**‘Why did you do that?’ The effects of instruction on recognition and production of informal second party complaints.**

Ziad Almaki, University of Shaqra

Christian Jones, University of Liverpool

**Abstract**

There have been a number of studies on the use of complaints as a speech act. The majority of these studies have included analysis of how different first language speakers make complaints (e.g. Katz 1987; Frescura 1995; Kozlova 2004; Prykarpatska 2008; Chen, Chen, and Chang 2011; Al-Khawaldeh 2016) while only a limited number of studies have examined the effects of instruction on the development of complaints as a speech act (e.g. Trosborg and Shaw 1998; Noonkong, Damnet, and Charttrakul 2017). Those that have examined this area have tended to focus on oral complaints made to second parties.

The current study focuses on the receptive and productive benefits of instruction in developing informal second party complaints in the context of interaction amongst peers. Using an experimental design with control and experimental groups, we examined the effects of instruction on EFL learners in Saudi Arabia as related to informal second party complaints made via WhatsApp text-chat. Results show a significant effect on receptive knowledge of complaints for the experimental group but no significant differences in terms of appropriacy of complaint production.

**Introduction**

Research into interlanguage pragmatics has a long history of investigating the effects of instruction on the development of pragmatic competence, here taken to mean the combination of language form used with appropriacy in a sociocultural context (Thomas 1983). This has included a number of studies on various speech acts, including requests (e.g. Alcón Soler 2015; Halenko and Jones 2011; 2017), apologies (e.g. Halenko 2018; Salgado 2011; Shardokova 2005) and refusals (e.g. Bella 2011; Ren 2013; 2014). Most studies of this nature demonstrate a positive effect for instruction, even when learners are already in a study abroad setting (Taguchi 2015), showing that teaching in this area can speed up the development of pragmatic competence both in terms of ability to recognise and produce appropriate speech acts according to a specific context of use. Despite this, there are noticeably some speech acts which have received less attention in the literature: amongst these are studies which have examined the effect of instruction upon complaints. Those that have done so have tended to focus on spoken complaints (Trosborg and Shaw 1998; Noonkong, Damnet, and Charttrakul 2017), and there is only a limited number of studies that focus on speech acts within e-communication (emails, text chat and so on) (e.g. Economidou-Kogetsidis, Savic and Halenko 2021). This article addresses this gap by examining the effect of instruction on learners’ ability to recognise and produce informal direct complaints via the text chat medium of WhatsApp messaging, as in the complaint “*you took my pencil*” that is made to directly address the second party. The present article adopts Boxer’s (1993) definition of a direct complaint. Boxer states that a direct complaint is a negative evaluation of an offense-maker who is responsible for an offense and is capable of fixing or repairing the socially unacceptable act.

It can be difficult to clearly classify language as formal or informal because the notion of formality is subjective at the sentence level (Lahiri, Mitra, and Lu 2011). Therefore, the present article adopts Heylighen and Dewaele’s (1999) definition of informal style and situational factors that determine the degree of formality of a given linguistic expression. Heylighen and Dewaele define an informal style as ‘flexible, direct, implicit, and involved, but less informative’ (p. 3). They also propose that the degree of formality becomes higher with the increase of the distance in space, time, or background between interlocutors. In the case of this article, second parties are friends or classmates, who are known to each other.

We consider this to be important for several reasons. Firstly, as a medium of communication, this type of messaging is now extremely common, with a recent estimate suggesting there are 100 billion such messages sent globally per day (Dean 2021). Secondly, as EFL learners will be amongst these users, there is no reason to think they will not need to use such messages in English. Finally, e-communication of this nature is somewhat unique, in that it has many features of informal spoken English while being in a written format (Knight, Adolphs and Carter 2014). This suggests that in L2 English, instruction could be particularly useful for this medium.

To investigate this area, we examine the effect of instruction on learners in one EFL context (Saudi Arabia). This is offered as an initial exploratory study in this area and one which could be developed in further research.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1. To what extent does instruction improve the recognition of informal second party complaints in Saudi B1 level learners?

RQ2. To what extent does instruction improve the production of informal second party complaints in Saudi B1 level learners?

RQ3. To what extent does instruction develop the type of complaint strategies used?

**Literature review**

***Interlanguage pragmatic studies on complaints***

Interest in the interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) of complaints has a history we can trace back some forty years when research began showing difficulties and pragmatic failures of language learners using complaints (Olshtain and Weinbach 1985; Boxer 1993; Trosborg 1995; Trosborg and Shaw 1998). Olshtain and Weinbach (1985) produced one of the earliest studies on the subject, where they aimed to examine how 35 highly proficient non-native speakers of Hebrew realize spoken complaints differently than 35 native speakers. It was found that the non-natives used more words, softeners, and intensifiers to express their intentions, and were less severe than their native counterparts by employing fewer threats and more indirect complaints. The researchers explain the behaviour of the non-natives to be expected since immigrants and new-comers to a culture tend to avoid conflict and face-threatening acts. A similar study by Trosborg (1995) also investigated the realization of direct spoken complaints by three groups of Danish learners of English with varying levels of proficiency. Trosborg found that the higher the proficiency level in English, the more strategies the groups employed. In spite of that, the most proficient EFL group used significantly fewer strategies than the baseline English group. Trosborg also found that the complaints by the EFL groups lacked upgraders, such as intensifiers and commitment upgraders, which made their complaints seem weak and hesitant, and down-graders, suggesting weakness in the mastery of politeness signals in English.

A considerable number of studies have attributed the difficulty of making complaints in L2 English to the effects of L1 on the learners. One of the earliest studies that suggested negative transfer was a factor when using complaints was by Boxer (1993), who investigated how Japanese learners of English use and respond to indirect spoken complaints (i.e., complaints made to a second party about someone not present in the immediate situation) in comparison to speakers of American English. Boxer found a significant difference in how the Japanese use non-substantive responses (i.e., verbal and non-verbal backchannelling), which the researcher ascribed to cultural differences between English and Japanese speakers. The main difference was in how some talk was culturally viewed in the Japanese learners’ L1. For instance, the use of backchannelling as a response to complaints can be seen as a discouraging act leading to abandonment of further complaining. Another case of negative transfer from L1 can be seen in the study by Park, Dillon, and Mitchell (1998). Park et al. investigated Korean business letters of complaint written in English through e-mail and found the Koreans would use buffers in English to start and end their complaint letters. Unlike American complaint letters that start by identifying the problem, letters by Koreans start with relevant, and sometimes irrelevant, information about the problem, which requires readers to go through these buffers before they can discover and understand the issue. Examples (i) and (ii) below illustrate a buffer and the relevant information that occurred after each one, and are taken from Park et al. (1998, 336-337). The use of ‘JJJ’ here is taken from the original article and is used to remove identifiable information about individuals as these are all genuine complaint letters.

(i) First of all, we would like to thank you for your kind cooperation during last year. (buffer)

(ii) As you know well, JJJ activity needs a long time to make a final conclusion. Last year at the management level meeting, which were held 2 times, and although so many times JJJ international meeting, we had requested for JJJ activities so many times. (Relevant information)

Since the use of buffers is a common practice in Korean letters, this is an indication of negative transfer from L1. Similarly, Hong and Shih (2009) investigated the perceptions of spoken complaints by 25 Chinese EFL learners in comparison to an English and a Chinese (non-EFL learner) group acting as baselines. The researchers found the EFL group to be more severe than the baseline groups in their choice of strategies by employing confrontational strategies, such as threats and accusations. The researchers partially ascribe this difference to negative transfer from L1 since the EFL and Chinese baseline groups scored similarly high on the severity scale in comparison to the English group. Hong and Shih also point out that the reason the EFL group was more severe than the other can be attributed to their weak mastery of English, which made them resort to direct ways of complaining to make their message clear. Another example comes from Rashidi (2017), who examined pragmatic transfer of spoken complaints in the language of Saudi EFL learners in comparison to native speakers of American English and found significant indication of negative transfer from L1 when the learners frequently used modified blames, such as *“you should’ve told of me about this”* and *“you have to clean up after yourself”*, a strategy that manifested in the data of native speakers of Saudi Arabic.

Another reason given for learner difficulty in performing complaints is ascribed to the effects of social variables on the learners. For instance, Wijayanto, Laila, Prasetyarini, and Susiati (2013) looked at politeness in the context of spoken complaints and reported that the Indonesian EFL learners’ choice of strategies was highly affected by social power and distance. A later study by Wijayanto, Prasetyarini, and Hikmat (2017) on Indonesian EFL learners that examined impoliteness in spoken complaints also found social variables to be the main factor in the learners’ choice of strategies, which the researchers claim to be a result of Indonesian people’s awareness and consciousness of social status that prompts different reactions to different levels of social standings.

A smaller number of studies have attempted to establish a relationship between length of residence in English speaking countries, contact hours and pragmatic competence in complaints. Results have not provided a definitive link between length of residence and competence in this area. One such study that tried to find a direct correlation between the two is by Mofidi and Shoushtari (2012), who examined the spoken complaints of 20 Iranian ESL and 20 EFL learners and found no correlation between length of stay and pragmatic competence in complaints. They also found the effect of contact hours to be unrelated to the acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence and complaints. Another study that supports these results is by Ekmekci (2015), who investigated spoken complaints by 15 non-native instructors in English using a DCT. Ekmekci found that although the instructors were grammatically competent and completed their education in English speaking countries, they were pragmatically unsuccessful in comparison to other native instructors when issuing complaints. Unlike the previous two studies, Tanck (2002) reported that a group of graduate students were able to perform spoken complaints to a native-like degree, which the researcher ascribes partly to their length of stay of more than a year in the United States. However, unlike the previous studies, the participants in Tanck’s study were also graduate students of TESOL, which could have affected their performance since they were advanced learners of English.

***Studies on the instruction of complaints***

The effects of instruction on complaint-making or responding to complaints has not received much attention in the literature. Nevertheless, the limited literature on the subject reports positive results for pragmatic instruction. In a pilot study by Trosborg and Shaw (1998), the effects of instruction on responses to spoken complaints in business interaction were examined. Fifteen advanced Danish students of business English undertook a pre-test and post-test, and three short teaching sessions in-between. Data were collected by recording role-plays of the groups, and then members from the two groups were interviewed about their experiences and recorded again in another role-play. A deductive teaching approach was followed with one group, and an inductive with the other. It was found that the different teaching approach had no discernible effect on the performance of the two groups, as both demonstrated parallel improvement. Moreover, as a result of focusing teaching on complaint responses, the participants showed development in using apologies in the post-test. However, other areas such as complaining strategies did not show any noticeable changes because they were not given any focus in the instruction.

A recent study by Noonkong, Damnet, and Charttrakul (2017) investigated the production of complaints and apologies by 45 Thai engineering students. The participants received 12 sessions of explicit deductive and inductive instruction focusing on the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of the two speech acts. A pre-test and post-test written discourse completion task and semi-structured interviews were administered, and responses were rated by three native speakers of English. The researchers recruited an experimental group without a control. The participants demonstrated a significant development on the four criteria they were rated on: correct expressions, quality of information, strategy choices, and politeness. Overall, the performance of the participants improved from inappropriate and unacceptable language use in the pre-test to not very appropriate use, but acceptable in the post-test. Moreover, the interviews revealed the participants’ awareness of the importance of selecting language with interactants based on the three social factors of power, distance, and severity of imposition. The interviews also demonstrated that an awareness of the benefits of using indirect strategies in interactions and better understanding of how non-verbal communication can be useful in verbal communication situations. Lastly, the teaching approach taken was regarded by the participants as motivating and promoted a learner-friendly atmosphere.

Looking back at the literature on complaints and what little there is on instruction, a number of inferences can be made. First, the speech act of complaint appears to be a problematic area for L2 language learners. Effects of L1 culture and negative transfer play a role in pragmatic failure by learners, and the influence of such factors needs to be taken in consideration when building future pragmatic instructional materials. Secondly, the small number of studies conducted have shown that instruction in this area can be effective. It also appears that the focus of instruction on certain pragmatic aspects increases awareness of said aspects. Third, pragmatic competence develops separately from linguistic competence. This was emphasised in results by Park (2001) and Trosborg (1995) who found their highly proficient participants to be grammatically accurate but pragmatically inappropriate. This demonstrates the importance of the pragmatic aspects of language, and necessitates the need for teaching materials to include the sociopragmatic part of language use as well as the pragmalinguistic one. Fourth, the complaint speech act has proven to be difficult for learners to acquire, including highly proficient EFL learners (Trosborg 1995). Trosborg (1995) argues that her groups of EFL learners, although of variable proficiency levels, failed to produce appropriate complaints because they were unable to combine complaint strategies successfully, could not convincingly support their complaints with upgraders and down-graders, and their complaints were weak when met with any resistance from their complainees. Lastly, upon inspection of study designs, in some studies mentioned, no control groups were employed. This indicates that there could be other possible effects on the results of these studies. That is; the differences that were reported on the experimental groups as a result of pragmatic instruction may lack accuracy if no control was used.

***Gaps in the literature***

Previous studies on the interventional explicit pragmatic instruction on speech acts in several contexts, such as study abroad (Halenko and Jones 2011; Halenko and Jones 2017; Hernández and Boero 2018), online (Cunningham 2016), and in EFL contexts (Saadatmandi, Khiabani, and Pourdana 2018) have shown benefits of instruction. Despite this, as noted, there are issues and shortcomings in relation to the speech act of complaints in the literature that can be addressed. Firstly, as evident from the scarce literature on complaints above, the speech act has not received adequate attention with regard to pragmatic instruction. Instead, many studies explored complaints within the context of interlanguage pragmatics over the years focusing on native vs non-native speaker differences (e.g. Ekmekci 2015; Alrashidi 2017; Wijayanto, Prasetyarini, and Hikmat 2017). Therefore, the limited number of studies on the subject calls for further research.

Secondly, despite the fact that most of the literature on complaints has examined the speech act as an informal spoken activity, very little attention has been given to informal text-based complaints. Moreover, the limited literature on text-based complaints has mainly explored asynchronous types of textual communication. For instance, Park, et.al., (1998) and Park (2001) made an interlingual investigation of complaint e-mail letters by Koreans, while Vásquez (2011) and Puksi (2016), have looked at complaining comments on review websites. All these studies have investigated some types of textual forms of communication that happen over a period of time. In addition, examining other types of communication could yield some unpredictable and interesting results. For instance, Vásquez (2011) looked at a hotel review website comment section, and found that most of user reviews to be solely negative with no mitigating devices or positive feedback to balance the complaints. A similar study by Puksi (2016) found an increased use of threats when complaining within reviews. These studies seem to demonstrate behaviours specific to the investigated platform as such conduct is most likely unacceptable in spoken activities. This could imply that other forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) might show platform-specific behaviours, too. The fact that no studies to our knowledge have tried to explore the speech act of complaint in synchronous textual communication or instant messaging (IM), and that no attempts in the literature have been made to instruct learners in complaining or responding to complaints in synchronous text-based communications, demonstrates that there is a gap in the literature. The current study attempts to fill this gap.

**Methodology**

***Participants***

Thirty undergraduate learners of English were recruited for the present study and randomly assigned to one of two groups: experimental group (*n*= 15) and control group (*n*= 15). All the participants were Saudi males from a University in Saudi Arabia, who attended the third and fourth year of a four-year program that teaches English skills, English literature, and linguistics. The undergraduates were considered B1 level learners in terms of the CEFR. For cultural reasons, it was not possible for the researchers to work with Saudi female students. The mean age of the experimental group was 23.4, with an age range between 20 and 34, while the control was 22.6, with an age range between 20 and 28. The mean amounts of prior English learning in public schools for the experimental and control groups were 7.3 and 6.5 respectively and the amount of English education the groups received in public schools ranged from 6 to 9 years.

***Study design***

The present study compared two groups of learners, an experimental and a control, using pre-tests and post-tests to measure immediate gains from pragmatic instruction on complaints in text-based communication. Five hours of teaching sessions occurred over a period of three days using an online platform (Zoom, a cloud-based video-conferencing service) (more detail on instruction is provided in later sections). Pre-tests were conducted before the first lesson, and post-tests immediately after the final teaching session. Tests were conducted online, using a form of discourse completion task and a receptive test.

Each test had two parts with thirteen items in total. The first production section consisted of an open-ended discourse completion task (DCT) of two sections. The first section required the production of an informal complaint to a second party and also a response to an informal complaint from a second party. In the first item, participants were provided a written imaginary situation containing an offense by a classmate that urged them to write a complaint in the form of an instant message, as in example (1). In the second item, participants were responsible for an offense towards a classmate they had received a complaint from. They were asked to respond also in the form of an instant text to that classmate’s complaint, as in example (2).

(1) Your classmate asked for your assignment to read and return tomorrow. The next day, he forgot to bring it with him and you lost marks for that. He left before you could talk to him. You send him a WhatsApp message complaining.

(2) You drop your classmate’s iPad and it doesn’t work anymore. He sends you a WhatsApp message saying: "Hey. My iPad doesn’t turn on. Didn’t you borrow it today?"

Each context was shown to the participants using PowerPoint, one question at a time. Participants had a minute to read the context and then two minutes to write their answers in a separate answer form on Google Forms (i.e., a cloud service by Google to build and distribute surveys online).

The second receptive section of the test consisted of an eleven-item multiple-choice questionnaire (MCQ) to measure participants’ reception of complaints. Each item contained a printed-screen image of a conversation between two parties on an instant messaging application (WhatsApp). Eight items contained one type of complaint strategy embedded in the conversation, according to Trosborg’s (1995) classification of complaints, while three items were distractors and did not contain complaints. Example (3) illustrates a conversation embedded with a direct accusation (see Appendix B for more samples). The groups were asked to read each conversation and then decide whether it contained a complaint or not. As with the DCT, for this task, the groups were given a minute to read each item on the PowerPoint show, but one minute to make their choices on the answer form using Google Forum.

(v) A) You scratched my car!

B) I am really sorry. I thought you would be angry

A) Of course!

The tests took place online by demonstrating the tasks to participants on Zoom using PowerPoint. To ensure the tests were conducted in a controlled environment, participants were asked to sit in an isolated room throughout the tests and teaching sessions. To control the time allowed to work on each item in tests, a timer was displayed beside the item, and whenever the timer reached zero, the tutor advanced the PowerPoint show to a page that informs participants the time allowed to read and understand the task is over, and they have a minute or two, depending on the task, to move to the provided answer form on Google Forum to register their answers.

***Instruction***

The teaching sessions occurred over a period of three days, where the experimental group received 5 hours of explicit instruction from one tutor in three consecutive days online over Zoom, as COVID-19 restrictions did not, at the time of data collection, allow for face-to-face teaching. The experimental group received an hour and a half of instruction on the first and third days and two hours on the second day. The control group did not receive any instruction on complaints between the tests. The participants joined the meetings using links that were sent to them via e-mail. The teaching material for the sessions was constructed based on Halenko and Jones’s (2017) suggestions of three underlying stages or principles when teaching speech acts. The first stage was to raise learners’ awareness of the complaint act, by defining the linguistic activity and potential participants in that activity, identifying text-based complaints from non-complaints in sample conversations, and discussing how textual complaint samples are similar/different to L1. The second stage taught learners the pragma-linguistic aspect of complaint-making and complaint-responses by demonstrating how complaints are structured, and introducing learners to strategies of making complaints, responding to complaints and the language used for both. The final stage enabled learners to use their acquired knowledge communicatively by giving them imaginary situations to complain or respond to in text-based communication while assessing their messages. Explicit instruction was used, defined by Kasper (2001) as a direct way of teaching pragmatic features of language (direct here in the sense that learners were told clearly what the aims of each class were) because it has been shown to be effective in teaching pragmatics of speech acts in the literature (Safont 2004; Kondo 2008; Halenko and Jones, 2011; Tan and Farashaian 2012; Us´o-Juan 2013; Halenko and Jones 2017).

***Data analysis***

*Rater analysis*

The data were analysed using SPSS (version 26). Starting with the production tasks, data were anonymised, and then assessed by two raters based on appropriacy of use. Each rater was an English L1 speaking, qualified teacher of English, working at a university language centre. Each rater was paid for their work and was instructed to rate the responses on how appropriate or not they felt they were for each scenario. They were not asked to look for any specific language items. Appropriacy is defined here as language that is natural in its context and does not violate the norms of language use in that particular context (adapted from Wolfson 1976, 202). Participants' DCT answers and scenarios were presented to the raters in a Google Form page, where each answer had to be rated on a scale from 5 (very appropriate) to 1 (very inappropriate). In total, the raters assessed 60 instances of complaints and 60 instances of responses to complaints. The raters were not related to the study, and were not informed of the precise nature of the study. To measure interrater reliability, an Intraclass Correlation Coefficient test was performed, and a result of 0.883 was found indicating high reliability between the raters.

A Shapiro-Wilk test was performed, and the data was found to be non-normally distributed. As a result, non-parametric tests were used (Mann-Whitney U) to find significant differences between the two groups’ performances across the two tests. Whenever significant values were found, measures of effect sizes were calculated and interpreted according to Cohen’s d (1988), where values of 0.2 are considered to be a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 a high effect.

*Linguistic analysis*

Two linguistic analyses were also conducted on the data yielded by the production task. The first item in the production task collected instances of complaints to an offense by a classmate. This set of data was analysed based on Trosborg’s (1995) classification of complaint strategies, as illustrated in table 1 below.

Table 1. Categories of complaint strategies as adapted from Trosborg (1995).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | | **Definition of category** | **Complaint strategies** | **Example from the data** |
| 1 | No explicit reproach | The complainable is not mentioned in the complaint. | 1. Hints | “My book was clean when I had it yesterday”\* |
| 2 | Expression of disapproval | The complainee is held responsible while not attributing any guilt to him. | 2. Annoyance  3. Ill consequences | “I lost marks because of this im disappointment” |
| 3 | Accusation | To establish the agent of a complainable. | 4. Indirect accusation  5. Direct accusation | “Why did you do this to my book? I gave to you to read it.” |
| 4 | Blame | To presuppose the complainee’s guilt of the complainable. | 6. Modified blame  7. Explicit blame (behaviour)  8. Explicit blame (person) | “If you told me, I would give you paper to write on.” |

\* The example is made-up as the strategy never occurred in the data.

The second item of the production task yielded instances of response to a classmate’s complaint. These instances were analysed based on the strategy set in table 2 below.

Table 2.Strategies of responses to complaints.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Response strategy** | | **Definition** | **Example from the data** |
| 1 | Apology | To apologize to the complainee about the offense. | “I’m sorry” |
| 2 | Agreement | To agree to the complaint taking responsibility for the offense. | “It’s my fault” |
| 3 | Explanation & excuses | To explain the complainable matter or find an excuse for it. | “I drop it by mistake” |
| 4 | Offering sympathy | To sympathize with complainer about the situation. | “I’m shy for what I do to your book” |
| 5 | Offer to improve situation | To offer/promise to compensate the complainer for the offense and/or to refrain from doing the offense again. | “I will give you a new device” |

After the qualitative analysis was complete, other statistical tests were performed in order to measure the amounts of different strategies used. A Shapiro-Wilks test found the two data sets above to be non-normally distributed. Means and standard deviations were calculated to recognize differences in frequencies between the groups, and Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to find statistical differences between the groups and gains made.

**Results and discussion**

Results will be discussed in relation to each research question in turn.

***To what extent did instruction improve the recognition of informal second party complaints in Saudi B1 level learners?***

Table 3 illustrates the means and standard deviations of the performances of the two groups in recognizing strategy-embedded complaints in the pre-tests and post-tests. The closer the mean value is to 0.00, the more troublesome the item was to the learners, and the closer the mean to 1.00, the better and more successful the learners’ performance was.

Table 3.Means and standard deviations of the groups’ abilities to recognize strategy-embedded complaints in pre-tests and post-tests.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Group | | | |
| Experimental  (n = 15) | | Control  (n = 15) | |
| Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Hints | Pretest | .33 | .488 | .33 | .488 |
| Posttest | .93 | .258 | .60 | .507 |
| Annoyance | Pretest | .80 | .414 | .93 | .258 |
| Posttest | .93 | .258 | .87 | .352 |
| Ill consequences | Pretest | .73 | .458 | .87 | .352 |
| Posttest | .93 | .258 | .87 | .352 |
| Indirect accusation | Pretest | .53 | .516 | .40 | .507 |
| Posttest | .87 | .352 | .47 | .516 |
| Direct accusation | Pretest | 1.00 | .000 | .80 | .414 |
| Posttest | 1.00 | .000 | .93 | .258 |
| Modified blames | Pretest | .80 | .414 | .87 | .352 |
| Posttest | .93 | .258 | .93 | .258 |
| Blame of behaviour | Pretest | .87 | .352 | .80 | .414 |
| Posttest | 1.00 | .000 | .80 | .414 |
| Blame of person | Pretest | .93 | .258 | .87 | .352 |
| Posttest | .87 | .352 | .93 | .258 |
| Total recognition in pretest | | 8.67 | 1.759 | 8.40 | 1.595 |
| Total recognition in posttest | | 10.40 | 1.121 | 9.13 | 1.302 |

Overall, the means and standard deviations show that the two groups were broadly equivalent at the pre-test stage and that the experimental groups scored higher on average and were more consistent at the post-test stage (m = 10.4, sd = 1.1) than they were at the pre-test (m = 8.6, sd = 1.7). A Mann-Whitney U test demonstrates that the two groups performed similarly in recognizing complaints in the pre-test (Z = -0.533, *p* = 0.594), while there was a significant difference in favour of the experimental group in the post-test (Z = -2.770, *p* = 0.006).

At the level of complaint strategies, the two groups had trouble recognizing hints and indirect accusations in the pre-test. However, the experimental group showed a significant improvement in comparison to the control group in the post-test in this area. This is attested to by a Mann-Whitney U test in the case of hints (Z = -2.122, *p* = 0.034) and indirect accusation (Z = -2.285, *p* = 0.022). Measures of effect sizes suggest that the significant difference between the groups in recognizing complaints in the post-test was of a medium effect (*d* = 0.505), whereas the differences at the level of single strategies were of small effect sizes in the case of hints (*d* = 0.387) and indirect accusations (*d* = 0.417).

These results demonstrate the positive effect of interventional pragmatic instruction in raising EFL learners’ awareness of the pragma-linguistic aspect of complaining. The performances of the two groups were similarly weak in identifying indirect types of complaints in the pre-test, such as hints and indirect accusations. Two inferences can be drawn from this. First, this could be attributed to the influence of L1. Encouragement of explicitness and straightforwardness, and discouragement of powerlessness and silence are part of the conversational ethos of the Saudi culture. These values can be realized in common proverbs, traditional teachings, and verses in the Kingdom. The following are examples of these common sayings followed by translations.

(a1) “اللي اختشوا ماتوا”

Translation: “Those who shied (from running away naked from a burning house) have died”.

(a2) “الكلمه اللي تستحي منها بدها”

Translation: “Start with the word that you shy from”.

(a3) “الساكت سمه ناكت”

Translation: “A silent person sheds poison”.

(a4) “ان لم تكن ذئبا أكلتك الذئاب”

Translation: “Wolves will eat you if you are not a wolf”.

(a5) “اللي ماله لسان ياكله الخنفسان”

Translation: “Those with no tongues can be eaten by a beetle”.

Second, the learners’ inability to recognize hints does not fully support the findings by Rashidi (2017), who found that Saudi speakers of American English frequently used hints as a strategy to complain. This contradiction in results can be attributed to a number of reasons, such as the difference in age range between the present study (i.e. 20 - 34) and that of Rashidi (i.e. 27 – 48). El-Dakhs et al. (2019) found that older speakers of Saudi Arabic had a better command of the language when making complaints implementing eleven strategies more significantly than younger speakers, including hints. This indicates that age can be an important factor in performing complaints by Saudi learners of English. Another reason for the discrepancy in results can be attributed to language proficiency as 41% of the Saudi speakers of English in the study by Rashidi (2017) considered themselves to be fluent in English. In a study by Trosborg (1995), advanced learners of English managed to use more mitigating devices and strategies than beginner and intermediate-level learners when making complaints. Thus, the intermediate level of language proficiency of learners in the present study could have contributed to a different outcome from Rashidi’s study.

Raising awareness in this way does not, of course, guarantee that learners will be able to produce more appropriate complaints. Recognition of language choices are, however, an important part of developing language awareness, which can be defined as ‘an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language’ (Carter 2003, 64). In other words, increased recognition is likely to lead to greater noticing when learners encounter these forms within input, a process which can make an important contribution to acquisition (e.g. Schmidt 1990; Bergsleithner, Frota, and Yoshioka 2013).

***To what extent did instruction improve the production of informal second party complaints in Saudi B1 level learners?***

Table 4 demonstrates the means and standard deviations of ratings of complaints and responses by the two groups. The mean values can be interpreted according to Pimentel’s (2010) intervals of Likert scale (1.00 to 1.79 = very inappropriate, 1.80 to 2.59 = inappropriate, 2.60 to 3.39 = neutral, 3.40 to 4.19 = appropriate, and 4.20 to 5.00 = very appropriate).

Table 4.Means and standard deviations of ratings of complaints and responses by the two groups.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group | | Rating of complaints | | Rating of responses | |
| Pre-test | Post-test | Pre-test | Post-test |
| Experimental | Mean | 3.4333 | 3.0333 | 3.3333 | 3.7000 |
| Std. Deviation | 1.16292 | .89576 | 1.12863 | .94112 |
| Control | Mean | 2.9667 | 3.1667 | 3.8667 | 3.9000 |
| Std. Deviation | 1.32916 | 1.17514 | .85496 | .82808 |
| Total | Mean | 3.2000 | 3.1000 | 3.6000 | 3.8000 |
| Std. Deviation | 1.24983 | 1.02889 | 1.02048 | .87691 |

Starting with complaint-making, non-parametric t tests (Mann-Whitney U) indicate no significant differences between the two groups across the pre-test (*p* = 0.389) and post-test (*p* = 0.639), and also no significant difference in gains made by the groups between the tests (*p* = 0.065). In responses to complaints, non-parametric t tests (Mann-Whitney U) show no significant differences between the groups’ performance of responses in the pre-test (*p* = 0.183) and post-test (*p* = 0.611). Another t test of the gains made also shows no significant difference between the improvements of the two groups (*p* = 0.529).

These results show that in this case, pragmatic instruction did not significantly improve production of complaints and responses to complaints, although it is clear from the means that the experimental group did perform better on the post-test responses to complaints at least. Two inferences can be made of the performances of the two groups. Firstly, responses to complaints were rated higher overall than the complaints, which could indicate that the complaint speech act is more difficult for EFL learners to master and perform in comparison to the other speech acts needed in responses to complaints. Secondly, the result contradicts Trosborg and Shaw’s (1998) findings about the positive effectiveness of focused instruction on complaints. There could be several reasons for this in this study. Firstly, the lack of a delayed post-test may not have given enough time for the learners to have acquired the gains made via instruction. Secondly, the period of instruction itself may have been too short. In much interlanguage pragmatics’ research, five hours of instruction is generally seen as the minimum needed to cause a change (e.g. Halenko and Jones 2017) and that was followed here but that may not have been enough in this instance. It may be that the complaint speech act needs a longer period of instruction. Lastly, as the instruction needed to be completed in one week, the results may have been negatively affected by the effects of massed (as opposed to distributed) practice when the latter has been shown to be generally more effective in second language learning (e.g. DeKeyser 2018).

***To what extent did instruction develop the type of complaint strategies used?***

Table 5 illustrates the most frequently used strategies by the two groups in the pre-test and post-test. Other strategies such as hints, ill consequences, and annoyance either did not occur or occurred once or twice, and therefore, were disregarded.

Table 5.Most frequently used complaint strategies

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group | | Modified blames | | Indirect accusations | | Direct accusation | | Total of strategies | |
| Pretest | Posttest | Pretest | Posttest | Pretest | Posttest | Pretest | Posttest |
| Experimental  (n = 15) | Mean | .33 | .13 | .20 | .13 | .53 | .73 | 1.20 | 1.27 |
| Std. Deviation | .488 | .352 | .414 | .352 | .516 | .458 | .414 | .458 |
| Sum | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 11 | 18 | 19 |
| Control  (n = 15) | Mean | .07 | .07 | .33 | .20 | .60 | .60 | 1.13 | 1.07 |
| Std. Deviation | .258 | .258 | .488 | .414 | .507 | .507 | .352 | .458 |
| Sum | 1 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 9 | 9 | 17 | 16 |

The most frequently used strategies in the pre-test for the two groups were direct accusations, indirect accusations, and modified blames, and that remained so in the post-test. A non-parametric t test (Mann-Whitney U) revealed no significant differences between the groups in using direct accusations (*p* = 0.446), indirect accusations (*p* = 0.630), and modified blames (*p* = 0.550) after the treatment sessions. The following are samples of the complaints made by the experimental group in the post-test in relation to the situation of complaining to your classmate for losing your homework). Spelling or punctuation errors have not been corrected.

(b1) “Hello my friend, you forgot to bring my homework with you so I dropped my grades. Is it possible that you don't repeat it?” (Direct accusation)

(b2) “Hey, did you lost my assignment or forgot to bring it with you, and can you tell the teacher about that because I don’t want to lose marks” (Indirect accusation)

(b3) “This is not a good way, I cooperated with you to help you, and now you are hurting me, shame on you” (Modified blames)

Table 6 shows the most frequently used response strategies by the two groups. The only strategy that did not appear in the data before and after the treatment was offering sympathy, and thus, was not included in the table.

Table 6.Most frequently used response strategies

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Group | | | | | |
| Experimental | | | Control | | |
| Mean | Std. Deviation | Sum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sum |
| Apology | Pre-test | .87 | .352 | 13 | 1.33 | .488 | 20 |
| Post-test | .93 | .458 | 14 | 1.20 | .561 | 18 |
| Agreement | Pre-test | .47 | .516 | 7 | .53 | .516 | 8 |
| Post-test | .40 | .507 | 6 | .33 | .488 | 5 |
| Explanation & excuse | Pre-test | .60 | .507 | 9 | .60 | .507 | 9 |
| Post-test | .53 | .516 | 8 | .47 | .516 | 7 |
| Offer to improve situation | Pre-test | .47 | .516 | 7 | .40 | .507 | 6 |
| Post-test | .87 | .352 | 13 | .80 | .414 | 12 |

The two groups used four responses frequently in the pre-test: apology, agreement, explanation and excuse, and offer, to improve the situations. Like their use of complaint strategies, the two groups continued to select similar response strategies in their post-test. A non-parametric t test (Mann-Whitney U) reveals no significant differences between the two groups in their employment of apologies (*p* = 0.156), agreements (*p* = 0.710), explanations and excuses (*p* = 0.720), and offers to improve situations (*p* = 0.630) after the treatment. The following are examples of response strategies by the experimental group in the situation of the post-test (responding to your complaining classmate for breaking his iPad).

(c1) “Yes I did but I didn’t do anything with it maybe the battery is off” (Agreement)

(c2) “Sorry about that, I promise to buy you a new iPad” (Apology)

(c3) “I am very sorry I purposely didn’t promise I’d buy you a new iPad” (Explanation and excuse)

(c4) “I’m so sorry It’s my fault I’m going to put it back” (Offer to improve situation)

A number of comments can be made regarding these results. Firstly, this outcome does not fully support the findings of other studies that found interventional pragmatic instruction to be effective in improving EFL learners’ choice of strategies (e.g. Kondo 2008; Usó-Juan 2013). Kondo (2008) and Usó-Juan (2013) found explicit and metapragmatic instruction to be effective in learners’ choices of refusal strategies. Again, this could add to the argument that the speech act of complaint is difficult for EFL learners to acquire in comparison to other speech acts like refusals. Secondly, the EFL learners in the present study avoided complexity when making their complaints as they rarely combined complaint strategies together, which agrees with the findings by Trosborg (1995) who considered such behaviour as one reason why EFL learners often fail in making convincing complaints. Some possible reasons for this lack of effect of instruction have been highlighted previously and might be due to the length of instruction, the lack of distributed practice or the lack of a delayed test, each of which were necessitated by the availability of participants. Another reason for this could be attributed to learners’ reliance on language which is both familiar and comfortable and often closely related to L1. This may be especially true when instruction relates to pragmatic uses of language and language choice is not restricted as it would be when learning only syntax, for example.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the results of this study show that instruction had a positive short-term effect on recognition of informal second party complaints. Learners in the experimental group were better able to recognise complaints from non-complaints overall and were also more sensitive to particular strategies. There was no significant impact of instruction on participants’ production of informal second party complaints and responses to complaints. The results are positive in that they show instruction can contribute to at an increased rate of awareness of how informal second party L2 complaints can be made via this chat medium. We would argue that this awareness can contribute to the longer-term acquisition of this speech act because noticing is one key aspect of acquisition (e.g., Schmidt 1990). Put simply, it is less likely that learners can produce something they cannot recognise first and within interlanguage pragmatics, it has been shown that instruction can lead to a heightened awareness of which forms to use for a particular pragmatic purpose (Halenko, Jones, Davies and Davies 2019). A general implication for instruction is that what Willis (2003, 219) terms ‘recognition’ of form and function is an important stage to work on and develop and pushing (or rushing) students to produce language may not in any case have any more positive results than not doing so (e.g. Golebiewska and Jones 2018).

The lack of a positive result in relation to production may also have been connected to the limitations of this exploratory study, which could be addressed in future research in this area. Firstly, if participants had been available, a delayed test may have produced a different result, as it is likely that pragmatic aspects of language take longer to acquire than others. Although there is no absolute consensus on how long we should wait before conducting a delayed test, a period of at least two or three weeks after instruction is generally accepted as to be a useful measure (Jones 2021) to measure the acquisition of what has been taught. Future studies in this area could address this gap via the addition of a delayed test, where possible. Secondly, the relatively small sample size may have contributed to this result. The size here was limited by which learners were willing to volunteer for the instruction and while it does not invalidate the results, ideally, a larger sample of twenty or more participants per group could be used in future studies. Finally, as mentioned, in terms of the instruction, distributed practice could have contributed to different results. Spacing out practice (normally termed distributed or spaced practice) has been shown to be beneficial for acquisition (DeKeyser 2018) and further studies could attempt this.

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**Appendix A: Sample production tests.**

*Pre-test*

(A) You lent your book to a classmate and he returned it by the end of the day. When you arrived home and checked your book, you found some pages to have writing on them. You send him a WhatsApp message complaining.

Answers from the data:

“Hello I just noticed that you have writing in some pages form my book that I lend it to you”

“Hello my friend, you borrowed the book from me and you gave it to me and it was not in the condition I gave it to you. Why did you do that?”

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(B) You leave some coffee stains on the book of your classmate. He sends you a WhatsApp message saying: "My book has coffee stains all over it. Did you drink anything while you were reading it earlier today?"

Answers from the data:

“Yes, I was drinking energy and I spilled on your book, sorry for what I did to you”

“Yes, I drank a little coffee and I apologize to you, my friend. What do I do to fix what I did?”

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Post-test*

(A) Your classmate asked for your assignment to read and return tomorrow. The next day, he forgot to bring it with him and you lost marks for. He left before you could talk to him. You send him a WhatsApp message complaining.

Answers from the data:

“Hey man . I lost my grades because of you , why don’t you bring to me quickly”

“This is not a good way, I cooperated with you to help you, and now you are hurting me, shame on you”

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(B) You drop your classmate’s iPad and it doesn’t work anymore. He sends you a WhatsApp message saying: "Hey. My iPad doesn’t turn on. Didn’t you borrow it today?"

Answers from the data:

“Yes I did but I didn’t do anything with it may be the battery is off”

“Yes, I’m sorry my friend, I’ll fix it, I hope you will excuse me”

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B: Sample recognition test.**

*Pre-test (embedded strategies between brackets)*

1) (Indirect accusation)

- Hey Ahmed.

- Hey

- I can’t find my phone charger. Didn’t I lend it to you yesterday?

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

2) (Hint)

- How’s the car?

- Ok, I guess. Driving it used to be a relaxing experience. I’m not sure I could say the same now

- Well, these things will break with time

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

3) (Non complaint)

- Hey man. Me and Ahmed went for a walk today. I wish you had been with us

- Really? How was it?

- It was fun. Oh and we met Khalid on the way, and he asked us for your phone number

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

4) (Explicit blame of person)

- What did you do that for, you moron!

- What?

- The teacher was not going to give us any homework, but you moron decided to remind him all of a sudden!

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

5) (Annoyance)

- You ok?

- No!

- What’s up?

- Just found some coffee stains on my brand-new shirt. Was on my way to the cinema to see the new Fast & Furious movie but now have to go home and change

- Sorry man. It must have been me this morning

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

6) (Ill consequences)

- What’s the matter?

- Just really annoyed

- Why?

- I will probably get a zero on my homework since I was not able to deliver it on time

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

7) (Non complaint)

- Hey Khaled

- Hey man whats’s up?

- Nothing really. I just need to borrow your course book today if that’s fine with you?

- Sure. I will be at college. Come see me then

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

8) (Modified blame)

- Hey man. I spoke with our friends about the weekend plans and we all agreed to go to the beach

- Sure. I will see if my time allows it

- By the way, about what you said about me last week, that was not a nice thing to say about a friend

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

9) (Non complaint)

- Hi. You remember that guy we saw last weekend?

- Yeah you mean the guy with the suitcase?

- That’s him. Someone tried to steal his suitcase from between his hands today

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

10) (Explicit blame of behaviour)

- Hi. The teacher asked me to tell you that the event will be next week

- Allright.

- so be ready before then. And I forgot to tell you, it is very rude and disrespectful to go around spreading rumours about your friends

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

11) (Direct accusation)

- Hey. I was talking to Amir

- Yeah?

- Why did you tell him about my problems? I told you not to.