APTIS GENERAL WRITING TASK 4: AN EXPLORATION OF PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO GAIN COMMUNICATIVE GOALS IN TRANSACTIONAL E-MAILS BY QUY NHON UNIVERSITY'S ENGLISH-MAJORED SENIORS

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Abstract:

This study's purpose is to explore the pragmatic strategies used by the English-majored seniors at Quy Nhon University (QNU) when they took Aptis General Writing Test (AGWT) Task 4. To fulfil this task, students are required to write two transactional e-mails in two different styles which are informal and formal in turn to convey a specific social function. Successful completion of this task requires from students not only an accurate construction of framing moves but also a flexible and precise usage of pragmatic strategies (e.g. ability to express intended thoughts appropriately in different social interaction contexts). The participants in this study were 30 fourth-year students whose major was English at QNU. The data were collected from their 30 trial-Aptis-writing-test papers. The findings revealed the pragmatic strategies they had utilized to attain the two e-mails' communicative goals and simultaneously depicted how their usage of these strategies had influenced the epistolary writing. Hopefully, this study's results will be useful for both test developers in the process of test validation and localisation and teachers in the process of preparing students for the AGWT Task 4.

Keywords: AGWT Task 4, English-majored seniors, pragmatic strategies, communicative goals

1. Introduction

Circular No.1 dated January 24th, 2014 by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam promulgated a local set of standards of foreign languages for undergraduates-to-be of all universities. With the adaptation to it, since 2015, before graduation English-majored seniors at QNU have been required to achieve an IELTS certification of 5.5 or equivalently, an Aptis one of 151 scores. Interestingly, in recent years for most English-majored seniors of many consecutive courses at this university, Aptis test, which was

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developed by the British Council, has probably been a strong preference of choice compared to IELTS test.

Since its birth in 2012, Aptis test is used by a wide range of organizations, including educational institutions, ministries of education, and commercial organizations because of its real strength of validation, flexibility, accessibility and efficiency (including cost) in testing the language proficiency (O'Sullivan & Dunlea, 2015). Despite its popularity and fruitfulness, so far very few research in Vietnam has been carried out on the basic components making up the full, four-skills package of the test, especially Writing component and its mostly vital task – Task 4.

To perform well in AGWT Task 4, the very firstly-crucial thing test-takers need to do is to assess the two e-mails' contextual factors, including the relative power relationship and social distance between the writer and the recipient, and the rights and obligations of each party in the given context (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018). For example, does the writer have the right to make a request in the given situation? Does the recipient have obligation to grant or deal with the request? Then based on this sociopragmatic analysis, test-takers need to choose linguistic forms accordingly for expressing their intended meaning. "*The mapping of linguistic forms onto their correct functional meaning and appropriate context of use in the target language can be a challenging task for many second language (L2) learners*" (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018, p. 6). This is because discourse communities may differ in sociopragmatic perceptions regarding politeness, rights, and roles in social relationships as well as linguistic conventions for encoding meaning. When test-takers transfer from their first language (L1) to the target one, communication purposes breakdown may happen due to their lack of intercultural sensitivity and inappropriate application of the sociopragmatic rules and pragmalinguistic conventions of their L1 when communicating in the target language. Besides, as a hybrid form of communication (an interface between oral and written language), e-mail communication affords a wide variation of registers, depending on the specific context of communication, and thus, poses a great deal of uncertainty to L2 learners (Chen, 2006).

Despite its great influence on communicative contexts, pragmatics of e-mail communication is less researched (Chen, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2015). More importantly, there does not appear any official approach to test-takers' pragmatic strategies used in AGWT Task 4 – a completely brand-new computer-based format of e-mail communication to most Vietnamese students – within educational contexts in Vietnam. This issue captures the author's curiosity and interest and, therefore, deserves to be properly studied. More specifically, this study seeks efforts to answer the two following research questions:

1) What pragmatic strategies did QNU's English-majored seniors employ to gain communicative goals of transactional e-mails in AGWT Task 4?
2) How did their usage of these pragmatic strategies influence the epistolary writing in AGWT Task 4?

Findings from this study will hopefully be useful for both test developers in the process of validation and localisation and teachers in the process of preparing students for the test.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender differences in language uses

Understanding the different communication patterns which women and men typically use assists interlocutors to reach better understanding and finally to achieve communicative purposes.

Since the 1970s, the study of gender and discourse has been growing by leaps and bounds. A lot of previous research has indicated that male and female have different tendency of using language to express their thoughts.

There is a general agreement that women are more likely to use politeness patterns than men in their speech. It is supported by a great number of well-known authors such as Kalcik (1975), Cameron (1989), Holmes (1995) in that women's linguistic behavior can be broadly characterized as affiliative or cooperative rather than competitive or control-oriented. Considering gender as an influential factor in determining language perception or production, Baxter (2000) and Mikako (2005) indicate that females do use more positive politeness strategies than males. This might clarify the reason why women use more tentative language than men (Robnett & Leaper, 2011). However, Mills (2003) states that there is no general rule about the general behavior of men and women rather "*decisions about what is appropriate or not are decided upon strategically within the parameters of the community of practice*" (p. 235).

2.2 Transactional e-mails

E-mail has long been a core tool for business communications since the Computerize Information Age. Transactional e-mail is a type of e-mail sent to facilitate an agreed-upon transaction between the sender and the recipient.

In terms of content, like traditional business letters e-mails need to be clear, concise, pertinently informative with an appropriate level of formality in accordance with certain contexts. According to Barron (2008), e-mail discourse represents a hybrid register resembling both speech (i.e. less formal) and writing (i.e. more formal), hence lending itself to a great range of styles (e.g. from those of a casual conversation to those of a conventional business letter), depending on a particular communicative contexts and writer – recipient role relationships. However, in comparison with traditional business letter, norms concerning the level of formality of e-mails are less clear and varied across cultures (Bjørge, 2007). As such, people from high power-distance cultures, characterized by inequalities of power, prefer a high degree of fomality when writing e-mails to authority figures. On the other hand, people from low power-distance cultures, where no such inequality is assumed, prefer informality in corresponding contexts (Bjørge, 2007).

In terms of organizational structure, Chen (2015) and Kankaanranta (2006) assume that e-mails generally comprise two major moves which are (1) framing moves and (2) content moves. Contributing to the physical layout of the message, framing moves consist of e-mail opening and closing which may be absent in informal e-mails, but occur frequently in initiating formal e-mails sent up the institutional hierarchy (Bou-Franch, 2011). Although "empty of content", these sequences are "*interpersonally loaded*" in the sense that "*in opening sequences, the social relationship between participants is negotiated and established, or recalled*", and "*in closing sequences, participants work to accomplish a joint, negotiated, frictionless termination of the social event*" (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1773).

2.3 Pragmatic strategy variations to acquire communicative purposes in transactional e-mails

As for Balconi and Amenta (2010), in using language to communicate individuals would intrinsically make choices and build strategies based on some of unique properties of pragmatic communicative competences including (1) variability, (2) negotiability, (3) adaptibility, (4) salience, (5) indeterminacy and (6) dynamicity.

Accordingly, though AGWT Task 4 is not purely a test of L2 pragmatic competence, what this dyad refer to should be the must-based-on pragmatically properties for test-takers to perform the two transactional e-mails successfully. Namely, the first e-mail, typically an indirect complaint involving expressions of "*dissastisfaction to an interlocutor about someone or something that is not present*" (Boxer, 1993, p. 29), is written to a recipient familiar to test-takers (a friend, a fellow member of a club), so the language style required in this e-mail is informal. The second one, a direct complaint, which is "*an act whose purpose is to give negative evaluation of a situation or an act for which the complainee may be held responsible with an implicature that what he or she has done brings undesirable consequences to the complainer*" (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993, pp. 108-122), is aimed for a strange audience to candidates and thus it should be written in a formal register. Accordingly, the pragmatic strategies applied in each e-mail should be different. For instance, in responding to informal e-mails, opening and closing may be absent but occur frequently in initiating formal e-mails sent up the institutional hierarchy. As asserted by Spencer-Oatey (2000, p. 29), the choice of forms of greetings in the opening sequence is reflective of "*a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between interlocutors*" in the perspective of the rapport management framework. In particular, greetings can contribute to the formality/deference politeness or informality/solidarity politeness of the e-mail (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1776). Relating to closing sequences, previous research (Economidou-Kogetsidid, 2011 & Kankaanranta, 2006) has revealed great stylistic variations, ranging from a simple "thank you" plus a signature to good wishes (e.g. "Have a nice day!"), appeals for actions (e.g. "I look forward to hearing from you"), farewell ("See you", "Regards" or "Sincerely") or a combination of multiple moves.

2.4 L2 learners' pragmatic competence and the usage of pragmatic strategies

The term "pragmatic competence" was introduced by sociolinguist Jenny Thomas in 1983 in the article "Cross – Cultural Pragmatic Failure". In that article, she defines pragmatic competence as the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context. That explains why Kasper (1997) asserts that a reasonably high level of pragmatic competence is vital for successful communication in the target language because pragmatic competence obviously places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistics means at hand.

According to Leech (1983), two major components of pragmatic competence include sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. The former refers to knowledge of social rules (e.g. cultural norms, politeness and taboos) that govern speakers' or writers' language use and hearers' or readers' possible interpretations. The latter refers to knowledge of linguistic resources required for expressing and comprehending meanings and intentions. For a long time, native speaker competence has been widely accepted as a point of reference for assessing non-native speakers' competence (McKay, 2002). However, Roever (2001) points out that such practices are considered problematic in several aspects in the context of English as a lingua franca communication in which the assessment of *"appropriateness" criterion is much "culturally relative and bound with cultural identity"* (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018, p. 6). Hence, in the field of L2 pragmatic assessment, pragmatic choices are recommended to be assessed *"not in terms of how much it approximates native speakers norms but based on learners' intended meanings and the nuances they choose to communicate"* (Ishihara, 2009, p. 447). Thus, it makes sense why the main focus of interest in L2 pragmatics is speech acts, such as making a request or expressing an opinion. Speech acts are often studied in relation to politeness, that is, choices speakers make in language use to display respect towards and rapport with others (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018, p. 8). For example, instead of producing a direct request such as "Pass the salt", speaker may opt for an indirect request such as "Can you pass the salt?" to avoid coerciveness, thus reducing potential friction. Politeness may also involve using respectful forms of address such as "Sir" and "Madam", or polite routines such as saying "thank you" and "please" to make others feel respected. In selecting particular politeness strategies (e.g. deference politeness or solidarity politeness), speakers consider their role relationship with others (e.g. are they equal partners or does one hold a higher or lower social status? Do they know one another well or not?), as well as the degree of imposition (low or high) imposed on the addressee by the produced speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, deference politeness is often preferred when a high imposition request is produced by a person of less power while solidarity politeness is more likely expressed when the social distance and power difference between speakers are minimal.

Recent years have started to witness increasingly more studies focusing on how L2 users communicate speech acts in the written mode, especially requests in e-mails and some interesting and prominent points are realised from those studies of L2 speech

act use and acquisition. Specifically, despite that some pragmatic knowledge is universal and shared among speakers of various languages, L2 users' linguistic and cultural backgrounds may still considerably impact on how they recognise and produce speech acts in the target language (Ellis, 2008). For example, American learners of L2 Spanish tend to prefer conventionally indirect request strategies when interaction in the L2, due to a transfer of pragmatic norms governing their native language use (Shiverly, 2011). In contrast, Chinese learners of L2 English tend to prefer direct request strategies but rely heavily on pre-request supportive moves to achieve indirectness, a pattern also found in their L1 (Chang & Hsu, 1998). Besides, although there does not seem to be a linear relationship between one's general proficiency and his or her pragmatic competence in the target language, advanced learners' speech act use is more socially appropriate than that of their lower proficiency fellow learners (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hendriks, 2008; Rose, 2000), particularly because of a greater use of modification devices for politeness effects (Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Nguyen, 2008; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2006, 2008; Warga, 2004). These findings are especially useful for this study to rely on to answer the research questions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study design

This study was designed as a descriptive study with the qualitative method. According to Zuriah (2006, p. 92), qualitative research is the procedure with descriptive data in forms of written words or sayings words from people who can be observed. The researcher took the role as the teacher in charge of instructing and preparing 30 English-majored seniors of QNU all theory (format, time for completion, and score assessment) relating to AGWT in general and AGWT Task 4 in particular. The data were then collected from the trial-Aptis-writing-test papers at the end of the preparation course.

3.2 Participants

Taking part in this study were 30 English-majored fourth-year students of academic year 2016-2019 at Department of Foreign Languages, QNU, Vietnam. These seniors were the students who had enrolled in the very first preparation course for Aptis test of QNU Foreign Languages Center. During the course of 36 sessions, they took 3 sessions a week for Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing in turn. As such, they had 9 sessions in total for preparing each skill.

3.3 Material analysis and coding procedure
3.3.1 Material analysis

The AGWT Task 4, which takes the form of a written Discourse Completion Task (Roever, 2015), has the sole format for all Aptis test designs. It consists of a situational description (e.g. an e-mail, a note, etc.,) subsequent to with two questions, each of which requires test-takers to write an e-mail to a specific recipient to express their feelings

about a negative situation and suggest possible alternative(s). As such, the difference between the two questions lies in the content of the situation. That is the reason why the researcher could freely choose any tasks from the online data bank of British Council as the material source for Aptis writing test revision for the students in the preparation course. The illustration for one of such tasks can be seen below:

AGWT Task 4 used for instructing the students in the preparation course

You are a member of a photography club. You received this e-mail from the club secretary.

Dear Member,
I am writing to inform you that the next of our photography club (taking photos of historical buildings) has been postponed for 2 months, as few of the buildings have been damaged due to last week's storm. It will now take place on Saturday 15th of March. The deposit that you paid for the trip will be used for the March trip. Please contact to the club secretary if you need to change your plans or would like a refund.

Question 1: Write an e-mail to your friend from the club. Write about your feelings and what you are planning to do. Write about 50 words. You have 10 minutes.
Question 2: Write an e-mail to the secretary of the club. Write about your feelings and what you would like to do. Write 120-150 words. You have 20 minutes.

Obviously, the questions require test-takers to carry out two different language functions (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018, p. 13). The first one involves making an indirect complaint or a complaint directed at a non-present, third party (Boxer, 1993). Meanwhile, the second one involves making a direct complaint, targeted at the recipient who is held accountable for the substance of the complaint (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993). Because a direct complaint involves a face-to-face confrontation by expressing the complainer's displeasure and dissatisfaction towards the recipient's undesirable act, it can threaten the recipient's positive face (i.e. desire to be approved and accepted by others) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). By contrast, an indirect complaint does not involve a negative evaluation toward the addressee but the complainer may risk presenting himself as critical (Kozlova, 2004), thus damaging his own positive face. Also, in sharing his negative feelings, the complainer expects the addressee to display commiseration and sympathy with the complainer, hence potentially threatening the addressee's negative face (i.e. desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Besides, another major distinction between the two questions lies in the social distance and relative power status between the writer and the recipient (a friend versus a strange audience) (Nguyen and Marwan, 2018, p. 14). Thus, to perform well in AGWT Task 4, test-takers need to be able to assess relevant contextual factors (e.g. writer-recipient relationship, role, rights and obligations) and make appropriate choices in language use accordingly for expressing their intended meanings.

3.3.2 Coding procedure

The teaching process took place in two months from September 10th, 2018 to November 1st, 2018 with 9 sessions. The details of the process can be seen as follows:

Day 1	→ Introduction of Aptis Writing test (format, requirements, scoring standards)
Day 2	→ Introduction of Aptis Writing test: Task 1
Day 3	→ Introduction of Aptis Writing test: Task 2
Day 4	→ Introduction of Aptis Writing test: Task 3
Day 5-8	→ Introduction of Aptis Writing test: Task 4
Day 9	→ Conducting a fully-constituted trial-Aptis Writing Test

As can be seen above, the AGWT Task 4 instruction occupied 3 out of 9 sessions which was meritorious with its importance and score. The students were carefully instructed (1) framing moves and (2) content moves typically employed for indirect and direct complaint e-mails. Tables 1 and 2 below which are adapted to Nguyen and Marwan's (2018, pp. 17-21) show categories employed for coding the strategies the students used to gain communicative goals for the indirect and direct complaint e-mails in the trial test.

Table 1: Coding categories for indirect e-mails

Type	Description	Examples (taken from data)
Framing moves	*Layout of the e-mail message*	
1. Greeting/opening	the writer opens the e-mail with a greeting	*Hi,* (informal) *Howdy partner,* (informal)
2. Self-introduction	the writer gives information on his or her identities	Rarely occurs in an e-mail sent to a familiar recipient.
3. Purpose	the writer explicitly states the purpose of his or her e-mail, or makes reference to the complainee's e-mail	*Just let you know…* *(informal)* *I am writing to inform you …* (formal)
4. Pre-closing	the writer signals the closing by moves such as expressing appreciation for the recipient's time, good wishes, or appealing for action	*Call me soon.* (informal) *See you on Sunday.* (informal) *Let's meet up this evening.* (informal)
5. Closing	signs off and signature	*Bye,* (informal)

		Love, (informal)
		See ya, (informal)
Content moves	*Core elements of the e-mail message*	
1. Realisation strategies	Head act; the following strategies are arranged from *the least direct to the most direct*	
1.1 Negative emotions/reaction (disappointment, dissatisfaction)	the complainer expresses negative reaction to the complainable or asserts the complainable (with or without explicit mention of the complainee)	*I'm sad to hear that…*
1.2 Reference to the offensive act/problem	report what has gone wrong	*I'm a little bit upset for this cancellation…*
1.3 Statement of possible solution on the part of the complainee, or hopes and wishes	indicate what the complainer thinks the complainee could/should do (have done)	*Why don't they organize a tour to take some pictures of the exhibition in out town?*
1.4 Future action/alternative plan on the part of the complainer; or soliciting actions from the recipients		*I'm gonna ask for a refund.* *I decided to write them to complain.*
2. Modifications	including linguistic elements for politeness effects	
2.1 Syntactic structure	embedding past tense	*I think* they should… Why *didn't* they…
2.2 Hedges		*I'm not sure* but I think I would… *I reckon* … *Is it possible* that you…
2.3 Politeness marker		*please*
2.4 Subjunctive mood		*could, would, should*
2.5 Cajolers	devices to involve the recipient	*you know, as you see*
2.6 Consultative	consulting recipient's opinion	*Agree?* *Do you feel like me?*
2.7 Sweeteners	employed to lessen the harshness of the complaint	*The club is useful. I can make friends with like-minded people.*
2.8 Grounder	explanation of the dissatisfaction or request for remedy	*I will contact the secretary and exchange this issue.*
2.9 Solidarity	expression of empathy with and understanding of the complainee's choice	*I won't mind it due to the unexpected disaster.* *It was not a mistake of the club.*
2.10 Disarmer/apology	employed to reduce potential offense	
3. Intensification	words or phrases that could increase the coerciveness of the utterance and need to be avoided	
3.1 Intensifiers		This news *really* makes me shocked. *Shit*!

		How *frustrating*!
3.2 Statement of urgency		Remember to reply me *soon!*

Example of how to code an indirect e-mail

Student female 04	Move/strategy	Modification/ intensification	Remarks
Hi there,	Greetings (informal)		
I'm completely floored by the announcement.	Negative emotions		
Imagine!		Cajoler "imagine"	
I joined the club just last week and now they have postponed the next of our photography club for 2 months.	Purpose (specific and explicit)		
Should I've known earlier I wouldn't have signed up! I've been looking forward to it for a long time. What a let-down!	Negative emotions	Grounder "I've been looking forward to it"	This whole segment counts as one because it focuses on one unified idea which is the complainer's disappointment.
I reckon I'm gonna ask for a refund.	Future action on the part of the complainer		
Bye, Van	Closings (informal)		This whole segment counts as one closing (sign off + signature)

Table 2: Coding categories for direct e-mails

Type	Description	Examples (taken from data)
Framing moves	*Layout of the e-mail message*	
1. Greeting/opening	the writer opens the e-mail with a greeting	*Dear…* (formal)
2. Self-introduction	the writer gives information on his or her identities	*I'm…*
3. Purpose	the writer explicitly states the purpose of his or her e-mail, or makes reference to the complainee's e-mail	*I am emailing to tell you…* (informal) *I am writing this email to express…* (formal)
4. Pre-closing	the writer signals the closing by moves such as expressing appreciation for the recipient's time, good wishes, or appealing for action	*I look forward to hearing from you.* (formal) *I hope my suggestions will be taken into consideration.* (formal)
5. Closing	signs off and signature	*Yours sincerely,* (formal) *Regards,* (formal)

Content moves	Core elements of the e-mail message	
1. Realisation strategies	Head act; the following strategies are arranged from *the least direct to the most direct*	
1.1 Negative emotions (disappointment, dissatisfaction)	the complainer expresses negative reaction to the complainable or asserts the complainable (with or without explicit mention of the complainee)	*I was quite depressed when I was informed…* *I am quite disappointed…*
1.2 Reference to the offensive act/problem	report what has gone wrong	*Thank you for your recent e-mail, informing us that the next photo trip has been postponed for two months and our next trip will start in March.*
1.3 Requests for repair/suggestions for remedy	the complainer reminds the complainee about their responsibility	*I hope you could pay more attention on preparation of the next arrangements so that our club can not be cancelled by such a nonsense mistake.*
1.4 Future action/alternative plan on the part of the complainer; or soliciting actions from the recipients		*I will follow our plan.* *I am looking forward to join the March trip.* *Could you refund the money for me?*
2. Modifications	including linguistic elements for politeness effects	
2.1 Syntactic structure	embedding past tense	*I think they should…* I received your e-mail…
2.2 Hedges		*Is it convenient that you…*
2.3 Politeness marker		*please*
2.4 Subjunctive mood		*could, would, should*
2.5 Cajolers	devices to involve the recipient	*you know, as you see*
2.6 Sweeteners	employed to lessen the harshness of the complaint	*I appreciate all your hard work for the club…*
2.7 Grounder	explanation of the dissatisfaction or request for remedy	*I must go to China for my business at the middle of March so I cannot attend the replacement for the next meeting.*
2.8 Solidarity	expression of empathy with and understanding of the complainee's choice	*I understand that such cancellations do happen due to last week's storm…* *The storm and its harmful consequences are unexpected.*
2.9 Disarmer/apology	employed to reduce potential offense	
3. Intensification	words or phrases that could increase the coerciveness of the utterance and need to be avoided	
3.1 Intensifiers		I *really* like taking photos…
3.2 Statement of urgency		I am looking forward to

| | | | hearing from you *soon!* |

Example of how to code a direct e-mail

Student female 07	Move/ strategy	Modification/ intensification	Remarks
Dear Sir/Madam,			
Thank you for your e-mail informing us that our photography club has been postponed for 2 months. I am very much looking forward to this trip.	Purpose (explicitly mentioned)	Sweetener	This whole segment counts as one because it focuses on one unified idea.
However, storm causes serious damage to everything so I can understand this reason and I sympathise with our club.	Reference to the problem	Solidarity	
On Saturday 15th of March, I have free time so I will attend our trip.	Future action		
Moreover, I agreed with you that my deposit will be used for the March trip.		Sweetener (I agreed with you)	
I appreciate all your hard work for the club and look forward to celebrating the next of our photography club. I hope that you will have many activities to make our trip have many laugh and wonderful memories.	Suggestions for future repair	Sweetener (I appreciate all your hard work for the club) Grounder (look forward)	
Yours sincerely, Kieu	Closings (formal)		

3.4 Instruments

The AGWT Task 4 in the trial-Aptis-writing-test papers consisted of a situational description with two prompt questions. The questions required the students to write an e-mail to a recipient to express their feelings about a negative situation and suggest possible action regarding the situation. The recipient in Question 1 was a fellow member who was also affected by the situation while the recipient in Question 2 was the manager of the club, who was deemed accountable for the situation.

AGWT Task 4 used in the trial-Aptis-writing-test paper

You are a member of a travel club. You received this e-mail from the club.

Dear Member,
I am writing to inform you that the famous world writer traveller, Ms. Zora Akello will unfortunately not be able to give a talk at our next club meeting due to a mistake in scheduling by the club secretary. However, our meeting will take place as usual with a discussion on travel hacks.

Question 1: Write an e-mail to your friend from the club. Write about your feelings and what you are planning to do. Write about 50 words. You have 10 minutes.
Question 2: Write an e-mail to the manager of the club. Write about your feelings and what you would like to do. Write 120-150 words. You have 20 minutes.

3.5 Data analysis

The method adopted in this study is descriptive analysis. The data which were elicited from the 30 trial-Aptis-writing-test papers at the end of the preparation course were the strategies used to complete Task 4 by the students. They were then tackled with descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentage and presented in tables. Besides, the influence of their usage of these pragmatic strategies on the epistolary writing in this task was expressed by words.

4. Findings and discussion

Findings and discussion about the students' employment of pragmatic strategies and their influence on the epistolary performance in AGWT Task 4 were analysed in (1) the way the students framed their messages and (2) the way they linguistically used these speech acts.

4.1 Research Question 1: Strategies employed to complete AGWT Task 4 by QNU English-majored seniors

The aim of Research Question 1 was to find out the pragmatic strategies used to complete AGWT Task 4. The results of the data analysis were presented Table 3 below.

Table 3: Strategies employed by the students in indirect and direct e-mails

	Indirect e-mail		Direct e-mail	
	Counts	Percentage	Counts	Percentage
Framing moves				
1.1 Greeting	29/30	96.66%	30/30	100%
* Informal greeting	27	90%	4	13.3%
* Formal greeting	2	6.66%	26	86.7%
1.2 No greeting	1/30	3.34%	0/30	0%
2.1 Self-introduction	0/30	0%	1/30	3.33%
2.2 No self-introduction	30/30	100%	29/30	96.7%
3.1 Statement of purpose	30/30	100%	30/30	100%
* Specific	18	60%	19	63.3%
* General	12	40%	11	36.7%
3.2 No statement of purpose	0/30	0%	0/30	0%
4.1 Pre-closing	11/30	36.63%	22/30	73.33%
* Informal pre-closing	10	33.3%	1	3.33%
* Formal pre-closing	1	3.33%	21	70%
4.2 No pre-closing	19/30	63.37%	8/30	26.67%
5.1 Closing	12/30	40%	26/30	86.67%
* Informal closing	11	36.67%	8	26.67%
* Formal closing	1	3.33%	18	60%
5.2 No closing	18/30	60%	4/30	13.33%
Content moves				
1. Realisation strategies				
1.1 Negative emotions	28/30	93.33 %	30/30	100%

1.2 Reference to the offensive act		28/30	93.33%	30/30	100%
1.3	Statement of possible solution	1/30	3.33%	14/30	46.67%
	Requests/suggestions	1/30	3.33%	16/30	53.33%
1.4 Future action/alternative plan		14/30	46.67%	15/30	50%
2. Modifications		2/30	6.66%	9/30	30%
3. Intensification		17/30	56.67%	21/30	70%

4.1.1 The indirect e-mail (E-mail 1)

Regarding E-mail 1, the first thing easily realised from the results in Table 3 is that not all students employed both opening/greeting and closing moves in framing their messages. In fact, 29/30 e-mails contained a greeting in which 27 ones (or an overwhelmed percentage of 96.66%) were in informal style as normally used to send to a familiar recipient whereas the rest 2 (6.66%) adopted the formal style. Pre-closing move appeared in 11/30 e-mails (36.63%), even less frequently when compared to 19/30 ones (63.37%) containing no pre-closing move at all. Closing move occurred in 12/30 e-mails with 11(36.67%) informal closings and 1 (3.33%) formal ones while they were totally omitted in the rest 18 e-mails.

These all above figures indicate two things: (1) a large majority of e-mails included a greeting but not a closing and (2) more e-mails were completed with no pre-closings and no closings than the ones with these two moves. The reason explaining for either the first affair or the second one might be it comes to the students' cognition that the lack of at least one among these moves helps to manifest their e-mails as the informal ones because opening and closing are optional elements of e-mail messages (Kankaanranta, 2006; Bou-Franch, 2011). This uncovers that the students had a fairly thorough grasp of the epistolary writing steps to make an e-mail become informal and applied this appropriate register to fulfil Task 4's Question 1.

More notably, as this e-mail was written to a recipient familiar to the writer, self-introduction was not actually necessary. Hence, this move was contained in 0/30 (0%) students' email messages. By contrast, the ground for which they wrote and sent this e-mail took an important stand in their mind. A strict 30 students (100%) mentioned statements of purpose in their e-mails. Many more of these statements (18/30) were conducted in a specific manner (e.g. "I'm writing to notify you that the meeting's club was cancelled because of a mistake in scheduling" (Student (S)8)) than those in general way (e.g. "Just let you know that I've read the letter from our travel club" (S9)).

When it comes to the consideration for the content moves, it seems that a large majority of students (28/30) preferred to intermix the strategy "expressions of negative emotion" in the statements of purpose when receiving the bad news from the club. Evidently, this writing style, though, effectively assisted them in quickly seeking for the empathy from the recipient; it might present themselves as critical as risk damaging their positive self-image (Kozlova, 2004). The next frequently used strategy was "reference to the offensive act" which up to 28/30 students (93.33% of the time) utilised as a corroboration to indicate what the club had done really led to their bad mood. Surprisingly, the percentage of students using strategies "statement of possible

solution" or "requests/suggestions" was scared, only 3.33% (1/30) for each. It is understandable as the students were conscious that the recipients in this e-mail were their fellow friends who were affected by the problem like them; therefore, proposing about what should have been done by the complainee is meaningless in this case. Instead of this, many students (14/30) put much emphasis on mentioning what they were going to do for future as a way to seduce the person "in the same boat" with them.

It is also worth noting from the findings that very few students – only 4/30 employed consultative strategy (e.g. "Do you think so?" or "Do you feel like me?") in the direct e-mail. Obviously, these students realised and wisely chose such an appropriate strategy to again acquire the empathy from their friends, and thus fortify the relationship between them. On the other hand, "statement of urgency" in the pre-closing move (e.g. "Write to me soon") occupied a rather high frequency of employment when 17/30 students (56.67%) adopted a very colloquial expression to urge a quick response from the recipients. The usage of this strategy contributes another informal feature to the indirect e-mail.

4.1.2 The direct e-mail (E-mail 2)

In the light of the E-mail 2, it was targeted to write for a recipient with important social status whom the writer may not know, formality, therefore, was highly expected. The findings show that not all students included both opening/greeting and closing moves in their messages or applied these two moves appropriately. Specifically, though an absolute 30/30 (100%) students started their e-mails with greetings, four among them (13.3%), however, did greet the recipient in a colloquial way (e.g. Dear plus first name). To make it worse, a strict frequency of students using closings in this e-mail did not appear when 8/30 (26.67%) and 4/30 (13.33%) finished their e-mails without either pre-closings or closings respectively.

More remarkably, while making the writer's identity clear was a necessary move in a direct e-mail as the audience may be unknown, nearly almost 29/30 (96.7%) students omitted self-introduction in their messages. Regarding the strategy "statement of purpose", Table 3 presents only 19/30 students produced specific statements as opposed to 11/30 making general ones. Evidently, the former was not much considerably higher than the latter while such detailed information should have been mentioned to the recipient who was accountable for the problem. Also, whether the students wrote statements of purpose generally or specifically, they all included direct reference to the offensive act (e.g. "I am writing to complain/to express my disappointment about the secretary mistake in scheduling), thus potentially violating politeness strategy in increasing the risk of face-threat to the complainee.

In term of content moves, Table 3 reveals one and all 30/30 (100%) students combined both strategies of "negative emotion" with "reference to the offensive act" at the beginning of their e-mails, thus potentially making a less harmonious relation between interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2000) right from the start. These strategies were followed by "statement of possible solution" (accounted for 46.67% of the time) while

making "requests/suggestions" for the complainee was a little bit more popular (occupied 53.33% of the time). Half of the students (50%) indicated what they were to do with the problem with "future action/alternative plan" strategy in their e-mails. Above all, expressions of dissatisfaction and direct mention to the problem made up the absolute percentage in this kind of complaint e-mail.

More notably, unlike the direct e-mail, findings from Table 3 exposed that a large number of the students employed strategies of "modifications and intensification" with 19/30 (63.33%) and 21/30 (70%) respectively throughout their messages. It seems that to some students these types of strategies were consciously used for the efforts to consolidate the rapport with the complainee.

All in all, the results indicate that many students were cognisant of the different registers applied in the two e-mails and obviously strove for using various pragmatic strategies thanks to which to emerge the informality versus the formality in each e-mail. It comes to the researcher's realisation that the students seemed to have no hurdles in dealing with the indirect e-mail in both framing moves and content moves. Meanwhile, they had more obstacles in the choice, application and preference for appropriate pragmatic strategies to construct a conformable register of a direct e-mail.

4.2 Research Question 2: The influence of the students' usage of pragmatic strategies on the epistolary writing
4.2.1 The indirect e-mail (E-mail 1)
The first thing came to realisation was that most students seemed to grasp the appropriate strategies to frame E-mail 1 specialised with an informal style. Nearly most students (90% of the time) employed informal greetings, and a large number of students contained pre-closings (36.63% of the time) and closings (40% of the time) though these two moves occurred less frequently than greeting move. These strategies were surely encouraged to use to start and finish any indirect e-mail. For the two e-mails with formal greetings and one e-mail with formal pre-closing in their messages, it was still acceptable for them in terms of scoring. Certainly, formal style was not highlighted in informal epistolary format for a fellow friend whose social status was equal to the writer, but nobody would surely feel unpleasant when receiving a polite saying of greeting or goodbye. On the other hand, some of them excluded greetings and pre-closings (3.34% and 60% of the time, respectively). Research by Kankaanranta (2006) and Bou-Franch (2011) uncovered that opening and closing are optional elements of e-mail messages and they often occur in initiating, formal e-mails. As such, the fact that these messages did not contain either of the two moves manifested the students were able to apply the most typical trait of presenting the informal style in the epistolary performance.

When word-counting and time spent on this task were the factors impacting on the task's quality, all students ignored self-introduction move. Interestingly, it was particularly another wise employment of pragmatic strategies in writing an indirect e-mail because this move was totally unnecessary to a familiar audience. Also, rather

much more students (60% of the time) preferred expressing explicitly the reason/problem for which they had to write the e-mail. It appeared that in the students' recognition, the recipient was simultaneously their fellow friend and the third party, so they felt free to expose feelings/emotions without any fears of potentially threating anyone's face. In reality, the students who had higher language proficiency performed this strategy better in their papers than the rest.

Concerning the content moves, the results show that more than half of the students utilised the format in which they mentioned "emotions" right after the e-mail (93.33% of the time) then followed by "reference to the problem" (93.33% of the time) and finally finished the messages with an indication of "future action/alternative plan" (46.67% of the time). Meanwhile, "statement of possible solution or request for problem remedy" scarcely occurred. In fact, further analysis of the linguistic usage based on the students' performances reveals that these were the rational and precise speech acts that could be met E-mail 1's demands in terms of writing "about your feelings and what you are planning to do". Nevertheless, the findings also indicate half of the rest did not focus on their message's content according to Question 1's requirements. Instead of clearly presenting the alternative plan on the part of the complainers themselves subsequent to the "reference to the offensive act", they only beat about the bush or mentioned unnecessary ideas (e.g. "they should have explained the reason for this mistake clearly so that we can know what the main point is" (S3) or "I'm gonna ask for a refund" (S9)). A majority of them even omitted "future action/alternative plan" which is the second demand of E-mail 1. Whether intentionally or heedlessly, these linguistic defects should be seriously taken into consideration.

Another point to mention was the usage of other devices. In fact, very few students (6.66% of the time) included some linguistic elements for polite effects such as cajolers or consultative moves, and a moderate number of them (56.67% of the time) were able to produce some intensifiers (e.g. "really/soon") in statements of urgency. Indeed, it can be said from the reality that though most students seemed to meet no obstacles in framing and using pragmatic strategies necessary to fulfil the demands of E-mail 1, many of them have not equipped fully with modifiers and intensifiers to make their performances be more flexible and effective, thus serve to upgrade what they wrote.

4.2.2 The direct e-mail (E-mail 2)

In the light of framing moves, while many students seemed to contain more features of formal communication, it appeared not to be the case for the others. Specifically, most students (86.7% of the time) started their messages with formal greetings which met the epistolary standard. However, the rest 13.3% still greeted the unfamiliar recipients less formally by combining "Dear" plus their first name. What's more, 3.33% and 26.67% of the students produced pre-closings and closings respectively in informal style (e.g. Thanks or Yours faithfully plus the sender's first name). Actually, these styles should not be encouraged to use in E-mail 2 because polite routines involve using forms such

as "Sir/Madam" plus the recipient's surname and the sender's full name at the signature to make the recipients feel respected.

Besides, as expected that E-mail 2 would be sent to a strange audience, self-introduction should have been found to occur with a high frequency. It was, nonetheless, contradictory with a tiny figure of 3.33% producing this move. A plausible of this omission for the rest majority of students may lie in the humble manner in Vietnamese's communicative culture in that they hardly introduce themselves unless being requested. This finding echoes the study by Bjørge (2007) when the levels of formality of e-mail are considered to be varied across cultures. However, it would be better to provide some very basic information to make the sender's identity clear and thus can "*meet the expected language of the output by Aptis test designers*" (Nguyen & Marwan, 2018). It would also be the case for "specific statement of purpose" strategy which should have been used more frequently by many students than only by 63.3% because this e-mail was about to be sent to the person who was accountable for the problem. Yet, the issue emerging in this case was that many students had strong preference for combining a direct "reference to the offensive act" with a "statement of purpose", but they did not use any modifiers to tone down the force of their complaints (e.g. "*I am writing this e-mail to express my dissatisfaction about the cancellation of Ms Zora Akello's talk*" (S3,7,8,10)). Therefore, this usage of strategies potentially increased the risk of face-threat to the complainee and violated the deference politeness between interculors (Bou-Franch, 2011).

Regarding content moves, further analysis once more demonstrates the students' employment of conformable speech acts and mitigation devices (e.g. modification) can obviously help to discriminate the language proficiency among them. First, what can be seen from the students' papers shows that while they could apply appropriate strategies for realising a direct complaint, many of them were incapable of using mitigation devices to compensate for the potential face-threat. Only 5/30 used subjunctive mood (e.g would or could), 1/30 contained politeness marker (e.g. please), 3/30 produced sweeteners (e.g. Your time and cooperation are highly appreciated), all in total making 9/30 (30%) employed modifiers for mitigation effects. Meanwhile, linguistic elements for similar effects such as hefges, cajolers, grounder, or solidarity were not employed by any students. By contrast, a large number of them (70% of the time) produced "statement of urgency" strategy (e.g. "All you have to do is to reply me right after reading my e-mail" (S3)) which should not be encouraged in a direct complaint because it could increase the coerciveness of the utterance and thus, need to be avoided. Moreover, as indicated in previous research about gender differences in language uses, the findings also reveal that all four male students tended to use more directive but less mitigative and supportive language to express opinions in their messages than the female ones. It seems that what they all cared was just how the problem was promptly compensated, so they preferred to produced intensifiers (e.g. quickly, soon, or really) to impose their ideas on the complainee. For the remaining strategy, it was regretful that half of the students (50%) excluded "future

action/alternative plan" from their messages while it was the second request of E-mail 2. Even the rest half contained this strategy in their e-mails, very few of them whose language proficiency was fairly high exploited the most commonly used syntatic modifiers (e.g. could, would or might) as a necessary contribution to consolidate the politeness with the audience once being used.

Taken together, the findings are consistent with previous second language pragmatic studies which indicate that devices such as modifiers and intensifiers are less noticeable and thus less frequent in use by lower proficiency learners (Hassall, 2011; Nguyen, 2008).

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1 Conclusion
This study was conducted with the efforts to explore the pragmatic strategies employed to produce indirect and direct e-mails in AGWT Task 4 by QNU English-majored seniors and the influence by the usage of these strategies on their epistolary writing. The following findings were withdrawn.

For indirect e-mails, almost all of the students with rather low or high proficiency seemed to experience little difficulties in the employment of conformable pragmatic strategies to fulfil E-mail 1. Specifically, they adopted fairly well the register for an indirect complaint e-mail. They were capable of constructing the frame for it with a variety moves (e.g. informal greeting, no self-introduction, informal pre-closing/no pre-closing, informal closing/no closing) typically specialised for informal style. Moreover, most of them were conscious of containing various realisation strategies (e.g. negative emotions, reference to the offensive act, future action/alternative plan) or even intensification (e.g. statement of urgency).

For direct e-mails, while most students hardly experienced hurdles in choosing appropriate frame and pragmatic strategies to fulfil the indirect e-mail, it seemed to be more challenging for them to do so in the direct e-mail. Namely, regarding the framing moves, many of them could not adopt the required style when either producing informal greetings, pre-closings, closings or excluding closings. Also, they scarcely contained self-introduction in their messages. All of these thus made their e-mail insufficient formal. Concerning speech act realisation, only few students gained the pramalinguistic accuracy and sociopragmatic appropriacy because E-mail 2 presented a higher imposition scenario due to the confrontation nature of the direct complaint compared to E-mail 1. Truly, though many of them tended to employ various pragmatic strategies such as "describing feelings and emotions", "expressing opinions", "expressing reactions", "making requests/future plan", it was regretful that very few were incapable of exploiting soften devices such as modifications or intensification. As a result, it made their epistolary writing less efficient.

5.2 Implications

What found from the findings of the study generates some ideas. First, it is recommended that students need more specific and selective instruction in how to make use of pragmatic strategies, especially modifications and intensification appropriately for each e-mail to make their epistolary writing in AGWT Task 4 more effective. Second, more studies should be carried out on the effectiveness of pragmatic strategies' usage in test-takers' epistolary writing of AGWT Task 4 in quantitative method. Hopefully, such an assessment could provide a clearer and more precise vision about the benefits in using pragmatic strategies which can be extremely helpful for test developers, teachers and test-takers.

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