European Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN: 2501-7136
ISSN-L: 2501-7136
Available on-line at: www.oapub.org/edu

doi: 10.5281/zenodo.2651748 Volume 4 | Issue 4 | 2019

WHAT MAKES AND BREAKS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER COMMUNICATION: AN INTERLANGUAGE STUDY OF COMPLAINTS

Marija Kusevska[i]
Goce Delchev University,
Shtip, Republic of Macedonia

Abstract:
The research presented in this paper is an interlanguage study of how Macedonian learners of English formulate complaints in the target language and compares their performance with the performance of American native speakers with respect to strategy selection, utterance length and degree of internal and external modification. Additionally, it looks at how native speakers view non-native complaints and what makes non-native complaints sound inappropriate. The analysis of the complaints was performed on the responses of 52 Macedonian learners of English and 48 American native speakers, gathered through a Discourse Completion Task. The results show that although there is some correlation in the way complaints are formulated by the two groups, Macedonian learners show some deviations: some linguistic means are never or barely used; others are used inappropriately or with different force. Besides, Macedonian learners of English don't have enough pragmatic knowledge to make their utterances efficient. The findings of this research will be used for designing e-learning modules for developing language learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; strategies; frames; mitigation

1. Introduction

This paper was motivated by the importance of developing pragmatic competence in foreign language learners that would allow them to adequately communicate in the target language. Pragmatic competence is understood as "*the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources*" (Barron, 2003: 10). Thus defined, pragmatic competence includes the ability to perform language functions and the knowledge of socially appropriate language use.

[i] Correspondence: email marija.kusevska@ugd.edu.mk

Copyright © The Author(s). All Rights Reserved.
© 2015 – 2019 Open Access Publishing Group

In defining pragmatic competence we find Leech's distinction between sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge particularly useful. Sociopragmatic knowledge refers to the "*specific 'local' conditions on language use […] for it is clear that the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle operate variably in different cultures or language communities, in different social situations, among different social classes, etc*." (Leech, 1983: 10). In particular, this includes knowledge of the context, recognition and production of illocutionary meaning, distribution of politeness strategies, the speaker-hearer relationship, formality of the situation, social values and cultural beliefs, etc. Pragmalinguistic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the particular linguistic resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions. Because sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules are not obvious, it often happens that learners do not understand or misunderstand what native speakers say. It is even more difficult for learners to produce appropriate expressions to meet the expectations of native speakers.

The above discussion raises the question of what abilities learners have to acquire to become pragmatically competent. Most of the studies that we have consulted have focused on speech acts (Roever, 2005; Liu, 2004; Beebe et al. 1990; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). Other studies have investigated routines, implicature, ability to perform politeness and discourse functions as well as ability to use cultural knowledge.

In this paper we focus on Macedonian learners of English and their performance of the speech act of complaining. In what follows, we first define the speech act of complaining and refer to some research that our study was motivated by. Then we describe our research framework and the results. Finally, we discuss some of the language behaviors of our learners.

2. Theoretical background

The speech act of complaining has attracted remarkable attention among researchers due to its pervasiveness and conflicting nature. We begin the discussion about complaining with its definition and description (2.1 and 2.2). Then we review previous studies on complaining (2.3).

2.1 The act of complaining

The speech act of complaining belongs to the category of expressive functions. In terms of Brown and Levinson's theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), it is a face-threatening act and can be harmful for both the speaker and the hearer. Trosborg (1995) defines the act of complaining as a retrospective act "*in that a speaker passes a moral judgement on something which he/she believes the complainee has already done or failed to do, or is in the process of doing."* She describes complaints as abusive, face-threatening and non-polite. According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1995: 108), the following conditions need to be fulfilled for the speech act of complaining to take place: 1. hearer performs a socially

unacceptable act 2. the speaker perceives the act as having unfavorable consequences of herself, and/or for the general public 3. the verbal expression of the speaker relates directly or indirectly to the act 4. the speaker chooses to express her frustration or annoyance. Since complaining is a face-threatening act and since it is conflictive by nature, the speaker is faced with a series of "payoff" considerations and levels of directness in line with Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Trosborg (1995: 314) points out that complaints can be expressed at varying levels of directness ranging from hints and mild disapprovals to severe challenges and that by choosing a particular level of directness, the complainer is able to decide on the conflict potential of the complaint. She proposes four categories of strategies with eight subcategories:

Cat. I No explicit reproach
- Str. 1 - Hints

Cat. II Expression of disapproval
- Str. 2 - Annoyance
- Str. 3 - Ill consequences

Cat. III Accusation
- Str. 4 - Indirect accusations
- Str. 5 - Direct accusation

Cat. IV Blame
- Str. 6 - Modified blame
- Str. 7 - Explicit condemnation of the accused's action
- Str. 8 - Explicit condemnation of the accused as a person

However, determining the strategies is not always an easy task. Complaints are accompanied by complex emotions and behaviours and one response may encompass more than one strategy. Indirect accusations may be followed by direct accusations and direct accusations may be followed by expressions of blame.

Decock and Depraetere (2018) reassess the notion of (in)directness as a tool for the analysis of complaint strategies. The reassessment consists in resolving the ambiguity relating to (in)directness in previous studies on complaints by drawing a distinction between 'linguistic' (in)directness on the one hand and perceived face-threat on the other. Apparently, an expression such as "you are really mean" cannot be considered more explicit than "you have ruined my blouse", but it might be considered to be more face-threatening, and hence, more 'direct'.

2.2 Formulation and modification of complaints

Complaints can be formulated as assertive statements, direct or indirect requests (directives), and questions. In order to achieve their goals, speakers modify their utterances internally and externally. *Internal modification* takes form of mitigating the circumstances under which the offence was committed and reducing the blame on the hearer, on one hand, or aggravating the complainable, on the other. To mitigate their

complaints, complainers may use downgraders, including downtoners, understaters, hedges, subjectivisers, cajolers, appealers as well as certain lexis. Syntactic downgraders like the use of the past tense, negation, negative constructions, hypothetical clause, embedded clause, ing-forms are also often used. For the purpose of aggravating their complaints, speakers may use upgraders, including intensifiers, commitment upgraders, and strong lexical items.

In order to appear more convincing, speakers may produce several supportive strategies to prove the act justified and his/her right to blame the complainee for something. These supportive moves provide for *external modification* "*at the structural level of discourse (preparators), at the interpersonal level (disarmers), as well as at the content level*" (Trosborg, 1995: 329). At content level, the list includes providing evidence that the hearer did something that is bad for the speaker and substantiations (providing facts or arguments that would justify the speaker's interpretation of what the hearer did as bad as well as an appeal to the complainee's moral consciousness). For the purpose of our study, we combined the latter in one group.

2.3 Previous studies on the speech act of complaining

Complaints have most often been studied from intercultural and interlanguage perspective. Olshtain and Weinbach (1987; 1993) investigated the speech act of complaining among native and non-native speakers of Hebrew with the aim of providing a description of the main semantic formulas used in the act of complaining and comparing these formulas as used by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. Trosborg (1995) conducted an extensive study comparing the strategies used by native and non-native speakers: Danish native speakers, English native speakers and Danish learners of English at various levels of competence.

Clyne, Ball and Neil (1991) studied the realisation of English complaints between immigrants from different non-English speaking backgrounds from Europe and Asia in the work situation in Australia. Their conclusion was that most speech acts were realized in a complex way, through serious schemata and embedded in culture-specific discourse with multiple speech acts. In their study of complaints made by American native speakers of English and Korean non-native speakers of English, Murphy and Neu (1996) also adopted the approach that complaints are multiple speech acts. Research on complaints in recent years has compared Western and non-Western speech act behaviors (Rinnert, Nogami, & Iwai, 2006; Farnia, Buchheit, & Salim, 2010; Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2011; Eslamirasekh, Jafari Seresht & Mehregan, 2012; Abdolrezapour, Dabaghi & Kassaian, 2012).

Boxer (1993a; 1993b) approached the act of complaining from another point when it is not directly addressed to the person responsible for the disposition. She refers to this act as indirect complaining, which she defines as "*the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about a speaker herself/himself or someone/something that is not present*" (Boxer 1993b: 24). Her research has led to a number of studies of this kind (Heinemann, 2009; Traverso, 2009).

Complaints are most often studied in everyday conversation. The research of business environments is limited to a small number of studies. One such example is the Geluykens and Kraft (2008) who studied complaining in intercultural service encounters. The article offers discussion both on complaining in intercultural services and on the instruments for collecting speech act data. In 2009, issue 41 of the Journal of Pragmatics was devoted to complaints. It included articles on complaints as they occur in a variety of social contexts, including ordinary conversation (Laforest, 2009; Drew & Walker, 2009; Traverso, 2009) as well as institutional settings (Heinemann, 2009; Monzoni, 2009; Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). The languages represented in the articles widened the usual scope of languages including Danish, English, Finnish, French and Italian. All papers looked at complaints as sequences and discuss recipients' affiliation or disaffiliation with complaints.

In our study we approach complaints from interlanguage perspective. We describe how Macedonian learners of English (MLE) formulate their complaints and compare their performance with the performance of American native speakers (AS). We compare native and non-native realization of complaints with respect to the following measures: strategy selection, utterance length and the degree of internal and external modification. We also examine how native speakers view non-native complaints and what makes non-native complaints sound inappropriate.

3. Description of the study

As the aim of this paper is to investigate the pragmatic competence of MLE through their realization of the speech act of complaining, learners' responses were elicited with the following questions in mind:

1) Do Macedonian learners of English use the same complaint strategies as native speakers of English?
2) Do Macedonian learners of English modify their complaints in an appropriate way?
3) How do native speakers view the complaints produced by Macedonian learners of English?

The analysis was based on the responses of 52 MLE at B2 level and 48 native AS of English. The MLE were students of English in their second and third year of study, age between 19 and 24. All students filled in a consent form and sat the Quick Placement Test designed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate for their level of proficiency in English to be determined. The native speakers were students at Arizona State University, USA, who voluntarily agreed to do the Discourse Completion Test. Also, 10 native speakers were invited to comment on some responses made by MLE. They were asked to mark the acceptable answers and to comment on some of the unacceptable ones.

The language corpus consists of 233 responses made by AS and 211 responses made by MLE collected through a Discourse Completion Test consisting of five tasks.

The scenarios were selected from previous research on complaints (Trosborg, 1995). All situations involved some kind of conflict or social difficulty and would require elaborate facework to achieve the desired goals. Table 1 presents the tasks and their contextual parameters.

Table 1: Tasks and their contextual parameters

Complaints	Contextual setting	Power	Social distance	Offence
1.	Unfair mark	+	-	high
2.	Noisy party	-	+	medium
3.	Cut-in line	-	+	medium
4.	Late pick-up	-	-	medium
5.	Damaged car	-	-	high

For the purpose of our analysis we adopted the coding of complaints as proposed by Trosborg (1995) (see Section 2.1). For the complaint strategies analysis, we classified the head acts for both groups and used the Chi-square test to see if the frequency of use of complaint strategies depends on group membership. In the analysis of complaint frames, and internal and external modification we relied on taxonomies from other research (Aijmer, 1996; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Koshik, 2005; Trosborg, 1995). The charts of the strategies were drawn on the basis of the head acts while those on the complaint frames include both head acts and supportive moves.

4. Findings

In the following section, we present the results of our analysis with respect to complaint strategy use, complaint frames and speech act modification applied both by MLE and AS. Complaint strategy use is analyzed according to Trosborg's classification. Complaint frames are analyzed through their formulation as assertive statements, questions and requests for repair. As for modification both internal and external speech act modification are analyzed.

4.1 Complaint strategies produced by MLE and AS

Figure 1 shows the overall tendency of how AS and MLE used complaint strategies. For both groups disapproval/annoyance was by far the most frequently used strategy. 67.4% of the responses produced by the AS and 75.2% of the responses produced by the MLE were disapprovals. Second most common strategy, although not nearly as common as disapproval strategy, for both groups was the accusation strategy, which covered 20.7% of the responses of AS and 20% of the responses of MLE. AS produced more blames than MLE, 10.4% and 4.8% respectively. Hints had the smallest number of occurrence for both groups: 1.5% for the AS group and none for the MLE.

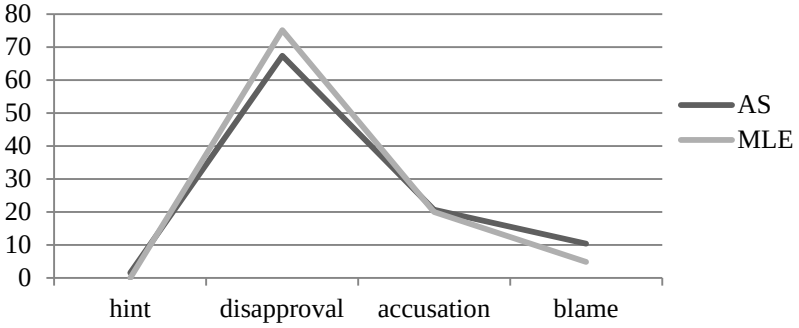

Figure 1: Total number of strategies

We used the Chi-square test to see if frequency of use of complaint strategies depends on group membership. Our null hypothesis was that there is no relationship between the choice of a complaint strategy and group membership (AS and MLE). The chi-square test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the overall strategy distribution between the AS and the MLE productions. The computed value $\chi 2=5.99$ is smaller than the probability level listed in the chi-square 3 (=7.82), which does not allow for rejection of our null hypothesis. Calculated p=0.13 means that group membership accounts for only 13%. That's a fairly weak relationship and other variables may account for the remaining 87%.

Although Figure 1 and our statistical analysis show that there is no relationship between the choice of complaint strategies and group membership, we could notice certain differences with respect to some of the tasks. As Figure 2, 3, 4, and 5 show, while the frequency of strategies used in the responses for Unfair grade and Cut-in line are similar, the responses to the tasks Late pick-up and Damaged car were somewhat different. We do not present a graph for the Noisy party scenario because all the responses for both groups were formulated as disapprovals.

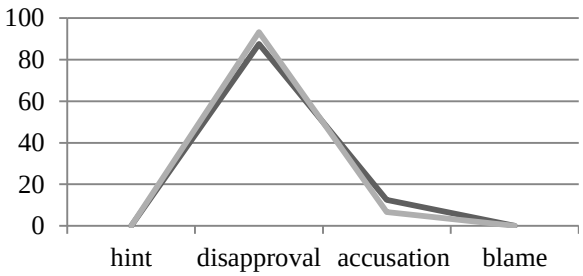

Figure 2: Unfair grade

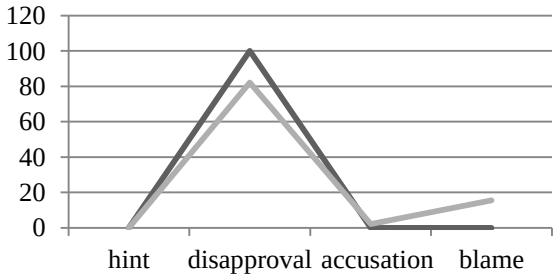

Figure 3: Cut-in line

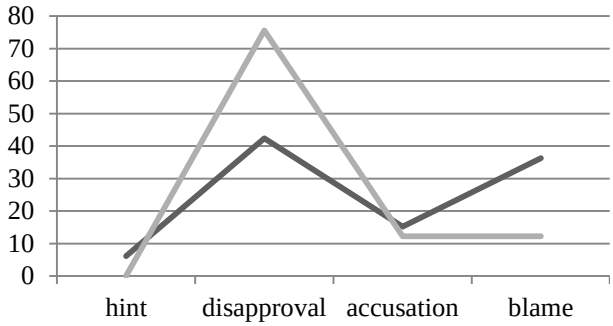

Figure 4: Late pick-up

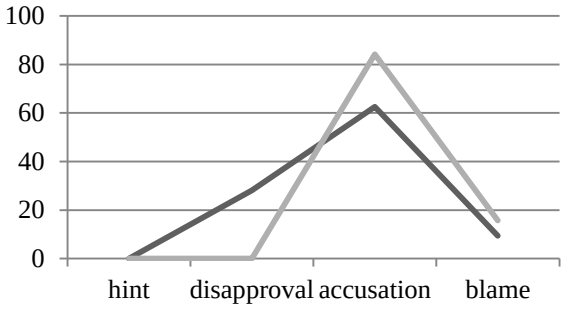

Figure 5: Damaged car

As it was mentioned in the previous section, annoyance/disapproval was the only had act strategy used by both AS and MLE in the Noisy party task. The head act strategy was also the same for both groups in the Unfair grade and Cut-in line tasks. However, Chart 4 and 5 show greater difference in the Late pick-up and Damaged car. While both groups used the same strategies in the head acts, disapproval/annoyance in the Late pick-up and accusation in the Damaged car, the frequency of their occurrence was different. In order to check the statistical significance of the difference we applied the chi-square test to these two results.

The chi-square test for the Late pick-up showed that there was statistically significant difference in the strategy distributions between the AS and MLE productions for the Late pick-up. Our computed probability level for $\chi 2$ (3, N=74) is 18.18, which is bigger than the probability level listed in the chi-square 3 (= 7.82). Therefore, we can reject our null hypothesis and say that the use of strategies is dependent on group membership. Calculated p is p = .49

The calculated probability for the Damaged car was $\chi 2$=7.46, which is smaller than the value in the chi-square 3 =7.82; so we cannot reject our null hypothesis for this task.

4.2 Formulation of complaint responses

The complaint responses included assertive statements, requests for repair, and questions. As the charts below show, both AS and MLE preferably formulated their complaints with assertive statements, followed by requests and then questions.

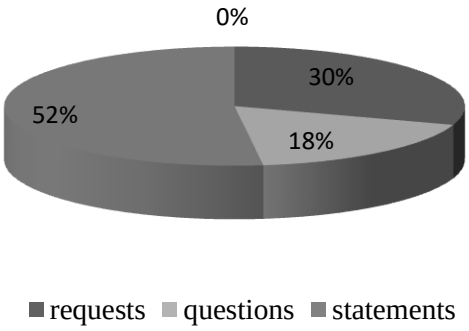

Figure 6: Complaint frames – AS

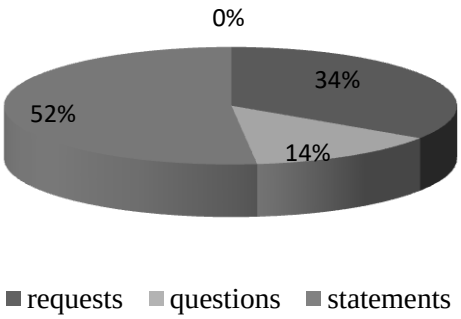

Figure 7: Complaint frames – MLE

4.2.1 Assertive statements

As the examples below show, most of the assertive statements reassert the complaint by pointing bluntly to a fact or a reason for making the complaint. On rare occasions they were formulated as evaluative statements or threats.

(1) I have a 9.00 class. I'm going to be so late. (AS) (fact)

(2) Can you please try to keep the noise down? If not I'll call the cops. (AS) (threat)

(3) You are not fair. (MLE) (evaluation)

In many cases, the assertive statements reaffirm the speaker's confidence by using verbs of knowledge and believe (*know, understand, believe, think, guess*) as well as epistemic adjectives and adverbs (*sure, surely, certain, certainly*).

Among the responses of the AS we found examples with *think* and *don't think* (*I think there may have been a mistake on my grade; I don't think you graded me fairly*) as well as the formulaic *I don't think so* as an expression of the speaker's disagreement with the hearer's behaviour; *feel* and *don't feel* (*I feel I did well on this test; I don't feel right about it*); *don't understand* (*I don't understand why you gave me this grade*); *believe*, also emphasized with *do* (*I believe I did better; I do believe the end of the line is 2 miles away*); *guess* (*I guess there's not respect from you later*); and the adjective *sure* in negative constructions (*I am not sure why I got this grade*).

MLE also used *think* and *don't think* (*I think there is a mistake with my results; I don't think I've deserved this mark*), and *sure* and *surely* (*I`m sure that I can do much better; I surely deserve a higher mark*). In fact, they made quite an extensive use of *sure*, often intensifying it with *pretty* and *really* (*I`m pretty sure I do not have that much mistakes; I`m really sure that I deserve a higher mark*). However, we did not find any examples with *feel* and *don't feel*, nor with *guess*. It is also worth noticing that there were only two examples with *don't think*. This is in stark contrast with the responses of the AS in which the negative form of think was preferred to its positive form. We did not find any examples of the formulaic *I don't think so*. As for *believe*, we found two examples, both preceded by *can't*: *I can't believe that you're late again; I can't believe, don't ask for my help any more*.

4.2.2 Requests

The results presented in this paper show that both AS and MLE used requests as their preferred strategy in the Unfair grade, Noisy party and Cut-in line responses. While in the first two the respondents showed preference for conventionally indirect requests framed as interrogative sentences *MODAL you VP* or *declarative sentences you MODAL VP* (Aijmer 1996: 148), in the third one they showed preference for direct requests realized as obligatory statements and imperatives. Table 2 shows the distribution of requestive frames among native and non-native speakers.

Table 2: Requestive frames in complaints

	Conventionally indirect requests AS - 62% MLE - 57%			**Direct requests AS - 38% MLE - 43%**	
	can/could will/would	embedded requests	want/need statements	statements of obligation	imperatives
AS	34%	8%	20%	8%	30%
MLE	37%	8%	12%	24%	19%

Both native and non-native speakers prefer conventionally indirect requests in comparison with direct requests. The difference between the two groups becomes more significant as the requests become more direct. We can notice a higher percentage for *want/need* statements and imperatives for AS and for statements of obligation for MLE.

A. Requestive questions

A large number of indirect requests have the form of *yes/no* questions containing one of the modal auxiliaries *can/could* or *will/would* (see Table 3). Both native and non-native speakers formulated most of the questions as hearer oriented. This is understandable as we are dealing with complaints, i.e. situations in which the speaker thinks that the hearer has committed an offence and asks him/her to repair it.

The table also shows that the number of questions with *will/would* is much smaller than the number of questions with *can/could*. *Would* is somewhat more frequent in comparison with *will* because it may occur in sentences beginning with *I'd like you to* (*I'd like you to revise my evaluation, sir*). All requests of this type were found in the responses of the Unfair grade task. They make the complainee sound firm, but formal and polite. Some of the AS made their requests more tentative with *if that would be okay*. In MLE responses we found *if possible*.

Table 3: Modals in conventionally indirect requests used in complaints

	AS = 34%				**MLE = 37%**			
	can	could	will	would	can	could	will	would
speaker oriented	9%	0	0	0	4%	0.5%	0	0
hearer oriented	7%	12%	0	3%	14.5%	14.5%	0.5%	2.5%
both	3%	0	0	0	0.5%	0	0	0
total	19%	12%	0	3%	19%	15%	0.5%	2.5%

B. Want/need statements

The *want/need* statements for both groups were formulated with *want*, *need* and *I'd like*. However, the distribution of these verbs within the two groups was very different (see Table 4). While AS formulated most of their responses with *need* (*You need to pay for damages*), MLE formulated them with *want* (*I want to talk with you about the exam results*).

Table 4: Distribution of want, need and I'd like to within each group

AS			**MLE**		
want	need	I'd like to	want	need	I'd like
17%	66%	17%	52%	9%	39%

C. Direct requests

Examples (4), (5) and (6) show that direct requests found in our two corpora take forms of statements of obligation and imperatives. Table 2 shows that AS prefer the use of imperatives (30%), while MLE prefer statements of obligation (24%). In their responses with statement of obligation, AS used the modal verbs *should, have to* and *can't*. In addition to these, MLE also used *must*.

(4) I think we should look over the exam together. (AS)

(5) You are just going to have to wait. (AS)

(6) You must wait for your turn. (MLE)

AS made some of their imperatives more polite by prefacing them with the apologetic expressions *Sorry* and *Excuse me* (9%), by using the pragmatic marker *please* (9%) or by embedding (*But I actually came to tell you to keep down the noise*) (13%). The rest of the imperatives (69%) were not mitigated in any way.

Contrary to this, MLE used *please* extensively (51%). However, in only one instance the imperative was prefaced by an apologetic expression (*I'm sorry*) and there were no instances of embedding the imperative. No other mitigating devices were used.

4.2.3 Questions

Most of the responses in both groups were formulated as questions in the Late pick-up and Damaged car tasks. Some questions are like real information-seeking questions. They may come after a previous accusation formulated as affirmative assertion.

(7) I found a dent in the fender that wasn't there before I loaned the car to you. What happened? (AS)

However, most often they are used on their own or come first in the sequence, formulated as accusations or blames:

(8) Why didn't you tell me about the dent? blame (AS)

(9) Did you dent my car up when I lent it to you? accusation (AS)

(10) What did you do with my car? I discover that there is a dent in the fender. You could told me that you do that. Next time I will think twice before I give you my car. (MLE)

In examples like (10), they are often seen as complaints about unfair treatment by setting up a contrast that displays this unfairness. This is especially typical for MLE.

Their responses on the Late-pick up and Damaged car tasks are much longer than the native speaker responses. As illustrated in the previous example, in all responses there is at least one more assertive statement. The statements do not offer any relevant information about what caused the discontent. Most often they are consequences of the hearer's behavior, which reaffirms the speaker's knowledge that the hearer does not have a reasonable explanation. The hearer is not expected to prove his/her innocence, because there is no way that s/he could do that but to apologize and make up for the loss. Among the responses in these two tasks there were very few embedded questions as in (11). Embedded questions are even more indirect and more polite than non-embedded ones.

(11) I was wondering if you noticed a dent in my fender? (AS)

4.3 Modification of complaints

The amount of internal modification in both groups was very small. Their preferred way of making their complaints more convincing was by applying external modification, i.e. producing supportive moves. Figure 8 illustrates this tendency

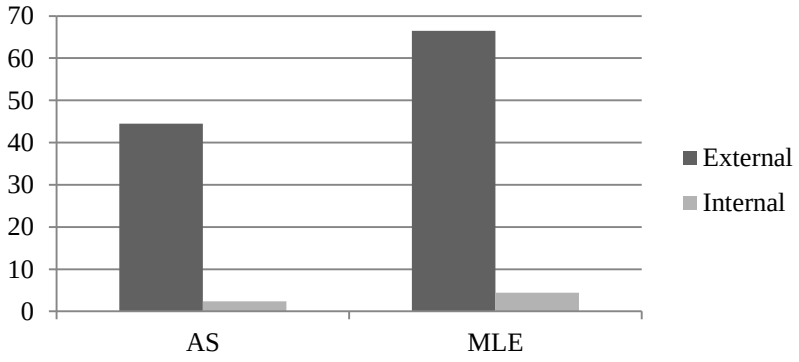

Figure 8: Internal and external modification per group

4.3.1 Internal modification

By internal modification, we mean the use of downgraders and upgraders by MLE and AS in order to soften or aggravate their complaints. The number of downgraders observed in AS complaints is somewhat higher than in MLE. The number of upgraders is somewhat higher in MLE complaints.

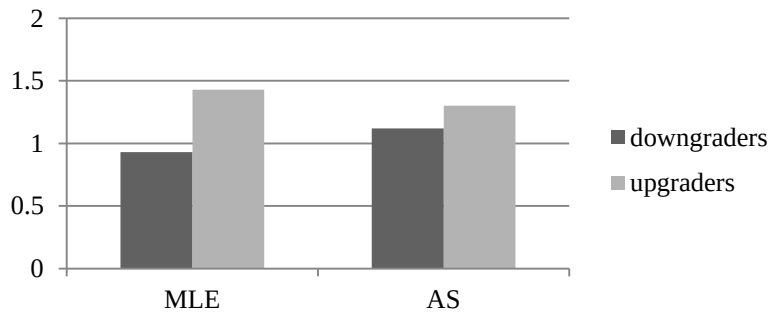

Figure 9: Distribution of downgraders and upgraders per group

A. Downgraders

The number of downgraders in both native and non-native speakers' utterances was limited. In the AS speech acts, there were no examples of limiters, cajolers or appealers, and in the speech acts of MLE we did not find any hedges or appealers. Table 5 comprises the downgraders found in the utterances of both groups. Some of the examples in the MLE column were represented by only one example. More examples were found with *I think, just* and *a little (bit)*.

Table 5: Downgraders in native and non-native complaints

Downgraders	**AS**	**MLE**
downtoners	*just*	*just, maybe*
limiters		*only*
understaters	*a little/a bit*	*a little bit*
hedges	*somewhat, any way*	
subjectivisers	*I (don't) think, I (don't) feel*	*I (don't) think*
cajolers		*you know*
grammatical constructions	*negative constructions* *hypothetical constructions* *past tense*	*negative constructions* *hypothetical constructions*
choice of lexis	*hope, try*	*hope*
solidarity markers	*guy*	

B. Upgraders

The number of upgraders is somewhat higher with MLE than with AS, 1.43% and 1.36% respectively. MLE used somewhat more intensifiers (1.1%) than AS (0.9%), whereas AS used more commitment upgraders (0.47%) than MLE (0.32%). Most common intensifiers that MLE used were *really*, *so*, and *very*. *So* was also more frequent than the others in the AS complaints, but the use of *very* and *really* was rendered to two examples for each. Both groups also used *just*.

(12) You can`t come in front of me just like that. (MLE)

(13) Please don't cut, we've been waiting here for a while and you're just going to have to wait too. (AS)

As for the commitment upgraders, both groups used *I know*. MLE used most often *I'm sure* as well as individual occurrences of some other adjectives and adverbs. However, both groups mostly intensified their complaints with strong lexical items. Some of the words that MLE used include *hard, mad, at least, disturbing, irresponsible, blind, impolite* and so on, many of which are used to evaluate hearer's acts. AS also used evaluative adjectives such as *unfair, unreliable*, and so on. But they also used many colloquial expressions such as *What the heck, the hell, dam,* as well as sarcasm (*Thanks for being on time; Nice of you to finally show up*), something that we did not find in MLE responses.

4.3.2 External modification

As we have seen in the previous section, the amount of internal modification in both groups is very small. Their preferred way of making their complaints more convincing is by applying external modification, i.e. producing supportive moves.

Most commonly, native speaker responses consisted of one or two moves whereas MLE used three or more moves (see Table 6). In particular, native speakers preferred one-move responses in Unfair grade and Damaged car and two-move responses in Noisy party, Cut-in line and Late pick-up. MLE showed preference for two-move responses in Late pick-up, for three-move responses in Unfair grade, Noisy party and Cut-in line and for more-than-three-move responses in Damaged car.

Table 6: Number of moves per response per group

	one move	two moves	three moves	more than three moves
AS	41.6%	41.6%	10.7%	6.1%
MLE	4.2%	27%	40.8%	28%

The supportive moves were formulated as initiators (I), preparators (P), disarmers (D), substantiations (S) and requests for repair (R). Figure 10 shows that in both groups most of the supportive moves were substantiations, followed by initiators and requests. The percentage of preparators, disarmers and threats was very small.

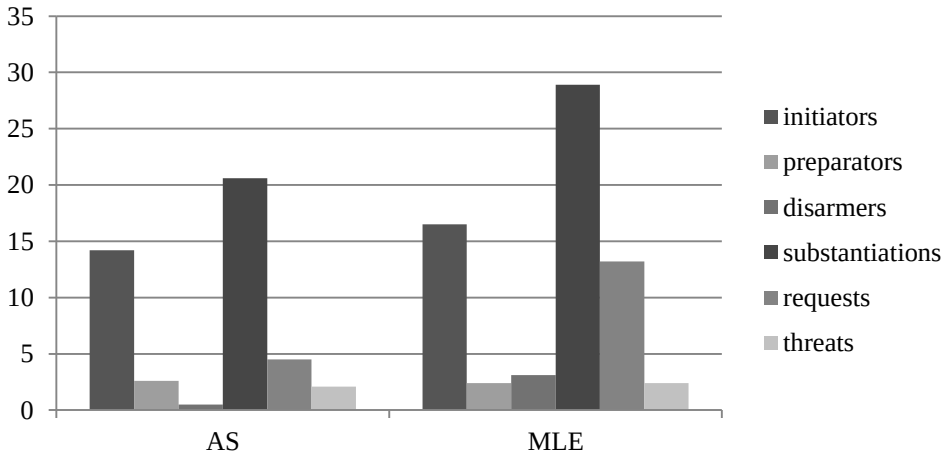

Figure 10: Distribution of downgraders and upgraders per group

The single move responses consisted of the head strategy only. Two types of responses were identified among the longer ones: 1. with an initiator; and 2. without an initiator. For convenience, in the first group we also included responses beginning with preparators and disarmers. The head act was followed by a substantiation, a request or a threat, or by a combination of some of these. In the responses of the MLE, we often found more than one substantiation. We also found examples with substantiations preceding complaints, but they were few in number.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that although MLE used similar strategies as AS, their performance was different in many ways. In this section we discuss the findings in the light of the questions postulated in 4, i.e. if MLE use the same complaint strategies as native speakers of English; if MLE modify their complaints in an appropriate way; and how native speakers view the complaints produced by Macedonian learners of English.

5.1 Frequency of distribution of complaint strategies

Our research showed that AS and MLE formulated their complaints using the same strategies and that these strategies were distributed in a similar way. This complies with other research on this speech act (Chen, Chen & Chang, 2011; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). Olshtain & Weinbach (1993: 113) conclude that this is the result of universality of the situations included in the instrument for data collection.

However, it appears that members of different communities do not perceive all situations in the same way and pooled observations may lead to omission of some important features. Such was the case with the Late pick-up and Damaged car scenarios, in which the members of the two communities demonstrated certain differences.

The difference was especially notable in the Late pick-up. AS formulated their responses for this scenario in an abrasive way and with linguistic means not found in the other situations: sarcasm, insulting words such as *incompetent, unreliable, dumb ass, asshole, dam*, as well as colloquial expressions such as *what the hell, what the heck, dude*. In contrast, in many of the responses of the MLE the expression of disapproval was followed by rapprochement. This is in line with Olshtain and Weinbach's claim that native speakers use harsher complaints than learners (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). Another possible explanation is that this is a situation in which native speakers use colloquial expressions that non-native speakers do not know or do not feel comfortable using. But it may also be due to cultural differences. Namely, unpunctuality is more tolerable in Macedonia than in western cultures.

5.2 Utterance length

A difference between AS and MLE which is immediately apparent from the results is the length of responses. In all tasks, MLE produced more strategies than AS, 2.7 moves and 1.4 moves, respectively. While AS showed preference for one- and two-move responses, MLE showed preference for three- and four-move responses. In addition, MLE produced more turns with initiators while AS produced more turns without initiators. MLE used more preparatory moves and disarmers than AS, especially apologies. Still, most of the supportive moves were reasons for the complaints.

Although Macedonian learners use a larger number of strategies per response, this does not make them more efficient. On the contrary, it makes their complaints

sound different from those produced by the native speakers: they become wordy and repetitive, look less efficient and more prone to argumentation, which often threatens the face of the hearer. This was also confirmed by the native speakers who commented on MLE responses. Their most frequent comments on the unacceptable answers were:

- that they were too lengthy, too wordy and awkward, not precise, and not direct enough;
- that there is no need for elaboration, which may inflame animosity; explanations sometimes
- made responses more aggressive and aggravated complaints;
- some responses were found vague and weird, not specific enough.

5.3 Complaint modification

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate that internal modification of complaints is marginal in both native and non-native speakers' utterances. Here we discuss some of the more obvious differences between the native and non-native speakers.

A. can/could

MLE produced more hearer oriented requests with can than the AS: *Can you explain my grade, please?* Some of the native speakers who checked our answers commented on this use of *can* and corrected it into *could*. And even then noted that those responses imply that the professor was wrong and would put him/her on the defensive. Their preferred responses were formulated with the inclusive *Can/Could we*. The general suggestion was to avoid personal statements, e.g. *You made a mistake*, and use impersonal ones instead, e.g. *There was a mistake*. Second person statements immediately put the person on the defensive and decrease the likelihood of cooperation. The requests of both native and non-native speakers were most often modified with *please*.

B. Embedding requests

The conventionally indirect questions were not further internally modified with hedges or downtoners. However, they were sometimes made more polite by embedding. For this purpose native speakers used constructions with *I was wondering, I just wanted to ask if, do you think, is there any way, would you mind*, and *we better*. MLE also used *I was wondering* and *would you mind*, but not the others. On the other hand they used some constructions that we did not find in the AS's responses. Most often it was *I would like to ask you*, but also *I would kindly ask you, if you could, I want to know if, is there any chance that*, and *I will really appreciate if* [ii]. Often the use of some of these means is result of transfer and they are direct translations of the corresponding Macedonian expressions (*I would like to ask you, I want to know if, is there any chance that*). Others, such as *I would kindly ask you, if you could, I will really appreciate it if* are result of instruction in which these expressions have been emphasized as polite.

[ii] Other research has also pointed out that the 'it' direct object used with some verbs like *appreciate* and *like* is problematic for MLE and they often drop it.

This research has also pointed out that MLE have problems using interrogative forms for embedding their requests (*do you think, is there any way*) as well as expressions used in conversational style (*we better*).

C. Negation

MLE do not use negative constructions in the same way as AS use them. In many cases where AS prefer negative constructions, MLE use positive constructions, often modified with intensifiers: *I don't think you graded me fairly* vs. *I really think I deserve a higher mark; I'm not sure why I got this grade* vs. *I'm really sure that I deserve a higher grade*. MLE lack the knowledge of how to apply negation in a way that makes complaints milder and more diplomatic.

D. Modal verbs

It is also possible to notice some differences in how MLE formulated the *want/need* statements and how they used modal verbs. We were able to notice that MLE preferred making *want* statements whereas AS showed preference for *need* statements (Table 4). *Want*-statements express the speaker's wish directly. *I want to talk about this dent in my car* is direct and assertive. A more tentative correspondence would be *I'd like to*: *I'd like to discuss my grade*. The past tense form *I wanted to* is more polite than *I want*: *I just wanted to ask if you could be less noisy*. *Need* is also used for directly expressing the speaker's need, but is not as forceful as *want*: *You need to pay for damages*. In general, MLE used stronger modal verbs than AS, including the verb *must*.

E. I think

I think can be both a mitigating and intensifying device and sometimes it is difficult to determine its function. It seems that the global organization of the linguistic environment in which it is used has an important role. In examples in which it is accompanied by intensifying devices such as strong or medium modal verbs or supportive acts giving reason or evidence, *I think* sounds strong and assertive and indicates that the speaker does not intend to soften the complaint. *I think* sounds more tentative when used in the past tense (*I thought you were coming at 8.30*) or with modal verbs (*I think there may have been a mistake on my grade; I think there might be a mistake*). The last two examples make use of several means of mitigation: *I think*, past tense of the epistemic *may*, the past form *might*, and defocalization of the complainee. And when *think* is used in questions, as in *Do you guys think you could keep it down a bit?* it is obviously a politeness marker accompanied by the past modal verb *could*, the understater *a bit* and the solidarity marker *guys*. We would like to add here that in addition to I *(don't) think*, AS also used *I (don't) feel*, which sounds even more tentative and vague.

However, none of the latter examples appeared in the MLE corpus of complaints. In all complaints of MLE, *I think* was used with strong or medium modal verbs and other intensifiers (*I think there must be some mistake; I really think that I should have a higher*

mark) or with statements expressing reasons or other arguments (*Professor I really think I deserve a higher mark for this final. I`ve studied so hard and I`m pretty sure I do not have that much mistakes*). While many authors list *I think* as a hedge in expressing politeness (Holmes, 1990; Aijmer, 1997; Kärkkäinen, 2003; Baumgarten & House, 2010), it can also convey the meaning of confidence and assertiveness (Hooper, 1975; Chafe, 1986; Simon-Vanderbergen, 2000), in which case it does not mitigate the illocution force of the speech act. It is this use of *I think* that is pervasive in the speech acts produced by Macedonian learners of English. MLE do not primarily use *I think* to express uncertainty but to express strong opinions. Their utterances are mainly assertive and goal oriented.

F. Apologies

Complaints were often prefaced by apologies, MLE complaints more often than AS ones, 33% and 10% respectively. AS used *Excuse me* most often, and *Sorry* to a much lesser degree. There were also two examples of *Excuse you*. Not only did MLE apologize more often but also used a greater variety of apologizes. In addition to *(I'm) sorry* and *Excuse me*, we also found expressions of the type *Sorry for interrupting you, I am very sorry to disturb you, I'm really sorry to bother you*. These made the utterances sound patronizing and inappropriate for the given context. Another problem was the discrepancy in the use of *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry*. Borkin and Reinhart (1978: 60) define *I'm sorry* as "*an expression of dismay or regret about a state of affairs viewed or portrayed as unfortunate by the speaker*" and *Excuse me* as "a formula used as a remedy. It is only appropriate when a social rule has been broken or is about to be broken, and when the speaker views or portrays himself as responsible for this breach". However, they admit that the differences are subtle and that it is difficult for foreigners to decide "*what constitutes a Social infraction in American society".* MLE cannot get much help from their mother tongue either because in Macedonian the same formula is used in both types of situations. Learners' preferance for *I'm sorry* is probably a result of its widespread distribution in English

G: Lexis

What is striking for the choice of lexis is the use of *try* and *feel* in the native data and their absence from the non-native data: *Can you please try to keep the noise down; You're late, now I will be late for my class. Try to be on time. I don't feel right about it*. *Try* and *feel* are not used in this context with their literal meanings. Rather, they are used in line with negative politeness - not to press people to do something. Foreign language learner communication is also impeded by lack of knowledge of vocabulary appropriate for the situation in focus. By not selecting the exact words and using "make-up" words to fill in the gap, learners may sound weird or unintelligible (*low the music, turn lower, shut down the party, extra grade, to prove myself*). A sentence like *Will you give me a fair explanation for writing me a lower mark?* though understandable, sounds offensive and puts the hearer on the spot.

H. Forms of address

Another field in which MLE show hesitation is how to address people. They used *sir* (*I`m sorry sir, but we are all waiting for tickets*) for addressing a stranger, but also *Mr/Mrs* without adding a family name (*Mr./Mrs. can you turn down the music?*). They also addressed the professor without adding his/her surname (*Professor, I'm sorry to interrupt*).

Certain forms of address are used as in-group identity markers which create intimacy between the speakers, called terms of solidarity by some researchers (Kakava, 2002). For this purpose, AS used *guys* and *dude* (*Can you guys keep it down?; Dude what the hell? Does the noise have to be that loud?*). MLE used the forms *neighbour* (*Excuse me, neighbour, would you mind being more quiet*), *brother* (*Hey, brother, I gave you my car in a working condition*), *mate* (*Sorry, mate, but you should stop with the noise*), *pal* (*Hey pal, can't you see the line are you blind or something?*), *boy* (*Hey boy, I'm sorry*) and *guy* (*Excuse me guy*). The use of *Professor* and *Mr./Mrs.* without a family name as well as of *neighbour* was influenced by how these forms are used in Macedonian. The above examples show that MLE tried to establish solidarity mostly by creating terms corresponding to the Macedonian ones. The limited number of native forms that foreign language learners use to establish solidarity with their interlocutors may be also ascribed to the informality of these means. In a foreign language it is difficult to build in familiarity and solidarity with means that are very informal. Speakers themselves do not feel comfortable using these means and the hearers, if they are native speakers, would not understand their use as an attempt of creating solidarity, but as rude and inappropriate. AS also used different forms of address when aggravating complaints. Native speakers used *sucka, clown, duckhead* as well as some swear words. MLE did not use any of these highly colloquial words. First, they are foreign language learners and cannot express all their emotions in the same way as native speakers do; second, they are in a quite formal environment which is restrictive of their expression.

6. Conclusion

The complaint analysis presented in this paper provides some evidence about the pragmatic competence of MLE. Although many aspects of MLE and AS communication seem to correlate, we were able to note several significant deviations in the language behavior of MLE. First, there are linguistic means that native speakers use, but MLE do not use, or barely use them (question and request embedding, negative constructions, *Do you think, I don't think so*, some lexis that make utterances more tentative, address forms and in-group markers that bring about solidarity). Second, some linguistic means are used with different force in the interlanguage of MLE (questions, *I think*, directives, (de)focalization, use of supportive moves). Third, some linguistic means are used inappropriately (*can* vs. *could*, strong modal verbs, external modification). Besides, MLE are not fully aware of how to make their utterances efficient.

The information obtained through this research will be further used for designing e-learning modules for developing language learners' pragmatic competence. The modules will address the deficiencies discovered in this research. They will consist of two types of activities: activities for raising learners' awareness of the pragmatic meanings conveyed by specific linguistic means which native speakers use, and activities that will enable learners to formulate speech acts with reference to the situation, interlocutors, emotional mood, etc.

Another point that we would like to make here is that the learning goals for English have changed. Having enough English for travel purposes or finding your way around is not enough today. The assumption that fluency is more important than accuracy is not valid any more. Students need to prepare to live the language, to study in English, to use English at work, and to be competitive with people from other countries. To achieve this goal, they need to recognize the fact that "*Language socialization depends on the acquisition of what is expected to be said in particular situations, and what kind of language behavior is considered appropriate in the given speech community*" (Kecskes 2014).

About the Author

Marija Kusevska is assistant professor at the Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delchev-Stip, Republic of Macedonia, where she teaches courses on English Linguistics and Contrastive analysis. In her research she mostly deals with topics of pragmatics and intercultural communication that focus on the notions of face, politeness, discourse-shaping practices and the use of specific linguistic means for specific purposes.

References

Abdolrezapour, Parisa, Azizollah Dabaghi & Zohreh Kassaian. (2012). Iranian EFL learners' realization of complaints in American English. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies* 12(2). 711-724.

Aijmer, Karin. (1996). *Conversational routines in English: Convention and creativity*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.

Barron, Anne. (2003). *Acquisition in interlanguage pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Baumgarten, Nicole & Juliane House. (2010). I think and I don't know in English as lingua franca and native English discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42. 1184–1200.

Beebe, Leslie M., Tomoko Takahashi & Robin Uliss-Weltz. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In Robin C. Scarcella, Elaine S. Anderson & Stephen D. Krashen (eds.), *On the development of communicative competence in a second language*, 55-73. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Boxer, Diana. (1993a). Social distance and speech behavior: The case of indirect complaints. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19. 103-125.

Boxer, Diana. (1993b). *Complaining and commiserating*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson. (1987*). Politeness. Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chafe, Wallace. (1986). Evidentiality in English conversation and academic writing. In Wallace Chafe & Johanna Nichols (eds.), *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*, 261-272. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Chen, Yuan-shan, Chun-yin Doris Chen & Miao-Hsia Chang. (2011). American and Chinese complaints: Strategy use from a cross-cultural perspective. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 8 (2). 253-275.

Clyne, Michael, Martin Ball & Deborah Neil. (1991). Intercultural communication at work in Australia: Complaints and apologies in turns. *Multilingua*. 251-273.

Decock, S., & Depraetere, I. (2018). (In)directness and complaints: A reassessment. *Journal of Pragmatics* 132, 33-46.

Drew, Paul & Traci Walker. (2009). Going too far: Complaining, escalating and disaffiliation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 2400-2414.

Eslamirasekh, Abbass, Davood Jafari Seresht & Masoumeh Mehregan. (2012). How do you react to the breakdown after it happens? Do you complain about it?: a contrastive study on the complaint behavior in American English and Persian. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 47. 34-40.

Farnia, Maryam, Lyn Buchheit & Shahida Banubinti Salim. (2010). "I need to talk to you" - A contrastive pragmatic study of speech act of complaint in American English and Malaysian. *Journal of Language Society and Culture* 30. 11-24.

Geluykens, Ronald & Bettina Kraft. (2008). The use(fulness) of corpus research in cross-cultural pragmatics: Complaining in intercultural service encounters. In Jesús Romero-Trillo (ed.), *Pragmatics and Corpus Linguistics*, 93-117. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

Heinemann, Trine. (2009). Participation and exclusion in third party complaints. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 2435-2451.

Holmes, Janet. (1990). Apologies in New Zeland English. Language in Society 19 (2). 155-199.

Hooper, Joan B. (1975). On assertive predicates. In John P. Kimball (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics*, 91-124. New York: Academic press.

Kakava, Christina. (2002). Opposition in Modern Greek discourse: Cultural and contextual constraints. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34. 1537–1568.

Kärkkäinen, Elise. (2003). *Epistemic stance in English conversation. A description of its interactional functions, with a focus on I think*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

Kasper, Gabriele. (1989). Variation in interlanguage speech act realization. In Susan Gas, Carolyn Madden, Dennis Preston & Larry Selinker (eds.), *Variation in second language acquisition: Discourse and pragmatics*, 37-58. Clevedon & Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Kasper, Gabriele & Shoshana Blum-Kulka. (1993). *Interlanguage pragmatics*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kecskes, Istvan. (2014). *Intercultural pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Koshik, Irene. (2005). *Beyond rhetorical questions: Assertive questions in everyday interaction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Laforest, Marty. (2009). Complaining in front of a witness: Aspects of blaming others for their behaviour in multi-party family interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 2452–2464.

Leech, Geoffrey. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.

Liu, Jianda. (2004). Measuring interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of Chinese EFL learners. PhD dissertation. City University of Hong Kong.

Monzoni, Chiara Maria. (2009). Direct complaints in (Italian) calls to the ambulance: The use of negatively framed questions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 2466-2478.

Murphy, Beth & Joyce Neu. (1996). My grade's too low: The speech act set of complaining. In Susan M. Gass & Joyce Neu (eds.), *Speech Acts Across Cultures. Challenges to communication in a second language*, 191-216. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gryter.

Olshtain, Elite & Liora Weinbach. (1987). Complaints: A study of speech act behavior among native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. In Jef Verschueren & Marcella Bertuccelli-Papi (eds.), The pragmatic perspective. Selected papers from the 1985 international pragmatic conference, 195-210. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

Olshtain, Elite & Liora Weinbach. (1993). Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining. In Gabriele Kasper & Shoshona Blum-Kulka (eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics*, 108-122. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rinnert, Carol, Yoko Nogami & Chiaki Iwai. (2006). Preferred complaint strategies in Japanese and English. Authentic Communication: Proceedings of the 5th Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference. Shizuoka, Japan: Tokai University College of Marine Science. 32-47.

Roever, Carsten. (2005). *Testing ESL pragmatics: Development and validation of a web-based assessment battery*. Frankfurt am Main, DEU: Peter Lang AG.

Ruusuvuori, J., & Lindfors, J. W. (2009). Complaining about previous treatment in health care settings. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2425-2434.

Scollon, Ron & Suzanne W. Scollon. (2003). *Intercultural communication. A discourse approach*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Simon-Vandenbergen, Anne-Marie. (2000). The functions of I think in political discourse. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 10 (1). 41-63.

Traverso, Veronique. (2009). The dilemmas of third-party complaints in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 2385-2399.

Trosborg, Anna. (1995). *Interlanguage Pragmatics: Requests, Complaints, and Apologies*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Creative Commons licensing terms
Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of English Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).