

# Making Complaints—Proficiency Effects on Instructor- and Peer-directed Email Correspondence\*

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**Abstract**—Computer-mediated communication tools have allowed users to interact across geographical and temporal borders. Among them, emails are extensively used for communicative, pedagogical, and social purposes, but relatively little research attention has been paid to the social interaction or speech styles in them. This study explored complaint strategies and discourse features, focusing on supportive moves and internal modifiers, of instructor- and peer-directed emails produced by English learners of low and intermediate levels, with each group being consisted of twenty-two participants. The results showed that the two groups were similar in complaint strategies used towards the instructor and peers by preferring explicit complaints and also in the production of significantly more supportive moves and downgraders towards the instructor to reduce the face threat. Nonetheless, justification, preferred by the intermediate learners as a supportive move, offered a legitimate stance to complain and appeared to make emails more appropriate and more effective to appease the addressee's unhappiness than the sole use of formulaic expressions of politeness, utilized most often by the low learners. This study suggested that whereas the low learners were still at the first phase of the interlanguage development characterized by the use of simple formulas, the intermediate learners had slightly moved forward.

**Index Terms**—complaints, email, strategy, supportive moves, internal modifiers, severity, status

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the widespread popularity of the internet, computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools have enabled users to interact across geographical and temporal borders. CMC can be either synchronous, which requires users' real-time, immediate responses, or asynchronous, where delayed responses and non-real-time interactions are allowed. Emails, an asynchronous CMC mode, are extensively used and sometimes are preferred to face-to-face interactions (Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2000; Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005). They are also often utilized in academic settings both for pedagogical functions of promoting learners' participation, communication, and writing fluency, and for communicative functions of making announcements, appointments, and even the students' offer of excuses for late work (Duran, et al., 2005).

In addition, emails serve the social function of maintaining interpersonal relationships (e.g. Baron, 1998; Bloch, 2002; Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008), which can be achieved via various strategies, especially those emphasizing common ground, reciprocity, and cooperation (Vinagre, 2008). However, this essential social aim of emails can be at risk when a face-threatening act, which threatens the email recipient's wants for personal freedom or desire to be appreciated, is involved, but emails at the same time can serve as a channel to mediate the anxiety of communicating (Kelly, Keaten, & Finch, 2004) and may allow these acts to be produced with more comfort and ease than face-to-face interactions. The double-edged characteristics make the email senders' face-threatening acts worth investigating. However, current CMC research is mainly task-based that explores issues regarding cost, efficiency, and productivity (Cutler, 1996), and little attention has been given to its impacts on the social interaction or speech styles, leaving a niche for further research. Though Hong (2012a) has initially addressed this issue based on a preliminary study, more in-depth explorations and discussions are needed.

### *Features of Email Correspondence*

Emails are a type of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool. Due to their capacity of allowing delayed responses, writers can, at their own pace, take all of the concerns into consideration and concentrate on planning and structuring a socially appropriate email before sending emails (Walther, 1996). Emails could be particularly advantageous for conflictive interactions since they enable users to carefully phrase messages, manage emotion, and have a better control over time and space (Shapiro & Allen, 2001) and mitigate confrontations that might be caused. Being text-based with few contextual cues of vocal inflection, gestures, and facial expressions, which generally convey social meaning such as the sender's attitudes towards recipient (Murray, 1995), email writers need to employ politeness strategies to assure the cooperative interaction (Smith, 2003). Some researchers have also claimed

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that emails can be beneficial for second language (L2) learners as they provide ample opportunities to interact, negotiate meaning with authentic recipients by carefully-planned expressions (Gaer, 1999) and select between formal and informal language forms appropriate for the rhetorical contexts (Bloch, 2002). They also offer an alternative communication channel for students, who do not appreciate face-to-face interactions, to communicate with instructors and peers (Warschauer, 1999) and thus level the barriers between teachers and students in traditional classrooms (Hawisher & Moran, 1993).

Despite the communicative and pedagogical benefits, there exist concerns for the informality of the language being used in emails. A major challenge still results from the lack of paralinguistic or contextual cues. Because of the invisibility of the recipient, email writers could not obtain contextual cues and therefore are likely to ignore their obligation to behave following the social conventions and majority judgments (Smilowitz, Compton & Flint, 1988). For instance, Duran et al.'s (2005) study showed that professors commonly received students' emails with poor grammatical content, inadequate punctuation, and informal tone, reflecting that speed and efficiency take precedence over appropriateness. Baron (2001) has also indicated students' tendency towards informality by regarding it as a trend.

Undesired directness might be another product of emails. As Cameron (2003) has pointed out that that communication in general is increasingly characterized by a "preference for directness over indirectness" (p. 29), this tendency can be prominent with emails because of their de-individuation, which makes the writers prioritize efficiency regardless of the recipient's status or social distance (Sussman & Sproull, 1999). The directness can be particularly problematic with L2 learners, whose email experience has been mostly among peers and equals, when they correspond with higher-status email recipients even if they tend to conform to traditional power routines in face-to-face encounters (Drake, Yuthas, & Dillard, 2000). Participants' status differences may become obscured owing to the absence of social context cues (Baron, 1984), leading to language that lacks status congruence (Herring, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991) and socially inappropriate emails.

#### ***Research on Face-threatening Acts in Email***

While many email studies examine the discourse, such as strategy use and functions (e.g. Bloch, 2002; Duran, et al., 2005; Johnson, et al., 2008; Vinagre, 2008), few have addressed email writers' specific acts, which are quite often collected through the use of discourse completion tasks, i.e. an open-ended questionnaire providing situational cues for the respondents. However, as email correspondence grows in popularity, speech acts, particularly face-threatening acts that might risk the recipient's face, should be explored as they frequently occur in emails and might result in misunderstandings and confrontations.

Requests, among types of speech acts, have received some interests from researchers of emails. Requests are a face-threatening act, requiring a person to do something that s/he may be reluctant to do and thus risking her/his negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by violating the wants to be free from imposition. In general, empirical studies (e.g. Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a, 2006b) have suggested that students write more formal emails to professors despite the general impression that their email messages are characterized by informality with poor syntax and abbreviations. Focusing on L2 learners, Lee (2004) examined request strategies in emails sent by Chinese learners of English to their teachers, who were traditionally regarded as authority, and found that the learners preferred direct requests while they mitigated the face threat and showed respect by linguistic politeness devices. Similar findings were reported in Chen's (2006) longitudinal study, which viewed the preferences for direct forms of requests as a means to make messages urgent so as to receive attention.

Cross-cultural differences also emerge in requestive emails. Chen's (2001) study of American and Taiwanese graduate students' requestive emails to faculty revealed that the two groups shared similar preferences for using strategies of query preparatory and want statements, but their difference lay in directness levels and amounts of lexico-syntactic politeness features. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), who examined requestive emails sent by native and non-native English speaking graduate students to faculty, has reported that native speakers demonstrated greater resources in creating polite messages than nonnative speakers, whose directness may result from lack of experiences and uncertainty about email etiquette because typically email appropriateness is not explicitly taught. Therefore, Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) have placed strong emphasis on developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence, i.e. ability to relate utterances to the communicative goals and to the features of the language use setting (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), for CMC, including the ability to perform speech acts by appropriate strategies. It would be essential for instructors to realize learners' difficulty in composing socially appropriate emails and then integrate email etiquette into instruction, whether it is explicit or implicit.

In spite of existing studies on requestive emails, rare studies examined other face-threatening acts in emails. Complaints, a speaker's expressions of grievances (Clyne, 1994), may also be carried out via emails. They can risk the addressee's positive face because they are performed when a person's behavior is considered problematic and threatens the desire to be appreciated (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Similar to requests, some contextual variables might influence the speaker's decision on the directness of complaints, for instance, the complainer's and the complaine'e's status differences and familiarity levels. Therefore, different strategies (e.g. Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993) and various external and internal mitigative linguistic devices (e.g. Trosborg, 1995) may be employed depending on how direct the speakers intend to be. With the growing emphasis on email etiquette, to realize complaints through strategies and mitigative devices with due attention to contextual variables appears to be crucial in determining the success of email exchanges

because they can minimize the risk of a communication breakdown resulting from linguistic or cultural misunderstandings, especially in a context where non-verbal communication is reduced to emoticons and punctuation marks.

Since almost none of the previous research addressed complaint emails, they become the target of the present study, with the focus on Chinese learners of English of two proficiency levels. The research questions are:

1. What are the differences between complaint strategies and discourse features in emails written by low and intermediate learners?
2. What are the differences of complaint strategies used towards instructors and peers produced by low and intermediate learners?

## II. METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

Forty-four English learners, who were college students in Taiwan, participated in this study. They were either low or intermediate level of English proficiency, defined according to their performances in a simulated paper-based TOEFL test prior to the email exchanges of this study. The subjects were categorized into the low group if their scores were lower than 420 while those whose scores were higher than 450 were regarded as having an intermediate level of proficiency<sup>1</sup>.

### *Procedures*

In this study, the participants wrote complaint emails—two to the instructor, i.e. the researcher, and two to the peers. In peer-directed emails, each proficiency group was divided into two sub-groups, with one group complaining and the other responding<sup>2</sup> in the first two exchanges and switching roles in the other two. There were six topics, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
THE SIX SCENARIO TOPICS<sup>3</sup>

Scenario number	Email recipient	Scenario topic
1	instructor	Your paper's grade was much lower than you expected.
2	instructor	Your late assignment was rejected whereas another student's was accepted.
3	peer	Your partner doesn't do anything for the project.
4	peer	Your classmate is always at least 30-minute late for meetings.
5	peer	Your classmate often borrows your stuff and never returns it.
6	peer	Your classmate never does assignments and always wants to copy yours.

### *Coding Scheme and Statistical Analysis*

The coding of this study involved the complaint strategies and discourse features, which focused on supportive moves and internal modifiers (lexical repertoire) used to modify the intensity of complaints. The coding of the complaint strategies included hints, indirect requests for repair, disapproval, direct requests for repair, explicit complaints, and accusations, which are defined and exemplified as follows.

#### **(1) Hint:**

The complainer avoids explicit mention of the offensive event to evade confrontations.

E.g. "So, I think that "Good credit makes future loans easier." (I18, Email 5)<sup>4</sup>

#### **(2) Indirect request for repair:**

The complainer may request for remedial actions or demand that the offensive behavior never occur again. Indirect requests may take the form of "Would you do X".

E.g. "Would you please check my presentation again or give some advice?" (I1, Email1)

<sup>1</sup> If the subjects had passed equivalent proficiency tests, such as TOEIC and General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), a national English proficiency test in Taiwan, they could be exempt from the pre-test. The highest score for the low group and the lowest score for the intermediate group were 500 and 550, respectively. With regard to GEPT, subjects who had passed beginning and intermediate levels of the test were assigned to the two groups accordingly.

<sup>2</sup> Although leaving unanalyzed, the email replies from peers were still produced to make email-exchange tasks authentic.

<sup>3</sup> The scenarios are adapted from Hong (2012b).

<sup>4</sup> The examples for the strategies are selected from the data of the present study. The parenthesis at the end indicates the source of the example, with *I* or *B* referring to the intermediate or the low group followed by the code number of the subject.

TABLE 2  
DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES OF SUPPORTIVE MOVES

Supportive Move	Definition & Example
Self-introduction	The complainer introduces himself/herself. E.g. "I am your English writing's student, Winnie." (B4, Email 1)
Preparator	It "prepares" the speech act by utterances that break the ground or warn the complainees that a complaint is forthcoming. E.g. "I have a question need to ask you." (I13, Email 2)
Recognition of responsibility/ fault	It reflects that the complainer's awareness of the responsibilities for the offence. E.g. "I know is my fault to hand this assignment late." (B7, Email 2)
Expression of politeness	The complainer expresses politeness by apologizing or showing appreciation. E.g. "I am very sorry for my late assignment." (B3, Email 2)
Expression of empathy	The complainer shows understandings of how the complainees feels or finds excuses for the complainees. E.g. "Therefore, when you refused my late assignment, I can totally understand." (I15, Email 2)
Promise for future actions	The complainer promises some remedial actions. E.g. "If I know the promble(m) of my paper I will correct it soon and remember it." (B15, Email 1)
Offer of help	The complainer shows willingness to help solve problems. E.g. "When you do not come to school you do not know homework, I can tell you how to do." (I13, Email 6)
Justification	It legitimatizes the complaint with reasons and explanations. E.g. "The PSP is so expensive and it my birthday present. Therefore that PSP is very important to me. Because you are my best friend, so I can lent the PSP for you." (I16, Email 5)

### (3) Disapproval:

The complainer voices unhappiness vaguely to sound like general annoyance, but s/he has made it clear that a violation has occurred.

E.g. "I was very angry at that time." (I3, Email 2)

### (4) Direct request for repair:

This strategy has similar functions as (2) but with a higher severity level. It can take the form of imperatives or statements such as "you must/should do X!"

E.g. "Have a little team spirit, please." (B11, Email 3)

### (5) Explicit complaint:

The complainer explicitly expresses complaints by references either to the offense or to the complainees, but no sanctions are included.

E.g. "Why you accepted his late assignment but rejected mine." (B4, Email 2)

### (6) Accusation:

In addition to explicit complaints, this strategy connotes potential sanctions.

E.g. "If the whisper is real, I will tell the dean to complain." (I3, Email 2)

In addition to complaint strategies, the participants used a variety of supportive moves, including preparators, self-introductions, recognition of responsibility/ fault, expressions of politeness, expressions of empathy, promises for future actions, offer of help, and justification, defined and exemplified in Table 2. Internal modifiers were also produced, including upgraders and downgraders (Trosborg, 1995), with the former increasing the intensity of the complaint and the latter reducing the face threat to make the complaint polite. The upgraders included intensifiers (e.g. *so*, *very*), overstaters (e.g. *all*, *every*, *always*), and commitment upgraders (e.g. *I'm sure*, *I'm certain*) whereas the downgraders were consisted of downtoners (e.g. *perhaps*, *a little bit*), subjectivizers (e.g. *I think*, *I am afraid*), appealers (e.g. *ok*, *don't you think?*), and politeness markers (e.g. *please*).

The complaint strategies were categorized by two coders, and the inter-rater reliability of the coding of emails sent to the instructor and the peers was .86 and .87, respectively<sup>5</sup>. Then, the strategies used by two proficiency groups and the impacts of the variable of status on the learners' complaint emails were analyzed by Chi-square. The two groups' overall use of supportive moves and internal modifiers were also processed by Chi-square analyses.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both groups used all of the six complaint strategies, including hints, indirect requests for repair, disapproval, direct requests for repair, explicit complaints, and accusations. Among all of the strategies, explicit complaints were most oft-used by both groups (low: 43%; intermediate: 42%), and no significant inter-group differences were found between the two groups' strategy use ( $\chi^2 = 6.148$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or that in emails sent to either type of the recipients (instructor:  $\chi^2 = 3.756$ ,  $p > .05$ ; peer:  $\chi^2 = 5.196$ ,  $p > .05$ ). As indicated in Table 3, the addressee's status also did not seem to cause significant intra-group differences in the two group's strategy preferences.

Moreover, the two groups were similar in terms of supportive moves and internal modifiers with only slight differences. Table 4 reveals that they used the same range of the moves to addressees of two status types, with the low group utilizing expressions of politeness (28%) most often and the intermediate group choosing justification (34%). The

<sup>5</sup> Twenty percent (Cohen, 1960) of the emails sent to the instructor and the peers were randomly selected for the inter-rater reliability test.

same preference was revealed in the two groups' emails to the instructor, but in peer-directed emails, preparators were most preferred (low: 36%; intermediate: 40%). A higher level of homogeneity was found in the two groups' use of internal modifiers (see Table 5), with subjectivizers (low: 47%; intermediate: 49%) and intensifiers (low: 56%; intermediate: 63%) being most preferred by both groups among downgraders and upgraders, respectively. They were also both inclined to use significantly more supportive moves (low:  $\chi^2 = 31.164$ ,  $p < .001$ ; intermediate:  $\chi^2 = 26.444$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and downgraders (low:  $\chi^2 = 10.499$ ,  $p < .01$ ; intermediate:  $\chi^2 = 6.963$ ,  $p < .01$ ) to the instructors than to the peers.

TABLE 3  
THE TWO LEARNER GROUPS' FREQUENCY OF STRATEGY USE IN EMAILS TO INSTRUCTORS AND PEERS

Strategy	Email Type Low			Intermediate		
	Instructor	Peer	Total	Instructor	Peer	Total
Hint	5 (3%)	10 (5%)	15 (4%)	1 (1%)	5 (3%)	6 (2%)
Indirect Request	33 (22%)	46 (24%)	52 (15%)	42 (26%)	36 (20%)	54 (16%)
Disapproval	29 (19%)	23 (12%)	79 (23%)	29 (18%)	25 (14%)	78 (23%)
Direct Request	16 (11%)	22 (12%)	38 (11%)	19 (12%)	33 (18%)	52 (15%)
Explicit Complaint	67 (44%)	80 (42%)	147 (43%)	68 (42%)	76 (41%)	144 (42%)
Accusation	2 (1%)	10 (5%)	12 (4%)	2 (1%)	9 (5%)	11 (3%)
Total	152 (100%)	191 (100%)	343 (100%)	161 (100%)	184 (100%)	345 (100%)
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 7.592$ , $p > .05$			$\chi^2 = 10.607$ , $p > .05$		

Note. The percentage is indicated in the parenthesis.

As statistic analyses yielded no significant differences between the low and intermediate learners' use of complaint strategies, supportive moves, and internal modifiers in emails, it seems to suggest that the subjects' proficiency difference did not contribute to complaint emails in terms of face-threatening levels. The obscured proficiency differences might have been related to the asynchronicity of emails, which allow writers time to plan the content and select among expressions of different degrees of formality and directness. Therefore, despite their proficiency levels, learners can search within linguistic repertoire at disposal and spend as much time wording and structuring as is needed, and therefore the influences of proficiency can be diminished.

TABLE 4  
THE TWO GROUPS' FREQUENCY OF SUPPORTIVE MOVES IN EMAILS TO INSTRUCTORS AND PEERS

Moves	Email type Low			Intermediate		
	Instructor	Peer	Total	Instructor	Peer	Total
Preparator	9 (11%)	17 (36%)	26 (20%)	7 (9%)	18 (40%)	25 (20%)
Self-introduction	9 (11%)	1 (2%)	10 (8%)	7 (9%)	0 (0%)	7 (6%)
Recognition of responsibility	7 (8%)	0 (0%)	7 (5%)	5 (6%)	0 (0%)	5 (4%)
Expression of politeness	28 (34%)	9 (19%)	37 (28%)	22 (27%)	5 (11%)	27 (22%)
Expression of empathy	5 (6%)	1 (2%)	6 (5%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Promise for future actions	4 (5%)	1 (2%)	5 (4%)	7 (9%)	0 (0%)	7 (6%)
Offer of help	0 (0%)	8 (17%)	8 (6%)	0 (0%)	4 (9%)	4 (3%)
Justification	19 (23%)	6 (13%)	25 (19%)	28 (35%)	15 (33%)	43 (34%)
Others	2 (2%)	4 (9%)	6 (5%)	3 (4%)	3 (7%)	6 (5%)
Total	83 (100%)	47 (100%)	130 (100%)	80 (100%)	45 (100%)	125 (100%)
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 31.164$ , $p < .001$			$\chi^2 = 26.444$ , $p < .001$		

In spite of the general similarity, inter-group differences are discernible in indirect requests towards recipients of the two status types. Complaint strategies, which did not explicitly voice the offence or unhappiness towards the complaine and were thus milder in terms of severity, included hints, indirect requests, and disapproval. It seems reasonable to assume that the less severe strategies would be preferred with instructors, who had authoritative status, whereas the severer strategies would be used more frequently with peers. While the both groups' complaint emails were in general consistent with this assumption, exceptions were found in the two groups' use of hints and the low learners' indirect requests. It may be explainable that both groups used more hints with peers, who shared more information for interpreting hints than instructors. However, the low learners' use of more indirect requests towards the peers was

contradictory to the assumption whereas their intermediate counterparts showed an opposite tendency, reflecting the low learners' relative instability in terms of conducting face-threatening acts, particularly when superiors were involved.

TABLE 5  
TYPES AND FREQUENCY OF THE INTERNAL MODIFIERS

Internal modifier	Low			Intermediate		
	Instructor	Peer	Total	Instructor	Peer	Total
<u>Downgrader</u>						
downtoner	12 (12%)	4 (5%)	16 (9%)	11 (11%)	10 (14%)	21 (12%)
Subjectivizer	42 (41%)	41 (56%)	83 (47%)	48 (47%)	37 (51%)	85 (49%)
Appealer	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	3 (2%)	1 (1%)	9 (13%)	10 (6%)
Politeness Marker	48 (47%)	25 (34%)	73 (42%)	42 (41%)	16 (22%)	58 (33%)
Total	102 (100%)	73 (100%)	175 (100%)	102 (100%)	72 (100%)	174 (100%)
<u>Upgrader</u>						
Intensifier	56 (88%)	33 (35%)	89 (56%)	59 (79%)	47 (50%)	106 (63%)
Overstater	6 (9%)	58 (62%)	64 (41%)	16 (21%)	45 (48%)	61 (36%)
Commitment upgrader	2 (3%)	3 (3%)	5 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (1%)
Total	64 (100%)	94 (100%)	158 (100%)	75 (100%)	94 (100%)	169 (100%)
Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 10.499, p < .01$			$\chi^2 = 6.963, p < .01$		

On the other hand, the asynchronicity seems to connote the email sender's higher level of indirectness and politeness, with the intention to reduce the face threat caused by the complaint. Nonetheless, the explicit complaint, which was direct and severe in comparison with the other strategies, was most frequently used in both groups' emails and therefore contradicts the assumed positive association between emails and indirectness. This tendency might be accountable from the nature of emails. Different from face-to-face interaction, which allows hints and silence, email writers have a specific purpose to elaborate to cue the recipient about the offence, leading to their use of explicit complaints, and etiquette can only be conveyed through supportive moves or internal modifiers. Therefore, unlike the findings of previous studies based on other elicitation tasks such as the written discourse completion task and role-plays (e.g. Chen, 2006; Hong, 2009), the learners of the present study preferred explicit complaints rather than requests or other milder strategies despite the high severity.

The learners' directness also accorded with the tendency reported in the literature. Although many interlanguage speech act studies centered on advanced learners' behaviors, few studies, which have classified low and intermediate learners as low-level learners, have suggested that they not only use a limited variety of politeness strategies with little sensitivity being shown (Scarcella, 1979; Walters, 1979) but also are unable to act in socially appropriate ways though they might have no difficulty in performing the illocutionary meaning (Tanaka, 1988). In addition to the relative easiness of the direct form of complaints, which directly map the propositional meaning and the linguistic form, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) has suggested that learners are direct because they lack experiences of writing polite emails and are uncertain about email etiquette. The directness may also reflect their attempt to make the recipient feel the emails important and urgent (Chen, 2006) and also inclinations to prioritize efficiency (Cameron, 2003).

Despite similarities in complaint strategies, inter-group differences were found in the learners' use of supportive moves. The intermediate learners' preference for justification mirrors their emphasis on giving themselves a legitimate stance to complain. This might be more effective in terms of appeasing the addressee's unhappiness than the sole use of formulaic expressions. In contrast, the low learners' reliance on expressions of gratitude, mostly conventionalized formula "thanks/ thank you" (81%), reveals their limitations in the semantic repertoire for more sophisticated supportive moves. This finding corresponds to Ellis's (1994) three phases of the interlanguage development, which has indicated that learners at the earliest phase are characterized by the use of simple formulas, suggesting that the low learners were still at the first phase of the interlanguage development whereas the intermediate learners had slightly moved forward. Such evidence was also found in the low learners' tendency to use conventionalized politeness markers, including "please", "sorry", as the downgraders in their emails to the instructor while subjectivizers were the most oft-used downgraders in the intermediate learners' emails sent to both types of recipients<sup>6</sup>.

Significant intra-group differences in the complaint strategies used in emails sent to recipients of the two different status types were not found in this study. This echoed with Trosborg's (1995) study, which indicated that the learners did not adjust their performance sufficiently to meet contextual requirements, those of dominance (higher social status) in particular. It is most likely because of the reduced effects of contextual cues, which convey social meaning, in emails (Baron, 1984; Murray, 1995; Smilowitz, Compton, & Flint, 1988). The senders might have felt less obligated to

<sup>6</sup> In the low learners' emails to the peers, subjectivizers were also the most oft-used downgraders.

conform to traditional power routines that are generally found in face-to-face encounters (Drake, Yuthas, & Dillard, 2000), leading to language that lacks status congruence (Herring, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991) and socially inappropriate emails.

However, the learner groups' use of supportive moves and internal modifiers seemed to have exhibited status influences to a certain degree. Different from Trosborg (1995), who contended that the learners failed to provide supportive moves for complaints, both groups of the present study employed more supportive moves and downgraders when complaining to the instructor than to the peers. Further, more than half of both groups' emails directed to the instructor began with supportive moves, which avoided directly raising the offence right at the beginning of the email. Comparatively, the frequency of using supportive moves to begin the email sent to the peers was lower, demonstrating that the learners' awareness of the recipients' status types was reflected in productions of face-threatening acts through external and internal modifications.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Due to the increasing popularity of e-communication, more research studies are needed for better understandings of the users' speech behaviors online so as to offer instruction on net etiquette to L2 learners, who could benefit much from online cross-cultural communication. The present study, addressing the use of complaint strategies and the discourse features, sheds light on how low and intermediate English learners conducted face-threatening acts through emails. Different from other elicitation instruments, emails are a communication mode that learners might use in daily life, thus bringing the collected data closer to genuine acts. The results show that there were no significant inter-group differences in learners' use of complaint strategies, supportive moves, and internal modifiers, but subtle differences found in the two groups' preferences for supportive moves distinguished their interlanguage development. On the other hand, though the email recipient's social status did not lead to intra-group differences in learners' strategy use, significant differences were found in supportive moves and internal modifiers, which reflected their adjustments of the politeness level.

As grammatical competence has often been dominated in planning for English instruction, email etiquette has hardly received due pedagogical attention. Nevertheless, the present study shows that the severity level of the learners' preferred complaint strategies in the emails was rather high, illuminating the needs of integrating the development of learners' pragmatic competence, especially when face-threatening acts are involved in online environments (Sykes, 2005), into the instruction and the curriculum by raising learners' ability to perform speech acts and to use appropriate strategies (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). However, this study only centered on low and intermediate learners' complaint emails without extending to those of higher-level learners, whose expressions of email etiquette involving face threats can be differentiated from the present findings. Thus, future studies can include advanced learners' and even native English speakers' complaint emails for comparisons for a fuller picture of face-threatening acts in CMC.

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