

How English Learners Manage Face Threats in MSN Conversations

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Abstract. This study explores how low- and intermediate-level English learners manage face threats in MSN conversations. The effects of the addressee's status are also studied. Forty English learners, who were further divided into beginner and intermediate groups according to their English proficiency, participated in this study. Based on six offensive situations, the subjects had two MSN chats with the instructor and four with their peers. The complaine's response needed to contain an upgrader, which intensified the offense. All of the subjects had the same topics for the two chats with the instructor, but in chats with the peers, each proficiency group was divided into two sub-groups, with one being the complainer, i.e., the group initiating the complaint, and the other being the complaine, i.e., the group being complained to. In the first two chats, one sub-group initiated the complaints and the other replied, and in the following two chats, the two sub-groups exchanged their roles. Nonetheless, only the complainers' strategy use was analyzed in this study. Results showed that the two learner groups used a similar range of complaint strategies, including hints, disapproval, requests for repair, explicit complaints, threats and warnings, and external moves which consisted of preparators, justifications, promises for future actions, expressions of politeness, and reconciliations, to express their unhappiness and react to the upgrader. The strategies and the moves most preferred by both groups were explicit complaints and providing justifications. Further analyses reveal that the two groups also tended to use requests for repair as a complaint strategy, but the intermediate group produced much more indirect requests than direct ones, whereas the beginner group tended to be balanced in the use of the two types. The addressee's status also influenced both groups' complaints in the strategy use. Although the two groups did not adjust strategy use well to fit the addressee's social status, the intermediate learners, who were likely to be more indirect when initiating complaints to the superiors than to the peers, appeared to be socially more appropriate than the beginners.

Keywords: face threats, complaints, MSN, status.

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1. Introduction

People often encounter face threats in daily life, which might make either the speaker or the addressee lose face, and these threats need to be carefully dealt with. Nowadays, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is widely used, particularly in cross-cultural interaction which may result in plenty of misunderstandings and communication breakdowns because of the reduced context in CMC. Thus, research into online speech behaviors of the users, including language learners, is needed, especially synchronous CMC which enables users to interact simultaneously. Some researchers have claimed that CMC conversations are more direct than natural talk because of the absence of the contextual cues (Smilowitz, Compton, & Flint, 1988) and the users' diminished regard for the normal conventions of politeness usually evident in face-to-face conversations (Simmons, 1994). Thus, the current study, with the focus on complaint strategies, examines how English learners manage face threats through MSN, a synchronous CMC. The research questions are:

- What are the complaint strategies used by beginners and intermediate learners to manage face threats in MSN conversations?
- Are there any differences in complaint strategies preferred by beginners and intermediate learners in MSN conversations?
- What are the differences in complaint strategies used towards superiors and peers by beginners and intermediate learners?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty students participated in this study. The subjects were English learners in Taiwan. They were college students, further divided into two proficiency groups: beginner and intermediate groups. The subjects' proficiency was determined by their prior performances in proficiency tests. The beginners' proficiency equaled to CEF* A2 whereas the intermediate learners' proficiency was CEF B1.

2.2. Instrument

In this study, MSN Messenger was used as the instrument to collect speech data. The subjects had two MSN chats with the instructor and four with their peers. The instructor represented the higher-status addressee whereas the peers represented equals in status. All the subjects had chats with the instructor, but in chats with their peers, each proficiency group was divided into two sub-groups, with one group acting as the complainer and the other responding to the complaints. In the first two chats, one sub-group initiated the complaints and the other replied, and in the following two chats, the

* Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

two sub-groups exchanged their roles. All of the responses were required to contain an upgrader, which intensified the face threat and may have made the complainer even unhappier. The six topics were provided as follows.

- You just got your paper back from your teacher. When you see your grade, you are shocked because the grade is much lower than you expected. *Upgrader*: The teacher criticizes the assignment and says that you deserve the grade.
- You had an assignment due yesterday. You tried to turn in the late assignment today, but it was rejected. However, you heard that your teacher accepted your classmate's late assignment. *Upgrader*: The teacher says that you should not have missed the deadline and gives an excuse for your classmate.
- You are working on a project with your classmate, who doesn't do anything. Whenever you ask him/her to help, s/he always says that s/he has no time. *Upgrader*: Your classmate fights back by saying that you also always do the same thing.
- Your classmate is always at least half an hour late whenever you hang out with him/her, and you really don't like it. *Upgrader*: Your classmate says that you were also late for the last meeting, so it is fair for you to wait this time.
- Your classmate often borrows stuff from you, but s/he never returns your stuff unless you rush him/her to do so. *Upgrader*: Your classmate argues that you also haven't returned his/her iPod that you borrowed a long time ago.
- Your classmate never does his/her assignments and always asks you to lend yours for him/her to copy. *Upgrader*: Your classmate threatens to end the friendship if you don't let him/her copy.

2.3. Coding scheme and statistical analysis

This study examines the complaint strategies and external moves that learners used to manage face threats. Complaint strategies express the speakers' unhappiness to an offensive situation whereas external moves reduce the face-threatening effects of complaints. In this study, there were five types of complaint strategies: hints, disapprovals, requests for repair, explicit complaints, and threats, as well as five external moves: preparators, justifications, promises for future actions, expressions of politeness, and reconciliations. The strategies and moves produced by the two proficiency groups and the impacts of the status variability on their strategy preferences were processed by Chi-square analyses.

3. Discussion

In general, the two proficiency groups produced the same range of complaint strategies and external moves. Both groups utilized explicit complaints and justifications with the highest percentage among all the complaint strategies and external moves, and there was no significant inter-group difference in the use of either strategies or moves.

However, differences were found in the two groups' use of requests for repair as a complaint strategy. The intermediate group produced much more indirect requests (85%) than direct ones (15%), whereas the beginner group tended to be balanced in the use of two types of requests (indirect: 58%; direct: 41%). To sum up, the learners were straightforward in expressing their unhappiness. The findings support [Sussman and Sproull's \(1999\)](#) claim that CMC technology fosters more direct communication strategies than face-to-face communication because of its text-based nature and de-individuation. This could also be because of the relative easiness of direct expressions, which directly map the propositional meaning and the linguistic form.

The social status variable appeared to have some influences on the two groups' complaints. They were similar in their use of strategies and external moves towards superiors and peers and showed significant intra-group differences in their preference of complaint strategies. Although the two groups tended to use more explicit complaints towards both superiors and peers, differences were found in hints and disapprovals: they were likely to produce more disapprovals towards superiors and more hints towards peers. This appears to be similar to [Trosborg \(1995\)](#), who claimed that the learners had difficulty adjusting their performance sufficiently to the parameters of dominance. As hints avoid explicit mention of the offensive events or the speaker's unhappiness, their severity level should be lower than that of disapproval. The subjects used more disapprovals towards superiors than towards peers, who received more hints possibly because of the reduced effects of contextual cues, which connote social meaning in CMC, and the learners temporarily overlooked the etiquette that should have varied with the addressee's social identity.

Despite the similarities, further analyses of strategies used to initiate the complaints towards addressees of two status types exhibit the differences between the two groups. The frequency of each strategy that beginners used to initiate complaints towards superiors and equals was similar, and this is supported by Chi-square analyses, which revealed no significant differences. However, the intermediate learners were inclined to use more requests for repair as a complaint strategy to initiate their interaction with superiors, and this differentiates from their initiative strategy towards addressees of the two status types ($p < .05$), especially as most of the requests were polite, indirect requests (89%). As [Blum-Kulka \(1987\)](#) has claimed, hints and indirect requests can be equally polite, and indirect requests can reduce the hearer's processing burden because they stated the intended follow-up remedial action clearly but politely. From this angle, in addition to explicit complaints, which are a popular strategy towards addressees of either status type, the intermediate learners preferred indirect requests, with the attempt to reduce the face threats that might be caused. This reflects their consciousness of the effects of the addressee's status. In contrast, the beginners' initiative strategies did not reveal this tendency, indicating that the addressee's status might not be their concern in MSN conversations, or even if it was, the beginners failed to exhibit the differentiation in their management of face threats.

4. Conclusions

This study showed that the beginners and the intermediate learners were similarly straightforward, and the variable of social status also had similar effects on their management of face threats. However, compared with the beginners, the intermediate learners tended to be more indirect. Their directness brings the pedagogical attention to the relationship between using CMC and developing learners' pragmatic competence. As Sykes (2005) has pointed out, CMC users need to be cautious because all dissatisfactions are expressed by words, whereas face-to-face communication includes facial expressions and body language to modify the intensity of face threats. Instructors can guide learners to attend to net etiquette, the reduced context of CMC, and consequences of inappropriate speech behaviors, and then integrate polite linguistic forms and expressions into their lessons.

This study is constrained by two limitations which provide suggestions for future studies. As this study only included beginners and intermediate learners future research could recruit advanced learners or even native English and Chinese speakers for investigations of effects of proficiency, cultural backgrounds, and language transfer. Further comparisons of natural face-to-face conversations are also needed for a fuller picture of the speech behaviors of English learners in CMC.

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