A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPLAINT RESPONSE STRATEGIES BETWEEN VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN SPEAKERS

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze and compare complaint response strategies employed by Vietnamese and American English speakers. The research design adopted a mixed-methods approach with Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) and retrospective interviews. The participants in this research included 50 Vietnamese native speakers and 50 American English speakers. The findings show that Vietnamese and American speakers avoided highly face-threatening and confrontational strategies. They also combined strategies when responding to complaints. American speakers preferred direct and solution-oriented strategies, but harmony-oriented strategies were favored by Vietnamese speakers. These results are hoped to provide a better understanding for an effective application to intercultural communication and English language education.

Keywords: pragmatics; speech acts; complaints; complaint responses; strategies

PHÂN TÍCH ĐỐI CHIẾU CHIẾN LƯỢC HỒI ĐÁP LỜI PHÀN NÀN CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT NAM VÀ NGƯỜI MỸ

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này nhằm phân tích và so sánh các chiến lược hồi đáp lời phàn nàn của người Việt Nam và người Mỹ. Nghiên cứu này áp dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, sử dụng phiếu hoàn thành diễn ngôn (DCTs) và phỏng vấn hồi tưởng. Đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu bao gồm 50 người Việt Nam và 50 người Mỹ. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy cả người Việt Nam và người Mỹ đều tránh sử dụng các chiến lược mang tính đối đầu và đe dọa thể diện cao; đồng thời, cả hai nhóm đều có xu hướng kết hợp các chiến lược khi hồi đáp lời phàn nàn. Tuy nhiên, người Mỹ thiên về các chiến lược trực tiếp và hướng đến giải pháp, trong khi người Việt Nam ưu tiên các chiến lược hướng đến sự hòa hợp. Những kết quả này cung cấp thêm những hiểu biết cần thiết để ứng dụng trong giao tiếp liên văn hóa và giảng dạy ngoại ngữ.

Từ khóa: Ngữ dụng học; hành vi ngôn ngữ; phàn nàn; hồi đáp lời phàn nàn; chiến lược

1. Introduction

In cross-cultural pragmatics, the study of face-threatening acts (FTAs) is highly important within the field of cross-cultural pragmatics for cross-cultural understanding and effective communication (House & Kádár, 2024). Complaints and complaint responses are considered as FTAs, so they play an essential role in managing interpersonal relationships and mitigating conflicts (Trosborg, 1995). A complaint response is conceptualized as a complementary speech act that follows a complaint, forming an adjacency pair and encompassing a diverse range of strategies (Diem, 2017).

In an increasingly globalized world, a nuanced understanding of cross-cultural pragmatic differences in managing sensitive speech acts like complaints and complaint responses is indispensable. Complaint response strategies have been studied in various studies, such as Diem (2017), El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023), and Laforest (2002), but these studies show a significant gap: a direct comparative study between Vietnamese and American English speakers is notably absent. To address this gap, this research aims to explore how Vietnamese and American speakers employ complaint response strategies and to compare their choices of these strategies. This research also investigates the underlying reasons for their strategic choices from their own perspectives. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Vietnamese and American speakers employ complaint response strategies?

2. What are the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and American speakers in choosing complaint response strategies?

This research offers significant contributions to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. First, it promotes greater cross-cultural understanding between Vietnamese and American speakers, enhancing intercultural communicative competence and mitigating potential miscommunication. Second, the findings have practical implications for second language pragmatic pedagogy.

2. Literature review

2.1 Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987)

Politeness has been defined and conceptualized in various ways across different theories and perspectives, but "most linguists perceive politeness as a continuum of appropriate communication" (Bowe & Martin, 2007, p. 26). According to Culpeper and Haugh (2014), there are seven distinct perspectives on linguistic politeness, including the socio-cultural view, conversational-maxim view, face-saving view, discursive approach, relational approach, frame-based approach, and interactional approach. Among these perspectives, the face-saving view of Brown and Levinson (1987) is a highly influential and frequently cited classic pragmatic theory of politeness (Bowe & Martin, 2007; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014). This theory was adopted in this study because it provided a foundational theoretical framework for conceptualizing notions such as "face" and "face-threatening acts" and enabled a comparative analysis of the choices of the complaint response strategies between Vietnamese and American speakers.

In their theory of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce three main notions: face, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies.

2.1.1 Face

The concept of "face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987) refers to the public image that every individual desires to maintain and defend. There are two universal components of "face":

- Positive face refers to "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others," including "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked, or admired" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62).

- Negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). It reflects the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition.

2.1.2 Face-threatening acts (FTAs)

A face-threatening act (FTA) can be defined as an act or behavior that threatens the face or potentially damages an individual's public self-image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). There are four types of face-threatening acts, identified by Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 65–66).

-Acts threatening the hearer's negative face: e.g., ordering, suggesting, threatening, warning.

-Acts threatening the hearer's positive face: e.g., complaining, criticizing, disagreeing, challenging.

-Acts offending the speaker's negative face: e.g., accepting thanks, excuses, or offers.

-Acts damaging the speaker's positive face: e.g., apologizing, accepting compliments.

2.1.3 Politeness strategies

Based on the degree of face threat, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose five politeness strategies.

-Bald on record: The speaker performs the FTA directly, concisely, and clearly when the face threat is very small or when the speaker has significant power.

-Positive politeness: The speaker performs strategies that attend to the hearer's positive face wants, such as expressing interest, approval, or sympathy.

-Negative politeness: The speaker performs strategies that attend to the hearer's negative face wants, often through indirectness, hedging, or apologizing.

-Off-record: The speaker performs the FTA indirectly to avoid responsibility for performing it.

-Don't do the FTA: The speaker chooses not to perform the face-threatening act at all.

2.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede (2001) introduced five independent cultural dimensions, which provide a framework for analyzing communication across cultures and explaining the social and cultural differences between nations (Bowe & Martin, 2007). Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions include power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Vietnam, with an individualism index (IDV) score of 20, is characterized by a highly collectivist culture. Therefore, in Vietnamese society, harmony

should always be maintained, and direct confrontation is generally considered rude and avoided. Consequently, in communication, information is implicitly conveyed. Moreover, the concept of face is crucial in social interactions, and direct discussion of performance can lead to an unacceptable loss of face.

In contrast, the United States is an individualist society with a high IDV score of 91 (Hofstede et al., 2010). In the context of the United States, directness and openness are considered signs of sincerity and honesty. Confrontation can be seen as a constructive means of resolving issues, and direct feedback is generally expected in social interactions.

2.3 Complaints and complaint responses

Complaints are generally defined as expressions of displeasure or annoyance in reaction to an offensive action or violation of social rules (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). They are classified as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) within Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Therefore, complaints potentially damage the social relationship between the speaker and hearer by disputing or challenging the complainee's social competence (Trosborg, 1995).

A complaint response is considered a complementary speech act that directly follows the complaint, forming an adjacency pair (Diem, 2017). Complaint responses are diverse, and responding to complaints involves not only simple denial or apology but also more complex strategies such as explanations, promises, or even threats (Diem, 2017). Different scholars, such as Laforest (2002) and El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023), have developed detailed frameworks to categorize these strategies. The present study utilizes an analytic framework adapted from these works, which categorizes complaint responses into four primary types, each comprising several sub-strategies (See Table 1).

2.4 Previous studies

Although the speech act of responding to complaints was considered to have received relatively less attention from researchers (El-Dakhs & Ahmed, 2023; Laforest, 2002), existing research has explored complaint response strategies across various contexts, such as family contexts (Laforest, 2002) and academic settings (El-Dakhs & Ahmed, 2023). It has also been investigated in cross-cultural pragmatics studies (Diem, 2017). This review examines the key methodologies and findings from these studies to establish a foundation for the present research.

In the context of French, Laforest (2002) investigated complaint-response sequences within naturally occurring conversations among family members. The study analyzed recorded interactions in four French-speaking families in Montréal, Canada. The analysis showed that there was a relation between the expressions of dissatisfaction and the degree of intimacy between interlocutors. Notably, complaints were generally indirect in form, and they were often performed without special precautions. The most frequent complaint realization pattern was "*mentioning the offensive act/behavior*", followed by "*adverse criticism of the hearer*".

Furthermore, the study found that responses to complaints were predominantly defensive. The findings of this study showed that the most frequent response strategy was "*rejection of the complaint*", followed closely by "*partial acceptance*" and then by "*disregarding the complaint*". Full "*acceptance of the complaint*" was the least frequent. To mitigate conflict, especially in instances of concentrated complaints, participants used various strategies to prevent escalation

into arguments. Finally, in response to a counterattack, the initial complainer almost always chose not to escalate by issuing a third complaint.

The study by El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023) explored the speech acts of complaining and responding to complaints in an academic setting in Egypt. In this research, two groups of participants from a private Egyptian university were involved: 40 undergraduate students and 40 university professors. The data for this research were collected using role-plays in two stages. The results of data analysis showed notable findings regarding complaint and response strategies in the Egyptian university context. Regarding students' complaint strategies, "*requests for repair*" made up 50%, followed by "*expressing disapproval*", "*making accusations*", and "*casting blame*". When complaining to professors, students frequently used initiators, primarily terms of address and respect. Additionally, the most common response strategies employed by professors fell under the category of "*partial acceptance*". Particularly, "*justifying oneself*" and "*suggesting alternatives*" were the two most frequently used complaint response strategies. This showed the professors' desire to maintain a good rapport with students. The study also noted that professors often employed both external and internal modifiers in their responses.

Unlike Laforest (2002) and El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023), Diem (2017) conducted a cross-cultural pragmatics study comparing complaint response strategies between British and Vietnamese speakers. In this study, the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), consisting of six real-life situations, was used to collect data from 30 British and 30 Vietnamese participants of various ages and jobs. The findings of this research identified 13 distinct strategies, including five combination strategies used by Vietnamese and British speakers. Significant similarities and differences in their preferred choices were discovered and discussed. Diem (2017) also concluded that three social variables: relative power (P), social distance (D), and the absolute ranking of imposition (R), based on Brown and Levinson's theory, were found to have a significant effect on the choice of complaint response strategies.

Diem (2017) also examined the reasons for the similarities and differences in complaint response strategy choices between Vietnamese and British speakers. The study found that British speakers' choices of these strategies were influenced by cultural values of directness and individualism. In contrast, Vietnamese speakers prioritized collectivism, face-saving, and the maintenance of social harmony.

Although Laforest (2002), El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023), and Diem (2017) studied complaint response strategies in different contexts and employed diverse methodological approaches, their findings showed some consistencies. These studies demonstrated that speakers from different cultures employed a wide range of strategies in responding to complaints, and social variables played a significant role.

Despite the valuable contributions of existing studies on complaint response strategies, a significant research gap remains regarding a direct pragmatic comparison between Vietnamese and American speakers. Furthermore, insight into the reasons behind speakers' strategy choices from their own perspectives has received limited attention.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

The current study was designed with a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach, in which quantitative data from Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) were collected first. Then, the collection of qualitative data from the retrospective interviews was conducted for the purpose of explaining and elaborating on the quantitative findings.

3.2 Participants

A total of 100 participants, comprising two groups of participants, were recruited for the DCT elicitation in this study: one group consisting of 50 native Vietnamese speakers residing in Vietnam, and the other consisting of 50 native American English speakers residing in the U.S. The recruitment procedure was conducted by employing convenience sampling combined with networking methods to access participants in both Vietnam and the U.S. Emails and Zalo messages (for Vietnamese participants), introducing the researcher and the study along with a Google Form link to the DCT, were sent to potential participants. The gender of the participants in each group was balanced at the screening stage. The age range of the participants was from 19 to over 60. All participants held at least a university degree and worked in a variety of professional fields. These criteria were strictly applied to enhance the demographic diversity of the sample. For the qualitative data collection, a subset of 12 participants (six Vietnamese and six Americans) from the DCT stage was selected based on their voluntariness, indicated in their responses to the DCT. The recruitment process continued until data saturation was reached. The interviews were arranged via email and conducted in Vietnamese with the Vietnamese group and in English with the American group.

3.3 Data collection instruments and procedures

3.3.1 Discourse completion tests (DCTs)

Discourse completion tests (DCTs) were used as a quantitative data collection tool in this research because of their efficiency and comparability. DCTs enable researchers to collect a large amount of data effectively and quickly, which can be directly compared across different groups through statistical analysis (Landone, 2022; Schneider, 2018). Therefore, they are suitable for cross-cultural pragmatics research and are frequently employed to compare linguistic behaviors across different languages (Landone, 2022).

In this study, to elicit speech acts of responding to complaints, the DCT was designed with six scenarios and two versions: Vietnamese for native Vietnamese speakers and English for native speakers of American English. The DCT scenarios were piloted, evaluated for their validity, and refined in terms of wording and cultural appropriateness based on feedback from participants and experts before their official administration for data collection.

The six scenarios were constructed to represent a range of everyday situations that would be familiar to both Vietnamese and American participants. These scenarios covered a wide range of contexts from personal to professional, and public situations, regarding responding to a complaint from:

- a friend about posting inaccurate information on social media

- a parent about making noise at home

- a student about an unexpectedly low score

- a subordinate about a delayed email reply

- a stranger about cutting in line in a public place

- a customer about the poor quality of merchandise

The DCTs were administered via Google Forms, a popular online survey platform, because of their numerous advantages, such as the ability to reach a broader population, convenience for participants, and the efficiency of data collection and management (Cohen et al., 2017).

3.3.2 Retrospective interviews

The interview was designed as a semi-structured verbal report to elicit participants' perceptions and reasons for their choices of strategies to make and respond to complaints across different social distance situations. The interview data provided insights into why and how interlocutors interacted in these situations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Google Meet video conferencing at the participants' convenience and were recorded for transcription with their permission.

3.3.3 Analytic Framework

To analyze the data collected from the DCTs, this study employed an analytic framework adapted from the classification schemes for complaint response strategies proposed by Laforest (2002) and El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023). In this framework (Table 1), complaint response strategies were divided into four main categories: (1) *acceptance*, (2) *partial acceptance*, (3) *rejection*, and (4) *disregarding the complaint*. Within these superordinate types, thirteen distinct strategies were identified.

Table 1

Framework for Analyzing Complaint Response Strategies, Adapted from Laforest (2002) and El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023)

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	*-You're right. That was my mistake.*
Strategy 2: excusing oneself	The complainee presents an excuse for committing the act causing the complaint.	*-I have a problem with my internet connection, so I couldn't reply to your email.*
Strategy 3: agreeing to change behavior	The complainee acknowledges the act causing the complaint but agrees to change it.	*- I will be more careful in the future.*
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.	*- Sorry to cancel our meeting at the last minute, but I have to finish and hand in my assignment tomorrow.*
Strategy 5: not taking the complaint seriously	The complainee reacts by laughing or joking.	*-Well, I guess I need a magic wand to fix this problem.*

Strategy 6: suggesting alternatives	The complainee proposes alternative ways to address the act causing the complaint.	- *How about a 50% discount on your next purchase?*
Strategy 7: setting conditions for future acceptance	The complainee sets a condition to behave differently in the future.	- *Next time, make sure to call me earlier, so I'll have some time to see you.*
Type 3: rejection of the complaint		
Strategy 8: denying the complaint	The complainee denies the act causing the complaint	*It wasn't me. I didn't leave the door open.*
Strategy 9: counterattacking	The complainee criticizes or accuses the complainant.	*-You weren't very clear. That's why I made that mistake.*
Strategy 10: not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/challenging the speaker's assertion	The complainee refuses to consider the act causing the complaint as blameworthy	*-Everybody does like this. I don't think it's a problem.*
Strategy 11: rejecting having an argument	The complainee won't allow the other party to present arguments or discuss the topic further.	*-I'm not going to argue about this.*
Strategy 12: acknowledging the act causing the complaint, but not admitting the responsibility	The complainee acknowledges the act causing the complaint, but denies responsibility for it.	- *I missed your call because my phone battery died.*
Type 4 – Strategy 13: disregarding the complaint	The complainee keeps silent or says nothing.	*-Silence / Say nothing*

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis in this research followed a mixed-methods approach. First, the quantitative data from the DCTs were analyzed using SPSS version 27. This analysis began with descriptive statistics, focusing on frequency counts and percentages of strategy use. To determine significant differences in strategy choices between the Vietnamese and American speakers, inferential statistics were employed. Although the Chi-square test was initially considered, its primary assumption was violated, as more than 20% of cells in the contingency tables had an expected count of less than 5 (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, Fisher's Exact Test was used as the appropriate alternative. This test is specifically designed for analyzing associations between categorical variables when expected cell frequencies are low (Cohen et al., 2018; Field, 2024).

Following the quantitative analysis, the qualitative data from the transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to provide deeper and contextual explanations for the quantitative findings.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese speakers

The findings revealed an overall tendency that Vietnamese participants preferred complaint response strategies that prioritized social harmony and confrontation avoidance, such as accepting responsibility and offering solutions. This approach showed that Vietnamese speakers tended to maintain social harmony and manage interpersonal rapport. This aligns with prior research in the Vietnamese context, which similarly observed that face-threatening strategies were rarely used.

4.1.1 Single complaint response strategies

The results in Table 2 showed that out of 300 responses to 6 DCT scenarios from 50 Vietnamese participants, 12 out of 13 possible complaint response strategies were employed with 463 occurrences. Vietnamese speakers omitted the strategy of "*R12: Acknowledging the act causing the complaint, but not admitting the responsibility*". The most frequently employed individual strategy was "*R3: Agree to change behavior*" (*f*=149, 49.7%). Its high frequency highlights the Vietnamese tendency to accept complaints and commit to making a change in their behavior. This approach prioritizes maintaining harmony and avoiding direct conflict in communication, as in the following example:

- "*Con xin lỗi ba/mẹ. Con sẽ vặn nhỏ âm lượng hoặc đeo tai nghe để không làm ảnh hưởng đến ba/mẹ nhé.*" (*VN08_S11*)

(*I'm sorry, Mom/Dad. I will turn down the volume or wear headphones so that it won't disturb you."*)

Other frequently used strategies included *R1: Admit responsibility* (*f*=99, 33%), *R2: Excusing oneself* (*f*=75, 25%) and *R6: Suggesting alternatives* (*f*=64, 21.3%).

Conversely, Vietnamese people tend to avoid or minimize the use of strategies that are perceived as face-threatening or directly confrontational. These include *R11: Rejecting having an argument* (f=1, 0.3%), *R5: Not taking the complaint seriously* (*f*=2, 0.7%), and *R9: Counterattacking* (*f*=4, 1.3%).

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Complaint Response Strategies Used by Vietnamese Speakers (N=300)

Strategy Code	Complaint Response Strategy	Frequency (*f*)	Percentage (%)
R1	Admitting responsibility	99	33
R2	Excusing oneself	75	25
R3	Agreeing to change behavior	149	49.7
R4	Justifying oneself	20	6.7
R5	Not taking the complaint seriously	2	0.7
R6	Suggesting alternatives	64	21.3
R7	Setting conditions for future acceptance	15	5.0
R8	Denying the complaint	13	4.3
R9	Counterattacking	4	1.3
R10	Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	14	4.7
R11	Rejecting having an argument	1	0.3
R12	Not admitting the responsibility	0	0
R13	Disregarding the complaint/ Silence	7	2.3
	Total	463	154.3

Notes: As participants often employed more than one strategy per response to a DCT scenario, the total percentage of individual strategy occurrences exceeds 100%.

The interview data reinforced the quantitative finding, revealing a strong preference among Vietnamese participants for responsibility-oriented strategies in response to complaints. For instance, interview participant *VN_I03* stated a clear perspective that receiving a complaint

is an opportunity for self-improvement and problem-solving. They stated: "*Em cảm ơn họ vì họ đã cho mình biết cái khuyết điểm của mình để mình có thể sửa.*" (*I thank them because they let me know my shortcomings so I can fix them*) and emphasized the importance of "*đưa ra cái phương pháp giải quyế*t" (*proposing a solution*). Similarly, another interviewee, *VN_I01*, demonstrated the practical application by proposing compensation when a customer complained: "*Bên em sẽ có bồi thường cho anh chị là một ly nước hoặc là một bịch snack gì đó nên mong anh chị thông cảm giùm em…*" (*Our side will compensate you with a drink or a bag of snacks, so we hope for your understanding…*). The reason for their strategy choice was explicitly explained by interviewee *VN_I02, who said* that they "*ưu tiên duy trì mối quan hệ hơn là thắng trong một cuộc tranh cãi*" (*prioritize maintaining relationships over winning an argument*). This reveals a fundamental cultural principle that governs communication in Vietnam, where social harmony and strong social relationships are essential (Le, 2012; Pham, 2008). Consequently, winning an argument, especially in public, can severely damage relationships and lead to conflicts.

These findings are consistent with previous research on complaint response strategies in the Vietnamese context, notably the work of Diem (2017). Her study also indicated that highly face-threatening strategies, such as *Rejecting* and *Threatening back*, were seldom employed.

4.1.2 Combining complaint response strategies

The statistical analysis showed that Vietnamese speakers frequently combined various strategies when responding to complaints. In this study, 35 different combinations were identified, and each combination comprised two to four individual strategies. The most frequently used combination was *R1 + R3* (*Admit responsibility + Agree to change behavior*), appearing 34 times (11.3%). This combination expresses willingness to take responsibility and commit to changing behavior, thereby preserving harmony and protecting the complainant's face. For example: "*Cho tôi xin lỗi vì tôi đã chậm trễ. Tôi sẽ giải quyết ngay.*" (*VN49_S10*) (*I'm sorry for the delay. I'll handle it right away.*)

The second most common combination of complaint response strategies used by Vietnamese speakers was *R1 + R2* (*Admit responsibility + Excusing oneself*), occurring 19 times (6.3%). This combination involved acknowledging responsibility while providing an explanation or context. For instance, "*Oh sorry, tui xin lỗi. Tui hông để ý.*" (*VN20_S9*) (*Oh, sorry, my apologies. I wasn't paying attention.*)

The interviews also showed that the reasoning for combining multiple complaint response strategies was to demonstrate politeness and sincerity. In fact, interview participant *VN_I05* explained that "*không nên trả lời cộc lốc, như vậy là bất lịch sự*" (*shouldn't answer briefly, that's impolite*). According to this participant, a longer response was perceived as a demonstration of greater politeness, respect, and sincerity towards the complainee. Moreover, combining strategies also reflects the communication norms of Vietnamese people, which prioritize subtlety and tact, especially when handling face-threatening situations (Le, 2012; Pham, 2008).

Consistent with the results of Diem's (2017) research, the findings of this study confirmed that Vietnamese speakers tend to combine strategies when responding to complaints.

4.2 Complaint response strategies used by American speakers

Table 3 shows the overall trend that American speakers predominantly opt for complaint response strategies that are receptive and solution-oriented, while avoiding strategies that involve rejecting the complaint or highly threatening the complainee's face. This preference emphasizes their communicative approach, which values sincerity and solution orientation.

4.2.1 Single complaint response strategies

The analysis of 300 responses from the American group, as shown in Table 3, indicates that Americans used 11 out of 13 complaint response strategies, with a total of 486 occurrences. The predominant strategy used by American speakers was *R1: Admitting responsibility* (*f*=178, 59.3%). This strategic choice highlighted a tendency to acknowledge fault, showing sincerity and a desire to maintain relationships. For example, "*Oh no, my mistake. Thank you for pointing it out.*" (*US07_S7*). Secondly, *R6: Suggesting alternatives* was highly preferred (*f*=114, 38.0%). This reflected a proactive approach to resolving disagreements or conflicts by suggesting solutions, such as "*Let's schedule a meeting to resolve the issue*" (*US29_S10*). In contrast, Americans never used two strategies that directly threaten the complainer's positive face*: R11: Rejecting having an argument,* and *R12: Not admitting the responsibility*.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Complaint Response Strategies Used by American Speakers (N=300)

Strategy Code	Complaint Response Strategy	Frequency (*f*)	Percentage (%)
R1	Admitting responsibility	178	59.3
R2	Excusing oneself	50	16.7
R3	Agreeing to change behavior	64	21.3
R4	Justifying oneself	21	7.0
R5	Not taking the complaint seriously	8	2.7
R6	Suggesting alternatives	114	38.0
R7	Setting conditions for future acceptance	9	3.0
R8	Denying the complaint	18	6.0
R9	Counterattacking	7	2.3
R10	Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	1	0.3
R11	Rejecting having an argument	0	0.0
R12	Not admitting the responsibility	0	0.0
R13	Disregarding the complaint/ Silent	16	5.3
	Total	486	162.0

Notes: As participants often employed more than one strategy per response to a DCT scenario, the total percentage of individual strategy occurrences exceeds 100%.

The qualitative analysis of the retrospective interviews with American participants provided deeper insights and explanations for the statistical findings. The interview data revealed that American speakers prioritized acknowledgment and commitment to change and resolution. One participant, *US_I03*, stated: "*I would probably acknowledge their complaint, explain why I did, what I did…*". This statement highlights the willingness to acknowledge but also to provide context or excuses (*R2: Excusing oneself*). Similarly, *US_I03* shared the view of *"…accepting the complaint immediately or maybe like promising to resolve the issue…*".

Similar to the findings on Americans' choice of complaint response strategies in the current study, Egyptian university professors in El-Dakhs and Ahmed's (2023) research predominantly employed partial acceptance strategies, which included *Suggesting alternatives* and *Setting conditions for future acceptance*.

In short, the results of the data analysis demonstrated that American speakers preferred cooperative and solution-oriented complaint response strategies.

4.2.2 Combining complaint response strategies

The data from Table 3 above indicates that American speakers frequently combine complaint response strategies, averaging 1.62 strategies per utterance (486 total occurrences in 300 responses). The combinations of two strategies were most preferred, accounting for 70.0% of all recorded combinations. Among them, the combination *R1 + R6: Admitting responsibility + Suggesting alternatives* (*f*=36, 12.0%) was the most popular one. Using this combination, Americans showed an immediate acknowledgment of the offense, followed by a proactive solution. The second most frequent combination was *R1 + R3: Admitting responsibility + Agreeing to change behavior* (*f*=32, 10.7%). By combining strategies in this manner, Americans demonstrated full acceptance of the complaint and a commitment to changing their future behavior.

The insights from the interviews confirmed the importance of accepting responsibility for American participants. The interview participant *US_I01* shared their principle when responding to a complaint: *"accepting responsibility... no matter how big or small"*. The reason for their choice was to *"let them know I'm listening, I accept it..."* Accordingly, their preferred combined strategies typically included a sequence of actions: *"take responsibility, provide alternatives, and make some suggestions"* (*US_I01*).

4.3 Comparative analysis of complaint response strategies between Vietnamese and American speakers

4.3.1 Similarities between Vietnamese and American speakers

Despite the distinct socio-cultural backgrounds between Vietnam, with a high-context, collectivist culture, and America, with a low-context, individualistic culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), the data analysis revealed some similarities in the complaint response strategies of both Vietnamese and American speakers. The primary similarities reflected a shared strategic approach to managing interpersonal interactions and potential conflict. An obvious similarity was that both Vietnamese and American speakers opted for indirect and less face-threatening strategies, while avoiding direct confrontational or personally attacking responses. Table 4 indicates that *R8: Denying the complaint* (*p* = .461) and *R9: Counterattacking* (*p* = .545) showed no significant difference in usage frequency between the two groups. Furthermore, both groups avoided the employment of *R12: Not admitting responsibility*, with 0% usage for both.

The avoidance of these strategies was explained as a way to maintain harmony and show respect as Vietnamese interview participants shared their views: arguing with friends *"only loses friendship, does not solve the problem"*. (*"chỉ làm mất tình bạn thôi chứ không giải quyết được vấn đề"*, *VN_I01*) and *"courtesy must be maintained under any circumstances"* (*"trong bất kỳ hoàn cảnh nào cũng phải đảm bảo tính lịch sự"*, *VN_I06*).

Table 4

Fisher's Exact Test Results for Complaint Response Strategies

Strategy Code	Complaint Response Strategy	Fisher's Exact Test Value (p)
R1	Admitting responsibility	$p < .001*$
R2	Excusing oneself	$p = .016*$
R3	Agreeing to change behavior	$p < .001*$
R4	Justifying oneself	$p = 1.000$
R5	Not taking the complaint seriously	$p = .106$
R6	Suggesting alternatives	$p < .001*$
R7	Setting conditions for future acceptance	$p = .298$
R8	Denying the complaint	$p = .461$
R9	Counterattacking	$p = .545$
R10	Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about as a problem/ challenging the speaker's assertion	$p = .001*$
R11	Rejecting having an argument	$p = 1.000$
R12	Not admitting the responsibility	N/A
R13	Disregarding the complaint/ Silent	$p = .087$

Note: * : statistically significant ($p < .05$). N/A: cannot be computed / not applicable

The Fisher's Exact Test values in Table 4 also show that no statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) in usage between the two groups for the strategies: *R4: Justifying oneself* ($p = 1.000$), *R5: Not taking the complaint seriously* ($p = .106$), *R7: Setting conditions for future acceptance* ($p = .298$), *R11: Rejecting having an argument* ($p = 1.000$), and *R13: Disregarding the complaint/ Silent* ($p = .087$).

4.3.2 Differences between Vietnamese and American speakers

Besides some universal similarities, Vietnamese and American speakers demonstrated significant differences in opting for complaint response strategies. These differences were mainly related to individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede et al., 2010) and the conceptualization of face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The data showed a highly significant statistical difference in the use of two strategies, R1: Admitting responsibility and R3: Agreeing to change behavior, between Vietnamese and American speakers. Americans (59.3%) employed strategy *R1* twice as often as Vietnamese speakers (33%). The Fisher's Exact Test value in Table 4 also confirmed a highly significant statistical difference in the use of this strategy between the two groups ($p < .001$). This difference aligns with American culture, which emphasizes individualism and directness (Hofstede et al., 2010). In contrast, Vietnamese speakers (49.7%) used *R3: Agreeing to change behavior* more than twice as often as Americans (21.3%), and this difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$). This finding indicates that Vietnamese with a collectivist orientation tended to maintain harmony and show willingness to adjust their behavior in the future (Le, 2012).

The Fisher's Exact Test results in Table 4 also report a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) in the selection of the complaint response strategies: *R2: Excusing oneself, R6: Suggesting alternatives, R10: Not acknowledging the act/behavior complained about*.

5. Conclusion

This study was a comparative analysis of complaint response strategies between Vietnamese and American English speakers. The findings indicated that both Vietnamese and American speakers employed complaint response strategies with high flexibility. Vietnamese speakers opted for 12 complaint response strategies, and   Americans used 11 of them. When responding to complaints, both Vietnamese people and Americans tended to combine strategies.

Both groups avoided highly face-threatening and confrontational strategies. However, American speakers preferred direct and solution-oriented strategies. In contrast, Vietnamese speakers prioritized face-saving strategies to maintain social relationships and avoid conflicts.

The findings provide valuable insights for intercultural communication and implications for language teaching, especially for teaching English and Vietnamese as foreign languages. It is recommended that language teachers use activities and materials with a focus on speech acts in their classes to explicitly teach the pragmatic universal norms.

Besides insights and findings, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size of participants is just enough for statistical analysis, but may not represent the Vietnamese and American societies. Secondly, social variables, such as social power, distance, age, and gender, have not been investigated.

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