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Complaint Responses in Business Emails: An Interlanguage Pragmatic Study of Thai EFL Learners

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Abstract

The study's primary objective is to investigate how Thai EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners use politeness and complaint response strategies similarly or differently in email communication. Email data are collected from 30 male and 30 female Thai EFL learners. The learners' complaint response strategies for handling complaints include gratitude, apology, explanation, offer, appeal, and guarantee. The study shows that complaint response strategies differ among Thai male and female EFL learners. Compared to the female group, the male group uses the offer and appeal complaint response strategies more frequently. More often than the male group, the female group opts for the complaint response strategy of guarantee. Additionally, the chi-square analysis reveals that the use of the politeness strategy of the hedge is significantly different between the male and female Thai EFL learners with varying levels of English proficiency. The employment of the indirect politeness strategy is another crucial difference between male and female students in the high group. However, there is no significant difference in how male and female English language learners with high and low competence levels utilize the direct politeness strategy.

Keywords: Complaint Response Strategies, Interlanguage Pragmatics, Politeness Strategies

1. Introduction

Many recent graduates work in service industries, such as hotels, airlines, and travel companies. In business sectors, service providers must always deliver outstanding services to their consumers. In service interactions, the client is always right. Service providers are subordinates with less authority than clients or service recipients (Leelaharattanarak, 2016, p.131). Socioprofessionally, business representatives are supposed to service the customers' needs and ensure their satisfaction (King, 1995).

Not every customer is pleased with the services. When client expectations are not satisfied, there are numerous complaints. A business representative or service provider is responsible for assisting consumers with problem resolution. Customers can lodge complaints with service providers via face-to-face interaction, telephone calls, letters, or emails. Therefore, service providers must have effective communication and interpersonal skills to respond to complaints with graciousness and an enticing resolution. Responding to client concerns requires good

manners, appropriate gestures, and courteous language. Inappropriately responding to complaints can result in conflict, a breakdown in communication, and ruin social relationships and a company's reputation.

Emails are often used for business communication because they are free and instantaneous; recipients receive an email as soon as they log on to the Internet and retrieve the message. Attaching photos, documents, and other things to an email makes it possible to provide additional information. Besides, emails can be sent to more than one recipient. Customers frequently use email to lodge complaints. Then, service providers are required to respond to complaints by email.

Pragmatic strategies such as complaint response strategies and politeness strategies can be employed to reply to complaints. Previous studies in interlanguage pragmatics investigating how language learners do speech actions have revealed discrepancies in the complaint-response strategies used by male and female language learners. Sulastri (2014) analysed the complaint replies of Indonesian EFL students and found that female students were less likely than their male counterparts to accept responsibility when responding to complaints. Pin-ngern (2015) investigated how Thai EFL students reacted to unsatisfactory situations in university contexts. She found that both male and female students demonstrated responsibility by accepting the facts and valued an explicit demonstration of apology.

Studies on complaint responses are under-researched in interlanguage pragmatics (Li and Suleiman 2017). Not many studies investigate strategies used in complaint responses in business contexts by Thai learners EFL learners. There is currently only one study on replies to complaints by Thai EFL learners in the hotel industry, conducted by Prachanant (2006), which revealed the complaint response strategies employed by Thai and English native speakers as well as Thai EFL learners. However, there is a shortage of information regarding the politeness and complaint response strategies utilized by male and female learners of different levels of English proficiency when responding to complaints by email.

This study intends to fill in research gaps and investigate if Thai EFL learners of different genders and English proficiency levels respond to complaints similarly or differently in terms of the selection of complaint response strategies and politeness strategies. Both theoretical and practical implications result from this study. Theoretically, it reveals how male and female Thai EFL students of levels of English ability employ complaint response strategies and politeness strategies. In addition, the results of this study expand the interlanguage pragmatics field by examining the email communication strategies adopted by Thai EFL learners. Different complaint response strategies and politeness strategies can be taught to students in both English language classes, particularly in business settings.

2. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on complaint responses, strategies used in email communication, gender differences, and politeness.

2.1 Complaint Responses

A statement does not merely describe a situation or mention some facts; it also carries out a specific activity. Austin (1975, p.2) notes that the statement is more than a description and an idea; it carries out actions independently. "The food tastes terrible." can be used to show dissatisfaction, show irony, or give information, depending on the situation. Suppose the utterance "The food tastes terrible." is considered a complaint. In that case, the complaint response may be uttered straightforwardly, as in "I apologize, it was my responsibility," or indirectly, as in "Would you kindly forgive me?" In the first utterance, the explicit performative verb "apologize" is used as an action verb, but in the second utterance, an indirect request is made.

Previous research on cross-cultural pragmatics, such as complaint responses, has uncovered the linguistic strategies used in complaint responses. Complaint responses on a Jordanian radio call-in show attempted to negotiate unity with other callers by urging them to speak freely and using empathetic words (Migdadi et al. 2012).

The likelihood of face-threatening actions can be reduced by utilizing respectful strategies. For instance, devices with strong influence primarily aim to promote unity. In addition, several rapport-building strategies, such as praising remarks, invitations for friendship, informal address forms, and hilarious statements, can be utilized to encourage complaint replies to work towards a successful problem resolution when responding to complaints. When adopting politeness strategies, diverse cultures are often characterized by either directness or indirectness. Different forms and functions may be influenced by language and culture when researching the speech acts employed by people from various civilizations. Gumperz (1982, p. 12) says that the way speech acts are performed shows how important what he calls "cultural assumptions" or "contextual presuppositions" is in understanding and interpreting speech acts in communication.

Prachanant (2006) researched complaint responses in the hotel industry in Thai contexts and identified the three most often utilized strategies among Thai EFL learners with low and high levels of English proficiency. The three strategies were, in order, "Offering repair," "Expression of apology," and "Acceptance of responsibility." In addition, there were both similarities and variations between the pragmatic strategies utilized in each circumstance. The study results indicate that responses to complaints used by Thai EFL learners with low and high proficiency levels contained elements that could result in pragmatic failure when interacting with native English speakers due to cultural differences in how responses to complaints are performed.

Sulastri (2014) researched complaint response strategies used by male and female Indonesian EFL learners when investigating gender differences in responding to complaints. Sulastri claimed that the male and female students behaved differently to the allegations when they refused to take responsibility. Female students refused to accept responsibility more frequently than male students.

According to Sulastri (2014), Migdadi (2012) and Prachanant (2006), respectful strategies, rapport-building strategies, giving repair, expression of apology, and admission of responsibility can be used to respond to complaints. Language learners should take precautions when communicating, and inappropriate complaint responses may lead to a pragmatic failure to communicate cross-culturally.

2.2 Strategies Used in Email Communication

Interlanguage pragmatics research reveals the employment of strategies used in email communication. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined Turkish EFL learners' emails to faculty. They identified the following: a) direct strategies rather than indirect strategies, b) overuse of direct questions and 'want' statements, c) underuse of query preparatory questions, d) insufficient mitigation causing directness and impoliteness, and e) inappropriate greetings and closing statements affecting the degree of direction. Biesenbach-Lucas concluded that most emails sent to authorities in the case "from students to academics" were sent directly. In other words, learners appeared incompatible with their status and impolite.

Burgucu-Tazegül & Engin (2016) analyzed the English request emails of Turkish EFL university students to their non-native professors and concluded that direct email languages were unpleasant and had a high degree of directness that led to pragmatic failure. Learners tended to disregard the degree of direction and employ minimal mitigation, resulting in unpleasant and direct email writing.

According to Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), Greek Cypriot university students (non-native English speakers) exhibited a high degree of directness in their email inquiries to faculty members (particularly concerning requests for information). There was no evidence of lexical or phrasal downgrades. Other than that, there were no welcomes and farewells. Typically, students used improper or undesirable forms of address. In addition, the politeness marker "please" was revealed to be the most often utilized mitigator. Economidou-Kogetsidis asserted that the students used a variety of intensifiers and upgrades to emphasize the urgency and coerciveness of their requests. However, Faerch and Kasper (1989) claimed that learners' ultimate preference for the marker 'please' could be explained by its dual function as an illocutionary force indicator and mitigator; thus, students used it both to appear nice and to persuade professors to respond.

2.3 Gender Difference

According to various empirical investigations, the concept of gender and languages has been applied. When it comes to women's speech, the dominance theory offers a conventionally negative assessment. Social inequities between men and women can be linked to men's conversational control over women, which appears to mirror a more significant political and cultural domination of men over women in society (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996, p.232). According to Lakoff (1975, 2004), a woman's unique way of speaking reflects her standing as a "subordinate" in society. Since women's language is loaded with qualifiers and mitigators, it effectively disqualifies them from positions of authority due to their inherent feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty.

The difference theory responds to Lakoff's (1975) dominance theory. In this idea, biological variations and psychological differences play a role in the varied speeds of language acquisition (e.g., Buffery & Gray, 1972; McGlone, 1980). Connecting with others is a priority for women, while men tend to focus more on the interdependencies between individuals (e.g., Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982). Conversely, men place higher importance on independence, detachment, self-reliance, and a greater emphasis on power structures.

In Thai society, Thai women play a significant role and have a high prestige since Thai women are often highly educated and hold prominent positions in the public sector (Jitpaisarnwattana, 2018, p.57). Males in Thailand hold top-paying jobs and leadership positions with their country's high status. Women and men have the same legal work, but the inequalities in social status are rather noticeable in practice. Femininity is a societal construct in which women are viewed as caretakers (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2007). Males, on the other hand, are considered the family's head. They are also supposed to provide for the needs of women, both materially and emotionally.

2.4 Politeness

In pragmatic studies, the concept of politeness has taken centre stage. There are two basic approaches to politeness: norm-based and strategy-based. According to Fraser (1990), the social norm approach to politeness is based on the premise that every civilization has a unique set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a specific behaviour, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context. In the social norm approach, Nwoye (1992, p. 12) says that being polite comes from being aware of one's social obligations to the other members of the group. Politeness is also defined by two characteristics, according to the social norm view of politeness: exhibiting deference and respect for the social rank of others. By protecting others from unpleasant intrusions, recognizing taboos and unfavourable issues, and preserving others' personal space, moral components and decency are concerned with reducing or avoiding territorial encroachment

Leech's maxims and Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies are among the strategy-based approaches. Leech (1983) provides a finer differentiation within his politeness principles. According to Leech's definition of politeness, what is courteous for one person may not be polite for another, and vice versa. Each of these maxims has its own set of rules that must be followed by the listener in order to determine what level of maxim is appropriate for a certain speech scenario, according to him. The six maxims are (1) Tact Maxim, (2) Generosity Maxim, (3) Approbation Maxim, (4) Modesty Maxim, (5) Agreement Maxim, and (6) Sympathy Maxim.

Among approaches to the study of linguistic politeness (Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987), Brown & Levinson's has been the most influential. Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) suggest five politeness strategies. They are (1) "Do the face threatening act (FTA) baldly with no redressive action," (2) "Do the FTA with redressive action with positive politeness strategies," (3) "Do the FTA with redressive action with negative politeness strategy," (4) "Go off-record," and (5) "Don't do the FTA."

3. Research Methodology

This section discusses the research methodology that was used in this study. First, I'll go over the populations and samples. Then, data gathering, and analysis are discussed.

3.1 Populations and Samples

For this study, the populations and samples were all Thai EFL learners. The research ethics committee at Chiang Mai University has approved the project to collect data from participants. The undergraduate students at Chiang Mai University who are learning English as a foreign language are from different majors and faculties. All of them have already received their TOEIC test scores. The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) results separated the Thai EFL students into two groups. They were categorized into a high group (scores of 945 or higher) and a low group (scores of 225 or lower) based on Wylie and Tannenbaum's (2006) study of the TOEIC scores to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Male and female undergraduate students comprised the majority of the 30 participants in each group, between the ages of 19 and 21. The populations and samples can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Populations and Samples

Populations	The Target Populations		Numbers of Participants		
			Male	Female	
Thai EFL learners	1.1 Thai EFL learners with high proficiency in English (H)	Undergraduate students from different majors at Chiang Mai University	TOEIC scores of 945 or higher	15 M-H	15 F-H
	1.2 Thai EFL learners with low proficiency in English (L)		TOEIC scores of 225 or lower	15 M-L	15 F-L

3.2 The Research Instrument

In this study, information was gathered through the use of email. Emails submitted by Thai EFL students were used to elicit complaint responses and politeness strategies. Emails have replaced face-to-face communication as the preferred method of communication for many people around the world (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). According to Ko (2013, p. 25-28), emails are complicated since they include patterns, organizations, and various components, such as the introduction (small talk), the body (the main content), and the conclusion (the end).

In designing the scenarios to elicit complaint responses, I surveyed the situations the questionnaire respondents considered severe, moderate, and mild conditions. The survey showed the most severe were unpleasant staff, the moderate situation was a delay in the delivery of the product, and the mild situation was after-wash discoloured clothes. These three scenarios were used for data collection.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Before the procedure of writing emails, the research project was approved by the Chiang Mai University Research Ethic Committee to collect data from human subjects. In the process of data collection, the information sheets giving general information about the study and consent forms were first given to undergraduate students to assist them in the decision-making process of participating in this study. Those who signed the consent form were regarded as the participants of this study.

To start data collection, the participants had to sit in a computer room. Then, I distributed the task of writing complaint response emails to the participants to read carefully and introduced the three situations via PowerPoint presentation. The participants were not informed about the severity of the situation to avoid awareness of levels of imposition. The participants were allowed to ask the researcher questions when they did not understand the three situations.

When it was time to write emails, the participants received three complaint emails from the researcher. Next, they had to respond to complaints via email without time constraints. The researcher did not give hints or clues and helped the participants write complaint response emails. The participants were allowed to use pseudonyms to preserve anonymity and confidentiality and ensure that the data they provided could not be traced back to them in reports, presentations, and other forms of dissemination. After they had finished writing complaint response emails, they submitted their emails to the researcher. Their complaint response emails were used for the analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

This section discusses how the data was analysed. The first sub-section focuses on data analysis for complaint response strategies and politeness strategies. In the second section, I look at the data to see how male and female Thai EFL learners with different levels of English use similar and different strategies.

3.4.1 Complaint Response Strategies and Politeness Strategies

I analysed complaint response strategies and politeness strategies used by EFL learners both quantitatively and qualitatively. Regarding the quantitative dimension, frequency and percentage analysis were adopted in the investigation of the occurrences of complaint response and politeness strategies used by the participants. The frequency of each strategy found in each category was counted and then converted into a percentage. The qualitative analysis examined how male and female EFL learners with different levels of English used the same or different strategies to respond to complaints in severe, moderate, and mild situations through email.

The complaint response strategies were coded based on the complaint speech act coding scheme adapted from the studies of Prachanant (2006) and Sulastrri (2014). The politeness strategies were adapted from Brown and Levinson's strategies (1987). Prachanant's (2006) strategies showed that in responding to complaints, strategies such as offering repair, expression of apology, acknowledgment of responsibility, explanation, and empathy could be used. Sulastrri (2014) claimed that the usage of accepting and refusing responsibilities were complaint response strategies. The politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) indicated strategies such as being conventionally indirect and using hedges and hints to soften or strengthen the imposition of speech acts. Considering the methods used in other studies, I have come up with the following coding scheme for my own:

Complaint response strategies

1. An apology is a regretful acknowledgment of complaints.
2. An explanation justifies why service providers should accept or refuse responsibilities.
3. An appeal refers to appealing for information or help.
4. An offer includes expressing sympathy, resolving problems, and establishing goodwill.
5. A guarantee is a promise that something will be done or will happen to solve the problem.

Politeness strategies

1. Direct means saying utterances without vagueness.
2. Hedge refers to conveying uncertainty or doubt.
3. Indirect means leaving phrases, half-statements, or inferences open to interpretation. It also means being traditionally indirect or using precise meanings different from their literal meanings.

Table 2: Complaint Response Strategies and Politeness Strategies
Complaint Response Strategies and Politeness Strategies

Complaint Response Strategies	Politeness Strategies	Examples of Linguistic Realizations
Apology	direct	I'm sorry.
	hedge	We would be very grateful if you could possibly accept our apology.
	indirect	May I apologize for this inconvenience?
Explanation	direct	It is not the company's policy to give you a full refund.
	hedge	It seems that the mistake was caused by you.
	indirect	This damage cost our company an arm and a leg.
Appeal	direct	I want you to send the damaged goods back as soon as possible.
	hedge	Is it possible that you could wait for the new consignment for approximately two weeks?
	indirect	Can you be responsible for your own expenses?
Offer	direct	We will give you full compensation.
	hedge	We were wondering if we could offer you a special promotion.
	indirect	Would you like to get a 5% discount for your future purchase?
Guarantee	direct	I guarantee that you will have a pleasant moment when you visit us.
	hedge	I feel that I can guarantee you the finest service.
	indirect	Can I assure you that you won't regret it in the future?

For my descriptive statistical analysis to yield consistency and reliability, I recounted the complaint response strategies and politeness strategies used by every participant in each situation. I rechecked the frequencies and percentages at two different times, and the frequencies and percentages were compared. If there were some differences, the frequencies and percentages would be rechecked. To verify the validity of the complaint response strategy and politeness strategy coding, two lecturers who teach pragmatics will validate my coding of the strategies.

3.4.2 Similarities and Differences in Male and Female Strategies

The frequency of the participants' strategy choices was used with the chi-square analysis to investigate how male and female Thai EFL learners with high and low proficiency levels respond to complaints similarly or differently regarding complaint response and politeness strategy choices. It is a non-parametric test that is conducted to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between male and female learners with different levels of English proficiency in strategies used in responding to the complaints. For concluding Chi-square results with 95% confidence, the value labelled two-sided asymptotic significance should be less than .05,

the alpha level associated with a 95% confidence level (Salkind 2016, p.303). Suppose the two-sided asymptotic significance is more remarkable than .05. In that case, it can be referred that there is genuinely no relationship among the variables because there are some similarities in terms of the strategies realized by the participants.

4. Results

The study findings include the similarities and variations in complaint response strategies and politeness strategies employed by male and female Thai EFL learners with varying levels of English proficiency.

4.1 Strategy Use

The Thai EFL learners used six complaint response strategies—gratitude, apologies, explanation, offer, appeal, and guarantee—when responding to complaints. Compared to the female group, which used 138 complaint response strategies, the male group chose 170 complaint response strategies. The data in Table 3 below represents the frequency of complaint response strategies and their corresponding percentages.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentages of Complaint Response Strategies

Complaint response strategies	Gratitude	Apology	Explanation	Offer	Appeal	Guarantee	Total
Male	17 (10%)	47 (27.65%)	44 (25.88%)	42 (24.70%)	15 (10%)	3 (1.77%)	170 (100%)
Female	14 (10.15%)	41 (29.72%)	36 (26.09%)	25 (18.11%)	7 (5.07%)	15 (10.86%)	138 (100%)

Male and female complaint response strategies have certain similarities and differences. The following subsections first discuss the similarities before moving on to the differences.

4.1.1 Similarities

One empirical observation was the utilization of the complaint response strategies of gratitude, apology, and explanation. The male and female numbers for those three strategies were not quite different, as seen in Table 3. Regarding the complaint response strategy of gratitude, men utilized it at 10 percent, while women employed it at a frequency of 10.15 percent. Additionally, both the male and female groups used the apology-based complaint response strategy, with 27.65 percent of the male group and 29.72 percent of the female group using it, respectively. One key component might be the complaint response strategy of explanation. The male and female groups' percentages—25.88 for the male group and 26.09 for the female group—were remarkably close. The following examples illustrate the application of complaint response strategies. M and F respectively represent male and female. The numbers represent the number of participants. The italicized wording highlights the complaint response strategies that can be found in the emails. The complaint responses of Thai EFL students presented in the given examples were actual data that had not been grammatically corrected.

Example (1) Situation: delayed product delivery

Thank you for your email of March 25, 2021. We have received and investigated the issue on the delayed product. We discovered that there is something wrong with the delivery system. We have to apologize you sincerely regarding the matter. (M10)

Example (2) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

Thank you for your email of 30 March 2021 regarding the improper and unsatisfying customer service. We did the investigation. We, World Seafood, feel very sorry and would like to apologize about the bad experience with our restaurant. It's our mistake that our staff were not trained properly enough. (F6)

In examples (1) and (2), the M10 responded to the complaints regarding the delayed product delivery, and the F6 responded to the complaints when the service at the restaurant was unsatisfying by selecting the complaint response strategies of gratitude, apology, and explanation. M10 and F6 started their email with a statement of thanks showing the receipt of the complaint in "Thank you for your email." When the complaints arose, both M10 and F6 opted for the complaint response strategy of apology. The M10 used the phrase 'have to' with his apology: "We have to apologize to you sincerely regarding the matter.". At the same time, the F6 expressed how she felt and selected the phrase 'would like to' with her apology in "We, World Seafood, feel very sorry and would like to apologize about the bad experience with our restaurant." The complaint response strategy of explanation emerged from both M10 and F6, giving justification what was happening and why the problem occurred. For example, M10 proposed something wrong with the delivery system, and F6 mentioned that the staff was not trained properly.

4.1.2 Differences

The male and female students' realizations of their complaint-response strategies were different. The use of the guarantee, offer, and appeal complaint response procedures showed notable differences, as shown in Table 3. The male group used fewer guaranteed strategies than the female group did. In 1.77 percent of cases, the guarantee complaint response strategy was used, whereas females used it 10.86 percent more often than the male group. Consider the following instances:

Example (3) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

We are guarantee that our new waiters and waitresses are well-trained and willing to give the best services. Please come to our restaurant again and you will not regret. We hope to hear from you again. Let us take care of you again next time, you will not be disappointed anymore. (F3)

Example (4) Situation: delayed product delivery

I have already received all of customers' complaints and would like to say officially sorry to all customers. I'll take full responsibility for all mistakes. Most importantly, I ensure that the same event won't happen again. (F6)

Example (5) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

We offer great promotion right now. Every menu is 50% off. I promise we will smile more. Please come back and be happy! (F13)

In cases (3) to (5), women appeared to care about clients' feelings when responding to complaints. Women seemed to place a strong emphasis on cooperation, relationships, and peace, also known as a "care ethic" (Serva, 2017). In (3), the F3 employed the performative verb "guarantee" to express assurance that waiters and waitresses will deliver exceptional service to customers in the restaurant. In (4), when the product delivery was delayed, the F6 was intended to guarantee or ensure that the same issue would not reoccur. In (5), the F13 promised that the restaurant's staff would smile and be willing to welcome customers when there was a problem with the team lacking a service mindset. In examples (3) to (5), the women showed how important it is for customers to get along with each other and said they wanted to give good service to customers in the future.

When the complaint response strategy of the offer was chosen, there was yet another apparent distinction between the male and female groups in utilizing this strategy. The male group used the offer complaint response strategy 24.70 percent of the time, compared to the female group's 18.11 percent. Below are some instances of strategy choices:

Example (6) Situation: after-wash discoloured clothes

If you feel that this situation is bothering you, I will be grateful to send you the scientific proof and information about this shirt and its reaction towards chemical detergent. Please feel free to contact us for more information. We will do anything we can satisfy your experience. (M3)

Example (7) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

As an apology, we will give you a voucher which has 2,000 US dollars for use in our restaurant. If you wouldn't mind, please accept this gift as our apology. (M10)

In Examples (6) and (7), M3 and M10 used the complaint response strategies of an offer to reply to complaints. The M3 reacted to the customer's complaint that the shirt's color had faded by stating, "We will do anything we can to satisfy your experience." In (4), when the restaurant staff lacked a service attitude, the M10 issued a \$2,000 restaurant voucher with the expression "We will give you a voucher which has 2,000 US dollars for use in our restaurant." As the modal verb 'will' is used in both (6) and (7), both are future offers. According to the notion of separate gender roles, men are primarily responsible for providing support (Van de Vijver, 2007, p.814). Men tended to be more inclined to make offers than women.

The employment of the complaint response strategy of appeal was the other distinction. The male group appeared to encourage clients to take action by sending emails in response to complaints. The male group chose the appeal strategy with a percentage of 10% and the female group with a percentage of 5.07%. Examples (8) and (9) provide the application of the complaint response strategy of appeal.

Example (8) Situation: delayed product delivery

We have two options for you. First, your products will be sent at two different times. Five laptops will be sent to you this week and the rest of them will be sent to you in the next seven days. Second, you will get 30% discount if you agree to wait for 10 laptops for more seven days. Write an email back to let us know your decision. (M14)

Example (9) Situation: delayed product delivery

We collaborated with the shipping company. It is recommended you wait for a few more days. I have to apologize to you again, but we are capable of only 50% of the cost to customers. (M11)

In cases (8) and (9), the product delivery was delayed. When reacting to the complaints, M14 and M11 urged customers to take action. In (8), the M14 used the imperative form "Write an email to let us know your decision." to request a response from the customer. In (9), the M11 asked the customer to wait a few additional days for the merchandise to arrive in "It is recommended you wait for a few more days.". It can be observed that men tend to convince others to do something. According to Serva (2017) and Jitpaisarnwattana (2018), men occupy the leadership position and are viewed as the head of the household. In responding to complaints, men appeared to appeal to clients to do something.

4.1.3 Politeness Strategies and Investigated Variables

The use of Thai EFL learners' strategies for responding to complaints via email seems to be significantly influenced by levels of English ability. The chi-square analysis findings are shown in the table below. There are similarities and contrasts in the politeness strategies employed by Thai male and female language learners at various levels of English competence.

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis Results

Politeness strategies	Male and Female (high group)		Male and Female (low group)	
	Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Direct	2.584	0.108	2.069	0.150
hedge	12.374	0.002	17.104	0.000
indirect	6.667	0.010	2.009	0.156

The chi-square analysis revealed that male and female learners with high and low levels of English proficiency did not differ significantly in their usage of the direct politeness strategy. Two-sided asymptotic significance for the high group was 0.108, whereas, for the low group, it was 0.150. That means that any number greater than 0.05

indicated a difference that was not statistically significant. The low group is represented by the letter L, while the high group is represented by the alphabet H. Take a look at the following instances:

Example (10) Situation: after-wash discoloured clothes

We apologize for the happened problem, and we confirm that our beloved customer will be happy with our service in the future. (ML11)

Example (11) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

We do apologize for all unimpressive behaviour, and we will take the blame for our workers. We will improve our service and look after the disgraceful behaviours. (MH1)

Example (12) Situation: discoloration of clothing after wash

Since you had confirmed to buy our clothes, you had already accepted the condition informed in the document. We cannot take the responsibility on your problem. (FH7)

Example (13) Situation: delayed product delivery

The choices are yours, take your time. Do not hesitate to contact me. I will wait here. (FL10)

In examples (10) to (13), there was no significant difference between males and females from the high and low groups in their use of direct politeness strategy. In (10), the ML11 responded to the complaint about the stained garment with the performative verbs "apologize" and "confirm." Similarly, MH 1 responded precisely, 'We do apologize.' The strategy was used without ambiguity when workers lacked a service attitude (11). The FH7 in (12) responded to the complaint regarding her shirt's colour fading. She did not redress her complaint responses to mitigate the face-threatening nature of her affirmative and negative forms in "We cannot take the responsibility on your problem." In (13), when there was a delay in product delivery, the FL10 was straightforward by using the imperative forms in "Take your time." and "Do not hesitate to call me." in response to the complaint.

The findings of the chi-square tests in Table 4 indicated that male and female learners with high and low levels of English proficiency differed significantly in their usage of indirect and hedge politeness strategies. The correlations among gender, English proficiency levels, and the usage of hedge politeness strategy were observed with a p-value of 0.002 for the high group and a p-value of 0.000 for the low group. The following examples illustrate how male and female Thai EFL learners use indirect and hedge politeness strategies differently.

Example (14) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

I was wondering that it might be our best pleasure if you could give us another opportunity to give you our better service. (FH7)

Example (15) Situation: delayed product delivery

I really apologize that cannot fulfil your 100% refund request. Perhaps, we can give you 50% of that by our rules and deals. (FL12)

Example (16) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

For our apology, we give you a 50 percent discount on the next bill. I thank for your comments. (ML8)

Example (17) Situation: delayed product delivery

We apologize for this matter. To show our good will, we give you 5% discount for your next order. Please do not hesitate to contact our manager for details. (MH14)

When males and females from the high and low groups replied to complaints, females employed the politeness strategy of hedging differently from the male groups. In (14), the FH7 asked the customer for a chance to provide better service in the future, as the client was unhappy with the restaurant staff's lack of a service mindset. For her hedging, the FH7 wrote "I was wondering..." and used the modal verb "it might..." and if-construction "if you could...". In (15), the FL12 employed the politeness strategy of hedging with the adverb 'really' to respond to the

complaint, as shown in: 'I really apologize that I cannot fulfil your 100% refund request.' The FL12 also used the politeness strategy of hedging with the adverb 'perhaps' and the modal verb 'can' in "Perhaps, we can give you 50% of that by our rules and deals" as a response to the complaint about the delayed delivery of the product. In contrast, male counterparts in the high and low groups tended not to choose the politeness strategy of hedging. Their complaint responses appeared straightforward without mitigating action to minimize face-threatening acts. The ML8 reacted to the complaint in (16) as shown: 'For our apology, we will give you a 50 percent discount on the next bill. Thank you for your comments when restaurant workers lacked a service-oriented mindset. The ML8 only used affirmative phrases devoid of adverbs and modal verbs. In the responses to complaints about late product delivery, the MH14 in (17) chose positive words and the imperative form with the polite word "please." In responding to the complaints, the politeness strategy of hedge employed by the female groups appeared to be softeners (Crystal & Davy, 1975), weakeners (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987), and downgrades (House & Kasper, 1981).

According to statistical analysis in Table 4, indirect politeness was used differently by men and women from the high group when responding to complaints. With a p-value of 0.010 for the high group, the relationships between gender, English proficiency levels, and the use of the hedge politeness strategy were revealed. Consider the following examples:

Example (18) Situation: staff lacking a service mindset

After I received a lot of complaints, I would like to beg for a chance. Can you please delete the blog showing bad comments about our restaurant? I will give you a full free course at our restaurant. Thanks in advance. (FH13)

Example (19) Situation: delayed product delivery

For the request regarding the full refund, we must inform you that our company can only refund back 50% due to the sales policy. Could you please inform us which solution suits your company the most? (FH4)

Example (20) Situation: delayed product delivery

I will coordinate with the related departments to quicker the shipment. However, let me know if you insist to make a refund. I will do everything to help you. (MH6)

The indirect politeness strategy applied by male and female learners of the high group differed significantly. When employees lacked service awareness, the FH 13 in (18) responded to the complaint by selecting a question form to appeal to the customer to delete the blog containing negative comments about the restaurant in "Can you please delete the blog showing bad comments about our restaurant?" The modal verb 'can' and the politeness marker 'please' were selected. In response to the complaint, the question form was utilized to make a request rather than to ask the question. The FH4 in (19) used a question form in her response to the complaint, although she did not intend to ask a question. She utilized the question form to politely request that the customer inform the company about the desired solution: "Could you please inform us which solution suits your company the most?" The use of a question to appeal to the consumer is a polite way to avoid forcing the customer to perform a specific action or imposing it on the customer's face. In contrast, the male students in the high-ability group did not use indirect politeness. Men tended to respond directly to complaints, as in (20). Usually, imperative, and affirmative forms are used by the male group.

4.1.4 Complaint responses and different levels of imposition

The choice of politeness strategy among Thai EFL learners appeared to be influenced by various degrees of imposition. Table 5 shows that the number of strategies used in severe, moderate, and mild scenarios was different.

Table 5: Politeness Strategy Frequency at Various Levels of Imposition

Different levels of imposition	Direct	Hedge	Indirect	Total
Severe	132	40	20	192
Moderate	120	24	21	165
Mild	125	10	8	143

In the severe situation, direct and hedging politeness strategies were used more frequently than in moderate and mild situations. It was evident that fewer indirect and hedging politeness strategies were used in the mild condition than in the moderate and severe ones. One possible conclusion is that when the severity of the situation is high, politeness strategies can be used to lessen the seriousness of threatening acts, whereas, in mild situations, fewer politeness strategies are utilized. The results of this study back up the idea (Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Chiravate, 2019) that the level of imposition affects the choice of politeness strategies. In business settings, it is essential to communicate in a way that upholds a positive face while sustaining a negative face to maintain goodwill between service providers and customers. Using politeness strategies in email correspondence is beneficial for reasons of solidarity and to avoid getting intrusive with clients.

5. Discussion

In business settings, business representatives or service providers are inferiors with less authority than clients or recipients of services. Business representatives are expected to meet the needs and satisfy customers' desires in a socially responsible manner. As a result, there will likely be an unequal connection between care providers and service recipients. Business representatives must be concerned about how they interact with their clients; they must carefully address their issues and avoid directly confronting them. Company representatives or service providers should employ complaint response strategies like gratitude, apology, and explanation when problems emerge. The service providers seem to care about maintaining a good image and want to be liked and desired by their clients. By employing respectful and courteous strategies in the complaint response strategy, the likelihood of face-threatening acts can be decreased. The results of this study were in line with Prachanant's (2006) and Pingern's (2015) studies, which found that Thai EFL learners with high and low English proficiency levels used apology-based complaint response strategies. In corporate settings, apologizing is likely to be seen as an essential strategy for demonstrating respect and politeness in response to complaints.

In table 3, male and female Thai EFL learners used the promise, offer, and appeal complaint response strategies differently in some situations. Possible explanations could be connected to the idea of gender differences. Compared to the male group, women tend to promise or guarantee more. According to Kleinknecht (2019, p.251), promises are made to build confidence, encourage collaboration, and enhance the recipients' expectations. This effect is particularly prominent for women since they place more trust in promises. Cooperation is frequently achieved in strategic encounters between people by placing trust in promises. For instance, Kleinknecht adds, it might be a promising strategy for all sides to send women to negotiate in corporate settings where establishing an informal agreement is of concern. Women tend to make commitments, so agreements between women seem to be the most binding. After making a promise to themselves, women can work to keep their end of the agreement.

Men are more likely than women to choose the complaint response strategies of offer and appeal. According to the study, men in Thailand hold leadership positions due to their high societal status. Males are thought of as the family's head, and they are also expected to provide for the emotional and material needs of women (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2007). Regarding the role of men in Thai society, it is likely that men tend to use the offer strategy to meet customers' needs when talking business. Another difference was the complaint response strategy of appeal used by the male group in contrast to the female group. The complaint response strategy of appeal was in line with Wood's (2005) claim that men use appeals because their main goal is to use language for practical purposes. The complaint response strategy of appeal may consider a necessary strategy employed to appeal for re-checking of the information verification; as a result, negotiating for a possible solution.

The politeness strategies used by male and female groups with diverse levels of English ability varied, as seen in Table 4. It was discovered that male and female Thai EFL students in the high and low groups used the politeness strategy of hedging differently. Females tended to use more hedges than the male group. Email writers may be able to use hedging tools to lessen the impact of threatening actions. What Lakoff (1973) asserts appears to be supported by the deployment of female hedges. Lakoff believed that the use of hedging in female speech denoted reluctance. The usage of hedges was in line with Holmes (2001) and Thongtong (2019), suggesting that the use of hedges is a trait specific to women. Because of their more significant social duty in the community, women appeared to be more respectful than men (Fitriani, 2016). Apart from that, the low group utilized fewer hedges in comparison to the high group.

There are possible explanations concerning the differences in the most frequently used politeness strategy choices between the high and low groups. First, due to their sufficient linguistic resources, the male and female learners from the high group possibly know how to make communication euphemistic, moderate, polite, and flexible, for example, with the use of hedge. The use of hedges was frequently found among learners with high English proficiency, supporting the Neary-Sundquist study (2013, p.149). The high group seemed to opt for more politeness strategies than the low group. The findings of this study of Thai EFL learners' strategy choices were precisely in line with the previous studies, as learners with a high level of English proficiency had more linguistic resources than learners with a low level of English proficiency (Byon, 2004). The low group employed fewer politeness strategies in performing speech acts because they did not have the necessary resources to do so (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987, 1993). Possibly, the low group opted for linguistic items and politeness strategies that they were familiar with to play it safe in communication.

The employment of the indirect politeness method is another notable variation among male and female EFL learners with a high degree of English proficiency. The indirect politeness strategy can be used to soften the imposition of complaint responses and being indirect lessens the likelihood of face-threatening conduct. This conventional indirectness can be seen as a mitigating tool by giving clients options rather than intruding on them directly through email correspondence. More often than the male group, the female group employed the indirect politeness strategy. According to Macaulay (2001, p. 293), since indirectness can be both courteous and provocative, women often choose different politeness strategies than men. Provocative forms are employed as an enabling strategy. In general, men are more authoritative, whereas women are more expressive, hesitant, and respectful in conversation (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Merchant, 2012). Men tend to be more assertive and direct in communication, seeing it as a tool to achieve goals like leadership or authority (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

6. Conclusion

This study attempts to investigate complaint response and politeness strategies utilized by Thai EFL learners concerning their different gender and different levels of English proficiency. Gender differences and English proficiency levels of language learners appeared to play a role in the selection of complaint response and politeness strategies. The findings of this study have implications for language instructors. First, students can gain from a continued focus on pragmatic comprehension. Authentic language samples can be used to practice pragmatic as well as linguistic expressions used by native English speakers. A dual emphasis on pragmatic and linguistic meaning will give students, especially low-level students, a more comprehensive understanding of English language use. Second, when teaching pragmatic ability, EFL teachers can focus on different areas of language use by using speech acts, pragmatic strategies, and politeness strategies.

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