

A Pragmatic Study of Vietnamese Students' Strategies of Making and Responding to Complaints

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Abstract—This study aimed to explore the strategies employed by Vietnamese university students when making complaints and responding to complaints. The data collection instruments included Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and retrospective interviews, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. DCTs were used to elicit responses in 8 controlled scenarios, while retrospective interviews provided more profound insights into why the strategies were selected and employed in making and responding to complaints. The DCT data were collected from 100 Vietnamese university students, and 10 of them were invited for retrospective interviews in a subsequent session. A modified version of Trosborg's (1995) coding scheme was employed to classify students' complaint strategies, while an adapted model from Laforest's (2002) work was used to identify strategies of responding to complaints made by the students. The findings revealed that Vietnamese students used a wide range of strategies in making complaints and responding to complaints, which largely corresponded to Trosborg's (1995) scheme and Laforest's (2002) model, respectively. Specifically, the Vietnamese data indicated that *Request*, *Indirect accusation*, *Opting out*, and *Direct accusation* were the most popular complaint strategies, whereas those for complaint response strategies were *Excusing oneself*, *Agreeing to change behavior*, and *Suggesting alternatives*. The findings of this research contribute to the broader understanding of speech act research in the field of pragmatics and offer some implications for enhancing communicative competence and language teaching and learning.

Index Terms—pragmatic, speech acts, strategies of making complaints, strategies of responding to complaints, politeness

I. INTRODUCTION

Complaints are employed to *express* disapproval or negative feelings (Boxer, 1993; Kraft & Geluykens, 2002; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995), and therefore “highly threatening to the social relationship between speaker and hearer” (Trosborg, 1995, p. 312). In some situations, they are considered an abusive act (Trosborg, 1995) and used to manipulate people; for example, a student may make a complaint to his/her teacher about an instance of unfairness. For the negativity a complaint may have, inappropriate strategies of complaints may result in personal conflicts in communication or cause communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. Complaints are often followed by a response from a complainees in reaction against the disapproval of a complainer. Two typical ways of responding to a complaint have been found, including accepting the complaint or rejecting it (Laforest, 2002). However, in some situations, the complaint might be disregarded; that is, the complainees might choose to ignore the complaint, either by remaining silent or by saying something that is not relevant to the subject (Laforest, 2002).

As Trosborg (1995) claimed, research on speech acts of complaining and responding to complaints has been widely conducted, with a focus on the English language and Western culture. In the Vietnamese context, research on this topic has also gained interest from Vietnamese researchers (for example, Diem, 2017; Nguyen, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). In these previous studies, especially those in the Vietnamese context, strategies of making complaints and responding to complaints had the tendency to be investigated independently from each other.

The current research, however, endeavored to incorporate strategies of two types, specifically how Vietnamese university students make complaints and respond to complaints, into one study. This study is expected to be significant for its contribution to gaining new insights into Vietnamese students' strategies of making complaints and responding to complaints as an adjacency pair, which has been understudied in the Vietnamese context. The study, therefore, aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Vietnamese university students employ to make complaints?
2. What strategies do Vietnamese university students employ to respond to complaints?

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It was expected that the current research would provide a better and broader understanding of how Vietnamese students select strategies to express complaints and respond to complaints in Vietnamese. This type of pragmatic knowledge of how to employ these strategies appropriately in specific situations would help avoid misunderstanding or personal conflicts in communication, fostering successful negotiations, and thus maintaining stable and long-term relationships. In addition, the study was expected to provide implications for language teaching and learning, so that language curriculum developers and teachers would be able to design teaching materials and activities that help improve communication skills for Vietnamese students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. An Overview of Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962) initiated the systematic study of speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words*. In his concept of performatives, Austin (1962) stressed that in **uttering** something, one is **doing** something. Austin (1962) provided three basic senses in which saying something means doing something, which refer to three kinds of acts: the *locutionary act*, the *illocutionary act*, and the *perlocutionary act*. Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts was then progressively modified and criticized by Searle (1976) and Levinson (1983).

Specifically, in his modification of Austin's (1962) theory, Searle (1976) redefined the structure of illocutionary acts and the rules governing illocutionary force. For Searle, the speech act is a minimal unit of discourse. Searle also pinpointed some weaknesses of Austin's taxonomy, and the most noticeable weakness is that there is no clear principle on which Austin's (1962) classification was based. As a result, Searle (1976) looked for a more abstract scheme based on felicity conditions, the conditions that the performance of the speech act must meet if it is to succeed. He suggested an alternative classification with five illocutionary types, including *representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declaratives*.

According to Levinson (1983, p. 240), Searle's (1976) alternative classification, however, turns out to be a disappointment because "it lacks a principled basis". In other words, the classification itself is "not even built in any systematic way on felicity conditions", which is contrary to Searle's claims (Levinson, p. 240). In his critique, Levinson (1983) concluded that *speech act theory* may gradually be "superseded by much more complex multi-faceted pragmatic approaches to the functions that utterances perform" (p. 278), and that the future of *speech act theory* possibly depends on "the tenability of the literal force hypothesis" (p. 282), the hypothesis predicting that *illocutionary force* is built into the sentence form.

Nevertheless, Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1976) taxonomies of speech acts have had a considerable impact on linguistics, as reported by Bach and Harnish (1979), Hancher (1979), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), and many other researchers on speech acts. Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1976) taxonomies of *speech acts*, therefore, would still be referred to in the current study.

B. The Speech Acts of Complaints and Complaint Responses

According to Searle's (1976) classification of speech acts, complaints belong to *expressive* speech acts category with the function of the speaker expressing a variety of psychological states. Therefore, complaints are defined as expressions of displeasure or annoyance in reaction to an action, a person, or a situation (Boxer, 1993; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). Boxer (1993, 2010) categorized complaints into two types: direct complaints and indirect complaints. Direct complaints are expressions directly towards the complainers supposed to be responsible for their offensive acts; therefore, they are face-threatening and abusive (Trosborg, 1995). In contrast, indirect complaints are more "face-saving" and normally utilized to avoid confrontation or establish solidarity in social interaction (Boxer, 1993, 2010).

Responses to complaints are a kind of complementary speech act, following complaint speech acts (Diem, 2017). According to Diem (2017), the purpose of responding to complaints is not only to react to a complaint but also to maintain harmony, "save face", avoid conflicts in the relationship, and seek future resolutions. Therefore, different strategies can be employed to respond to a complaint, such as apologizing, accepting the complaint, or even making another complaint as a complaint response.

C. Selected Models for Strategies of Making Complaints and Responding to Complaints

Trosborg (1995, p. 315) classified complaint strategies into four main categories: 1) *no explicit reproach*, 2) *expression of annoyance or disapproval*, 3) *accusation*, and 4) *blame*, which were then subdivided into eight sub-categories, being ranked in the order of directness. Based on Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023) expanded this framework by adding two more categories: *opting out* and *directives*. This adapted model from El-Dakhs and Ahmed's (2023) research would be employed to code and analyse complaint strategies in the current study, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
STRATEGIES OF MAKING COMPLAINTS

No	Categories/ strategies	Characteristics
Strategy 1	Opting out	Saying nothing
Strategy 2	Hint	No explicit reproach
	Cat. Expression of disapproval	
Strategy 3	Annoyance	Phrases expressing the speaker's annoyance
Strategy 4	Ill consequence	Phrases expressing the negative consequences of an action on the speaker
	Cat. Accusation	
Strategy 5	Indirect accusation	Making an indirect accusation
Strategy 6	Direct accusation	Making a direct accusation
	Cat. Blame	
Strategy 7	Modified blame	Expressing blame implicitly
Strategy 8	Explicit blame (behavior)	Expressing blame against a behavior explicitly
Strategy 9	Explicit blame (person)	Expressing blame against a person explicitly
	Cat. Directive acts	
Strategy 10	Request	Making a request
Strategy 11	Threat	Making a threat

Concerning the strategies used to respond to complaints, Laforest (2002, p. 1605) presented “four large categories: acceptance of the complaint, partial acceptance (‘yes but’ responses), rejection of the complaint, and disregarding it”, with each category including one or more than one strategy. Laforest’s (2002) model comprised eight complaint-response strategies, which El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023) subsequently adapted by adding five more strategies to the list. The coding and analysis of complaint-response strategies in the current study were based on the adapted model from El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023), as presented in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
STRATEGIES OF RESPONDING TO COMPLAINTS

No	Categories/ strategies	Characteristics
	Cat. Acceptance of the complaint	
Strategy 1	Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about	The complainees assumes responsibility for the complaint and acknowledges the fault.
Strategy 2	Excusing oneself	The complainees presents an excuse for committing the act causing the complaint.
Strategy 3	Agreeing to change behavior	The complainees acknowledges the act causing the complaint but agrees to change it.
	Cat. Partial acceptance of the complaint	
Strategy 4	Justifying oneself	The complainees argues that s/he had good reasons for behaving as s/he did.
Strategy 5	Not taking the complaint seriously	The complainees reacts by laughing or joking.
Strategy 6	Suggesting alternatives	The complainees proposes alternative ways for the act causing the complaint.
Strategy 7	Setting conditions for future acceptance	The complainees sets a condition to behave differently in the future.
	Cat. Rejection of the complaint	
Strategy 8	Denying the complaint	The complainees denies the act causing the complaint.
Strategy 9	Counterattacking	The complainees criticizes or accuses the complainer.
Strategy 10	Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	The complainees refuses to consider the act causing the complaint as blameworthy.
Strategy 11	Rejecting having an argument	The complainees won't allow the other party to present arguments or discuss the topic further.
Strategy 12	Acknowledging the act causing the complaint	The complainees acknowledges the act causing the complaint.
	Cat. Disregarding the complaint	
Strategy 13	Disregarding the complaint	The complainees remains silent, continuing with an intervention unrelated to the complaint.

D. Review of Previous Studies

(a). Previous Studies of Strategies of Making Complaints

There have been numerous studies on complaint strategies. Most of the studies were conducted in interlanguage and cross-cultural contexts, whereas a few explored the complaint strategies employed by native speakers.

Yang (2016) explored the cross-cultural differences in the selection of complaint strategies between Chinese and British university students. In this study, two research instruments were employed: a background questionnaire and Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs). A total of 60 university students, including 30 Chinese university students and 30 British

university students, were invited to be research participants. The findings showed that there were both similarities and differences in the strategies of making complaints used by the Chinese and British students. However, more similarities in the pragmatic behavior between the two groups of participants were found, while only a few differences existed. Various complaint strategies from Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, such as "below the level of reproach", "deplorable situation", "modified blame", were employed by both groups at similar percentages of occurrence, but other strategies, such as "hints", "criticism", never occurred. Similarly, in Alhamdan and Al-Shorman's (2022) study, DCTs with 10 scenarios were also administered to collect data for an investigation of the complaint strategies used in educational contexts by 100 male university students in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The research results revealed that both groups of students used a wide range of strategies, but there were differences in the number and types of complaint strategies used by university students in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The Saudi Arabian students utilized twelve out of thirteen strategies, but the Jordanian students employed only nine. Among the Jordanian students, *accusation* and *suggestion* were the most frequently used, while the Saudi students used *accusation* and *inquiry* the most.

In an interlanguage study exploring complaint and politeness strategies used by Iranian speakers of English, Masjedi and Paramasivam (2018) used DCTs with 50 Iranian postgraduate students and found that Iranians employed *indirect accusation* most frequently, with annoyance coming in the second place, whereas *hints* and *explicit blame (person)* were the least frequently used. In addition, a considerable number of Iranian students chose to ignore the problem and did not make a complaint. Another interlanguage study on the speech act of complaining by Laabidi and Bousfiha (2020) also employed DCTs to collect data from 37 Moroccan EFL university students and found that annoyance was the most frequently used strategy, whereas *modified blame* and *explicit blame (behavior)* were the least popular ones.

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2016) conducted a study on the complaint strategies employed by Vietnamese native speakers. In this study, the researcher utilized open role-plays and verbal report interviews to collect data from 72 native Vietnamese speakers (36 males and 36 females), aged from 21 to 55 and in different professions. The study revealed that the complaint strategies used by Vietnamese native speakers were categorized into eleven types and ranked according to their level of severity from least ("*Below level of reproach*") to most severe ("*Request for a change in complaine'e's future behavior*"). The author also indicated that less severe complaint strategies, such as "*expressions of annoyance or disapproval*" and "*below level of reproach*" were used by Vietnamese native speakers at a higher level of frequency because Vietnamese speakers preferred to avoid directly attacking the hearer's face. Nguyen's (2016) study also found that Vietnamese native speakers often combined less severe strategies (non-open face-threatening strategies) with more severe ones (open face-threatening strategies) in order to maintain harmony even in conflict situations.

(b). Previous Studies of Strategies of Responding to Complaints

The strategies of responding to complaints have also been examined in a number of intercultural or cross-cultural pragmatics studies. For example, Thongtong (2022) explored the pragmatic strategies used by Thai EFL learners when responding to customer complaints in business emails. This study also considered the influence of gender and English proficiency on the selection of politeness and complaint response strategies. Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) with three scenarios of three different levels of complaint severity were used to elicit data from 60 Thai EFL students (30 males and 30 females). The result showed that six complaint response strategies, including *gratitude*, *apologies*, *explanation*, *offer*, *appeal*, and *guarantee*, were employed by Thai EFL learners. Both male and female Thai EFL students utilized three complaint response strategies: *gratitude*, *apology*, and *explanation*, with similar frequencies. However, it was noted that the gender of Thai EFL learners affected the use of *guarantee*, *offer*, and *appeal* strategies. In fact, the group of Thai male EFL learners used the *offer* and *appeal* complaint response strategies more frequently than that of females.

In an interlanguage study exploring complaint responses, Indahsari (2019) also employed DCTs to collect data from 30 Indonesian EFL learners divided into three different groups based on the length of their study time of English. It was found that *direct apology* and *opting out strategy* were the most frequently used strategy and the least frequently employed one by all three groups, respectively. In addition, the combined *apology strategy*, including *direct apology* and *indirect apology*, was also the most popular among Indonesian EFL students.

Diem (2017) investigated the complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese and British people and presented implications for effective complaint handling strategies in communication between Vietnamese and British people. The study used DCTs with six scenarios to elicit responses to complaints. The result showed that 13 strategies were used when Vietnamese and British people responded to complaints, but there were significant differences in each group's selections of the strategies. The findings also revealed that among British participants, direct strategies were frequently used, mostly *rejecting* strategies. However, Vietnamese people most favored *apologizing* and *showing concern* strategies. Vietnamese people also preferred combining complaint response strategies to express sincerity and maintain harmony.

The review of previous studies indicates that the strategies of making complaints and responding to complaints have been investigated in different languages, with cross-cultural studies and interlanguage studies being the most preferred by researchers. Although the findings are various, available research has shown obvious interest in employing DCTs as the data collection instrument. Trosborg's (1995) and Laforest's (2002) frameworks have also been proved to be prominent in these studies. With regards to the Vietnamese language, Vietnamese complaint strategies and complaint responding strategies tended to be explored separately from each other. In order to fill the research gap, the current study aimed to incorporate strategies of the two types into one study. Specifically, the present research endeavoured to examine

the strategies that Vietnamese university students employed to make complaints and the strategies they utilised in responding to complaints.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

A total of 100 native Vietnamese students from three universities in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam were invited to participate in this research. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25, and their majors varied, enabling the collected data to be abundant thanks to the participants' different viewpoints and academic experiences.

B. Data Collection

The data collection instruments included Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and retrospective interviews.

DCTs were employed in this research because of their popularity and various advantages in pragmatic studies (Culpeper et al., 2018; Sweeney & Hua, 2016). First of all, DCTs are considered one of the most efficient data collection tools in pragmatics research as they allow researchers to collect data quickly (Ogiermann, 2018). They are particularly useful for collecting data on speech acts that do not frequently occur in real-life conversations (Culpeper et al., 2018; Ogiermann, 2018). Secondly, DCTs enable the collection of a large amount of cross-linguistic data, and therefore, offer researchers valuable insights into the pragmatics of various languages and language varieties (Ogiermann, 2018). Thirdly, DCTs can elicit the production of any speech act across different situations, allowing researchers to record a wide range of semantic formulae for the speech acts being studied (Ogiermann, 2018).

In this study, DCTs were designed as online questionnaires in Vietnamese with eight controlled scenarios reflecting common contexts in Vietnamese university students' real life. These eight situations were carefully designed and revised to ensure their popularity and representativeness in Vietnamese students' real-life communication. Specifically, in Part 1 of the DCTs, complaint strategies were elicited, whereas in Part 2, participants were asked to provide responses to complaints also in situations similar to those in Part 1.

After the data from DCTs were obtained, 10 participants were invited to participate in a retrospective interview. These participants were selected based on the demographic information and responses from DCTs, as well as their willingness to participate in the interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain deeper insights into the reasons why the strategies were selected and employed in making and responding to complaints, along with their perceptions of these strategies.

C. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the DCTs and the retrospective interviews were coded using thematic analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). Specifically, a modified version of Trosborg's (1995) coding scheme was employed to classify students' complaint strategies, whereas an adapted model from Laforest's (2002) work was used to identify strategies of responding to complaints (See Table 1 and Table 2). After this, an inventory of coded themes was established for strategies of making complaints and responding to complaints.

This is a descriptive and interpretive study. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the overall distribution of complaint strategies and complaint responding strategies across the scenarios. Interpretive methods were utilised to analyse the contents included in the strategies as well as the complainers' and complainees' comments on their own performance.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Vietnamese Students' Complaint Strategies

The strategies of making complaints employed by Vietnamese students were found to be various, covering 10 out of the 11 strategies already established in El-Dakhs and Ahmed's (2023) modified version of Trosborg's (1995) model.

TABLE 3
OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' COMPLAINT STRATEGIES

Complaint strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Opting out	47	8.75%
Hint	29	5.40%
Annoyance	29	5.40%
Ill consequence	32	5.96%
Indirect accusation	54	10.06%
Direct accusation	44	8.19%
Modified blame	27	5.03%
Explicit blame (behavior)	23	4.28%
Explicit blame (person)	8	1.49%
Request	244	45.44%
Threat	0	0.00%
Total	537	100.00%

As noted in Table 3, the *Threat* strategy was totally absent in the Vietnamese students' selection of complaint strategies. The *Request* strategy was observed to be the most preferred one, which accounted for up to 45.44% of the total complaint strategies used by Vietnamese students in the study. Following *Request*, three other strategies, *Indirect accusation*, *Opting out*, and *Direct accusation*, occupied 10.06%, 8.75%, and 8.19% of the strategies, respectively. The study further revealed that the least favored strategy was *Explicit blame (person)* with only 1.49% while the rest of the complaint strategies, including *Ill consequence*, *Hint*, *Annoyance*, *Modified blame*, and *Explicit blame (behaviour)* were of relatively similar interest, with the percentages ranging from 5.96% to 4.28%. Some typical examples of the employed complaint strategies in the current study are presented as follows:

Complaint strategy: Hint (Situation: Waiting at an ATM, complaining about a stranger's line cutting.)

Dạ cô ơi, xã hội bây giờ văn minh tiến bộ, thời gian của mỗi người quý báu như nhau.

Excuse me, ma'am, society's modern now, everyone's time is precious, you know.

Complaint strategy: Annoyance (Situation: Doing an assignment with a classmate, complaining about his/her being late for a meeting.)

Tao đợi hơi lâu rồi đó.

Hey, I've been waiting quite a while now.

Complaint strategy: Ill consequence (Situation: Doing an assignment with a classmate, complaining about his/her being late for a meeting.)

Bạn đến trễ sẽ ảnh hưởng đến tiến độ làm bài.

Your being late will affect our teamwork's progress.

Complaint strategy: Indirect accusation (Situation: Waiting at an ATM, complaining about a stranger's line cutting.)

Cô ơi, ở đây mọi người đều xếp hàng cô ạ!

Excuse me, ma'am, everyone lines up here!

Complaint strategy: Direct accusation (Situation: Complaining with a teacher about some test items not having been covered in class before, resulting in your low mark.)

Dạ thầy ơi, phần kiến thức này thầy chưa dạy cho lớp nhưng mà trong đề có á thầy.

Excuse me, teacher, you haven't taught us this part yet, but it's in the test.

Complaint strategy: Modified blame (Situation: Doing an assignment with a classmate, complaining about his/her being late for a meeting.)

Đi sớm dữ rồi đó!!! Giờ đây thun hay gì vậy?

Showing up real early, huh!!! Are you on elastic time or something?

Complaint strategy: Explicit blame (behavior) (Situation: Waiting at an ATM, complaining about a stranger's line cutting.)

Cô ơi, bộ cô không thấy con cũng đang xếp hàng hả?

Excuse me, ma'am, can't you see I'm also waiting in line?

Complaint strategy: Explicit blame (person) (Situation: Waiting at an ATM, complaining about a stranger's line cutting.)

Cô ơi, cô có ý thức dùm con đi ạ.

Ma'am, please be more considerate.

Complaint strategy: Request (Situation: Doing an assignment with a classmate, complaining about his/her being late for a meeting.)

Lần sau bạn có thể đi đúng giờ hơn được không?

Can you be punctual next time?

The information collected from the retrospective interviews confirmed and explained the high frequency use of the *Request* strategy and the absence of the *Threat* strategy. Although *Request* is considered as a more direct strategy of making complaints than others, it was much preferably used by many Vietnamese students who showed their desire for effective outcomes but still wished to be polite, avoid conflicts, or respect hierarchy by means of using selective language in making a request when complaining. The students also explained the absence of the *Threat* strategy, that is, they wished to avoid confrontation with the interlocutor and thus decided not to make any threats in the complaint performance. As one student put it, "Although *Request* and *Threat* seem to be both direct in complaining, I have the tendency to employ *Request* instead of *Threat* because the former is more effective and polite".

That the *Request* strategy was found to be the most preferred in the current study was in line with Nguyen's (2016) research, whereby a large number of Vietnamese complaint strategies included *requesting for complaine'e's explanation*, *requesting for repair*, and *requesting for a change in complaine'e's future behaviour*. Similar findings were also evident in Alhamdan and Al-Shorman's (2022) study, in which *accusation and suggestion* were the most preferably used by Jordanian students, whereas *accusation and inquiry* were utilised with the highest frequency by Saudi students. Moreover, the results of the current study were consistent with the available research findings in that less direct strategies were preferably employed to make complaints in order to avoid conflicts and maintain social relationships (e.g., Alhamdan & Al-Shorman, 2022; Laabidi & Bousfiha, 2020; Masjedi & Paramasivam, 2018; Nguyen, 2016; Yang, 2016).

B. Vietnamese Students' Complaint Response Strategies

The research findings presented in Table 4 illustrate the complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese students, focusing on the frequency of use. It was found that Vietnamese students' complaint response strategies varied and covered up to twelve out of thirteen strategies as indicated in El-Dakhs and Ahmed's (2023) adapted version of Laforest's (2002) model.

TABLE 4
OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' COMPLAINT RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Complaint response strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about	68	13.44%
Excusing oneself	116	22.92%
Agreeing to change behavior	107	21.15%
Justifying oneself	13	2.57%
Not taking the complaint seriously	1	0.20%
Suggesting alternatives	101	19.96%
Setting conditions for future acceptance	17	3.36%
Denying the complaint	10	1.98%
Counterattacking	20	3.95%
Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	23	4.54%
Rejecting having an argument	0	0.00%
Acknowledging the act causing the complaint	1	0.20%
Disregarding the complaint	29	5.73%
Total	506	100.00%

As shown in Table 4, various complaint response strategies were utilized at different levels of frequency by Vietnamese students when facing complaints, except for *Rejecting having an argument* being employed by none of the research participants. The most frequently used strategies include *Excusing oneself* (22.92%) and *Agreeing to change behavior* (21.15%), followed by *Suggesting alternatives* (19.96%). The strategy of *Admitting responsibility* (13.44%) was employed with moderate frequency. Additionally, Vietnamese students showed less favor for the remaining strategies, such as *Disregarding the complaint* (5.73%), *Not acknowledging the act/behaviour complained about as a problem* (4.54%), *Counterattacking* (3.95%), *Setting conditions for future acceptance* (3.36%), *Justifying oneself* (2.57%), and *Denying the complaint* (1.98%). Particularly, only one of the participants' complaint responses was classified as *Not taking the complaint seriously* and another one for *Acknowledging the act causing the complaint*. Some typical examples of the employed complaint response strategies in the current study are presented as follows:

Complaint response strategy: Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about (Situation: Responding to a classmate's complaint about your being late for a meeting.)

Xin lỗi nha. Lỗi tui thiệt.
Sorry. That was my fault.

Complaint response strategy: Excusing oneself (Situation: Responding to a stranger's complaint about your line cutting at an ATM.)

Dạ xin lỗi cô ạ tại con gấp quá.
I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm in a hurry.

Complaint response strategy: Agreeing to change behavior (Situation: Responding to a classmate's complaint about your being late for a meeting.)

Xin lỗi, lần sau mình sẽ đúng giờ hơn.
Sorry, I'll be punctual next time.

Complaint response strategy: Justifying oneself (Situation: Responding to a stranger's complaint about your line cutting at an ATM.)

Xin lỗi cô nhưng mà con đang cần gấp tiền đi mua thuốc.
I'm sorry, ma'am, but I am urgently in need of money to buy medicine.

Complaint response strategy: Not taking the complaint seriously (Situation: Responding to a classmate's complaint about your being late for a meeting.)

Ồ! Cảm ơn bạn đã đợi mình nghe.
Oh! Thanks for waiting for me.

Complaint response strategy: Suggesting alternatives (Situation: Responding to a student's complaint about test items not having been covered in class before, resulting in a low mark.)

Thầy sẽ cho làm bài kiểm tra thêm để cộng điểm.
I'll organise an extra test for you to get bonus points.

Complaint response strategy: Setting conditions for future acceptance (Situation: Responding to a student's complaint about test items not having been covered in class before, resulting in a low mark.)

Nếu đúng như em nói thì thầy sẽ cho mọi người kiểm tra lại.
If what you're saying is right, I'll let everyone retake the test.

Complaint response strategy: Denying the complaint (Situation: Responding to a stranger's complaint about your line cutting at an ATM.)

Tôi có lý do đủ quan trọng, chứ không có tự ý chen lấn.

I had a good reason; I didn't just cut in line for no reason.

Complaint response strategy: Counterattacking (Situation: Responding to a classmate's complaint about your being late for a meeting.)

Đến trễ có một lần, nhìn lại mình xem đi trễ bao nhiêu lần rồi.

I was late just once. Look at yourself and see how many times you've been late.

Complaint response strategy: Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion (Situation: Responding to a student's complaint about test items not having been covered in class before, resulting in a low mark.)

Cô muốn thử sức học của mấy em với các câu hỏi đó.

I actually wanted to challenge you with those questions.

Complaint response strategy: Acknowledging the act causing the complaint (Situation: Responding to a student's complaint about test items not having been covered in class before, resulting in a low mark.)

À, kiến thức thì rất nhiều và khó.

Yes, the content is extensive and difficult.

The information obtained from the retrospective interviews explained why *Excusing oneself*, *Agreeing to change behavior*, and *Suggesting alternatives* were the three most popular complaint response strategies. As one participant emphasized, "As a polite practice of responding to complaints, you should excuse yourself first. And in order to comfort the complainer, the complainees should also express his/her agreement to change behavior and promise or suggest an alternative as compensation." Accordingly, these three complaint strategies could be employed in a sequence of responses to the complaining speech act. Moreover, the interview data further explained that making use of *Disregarding the complaint* was a practice of politeness strategies since "being silent as a response to complaints would sometimes be effective in avoiding conflicts".

The current research reveals both similarities and differences with the findings from previous studies. That *Excusing oneself* being the most popular complaint response strategy in the present study is in line with Thongton (2022), Indahsari (2019), and Diem (2017), whereby Thai students, Indonesian students, and Vietnamese people were research participants, respectively. Nonetheless, while Indonesian students preferred *Opting out* strategy (Indahsari, 2019), the Vietnamese students in the current research also employed an equivalent strategy of *Disregarding the complaint* but with much less preference. On the whole, the Vietnamese students also emphasized using complaint response strategies in such a way that could take responsibility, minimize the degree of offense, and maintain harmony with the complainers.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study was the first to explore Vietnamese complaint strategies and complaint response strategies simultaneously. The findings showed that Vietnamese students used various strategies in making complaints and responding to complaints, which largely corresponded to Trosborg's (1995) scheme and Laforest's (2002) model, respectively. The research results also indicated that the most preferred complaint strategies by Vietnamese students involved *Request*, *Indirect accusation*, *Opting out*, and *Direct accusation*, with *Request* being the most dominant and *Threat* being totally absent in the Vietnamese data. Regarding the complaint response strategies, the Vietnamese students showed their great preference for *Excusing oneself*, *Agreeing to change behavior*, and *Suggesting alternatives*, which could be used in a sequence of responding to the complaints. On the whole, the research findings revealed the Vietnamese students' strong desire to avoid conflicts, maintain harmonious relationships while still achieving sustainable outcomes in communication.

The results of the current research have also offered implications for language teaching and learning in order to enhance Vietnamese learners' communicative competence in general and pragmatic competence in particular. Specifically, language teachers and curriculum developers would be provided with more insights into the Vietnamese employment of and preference for complaint strategies and complaint response strategies so that they would be able to design appropriate activities and materials to better fit the learners' use of the speech acts and their communicative purposes.

Further research would be required to investigate how Vietnamese people of different age groups make and respond to complaints, taking into consideration different social variables such as gender, social distance, and social status.

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