit in that the person, who tried to cut in line, or the offensive action, cutting in the line, are not referred to at all.



The structure of ‘excuse me’ is used by 64.4 % of NS subjects (47 out of 73). In contrast, 30 % of NNS subjects (17 out of 56) used ‘excuse me.’ ‘The end of the line is back there’ and ‘the line starts back there’ were used by 37 % of NS subjects (27 out of 73), while they were used by only 8.9 % of NNS subjects (5 out of 56). Only five NNS subjects made

[¶] See the page 17 of this paper.

complaints to a stranger for cutting in line, following the ways of NSs' complaints.

➤ Excuse me

Most of the NS subjects used the structure: 'excuse me' as an initiator of the complaining act. In contrast, 14 NNS subjects used 'I'm sorry' and 'please' as initiators for complaining. The portion of NNS subjects who used these two forms is compatible with the portion of NNSs who used 'excuse me.' What makes NNSs 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'?

Borkin and Reinhart (1978) argued the differences between 'excuse me' and 'I'm sorry.' According to them, the two structures are different from each other in that 'excuse me' primarily expresses the speaker's relationship to the rules of pragmatics; while 'I'm sorry' expresses the speaker's relationship to another person. When the speaker wants to fix the violation of the rule in the past or for the immediate future and the speaker's main concern is about a rule violation on his/her part, 'excuse me' is more appropriate. On the other hand, 'I'm sorry' is used when the speaker's main concern is about the violation of another person's rights or damage to another person's feelings.

Thus, in this study, NS subjects used 'excuse me' as an initiator of complaints because the complaints are quite threatening to hearers' face and NS subjects must have wanted to indicate that they are going to start complaining to the stranger, which may violate the rule of social relationships. For the NSs, the offensive events were caused by the stranger; however, they are wholly responsible for the act of complaint. In contrast, for the NNSs who initiated their complaints with 'I'm sorry,' the offensive event: cutting in line was not a focus of the complaints. Rather, the offender's rights or feelings were considered so that their utterances cannot be classified as complaints any more.

Regarding 'please,' White (1993) maintained that the primary function of 'please' is requesting and offering. Nevertheless, 'please' was used by NNSs in the situation of complaints. Actually, the NNS subjects who used 'please' as an initiator made complaints in a more explicit way, such as requesting the hearer to fix the offensive event. For example:

NNS FL 3) Please go to the back of the line.

NNS AD 4) Please go to the waiting line.

NNS HI 3) Hey! Please don't cut in the line.

NNS LI 12) Please can you go behind the end of the line?

NNS LI 13) Please behind with us.

NNS LI 14) Please don't cut in line.

In here, the speakers used a very direct way of complaints that followed up the 'please' by using the imperative forms of 'go' or 'don't cut,' directly. These NNS subjects might consider the 'please' as an indicator of politeness and might want to be polite to the violator. Nevertheless, it can be said that these are not appropriate for this situation of complaint, in that those structures are far from the NSs' unmarked forms of complaining. The degree of severity is also stronger than that of the unmarked forms, and finally, they are not complaints any more because they have been combined with 'please.'

Several relevant points come up based on these results. What could be the factors for NNSs failure in performing the complaining acts? First, this failure is caused by NNSs' linguistic limitation; they might not know the meaning of 'excuse me,' 'I'm sorry,' and 'please.' Secondly, the factor that affects NNSs' failure more seriously is the sociopragmatic rules. They might not know the rules of use (when, how, to whom, and with what purpose) apply to the three structures. Finally, even though the NNSs know the rules of use, this complaining event: cutting in line might not be perceived as a complainable event for them. Therefore, to make complaints appropriately for specific situations, NNSs should know and follow the linguistic, social, and cultural conventions of the target community (American society).

➤ Proficiency level and the length of residence

Returning to the hypotheses III and IV[¶], the proficiency levels and the length of residence of the NNS subjects who made complaints following the NSs' unmarked forms are summarized in the following table, in order to be examined.

Subject	Proficiency level	Length of residence
NNS FL 4	Fluent	Over 4 years
NNS FL 13		Over 10 years
NNS FL 16		No response
NNS FL 18		21 years
NNS AD 6	Advanced	No response

As presented in the table above, most of the NNS subjects who made complaints appropriately were at high level of English proficiency, as expected in the third hypotheses. It does not seem, however, that there is a correlation between the length of residence and the appropriateness in this specific situation of complaints- to a stranger for cutting in the line.

➤ Interesting examples of NNSs

Let's take a look at the following examples from NNSs. Sometimes the inappropriateness make the utterances funny for the situation. Through the following examples, it can be recognized how the linguistic limitations affect the appropriateness and, as a result, successful communication. In this part, the problematic points are marked, indicated, or briefly referred to, rather than discussed as a whole.

- NNS FL 2) This is my place. Go back to yours. → The meaning of my place and your place. In English, the meaning of someone's place usually are physical places he/she lives or someone's position or situation.
- NNS AD 2) Excuse me! I'm on the line. → On the line → When someone is waiting with other people, we usually say 'he/she is in line' without 'the'.
- NNS HI 6) Oh! Sorry, but I'll be the next. → This utterance is more like yielding
- NNS HI 7) It's so boring to wait over two hours!!! → This seems like a complaint to him/herself rather than a complaint to the other who is trying to cut in line.
- NNS HI 9) Are you very busy now? → Being busy has nothing to do with the event of cutting in line, specifically in the situation of waiting for buying concert

[¶] Look at the p. 30 in this paper.

tickets.

- NNS HI 11) I'm sorry! Please behind me! → Without imperative verbs, meaning ambiguous → 'Please behind me' could be perceived as a permission or invitation to get in line. The speaker's intention is also ambiguous because of 'I'm sorry.'
- NNS LI 10) Excuse me. Would you go to the beginning of the line please! → the notion of 'beginning' → The beginning of the line is actually the place nearest to the ticket office in this situation.
- NNS LI 11) The all tickets are sold out. → This is absolutely not a complaint.
- NNS LI 13) Please behind with us. → With us → It seems that the speaker tries to move to the end of the line with the offender.

In these examples, specific grammatical and linguistic aspects seem to play very important roles in appropriateness of language use, in particular appropriate complaint. However, the linguistic limitations cannot be overcome by acquiring linguistic competence alone. They should be combined by sociopragmatic competence in order to communicate successfully in a target language.

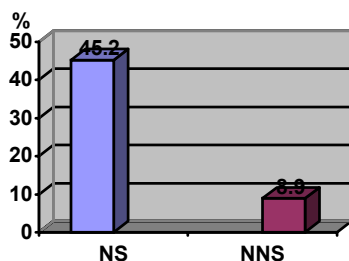
➤ Overall

In this situation, the unmarked forms of complaints performed by NNSs were discovered. The unmarked forms were 'Excuse me, the end of the line is back there' and 'Excuse me, the line starts back there.' Noticeably, over 60 % of NS subjects used 'excuse me' as an initiator of complaints for this situation. As expected in the second hypothesis, only about 9 % of the NNS subjects made complaints with exactly the same structure as 'the end of the line is back there.' Regarding the proficiency level, most of the NNS subjects (4 out of 5) who followed the way of NS complaints were fluent English speakers. The factor of length of residence cannot be discussed in this situation since not all of the NNS subjects provided the information of their length of residence in the US. Thus, all hypotheses were proved in this situation, except for the fourth hypothesis.

Situation #3: complaining to the boss for a bad review at work (+ P – D + W)

You have worked for your boss since last year. You think you get along well. Every year, your boss writes a review of your job performance. This year, you find out that your boss is giving you a bad review. You think the review is not fair.

➤ The unmarked forms of NSs



This situation is different from the two previous ones in that this complaint event concerns a more important subject matter: a bad review from the boss at work. Also, this situation is different with respect to the relationship between participants; that is, a power discrepancy exists between them. In this situation, the unmarked forms of NSs were also discovered; that is, 'can/could we talk about (this)?' and 'I'd like to discuss/talk with you about (this).' 45.2 % of NS subjects performed complaints for this situation using these structures. These

unmarked forms are also implicit without directly referring to the offensive person and event. Interestingly, only 8.9 % of NNS subjects (5 out of 56) made complaints in the same way. Four of these NNS subjects are at high levels of proficiency: three of them are fluent English speakers and one of them is at an advanced level of proficiency; two of them have stayed for over four years in the US and one of them has stayed for over one year (one of them: no response). It seems that the length of residence in the US did not affect the appropriateness of NNSs' complaints, while the proficiency level did affect the appropriateness in this particular situation.

Overall, all of hypotheses were supported, except for the fourth hypothesis: Among NNSs, the longer their residence in the US, the more appropriately they will make complaints.

➤ Feature of the unmarked forms

The grammatical structures of the unmarked forms of NSs contain modals such as 'can we ---?', 'could we ---?', and 'would like to ---.' With respect to the notion of formality, these modals are typically expressed in more formal situations. The motive of using these structures is closely relevant to the context of this situation; that is, the speakers (subjects) should make complaints to their boss for a bad annual review at work. Thus, the offender who the speakers are complaining to is higher in position and power at work. Also, the topic (a bad annual review that the speakers make complaints about) is important for them since it can cause the loss of their job. Thus, NSs choose a more implicit way of complaining, especially using the linguistic structure of the unmarked complaints for this situation.

➤ Utterances of NNSs

Without acknowledging the requirements of the situation referred to above, most of the NNSs subjects performed complaints in more explicit and confrontational ways. The following utterances are the examples of the confrontational way of complaints for this specific situation.

- NNS FL 6) In my opinion, we have to discuss together this performance to clarify some points.
- NNS FL 7) Hi, boss. I think I need to talk to you. Do you have any time available?
- NNS AD 9) Why do you think I deserved a report like that!
- NNS HI 1) Hey. The review is not fair. I want another review.
- NNS HI 4) Why did you give me a bad review? Did I do something wrong? If not, I wish you can adjust this review.
- NNS HI 8) This is unfair, I worked so hard this year.
- NNS LI 7) I'm sorry, I'm going to quit.
- NNS LI 16) What's wrong with me?

Most of the utterances seem like criticizing rather than complaining. The linguistic structures used in the examples do not reflect formality towards the person in a higher position. Also, the first two utterances would be appropriate if someone in a higher position was talking to another in a lower position. Thus, these utterances are inappropriate in that they do not reflect the relationship between participants and they were not supported by compatible linguistic structures for this situation.

This kind of deviation of NNSs' complaints is also reported in the study of Murphy & Neu (1996). They examined utterances of English NSs and Korean speakers in speech act of

complaints. The situation is that the subjects make complaints to their professor for a low grade. The face system is the same as this situation (#3: +P -D +W) in this study. The results show that NSs used implicit way of complaining while the Korean students used a more explicit way of complaining.

***Situation #4: complaining to an academic advisor for a bad advice on taking courses at school
(+ P + D + W)***

Last fall, you registered for courses. You went to your academic advisor in order to get advice. That was the first time and the only time you met the advisor. You asked the advisor what courses you should take during the fall semester. The advisor told you what courses to take. After the fall semester, you find out that one of the courses was not necessary for you. Instead, you have to take a different course now during the summer semester in order to fulfill the required courses.

➤ The structure and features of NSs' complaints

For this situation, the linguistic unmarked forms were not found, unlike in the previous situations. However, the structure and components of complaints were found out. The complaints in this specific situation have four steps: recalling the event → criticizing → expressing speaker's feeling or reasons → trying to fix the situation. Let's take a look at the steps with examples of NSs' complaints.

1°. Recalling the event

- NS 7) I thought you should know that 000 is no longer required for the major.
- NS 12) Well, you know that (name of course) that you told me to take in the fall?
- NS 32) Hi. I just learned there was a problem with one of the courses I took.
- NS 43) You know Mr./Ms. 000. You gave me some really bad advice last semester.
- NS 63) One of the classes that you advised that I take actually is not required.

2°. Criticizing (involving "you")

- NS 1) How could you make a mistake like this?
- NS 20) It was your mistake so the required summer course should be waived.
- NS 25) My summer is ruined because of you.
- NS 29) Why did you tell me to take this course?
- NS 45) You have not been doing your job, and I will be making a complaint to the dean.
- NS 48) I've been set back now and I'm going to have to talk to a dean.
- NS 67) You incorrectly told me that I need this course.

3°. Expressing speaker's feeling or reasons (involving "I")

- NS 2) I can't afford to take another class here.
- NS 10) I'm very upset.
- NS 14) I'm very disappointed and a bit angry.
- NS 57) I feel frustrated.
- NS 69) I was disappointed to learn that following your advice cost me time and money.

4°. Trying to fix the situation

NS 24) Can you help me resolve this situation?

NS 30) Can I have that credit changed so I don't have to take a class over the summer?

NS 38) Is there any way we could waive the class?

NS 67) I feel as though you should get special permission for this course to count or get reimbursed for the class that didn't count.

These four steps were components of the complaints of NS in this specific situation. Each step was used in combination with other steps. These utterances are explicit and direct. Sometimes even such threats as 'going to the dean' were used. This result is noteworthy in that NSs tended to use an explicit way of complaints only in this particular situation, while their complaints were implicit through the previous three situations.

This big difference in the way of complaints can be explained by the face system of this situation. This situation is similar to the third situation in which the subjects made complaints to the boss for a bad review at work. The power disparity between participants and the weight of imposition in this situation are the same as those in the third situation. The only difference between the two situations is the distance of the relationship between participants. In this situation, the speaker has met the academic advisor only once. However, the relationship between the speaker and the boss has been maintained for at least two years. Thus, it can be said that the different relationship with respect to distance influences the way of making complaints and the NSs tend to use a more explicit way of complaining in the situation of + P, + D, and + W.

➤ Implicit way of NNSs' complaints

While NS subjects used an explicit way of making complaints as presented above, some of the NNS subjects used a more implicit way of complaining in this particular situation. The examples are presented as follows:

NNS AD 2 and NNS HI 11) I wanna graduate on time.

NNS HI 2) Thank you for your advice but next time I want another advisor,
please.

NNS HI 4) Can you let me try? I will try my best.

NNS HI 9) Thank you for teaching me. In the next time, I want that you teach me
another way.

NNS LI 3) This happened already. Next time I will be careful.

NNS LI 4) That's OK. Even though advisor couldn't know about all students in
detail.

NNS LI 7) I will take summer course.

From these utterances, it can be observed that these NNS subjects tend to personalize the offensive events as their own problems without referring the offensive events or person, directly.

➤ The length of utterances

Another noticeable aspect of the complaints of NSs and NNSs in this situation is the length of their utterances. The complaints of NSs tended to be longer than those of NNSs. NS subjects made complaints with a combination of the four components of complaints and this might make the complaints longer. Let's look at the following utterances of two NS subjects:

NS 42)

Hi. You probably don't remember me. I met with you once at the beginning of the semester.

→ recalling the event

I followed your advice and took 000 course, which you said was required for my major. I just found out that you advised me to take the wrong course.

→ criticizing (involving 'you')

Now I'm going to have spent my time and money taking the right course in the summer semester. I think you should know what I'm a little upset about this.

→ expressing speaker's feeling or reasons (involving 'I')

You need to be more careful about ---. → trying to fix the situation

NS 44)

Prof. (name), did you know the course A wasn't really a required course for my degree?

→ recalling the event

I am now having to take course B this summer. While I did learn something in course A, I am sorry about it because my parents are helping pay for my tuition.

→ expressing speaker's feeling or reasons (involving 'I')

--- Anyway, I wanted to make sure you knew, in case you had to advise another student in the same situation.

→ trying to fix the situation

Now, let's compare these two utterances to the following utterance which is the longest one among complaints of NNS subjects in this situation.

NNS FL 12)

Is there a way we should try to do something → trying to fix the situation

about the fact that you have suggested to me to take a course and unfortunately it was wrong suggestion.

→ criticizing (involving 'you')

This length difference must be caused by the linguistic and sociopragmatic limitations of NNS subjects. In order to make complaints in an appropriate way in this situation, the speaker must have enough grammatical competence to produce a long utterance. In addition, the speaker must know the components and the steps of the complaints in this particular situation.

➤ Overall

In this situation, the linguistic unmarked forms were not found; instead, the components and the structure of complaints were discovered. The NSs' complaints were very explicit in this situation, unlike in the previous situations. However, while NSs' complaints were explicit, some of the NNS subjects used an implicit way of complaining. Thus, the first two hypotheses were supported in this situation, but the other two hypotheses are not applicable.

SUMMARY

Up to this point, the utterances of the NSs and NNSs in the speech act of complaints were examined and the findings and noteworthy points were discussed. The unmarked forms of NSs were discovered in the situation #1, #2, and #3. The unmarked forms of NSs' complaints are presented in the following table.

Situations		Unmarked forms
#1	Complaining to a friend for messing up the kitchen	What happened (in) (here)? What's going on (here)?
#2	Complaining to a stranger for cutting in line	Excuse me. The end of the line is back there. Excuse me. The line starts back there.
#3	Complaining to a boss for a bad annual review	Can we talk about (this)? I'd like to discuss/talk with you about (this).

All of these unmarked forms in the specific situations are categorized as an implicit way of complaints: specifically, the category of 'express annoyance about the offensive event and person, without direct reference.' Thus, this linguistic unmarked forms and the implicit way of speaking must be appropriate linguistic forms and appropriate way of complaining in these situations.

NNS subjects, however, did not always make complaints following the appropriate ways of complaints. The portion of NNS subjects who used the unmarked forms in making complaints is considerably lower than that of NS subjects. They tended to make complaints in a more explicit way, while NS subjects used more implicit ways of complaints.

In situation #4, any linguistic unmarked form was not discovered; instead, the components and the structure of the NSs' complaints: **Recalling the event, criticizing, expressing speakers' feelings or reasons, and trying to fix the situation.**

Regarding proficiency level and the length of residence in the US, the NNS subjects who are higher in proficiency level and longer in the length of residence were expected to make complaints more appropriately. As expected, most of the NNS subjects who made complaints in appropriate ways were fluent English speakers. However, there was no strong correlation between the length of residence and the appropriateness in complaints. Only in situation #1, the length of residence seemed to affect the appropriateness of NNSs' complaints.

Overall, the first through the third hypothesis were proved, however, fourth hypothesis were not supported in all situations. The following table shows the results of this study as a whole.

In addition, other points were also observed. The utterances of NNSs tend to be shorter than those of NSs, in general. Significantly, the linguistic limitations of NNSs seem to influence the appropriateness of complaints.

Hypotheses	Situations	#1 -P -D -W	#2 -P +D -W	#3 +P -D +W	#4 +P +D +W
There will be speech act sets of NSs' complaints that are appropriate for specific situations.		√	√	√	N/A
NNS complaints will deviate from NSs' in linguistic forms and appropriateness of complaints for specific situation.		√	√	√	√
Among NNSs, the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will make complaints.		√	√	√	N/A
Among NNSs, the longer their residence in the US, the more appropriately they will make complaints.		√	-	-	N/A

CONCLUSION:

Implications in the ESL classroom

The results of this study apparently show that nonnative speakers are not always successful in complaint and in communication, in general. These failures of nonnative speakers in complaints are primarily caused by their grammatical and linguistic limitations, but mainly caused by the limitation of sociopragmatic knowledge. Then, should teachers teach the unmarked forms in the classroom? This paper strongly suggests that teachers teach the unmarked forms of native speaker complaints for specific situations.

It is significant for teachers to know the unmarked forms, in that recognizing those unmarked forms objectively could prevent teachers from being dependent too much on their intuition or their speech preferences in teaching. The unmarked forms of native speaker utterances provide the idea of what and how a majority of native English speakers actually speak in certain situations.

Thus, those unmarked forms are very useful sources for teaching in two aspects. First, they provide the safest way of communication to learners as they provide grammatically and linguistically correct forms. Teachers can facilitate more secure environments for successful communication. Also, the unmarked forms can teach learners about the notion of appropriateness in the American speech community. Learners can recognize the fact that if they do not follow the implied rules of the speech community, their communicative goal may not be achieved. Based on correctness and appropriateness of the unmarked forms of native speaker utterances, strategies for successful communication can be taught and learned in the ESL classroom.

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