



SOCIAL POWER AND STRATEGIES OF COMPLAINT AND COMPLAINT RESPONSES IN VIETNAMESE: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE MEKONG DELTA REGION

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Abstract: The current study investigated the complaint and complaint response strategies employed by native Vietnamese university students with a focus on examining the relationship between social power and their choice of politeness strategies to make complaints and respond to complaints in Vietnamese academic contexts. This research adopted a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative data from Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and qualitative data from introspective interviews. 150 native Vietnamese participants from four universities in the Mekong Delta region were involved in the research to elicit answers for 12 scenarios in DCTs, and seven of them participated in semi-structured interviews, providing data about their perception and experience. The results showed that Vietnamese students utilized a wide range of complaint and complaint response strategies and varied their choice of strategies across different social power contexts. Their strategic choice heightened the importance of politeness and indirectness among Vietnamese students to maintain harmony and avoid conflicts. To make complaints, Vietnamese students significantly favored Request strategies in all social power situations, and to respond to complaints, constructive and reparative strategies such as Suggesting Alternatives and Agreeing to Change Behavior were highly frequently used. When interacting with peers, Vietnamese students were more direct, but when addressing those with higher power, they opted for indirectness. The findings of this study introduce significant implications for language teaching and intercultural training for students in the Vietnamese context.

Keywords. complaint strategies, complaint response strategies, social power, Vietnamese students

1. Introduction

Politeness plays an essential role in communication success. In social interactions, individuals employ various linguistic politeness strategies to maintain social harmony, build rapport, and avoid conflicts to achieve successful communication, especially in various face-threatening contexts [2]. Therefore, in complaints, regarded as face-threatening acts (FTAs) [6], different strategies are used to mitigate the threat because in this kind of speech act, the hearer's positive and negative face can be harmed [2]. Similarly, to respond to a complaint, the speakers have to deal with the complainer's dissatisfaction or annoyance, so employing politeness strategies is also crucial.

The issues concerning the concepts and norms of linguistics politeness in Vietnamese culture and society have been investigated in many pragmatics studies, and it is believed that under the influence of globalization with the increased contact with foreigners and exposure to global media, traditional Vietnamese politeness norms and perceptions were challenged, and Vietnamese older generations showed their concern about a decline in politeness [3]. In Vietnam, several studies have been conducted to examine the politeness strategies of native Vietnamese speakers when performing different kinds of speech acts, such as complaints [7] and refusals [13]. These studies highlighted the way Vietnamese people interact in various social contexts, focusing on the importance of social factors such as gender, age, and social power.

This study particularly aims to investigate contemporary Vietnamese university students' choices in performing complaint speech acts and responding to complaints, as well as to analyze the relationship between their strategic choices and social status. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the politeness strategy choices of the young Vietnamese generation with significant exposure to globalization and active engagement in cross and intercultural communication, and then offer several implications for enhancing communication efficiency and language education in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Linguistic politeness

According to Brown and Levinson [2], in social communication, interlocutors employ various strategies to minimize face threats, and redressive actions are possibly taken into consideration to keep the addressee's face. Redressive actions involve two kinds of politeness: positive and negative. Positive politeness aims to avoid threatening the addressee's face by making them feel good and showing approval and friendliness. In contrast, negative politeness focuses on respecting their independence and avoiding imposition on them.

In Vietnamese culture, the notion of politeness originates from traditional Confucian philosophy, and politeness literally means respectfulness, propriety, modesty or tactfulness [3, 11]. In social communication in Vietnam, politeness refers to not only formality and distance but also good manners and behaviors [3]. Vietnamese people employ politeness to avoid confrontation and to maintain social harmony, especially in face-threatening contexts such as complaining [7, 15]. In some social interactions, Vietnamese tend to remain silent to avoid performing offensive and potentially face-threatening acts or giving direct negative responses such as complaints, direct requests [3].

2.2. *Sociological variables influencing the choice of strategies*

In social communication, when dealing with FTAs, speakers select a variety of strategies from *on-record* strategies to *off-record* strategies [2]. Choosing direct strategies, they may reduce misunderstanding but threaten the addressee's face. In contrast, *off-records* strategies help them communicate in a polite and tactful way so that they can save the face of both parties in the conversation.

According to Brown and Levinson [2], three major factors impacting the strategic choices of speakers include the social distance (D), the relative power (P), and the absolute ranking (R). The social distance (D) shows the similarity between individuals; the relative power refers to the degree to which speakers influence hearers' behavior; and the absolute ranking (R) represents the ranking levels of impositions, interfering individuals' negative and positive wants.

2.3. *Speech acts of complaining and responding to complaints*

According to Searle's [12] classification of speech acts, complaints belong to the expressives category, in which speakers express their psychological state about a state of affairs. Considering politeness, Brown and Levinson [2] categorized complaints as face-threatening acts (FTAs), which damage both positive and negative face of interactants. In addition, complaints have been defined differently by numerous researchers and scholars [4, 10, 14]. Within this study, we adapted the definitions of complaints, proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach [10] and Trosborg [14], so complaints can be conceptualized as a speech act in which the speaker expresses dissatisfaction, annoyance, or negative feelings in reaction to an unsatisfactory past or present condition such as an offensive action, an unfavorable event, or an unacceptable behavior or attitude. Complaints are performed at various levels of directness from indirect expression of discontent feelings to straightforward accusation [7, 14].

Subsequently, responses to complaints are performed, following a complaint to address the complainer's dissatisfaction or negative feelings. Since complaints are face-threatening and abusive acts [14], managing face threats plays a vital role in responding to complaints. In social communication, various strategies of complaint responses are employed, such as accepting the

complaint, partially accepting it, or refusing it [4, 5]. Some of these strategies are used to maintain social relationships and avoid communication failure [4].

3. Review of previous studies

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine complaint and complaint response strategies in the world, including in Vietnam. Alhamdan and Al-Shorman [1] investigated the complaint strategies employed by male Saudi and Jordanian university students in various academic scenarios. The focus of this study is to identify the strategies they used to make complaints about academic advisors, instructors, classroom environments, and exams to different interactants, such as a friend, a person in charge, and a complaine. In this research, the researchers designed a discourse completion test (DCT) with ten scenarios and involved 100 participants, including 50 Saudi and 50 Jordanian male undergraduate students. The results of the study showed that Saudi and Jordanian students utilized a variety of strategies (both threatening and less threatening) to make complaints. The most frequently used strategies included *justification, request, accusation, inquiry, and suggestion*, whereas more face-threatening strategies such as *criticism, threat, challenge, expressing anger, and regret* were used at the least level of frequency. The tendency of their employment of complaint strategies was interpreted in the study as the influence of Islamic values, which emphasize respect and admiration for others. However, the author concluded that the social status of the complaine did not significantly influence the choice of complaint strategies of both groups. They almost used the same strategies to express their dissatisfaction to their friends, the person in charge, and the complaine.

Regarding complaint response strategies, Laforest [5] and El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4] examined different contexts. Laforest [5] studied complaint response sequences in French family conversations, while El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4] focused on the strategies professors in Egyptian universities employed to respond to their students' complaints. The results of these two studies showed that complaint response strategies were used differently based on the context. Partial acceptance strategies were dominant strategies used to respond to complaints in both Laforest's [5] and El-Dakhs and Ahmed's [4] studies. However, in family situations [5], the disregarding strategy was utilized for severe complaints to avoid arguments and confrontation, while in a university context, professors did not use the disregarding strategy [4]. El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4] also noticed that social variables (gender, age) were insignificant in the university context.

In Vietnam, several studies in the field of pragmatics have examined the speech acts of complaints and complaint responses. Particularly, Nguyen [7, 8] investigated the complaint strategies used by Vietnamese native speakers and the correlation between social status and their complaint behaviors. Roleplays and verbal report interviews were utilized to provide data

about their choices of complaint strategies. In Nguyen's [7] research, eleven complaint strategies used by Vietnamese native speakers, categorized by the level of severity, were identified, and most of these strategies were previously discussed by other researchers, such as Olshtain and Weinbach [10] and Trosborg [14]. However, the author noticed that in her study, three new complaint strategies (*Reaction to complainee's explanation*, *Mockery*, and *Reaction to complainee's offer to repair*) were identified through the analysis of role-played data. The findings also showed that Vietnamese speakers preferred the least face-threatening strategies, such as "*Below level of reproach*" and "*Expression of annoyance or disapproval*", and tended to combine non-open face-threatening strategies with open ones as a means of softening potential face threats, or to combine two open face-threatening strategies to intensify the complaint. This tendency highlighted Vietnamese speakers' preference for preserving harmony and avoiding conflicts in interpersonal relationships.

Nguyen [8] noticed a significant correlation between social status and complaint behavior. Vietnamese speakers with a higher social status tended to employ a greater variety of complaint strategies compared with those with equal or lower status. Particularly, those with a higher social position tended to use the most significant number of complaint strategies, whereas complaint strategies were the least used by individuals with lower social status. Moreover, the study revealed the differences in their choices of tactful complaint strategies. People with lower social status preferred non-open face-threatening strategies and tended to avoid open face-threatening strategies. Data from the verbal interviews explained that Vietnamese speakers' behaviors were influenced by the rules originating from Confucianism and Buddhism, in which the respect for superiors was highly valued, and mutual respect and a sense of responsibility were crucial to maintain. The author also concluded that Vietnamese speakers' preference for other-face-oriented strategies other than self-face-oriented employed showed their tendency to minimize potential conflict or face threats and to maintain harmony in relationships.

Similarly, in academic contexts, Vietnamese students in Vũ's [15] research used different patterns of semantic formulas to make a complaint, depending on particular situations and the relationships between the interlocutors. In a formal situation with a higher-status hearer, like complaining to a teacher about a low grade, Vietnamese students might be more indirect, just offering suggestions on how to resolve the problem without expressing displeasure. Regarding politeness strategies and devices, the author noticed that *criticism* was most frequently used by Vietnamese students when they complained to strangers about the photocopy service and line-cutting. When talking to a teacher, however, they employed *reproach* at the highest level of frequency. When interacting with interlocutors with the same social status, they employed various politeness devices, but when talking to speakers of higher social power, such as

teachers, they had a tendency to increase the use of these strategies. This study implied that higher social power affected the choice of strategies to express dissatisfaction.

The results of the previous studies have shown several research gaps. The findings about complaint strategies in relation to social variables such as social status have been identified as inconsistent. In Alhamdan and Al-Shorman's [1] research, Saudi and Jordanian students employed similar complaint strategies regardless of the complainees' social status, so this social variable did not play an essential role in their choice of strategies. However, social status showed a tight relation to complaint strategies' choices in other studies about Vietnamese speakers [8, 15]. Moreover, previous research examined complaints or complaint responses solely as an isolated speech act, so analyzing them, both complaints and complaint responses strategies, together, will provide a broader and more comprehensive view. Therefore, this study, choosing the ethnographic group of Vietnamese university students who represent a dynamic young generation in a current fast changing Vietnamese society, aims to address the research gap and validate previous findings.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Questions

The present study aims to examine complaints and responses to complaints together as a set of speech acts in an interactional sequence within Vietnamese contexts, and explore the role of the social status variable in social communication among young people in Vietnam. The specific objective of this research is to address the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Vietnamese university students use to make complaints and respond to complaints in Vietnamese?
2. To what extent does social power influence the strategies employed by Vietnamese university students to make complaints and respond to complaints in Vietnamese?

4.2. Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining two research instruments: written Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and introspective interviews. This mixed methods research approach allows data triangulation, which enhances both reliability and depth of research findings since the combination of these two research tools provides both quantitative and qualitative data.

DCTs were used in this research due to their advantages and appropriateness for this research's aims. In fact, DCTs allow quick and efficient elicitation of a large amount of data on strategies of complaints and complaint responses. Moreover, using DCTs, the researcher can control the scenarios and social variables in each scenario to collect suitable research data [9,

13]. In this study, DCTs were designed in online Google forms, which required participants to give written answers in 12 scenarios. The scenarios were divided into two sections: section one, which included six scenarios to elicit complaint strategies, and section two, which included six scenarios to obtain complaint response strategies. These scenarios were equally distributed across three power dynamics: interactions with individuals of equal power (P=), such as a friend, a stranger; higher-power individuals (P-), such as a teacher, a staff member; and lower-power individuals (P+), such as a restaurant attendant, a taxi driver. Below are three sample scenarios in the DTC, illustrating three social power dynamics.

-Sample 1: Scenario of complaining to a peer about their being late (P=)

You and a classmate have a project for your marketing class, which is due tomorrow. Today, your classmate is over 30 minutes late for your meeting. You feel annoyed because this classmate has a habit of being late. Finally, your classmate has arrived. You say:

-Sample 2: Scenario of responding to a complaint from a customer in a restaurant (P-)

You are a server at a restaurant. A customer gets your attention and complains about the foul smell of the food you have served. You respond to the customer. You say:

-Sample 3: Scenario of complaining to a server in a restaurant (P+).

You are having lunch in a restaurant and have just been served your meal. You notice that there is something wrong with the dish because the meat in your dish doesn't look fresh. You call the server and say:

Additionally, introspective interviews were implemented in this study, providing insights into participants' perspectives and the reasoning behind their strategies' choices in making complaints and responding to complaints. In the interviews, participants were asked two types of questions: scenario-based questions and open-ended questions about their experiences and perceptions about their complaint and response strategies in relation to social status. Data from the interviews helped explain how Vietnamese university students performed these strategies in various social contexts and how social status influenced their choice of strategies.

4.3. Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from four leading universities in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. A total of 150 native Vietnamese students, with ages ranging from 18 to 45 and from different academic disciplines, participated in eliciting answers to the DCT scenarios. The majority of these students were undergraduates. Then, seven of these participants were involved in semi-structured introspective interviews based on their willingness and self-reported experiences. These participant selection criteria aim to ensure a wide range of perspectives and insights. The number of interview participants was limited to seven because interview data reached saturation at this point, with no new insights observed.

4.4. Data collection and coding frameworks

Data collected from DCTs were initially screened to remove incomplete or inappropriate answers. Subsequently, each of the answers was segmented and coded to identify all strategies based on Trosborg's [14] theoretical framework and Laforest's [5] framework adapted and presented in El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4]. Particularly, based on Trosborg's [14] theoretical framework (see **Table 1**), complaint strategies were classified into six categories, including 11 specific complaint strategies. Complaint response strategies were divided into four categories, comprising 13 specific response strategies, drawing from the studies of Laforest [5] and El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4] (see **Table 2**). Audio data from interviews were first transcribed into text. These transcriptions were then thematically grouped and coded.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process in this research, both intra-coder and inter-coder reliability were implemented. For inter-coder reliability, a second trained coder_an experienced researcher in the field_was recruited to code the same data, using the same coding schemes described in Tables 1 and 2. The level of agreement between two coders was calculated by comparing two sets of coding results from the two coders, using Excel formulas, and the percentage of agreement, which was over 95%, showed a high consistency level of the findings. Then, the few instances of disagreement between the two coders were reviewed and resolved through discussion to achieve complete agreement.

Table 1. Analytic Framework of Complaint Strategies Adapted from Trosborg's [14]

Complaint strategies	Explanation	Examples
Type 1 – Strategy 1: opting out	Saying nothing	- <i>Silence, saying nothing.</i>
Type 2 – Strategy 2: hints	No explicit reproach	- <i>It feels like we've been waiting a while...</i>
Type 3: expression of annoyance or disapproval	Expressions of negative judgment	
Strategy 3: annoyance	Phrases expressing the speaker's annoyance	- <i>Why did you cut in line like that?</i>
Strategy 4: ill consequences	Phrases expressing the negative consequences of an action on the speaker	- <i>You're always late. I won't do group work with you anymore.</i>
Type 4: accusation		
Strategy 5: indirect accusation	Making an indirect accusation	- <i>Your test score is still so low. How come?</i>
Strategy 6: direct accusation	Making a direct accusation	- <i>You delivered the wrong order again.</i>
Type 5: blame		

Strategy 7: modified blame	Expressing blame implicitly	- <i>If you had been on time for the group meeting, I would have made it to my part-time job.</i>
Strategy 8: explicit blame, behavior	Expressing blame against a behavior explicitly	- <i>You eat and don't clean up at all.</i>
Strategy 9: explicit blame, person	Expressing blame against a person explicitly	- <i>You were so careless in your previous test.</i>
Type 6: directive acts		
Strategy 10: request	Making a request	- <i>Please make my dish quickly.</i>
Strategy 11: threat	Making a threat	- <i>If you don't reply to my email immediately, I will report it to the Director.</i>

Table 2. Analytic Framework of Complaint Responses Strategies Adapted from Laforest [5] and El-Dakhs and Ahmed [4]

Complaint-response strategies	Explanation	Examples
Type 1: acceptance of the complaint		
Strategy 1: admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about	The complainee assumes responsibility for the complaint and acknowledges the fault	- <i>Yes, this is our shop's fault.</i>
Strategy 2: excusing oneself	The complainee presents an excuse for committing the act causing the complaint.	- <i>Sorry. I overslept today.</i>
Strategy 3: agreeing to change behavior	The complainee acknowledges the act causing the complaint but agrees to change it.	- <i>I'll be on time next time.</i>
Type 2: partial acceptance of the complaint		
Strategy 4: justifying oneself	The complainee argues that s/he had good reasons for behaving as s/he did.	- <i>The price is a bit high, but it reflects the premium quality.</i>
Strategy 5: not taking the	The complainee reacts by	- <i>You know I'm as slow as a</i>

complaint seriously	laughing or joking.	<i>turtle.</i>
Strategy 6: suggesting alternatives	The complaineo proposes alternative ways for the act causing the complaint.	<i>- Can I exchange it for another item for you?</i>
Strategy 7: setting conditions for future acceptance	The complaineo sets a condition to behave differently in the future.	<i>-Next time, if you book a table in advance, our restaurant will make a reservation for you.</i>
Type 3: rejection of the complaint		
Strategy 8: denying the complaint	The complaineo denies the act causing the complaint	<i>I didn't tear your book.</i>
Strategy 9: counterattacking	The complaineo criticizes or accuses the complainant.	<i>-Don't blame me. I didn't do that.</i>
Strategy 10: not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	The complaineo refuses to consider the act causing the complaint as blameworthy	<i>-It's not a big deal. Who doesn't make mistakes?</i>
Strategy 11: rejecting having an argument	The complaineo won't allow the other party to present arguments or discuss the topic further.	<i>-If you say so, I have no ideas.</i>
Strategy 12: acknowledging the act causing the complaint, but not admitting the responsibility	The complaineo acknowledges the act causing the complaint, but denies the responsibility caused by the act.	<i>-The delivery was late due to the high season.</i>
Type 4 – Strategy 13: disregarding the complaint	The complaineo keeps silent or says nothing.	<i>-Silence / Say nothing</i>

4.5. Data Analysis

The author used descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative data from DCTs to identify occurrence frequencies, percentages, and distributions in both complaint and complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese university students across different social status

scenarios. In addition, thematic analysis was employed to analyze quantitative data from interviews to gain a deeper understanding and validate findings from the statistical analysis.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Complaint strategies used by Vietnamese university students

The data for this study were collected from 150 native Vietnamese university students, who gave answers to 12 distinct scenarios in the DCT. After the coding process of the data of complaint strategies employed by this group of university students, elicited from six of the 12 scenarios, it was found that one answer in each scenario can contain multiple strategies, and finally, we recognized and calculated a total of 1,117 complaint strategies, which were categorized into 11 types of complaint strategies as in **Tables 1**.

Figure 1 presents a detailed distribution of the frequency of eleven recognized complaint strategies, employed by Vietnamese university students, and also shows that they used a wide range of complaint strategies with a specific preference for a certain type. Among the eleven recognized complaint strategies, *Request* was the most frequently used by native Vietnamese students, with 572 occurrences accounting for 48.6 % of all complaint strategies. Following *Request*, the next most commonly used one was *Hint* (160 occurrences, 13.4%). *Annoyance* (134 occurrences, 11.4%) and *Opting out / Silent* (131 occurrences, 11.1%) were found to occur slightly less frequently. In contrast, the least frequently used strategies included *Explicit blame* (person) (2 occurrences), *Indirect accusation* (6 occurrences), and *Direct accusation* (7 occurrences). Other strategies, such as *Ill consequence* (36) and *Explicit blame* (behavior) (14), were used at a low level of frequencies compared to *Request*, *Hint*, and other more popular strategies.

The tendency of Vietnamese students' dominant use of *Request* strategy indicated their preference for a less direct and more polite way to express their dissatisfaction. This interpretation was confirmed by qualitative data from the introspective interviews. In the introspective interviews, they explained that *Request* was a strategy of saving face. Their choice of this type of strategy was due to avoiding conflicts and giving the complainee a chance to repair the offense. They explained that in communication, young people sought a resolution to the issues rather than confrontation. One of the participants in the interviews stated: "*Khi phàn nàn một vấn đề nào đó, tụi em thường muốn vấn đề được giải quyết một cách hiệu quả.*" (When complaining about an issue, we usually want the problem to be resolved effectively). Similarly, in El-Dakhs and Ahmed's [4] research, students chose the same strategy to complain, and "half of the students' complaints came in the form of requests for repair" [4, p. 14]. In addition, the highly frequent use of *Hint* and the least use of *Explicit blame* (person) recognized in this study, aligning with the findings in Nguyen's [7] research, revealed the indirectness of Vietnamese students in

communication. They preferred to employ the least face-threatening strategies and favored other-face oriented ones.

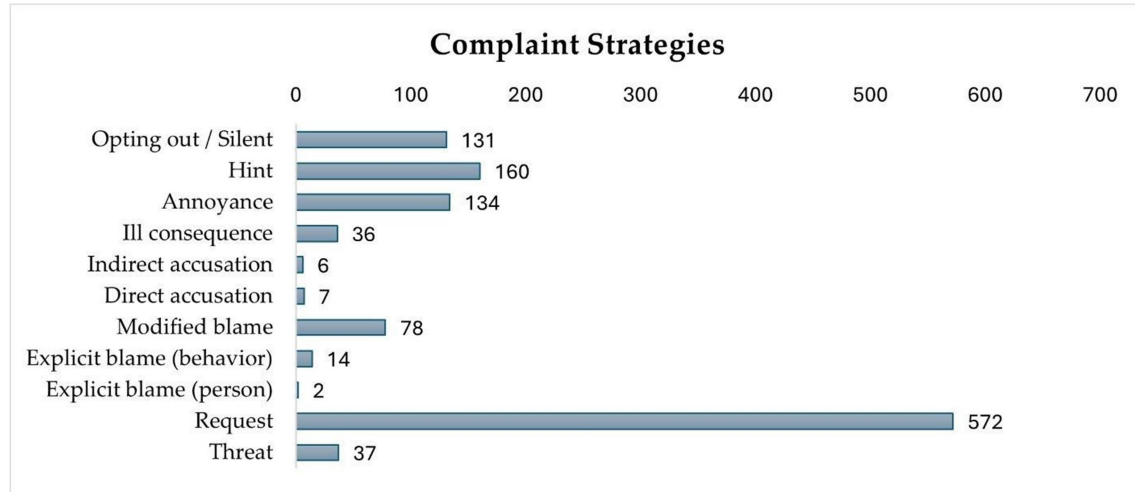


Figure 1. Frequency of Complaint Strategies

5.2. Relationship between social status and Vietnamese university students' complaint strategies

The data in **Table 3** shows that Vietnamese university students employed different complaint strategies across three types of social power dynamics, and they adjusted their strategic choices based on the hearers' social power. In peer interaction situations between interactants of equal power ($P=$), *Request* (26.6% of all strategies used in these scenarios) was the most popular, followed by *Annoyance* (22%) and *Hint* (16.6%). In contrast, *Explicit blame (person)* (0.5%) was the least used, with *Direct accusation* (1.4%) and *Indirect accusation* (1.4%) occurring at a very low frequency level. This finding demonstrated that Vietnamese university students tended to use indirect strategies along with direct ones when making complaints to peers, but still showed a preference for indirectness and politeness. For example, complaining to a peer about unpunctuality, they requested: “Đến trễ nhé, lần sau có hẹn hãy sắp xếp công việc trước.” (You’re late, next time please arrange your schedule when having an appointment.). To show their annoyance, they said: “Vô duyên dữ vậy bạn.” (Hey guy, you’re being really impolite). Notably, *Threat* strategy, one of the most face-threatening strategies, was employed most frequently to make complaints to peers ($P=$) at 5.8%, compared to hearers with higher power ($P-$) at 0.8% and lower power ($P+$) at 2.4%. This finding revealed a clear relationship between this strategy and social power dynamics. The introspective interview participants explained that *Threat* was least used to make complaints in ($P-$) situations because in Vietnamese culture, it is not appropriate and violates the social hierarchy to threaten people with higher social status. They showed their concern that “Sinh viên như tụi em không dám đưa ra lời đe dọa khi phàn nàn với người lớn như thầy cô vì làm vậy bị xem là “hỗn” trong văn hóa của người Việt Nam, nhiều khi còn bị rầy la.” (Students like

us do not dare to make a threat when complaining to adults like our teachers because doing so is considered insolent in Vietnamese culture, and sometimes we can even be scolded for that.).

Table 3. Distribution of complaint strategies in different power dynamics

No	Complaint strategies	P=	P-	P+
1	Opting out / Silent	13.6%	16.5%	2.9%
2	Hint	16.6%	14.7%	9.1%
3	Annoyance	22.0%	2.7%	8.0%
4	Ill consequence	4.9%	1.3%	2.7%
5	Indirect accusation	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
6	Direct accusation	1.4%	0.3%	0.0%
7	Modified blame	4.9%	13.1%	2.1%
8	Explicit blame (behavior)	2.3%	0.3%	0.8%
9	Explicit blame (person)	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
10	Request	26.6%	50.3%	72.0%
11	Threat	5.8%	0.8%	2.4%
TOTAL		100%	100%	100%

In P- scenarios where lower-power individuals complain to higher-power ones; *request* was also the most frequent strategy (50.3%). In addition, *Opting out/ Silent* (16.5%) and *Hint* (14.7%) were frequently used. However, two severe face-threatening strategies were absent, including *Indirect accusation* and *Explicit blame (person)*. This tendency highlighted that Vietnamese students emphasized the importance of being polite and indirect when performing a face-threatening act like complaints in interaction with a complaine with a higher social status. In addition, the absence of *Indirect accusation* and *Explicit blame (person)* and the rare use of other accusation and blame strategies revealed that Vietnamese students avoided direct confrontation and challenges to authority. Moreover, according to their explanation, it was crucial in Vietnamese culture for younger generations to show their respect to seniors, which was considered a norm [3].

In P+ scenarios in which higher-power speakers address lower-power individuals, Vietnamese students employed fewer types of strategies to make complaints. They did not use any *Explicit blame (person)*, *Direct* and *Indirect accusation* strategies. Meanwhile, *Request* was dominant and much more frequent than any other strategies at 72%. In the interviews, they added the reason for this polite strategic choice as they wanted to build solidarity and maintain social harmony. For example, when complaining to a seller, they said: “*Phiền anh chị kiểm tra lại món này giúp tôi. Cảm ơn!*” (Could you please check this item? Thank you.)

The current study is consistent with the results in Nguyen’s [8] research about preferences of indirectness and politeness in communication, as well as the critical role of social

power in Vietnamese culture. The current findings highlighted the tendency that Vietnamese university students favored the avoidance of direct face-threatening strategies as well as increased employment of requests as a mitigating strategy to reduce the risk of conflicts. Their complaint strategies varied across various social power situations. However, when expressing their displeasure or negative feelings to friends or strangers, contemporary Vietnamese students were identified to be more direct, showing annoyance more frequently.

Differing from Vietnamese university students, Saudi and Jordanian ones in Alhamdan and Al-Shorman's [1] study employed a contrasting approach of complaint strategies. In this study, the authors found that both groups of Saudi and Jordanian university students did not vary their strategies to express their dissatisfaction regardless of the complainee's power.

5.3. *Complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese university students*

The data for the complaint response strategies were elicited from the other six scenarios in section two of the DCT. A total of 1,300 complaint response strategies were recognized and categorized into thirteen types, based on the framework in **Table 2**. The frequency distribution of each type of complaint response strategy used by Vietnamese university students was illustrated in **Figure 2**, which showed that all thirteen complaint response strategies were recognized through Vietnamese students' interactions with complaints. Among these responding strategies, *Suggesting alternatives* (293 occurrences, 22.54%) and *Agreeing to change behavior* (290 occurrences, 22.31%) were the most frequently employed by Vietnamese students. Subsequently, when being complained about, they frequently admitted the responsibility for their offensive act or behavior (233 occurrences, 17.92%) and sometimes showed their partial acceptance of the complaint by arguing that they had good reasons for the wrong act or behavior (*Justifying oneself*, 133 occurrences, 10.23%). Conversely, the strategies which appeared at the lowest frequencies included *Acknowledging the act causing the complaint* (24 occurrences, 1.85%), *Rejecting having an argument* (21 occurrences, 1.62%), *Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem or challenging the speaker's assertion* (19 occurrences, 1.46%), and *Not taking the complaint seriously* (12 occurrences, 0.92%).

The frequent occurrence of two strategies: *Suggesting alternatives* and *Agreeing to change behavior*, observed from the statistics, suggested that when addressing dissatisfaction or displeasure from a complainer, Vietnamese students tended to seek solutions or chances to repair the damage. They also addressed the complaints seriously and rarely rejected the responsibility or challenged the complainer, so that they could avoid conflictive acts and maintain positive relationships.



Figure 2. Frequency of Complaint Response Strategies

5.4. Relationship between social status and Vietnamese university students' complaint response strategies

The distribution of complaint response strategies in the scenarios with three types of social power in **Table 4** shows that Vietnamese students selected different strategies to respond to complaints due to the power of the speaker. In equal power situations interacting with peers (P= situations), Vietnamese students did not deny admitting their responsibility for the offensive act or behavior. In addition, they never set conditions to act or behave differently in the future. Their most frequently used strategies included *Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about* (22.4%) and *Agreeing to change behavior* (19%). Other strategies, such as *Suggesting alternatives* (16.2%), *Justifying oneself* (15.6%), and *Excusing oneself* (14%), were also rather popular, but the occurrence frequencies of these strategies were not significantly different. The dominant use of these strategies indicated that Vietnamese students tended to accept complaints from peers, and showed their willingness to be responsible for the annoyance or displeasure as well as to give solutions to repair the damage. This tendency highlighted the importance of mutual respect for harmony maintenance and constructive resolution in the university context among Vietnamese students. This is consistent with Chew's description of Vietnamese politeness values [3].

Table 4. Distribution of complaint response strategies in different power dynamics

No	Complaint Response Strategies	P=	P-	P+
1	Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about	22.4%	24.7%	2.1%
2	Excusing oneself	14.0%	0.6%	0.9%
3	Agreeing to change behavior	19.0%	23.6%	25.4%
4	Justifying oneself	15.6%	1.1%	14.8%
5	Not taking the complaint seriously	1.2%	0.2%	1.5%
6	Suggesting alternatives	16.2%	33.8%	16.6%
7	Setting conditions for future acceptance	0.0%	1.5%	6.2%
8	Denying the complaint	2.6%	1.1%	3.8%
9	Counterattacking	0.4%	1.5%	10.4%
10	Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	3.2%	0.4%	0.3%
11	Rejecting having an argument	0.2%	1.1%	4.4%
12	Acknowledging the act causing the complaint, but not admitting the responsibility	0.0%	2.8%	3.2%
13	Disregarding the complaint/ Silent	5.2%	7.6%	10.4%
TOTAL		100%	100%	100%

In P- scenarios in which Vietnamese students interacted with complaints from higher-status individuals, the face-saving approach was employed by using more complaint-accepting strategies and fewer denial ones. When facing a complaint from those with higher social status, such as customers, they regularly chose *Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about* (24.7%) and *Agreeing to change behavior* (23.6%). For example, they said: “*Bên nhà hàng em xin lỗi vì sai sót này. Em sẽ kiểm tra lại và đổi lại cho quý khách.*” (*We’re really sorry about this mistake. We’ll check and get you a new one.*). They rarely used *Excusing oneself* (0.6%) and *Challenging the speaker’s assertion* (0.4%). Their strategies aimed to mitigate the negative consequences of the complaint because, in these situations in Vietnamese contexts, denying complaints could threaten the superior complainers’ face, and giving accusations might imply the complainers’ insincerity. However, *Suggesting alternatives* (33.8%) was observed to be the most popular strategy employed by Vietnamese students when interacting with those with higher power. It seemed to be not ordinary in Vietnamese culture, but the reason behind the interviews indicated the proactiveness of Vietnamese students as a young generation.

In higher-power (P+) situations, Vietnamese students also adopted the face-saving strategies, but the politeness approach utilized to interact with lower-power complainers in these scenarios was different. The most frequently used complaint response strategies, including *Agreeing to change behavior* (25.4%) and *Suggesting alternatives* (16.6%) and the notably rare strategy *Admitting responsibility for the act/behavior complained about* (2.1%) reflected that those with high-power status protected their face by ignoring the guilt of act or behavior which might harm their face and authority, and asserted their power by giving corrective remedies. In higher-power situations, *Silent*, with the percentage of 10.4%, was more popular than in equal and lower-power situations. This could be interpreted as an indirect avoidance of acknowledging the responsibility to protect their public image.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Vietnamese university students employed various strategies to make complaints and respond to complaints. Consistent with traditional Vietnamese cultural norms, Vietnamese students tended to prefer indirect and face-saving approaches. Specifically, they dominantly adopted the *Request* strategy in all complaining situations. When responding to complaints, to reduce their negative effects, they preferred to mitigate the offense by frequent employment of *Suggesting alternatives* and *Agreeing to change behavior* strategies. In addition, Vietnamese students opted their complaint and complaint response strategies according to the respective social power of interactants in the communication. In equal power situations, *Admitting responsibility* was the most popular strategy when they interacted with peers, which reflects politeness and mutual respect among people of equal power. In P- situations when interacting with higher-power individuals, they showed their dominant choice of *Request* to complain and *Suggesting alternatives* to respond to complaints. This new trend of their choices of strategies reflected their proactiveness of contemporary young generations in Vietnam in solving conflictive issues. These findings suggested several implications for language teaching and training in intercultural communication. The integration of the insights of appropriate choice of politeness strategies, especially in face-threatening situations, into training courses or workshops can help Vietnamese students effectively communicate, especially in hierarchical settings like Vietnam or in intercultural contexts.

The study is subject to several limitations. First of all, the findings of this research were based on data from university students in the Mekong Delta region, so the research results may not fully represent the strategic choice of Vietnamese students nationwide. Moreover, this study solely focused on one social variable: power in relation to Vietnamese students' employment of complaint and complaint response strategies. Therefore, other variables such as social distance, gender, and age need further research to provide deeper insights.

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