

The influence of gender on complaint emails in service encounters by B2 EFL Spanish speakers

La influencia del género en los emails de queja en interacciones de servicio de estudiantes españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera en nivel B2

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Abstract

The speech act of complaining presents a considerable challenge due to its face-threatening nature, requiring a high level of pragmatic competence. This challenge is intensified when complainants communicate in a language other than their native tongue, as they may lack familiarity not only with the linguistic forms required but also with the sociopragmatic nuances involved. The present study adopts a mixed-method corpus-learner approach by analysing a dataset of complaint emails from service encounters authored by 50 Spanish students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Specifically, it seeks to address two research

questions: (a) What strategies and moves shape the structure of complaint emails written by Peninsular Spanish EFL students in service encounters? And (b) To what degree does the variable of gender influence the composition of complaint emails in this context? It is hypothesised that students, albeit partially aware of the structure of this kind of emails, might transfer some strategies from their L1. Regarding gender, it is expected that female students will mitigate their complaint while male students will perform complaints more directly. The findings support both hypotheses as students recognise the necessity of following a four-move structure and acknowledge the impact of the variables of power and interpersonal distance. However, notable distinctions emerge between female and male students regarding their utilisation of strategies and sub-strategies within each move, potentially perpetuating gender-based stereotypes. These findings highlight the need for targeted language instruction that addresses both linguistic and sociopragmatic aspects.

Keywords: EFL learner corpus, emails, complaints, service encounters, Peninsular Spanish students

Resumen

El acto de habla de la queja presenta un desafío debido a su naturaleza amenazante para la imagen, lo que requiere un alto nivel de competencia pragmática. Este desafío se intensifica cuando el individuo formula la queja en un idioma distinto a su lengua materna, ya que es posible que no esté familiarizado tanto con las formas lingüísticas requeridas, como con los matices sociopragmáticos. Desde una perspectiva mixta, este estudio analiza una muestra de correos electrónicos de queja escritos por 50 estudiantes españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Se pretende dar respuesta a dos preguntas de investigación: (a) ¿Qué estrategias y movimientos estructuran los correos de quejas de estos estudiantes en las interacciones de servicio? (b) ¿En qué medida

influye el género en la composición de dichos correos en este contexto? Partimos de la hipótesis de que los estudiantes son conscientes de la estructura de este tipo de emails, pero que se producirán transferencias desde su L1. En cuanto al género, se espera que las estudiantes empleen un mayor grado de mitigación frente a un estilo más directo de los estudiantes. Los resultados prueban ambas hipótesis, mostrando que los estudiantes siguen una estructura de cuatro movimientos y reconocen la importancia de las variables de poder y distancia interpersonal. Sin embargo, existen distinciones notables entre ellos con respecto a las estrategias y subestrategias empleadas en cada movimiento, perpetuando ciertos estereotipos de género. Estos hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de una instrucción que aborde aspectos lingüísticos y sociopragmáticos.

Palabras clave: Corpus de aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), correos electrónicos, quejas, interacciones de servicio, estudiantes españoles peninsulares

1. Introduction

Mastering pragmatic competence in foreign languages is challenging yet crucial. Complaining is an intricate speech act for both native and non-native speakers of the language, as it takes place in a face-threatening context that puts the EFL speaker at a disadvantage. Proficiency in expressing complaints encompasses more than just linguistic strategies; it also involves the culture-specific norms and unspoken rules governing complaints across different cultural backgrounds (Chen et al., 2011).

The CEFR-CV (Council of Europe, 2020) underscores the importance of demonstrating pragmalinguistic competence by initiating, following up on, and negotiating a complaint across face-to-face and digital communication, in both written and spoken interaction, and within mediation environments at B1 and above.

This covers a spectrum of complexity, from everyday transactions like requesting food or drink to addressing conflicts and demanding satisfaction. Formal e-mails and letters of complaint are integrated into written interaction activities.

Research has often focused on oral and written complaints by EFL students. However, the consideration of emails is relatively recent (Nguyen & Pham 2021). Besides, with very few exceptions (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2017; Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023), there has been minimal focus on written complaints by Spanish EFL learners. Similarly, although there is compelling but limited research on how the learner's gender influences the performance of complaints among English learners from various L1, very little consideration has been given to Peninsular Spanish. This paper seeks to redress this balance by focalising on the effect of gender on the moves and strategies displayed in B2 emails of complaints authored by Peninsular Spanish EFL students, particularly in the context of service encounters. The rationale for focusing on B2 level is rooted in the *CEFR-CV's* expectation (2020) that B1 learners should possess the competence to proficiently compose complaint emails.

2. Complaints in service encounters

Service encounters typically encompass brief and transitory acts of communication of an impersonal rather than social nature between a service seeker and a service provider. They offer opportunities for fleeting rapport construction, crucial in customer complaint services, where meeting customer expectation is paramount (Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). The rationale behind this lies in the likelihood that complainers are frequent users of the organisation's products or services. Hence, the predisposition to complain is proportionate to the perceived gravity of the transgression, discontent leading to negative word-of-mouth (Goodman & Newman, 2003).

Complaints can be direct or face-threatening, addressing the accountable party for the offence, or indirect or non-face-threatening, focusing on a third party (Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). In this context, when clients are dissatisfied with the service provided, they hold the complainee liable for the transgression and issue a complaint to pass judgement and request for repair to redress the objectionable situation (Laabidi and Bousfiha, 2020).

Complaints may hinder rapport construction, often challenging the recipient's negative face and potentially leading to hostility and confrontation (Yuan and Zhang, 2018; Wijayanto et al., 2017). Consequently, within the service provider sector, complaints often entwine with complaint management, service recovery actions, and efforts to prevent complaints from escalating.

Complaints often mirror storytelling, as complainers share their experience with story-recipients expecting an affiliate response. This process involves affectivity; emotions like frustration, blame or disappointment are woven here, which can prompt complainers to divulge private information (Orthaber & Márquez Reiter, 2011). However, from a sociopragmatic perspective, the relationship between both interlocutors tends to be asymmetrical, where the client is typically viewed as being in the right and distant, which clearly influences how complaints are articulated and the moves and strategies employed in the process.

2.1. Moves and strategies in the speech act of complaint

Moves refer to “semantic and functional units of texts that have specific communicative purposes” (Biber et al., 2007: 31). The selection of a complaint move pattern is shaped by the social variables of distance, power and ranking of imposition (Moon, 2001).

The speech act of complaint is often poly-move (Prykarpatska, 2008). Even though it “has no predetermined form [...] and is more

intricate and difficult than many other speech acts” (Yang & Wu, 2022, p. 2), previous research on complaints generally outlines a four-move pattern initiated by an opener, followed by a statement of the predicament, a proposal for remediation and a closing, each containing multiple strategies (Trench, 1995; Prykarpatska, 2008; Yuan & Zhang, 2018; Nguyen & Pham, 2021; Maíz-Arévalo & Méndez García, 2023).

However, alternative patterns have also been proposed. Trench (1995) identifies five moves –opener, act statement to express the problem, speaker’s justification, remedy and closing. Hasyim and Hasyim (2020) distinguish the four moves of initiating, questioning, criticising, and requesting repair. Meanwhile, Chen et al. (2011) present a cluster of six moves, the most frequent being dissatisfaction + request for repair.

Each move within a complaint sequence is realised by one or several stages or strategies, linguistic or discursive choices made by the speaker to achieve their communicative goal. For instance, in the opening move, a complainer may directly initiate the complaint or seek the complaineer’s attention; or when stating the problem, strategies could range from implicit expressions of annoyance to explicit strategies such as blaming or accusing the addressee (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987). The choice of strategy hinges on factors such as the speaker-listener relationship, the severity of the problem and cultural expectations. Understanding the available strategies enables complainers to better tailor their complaints for achieving desired outcomes.

In service encounters, the speech act of complaint in spoken interaction comprehends five moves: greeting, aggression-reduction, conflict-settlement, problem-solution and conclusion. Despite the inherent diversity in each complaint scenario, research attests that the reason for the complaint is frequently expressed during the greeting phase (Orthaber & Márquez Reiter, 2011).

Among the rare studies on the formulation of complaints in service encounter contexts by EFL learners, Amiryousefi et al. (2018)

examine how Iranian EFL learners, Persian native speakers and English native speakers handle rapport management strategies. Results highlight the widespread use of social relations or rapport management strategies, particularly, rapport enhancement, maintenance, challenge and neglect strategies. However, culture-specific differences are identified in the frequency of use of these strategies, rapport enhancement and maintenance strategies being more common among Persian native speakers, whereas rapport challenge strategies are more frequent among Persian native speakers and Iranian EFL learners.

2.2. EFL learners' formulation of complaints

Studies of EFL learners' complaints often delve into cross-cultural and acquisitional perspectives against the backdrop of an interlanguage framework that typically compares learners' use with that of native speakers, though this approach is increasingly considered limited (Chen et al., 2011; da Silva, 2014). These studies stress the negative pragmatic transfer of learners' native language and culture (Chen et al., 2011; da Silva, 2014).

Some investigations suggest that EFL learners tend to be more explicit in their complaints than native speakers (da Silva, 2014; Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016; Trench, 1995). Yet, other studies underline that native speakers demonstrate assertiveness and a preference for explicit complaint strategies (Laabidi & Bousfiha, 2020), contrasting this to EFL learners' inclination towards over-politeness and indirect complaints (Eshraghi & Shahrokhi 2016). These findings also indicate that learners' pragmatic competence of their local culture influences their use of mitigators and indirect strategies to soften complaints. Additionally, contextual variables significantly impact the strategies employed by learners.

In Spain, Hidalgo et al.'s (2014) investigate the complaints made by Spanish university students in both their L1 and in EFL,

revealing a broader range of strategies and a more direct approach when complaints are made in Spanish. Interestingly, students tend to associate directness with Spanish and indirectness with English.

Likewise, Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor (2017) look into the impact of language proficiency on the complaint strategies among female EFL university students in Spain and find that, regardless of proficiency level, students employ a buffering strategy to mitigate the message prior to voicing the complaint.

While studies have primarily focused on face-to-face interaction, a significant number of complaints are now issued digitally, especially through email.

2.3. EFL students' construction of emails

Emails have become a prevalent mode for handling complaints. They dominate long-distance relationships due to their asynchronous nature (Chen, 2015; Halenko et al. 2021), are extensively used in the workplace and serve as a medium for young individuals to communicate with adults in writing (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018).

Teaching and learning the skill of email writing in English present evident challenges. The wide array of sender-recipient relationships and interaction contexts, coupled with the variability in email conventions across cultures, has led to a lack of consensus on the pragmatics of native speakers' email writing. Emails differ significantly from traditional letter-writing due to their contextual variability and hybrid character. Resembling other forms of correspondence, e-mails can exhibit stylistic and linguistic features of written formality or e-politeness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), and typically adopt an epistolary format with greetings, main body and farewell. Notably, they lack non-verbal and paralinguistic cues, "although the use of emoticons and capitalization can be seen as a way to make up for these cues" (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018, p. 491).

Moreover, like other written texts, emails can be revised and edited by the sender (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018). Conversely, their interactive, transient and dynamic nature, allows for informal features akin to speech such as single words, short sentences, non-standard spellings or emoticons, and the exclusion of openings, closings and signatures (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018).

Studies exploring emails authored by EFL learners primarily address the power dynamics in students' communication with professors, predominantly in students' formulation of requests (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Codina-Espurz, 2022; Chen, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015, 2016, 2018; Lazarescu, 2020), demonstrating not only a manifest power imbalance but also substantial discrepancy in perceptions regarding appropriateness and email pragmatics. Additionally, research focuses on forms of address and greetings/closings formulas (Bou-Franch, 2011; Schauer, 2021).

In EFL students' request emails distinct patterns surface, including higher directness, omission of greetings (termed as avoidance strategy or zero form of address) or avoidance of deference forms (like "dear" or 'title' + name) and absence of closings alongside insufficient mitigation (Codina-Espurz, 2022). There is a tendency to impose on the reader, with more requests for action than for information (Lazarescu, 2020). Remarkably, some students believe that merely using "please" or "thank you" constitutes "polite" formulaic utterances (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). Besides, recent research indicates that despite students recognising the status difference, they often overlook this dissimilarity and choose not to mitigate or downgrade their request emails to professors (Codina-Espurz, 2022).

Consequently, EFL students often alternate between formal or casual language, using clipped syntax, symbols or abbreviations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). However, professors tend to perceive casual language as inconsiderate or rude based on perceived status-

congruent inappropriateness (Nguyen and Pham 2021). Lecturers react negatively to language that echoes spoken communication, high directness, emotional expressions, criticism towards them or allusions to personal rather than academic motives. Conversely, they appreciate conciseness, clarity and the inclusion of formal openings, closings or thank-you sequences (Lazarescu, 2020). Indeed, the perceived difference in email politeness leads to the unfavourable perception of students by lecturers (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016).

In the case of Spanish EFL learners, an analysis of emails of requests addressed to lectures both composed in their L1 and in English as a foreign language reveals that while closings often demonstrate deference, openings are generally crafted in a more informal way (Salazar Campillo, 2018).

All these studies manifest the culture-specific character of email writing and stress the relevance of mastering the pragmatic competence of email writing (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). This significantly becomes more pronounced in contexts where EFL learners compose emails in English, addressing both native and/or non-native speakers within their community. In such situations, they are uncertain whether they should adhere to the politeness norms of the target or their local culture. Furthermore, merely being familiar with the norms applied to email writing in their own and in an English-speaking community may not suffice, as these norms could collide with those of email construction in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). While much of these findings centre around request emails, they extend to the composition of complaint emails as well.

2.4 EFL student's emails of complaint

Research on EFL learners' complaint emails is indeed limited, with only a few studies available. Examining Korean ELT students, Park

(2001) finds out that many complaint features are not traceable to students' native tongue or culture. These comprehend the use of aggressive language, expressions of personal emotions, cynicism, sarcasm, and a high level of blame and imposition on the complainee, often directing them on how to proceed. This tendency could stem from the methodology, where students' emails are collected as elicited writing exercises without real-life consequences.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, Nguyen and Pham (2021) note a consistent structural pattern across both direct and indirect complaints. Emails typically include moves such as greetings, self-introduction, statement of purpose, pre-closing and closing, with the opening/greeting move being more prevalent. Along with opening and closing formulas, these formal emails incorporate pre-closing strategies like appeal for action, thanking and leave-taking. Strategies encompass elements like expressing negative emotion, statement of offensive act, interrogation, or request for repair, outlining consequence for direct complaints, and suggesting potential solutions or alternative plans for indirect complaints.

Among the scant studies on the emails of complaints composed by Peninsular Spanish EFL students, Maíz-Arévalo & Méndez García (2023) report on the customary four-move pattern of opener, statement of the predicament, remediation and closing. These emails often show transfer substrategies from Spanish, like the use of lengthy openers prior to the statement of purpose or the relevance of rapport construction. This aligns with previous research on emails written by Peninsular Spanish students in their L1 to their professors, characterised by a notably “‘people first, business second’ communicative style” (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1172).

Morales Ruiz (2023) delves into the structure of complaint emails authored by Peninsular Spanish speakers in their L1, specifically examining the opening, external modification and closing sequences. These emails consistently incorporate opening sequences, usually semi-formal or informal, generating a sense of fake intimacy, a discovery

consistent with the findings outlined by Bou-Franch (2011). The closing sequence encapsulates the farewell and/or signature. Interestingly, the absence of a closing sequence might signal the complainer's annoyance and discomfort. While not extensively explored, gender has an impact on how EFL learners formulate complaints.

2.5. Gender in EFL learners' expression of complaints and complaint emails

Kakolaki and Shahrokhi (2016) contend that socialisation, gender, and language intertwine, positioning women as subordinate as they are socialised to adopt language patterns lacking power, whereas men assert their dominance by employing powerful verbal strategies associated to authority.

While acknowledging the complexities around gender distinction, research on gender differences in complaints among EFL learners has revealed significant variations in language use between men and women. This includes male's conciseness compared to women's longer responses (Trench, 1995). Females often utilise standard forms, employ polite and tentative language, offer supportive responses, and avoid disagreement to smooth social connection and engage interlocutors. Conversely, males adopt a more direct and less mitigating style characterised by fewer politeness devices (Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016).

Thongtong & Srioutai (2019) discovered that male English major Thai undergraduate students tend to use the appeal strategy (employing questions to solve problems) in their oral complaints, while female students favour inquiry (asking questions for information and about problems). Similarly, research on Iranian EFL learners suggests that males generate complaints more frequently, use fewer mitigation devices and employ more direct speech patterns than females (Kakolaki and Shahrokhi, 2016). Comparing written complaints

in Spanish and German, Pastor Villalba (2011) provides further evidence of the unequal distribution of complaints in favour of males.

Very few studies have focussed on the impact of gender on EFL learner's complaint emails. A recent study into the variance in email complaint response strategies of Thai female and male EFL learners (Thongtong, 2022) points towards a preference for appeal and offer among males, while females lean towards the guarantee strategy. Additionally, females are more inclined to use indirect politeness strategies.

In the study on complaint emails by Peninsular Spanish learners conducted by Maíz-Arévalo & Méndez García (2023) gender differences are apparent. Males tend to employ self-assertive strategies such as presenting remediation as a fact already implemented or imminent (*fait accompli*), while females generally prefer over-mitigation, over-politeness and strategies that facilitate rapport construction.

3. Methodology

As already mentioned, writing complaint emails is specially challenging for EFL learners as it entails both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence.

This paper aims to answer these research questions: (a) What strategies and moves shape the structure of a complaint email written by EFL students in the context of service encounters? And (b) To what extent does the variable of gender influence the way they compose emails of complaint in this context?

Based on previous research, our departing hypotheses are that students will partially follow the expected generic conventions of complaint emails while incorporating other moves as a result of L1 transfer. Regarding the influence of gender, it is hypothesised that

female writers will employ more mitigation in contrast to a more direct style by male students.

3.1. Setting and corpus description

The corpus used in the present study is part of the FineDesc L2 learner corpus (project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation), from which emails of complaint in the context of service encounters were selected.

For the current study, a total of 50 students at B2 level (28 female and 22 male learners) participated in the data production. All the participants voluntarily took part in an examination to certify their English level. The 50 writings under scrutiny were those of the students that succeeded in reaching a B2 level. As exam candidates, all of them agreed for their writings to be used for research purposes provided personal data were omitted. None of the informants were students of any of the researchers, who only knew that they were L1 Spanish speakers and the candidates' own identification as female, male or non-binary. All the participants are hence identified by a number code and a corresponding F or M according to the gender they indicated themselves (see note 1)¹.

As part of the examination, students were requested to write an email of complaint to a travel agency after having a negative experience with their accommodation, which failed to reach the expected standards. They were also prompted to express how the inferior category of the accommodation had affected their holiday and to demand some compensation in exchange. Their complaint could be accompanied by the photos of the accommodation they took.

Participants were given 25 minutes to perform the 175-200-word task in written form (not digitally). The context involves an asymmetrical relationship with the customer-student occupying a

¹ None of the students chose the non-binary option when identifying themselves but resorted to the binary distinction between female and male.

higher position in the power scale as well as a distant one since guest and host do not know each other. The ranking of imposition is relatively high given that the host wishes to be compensated with either a voucher for another holiday, or a refund, which might go against the wishes of the service provider.

The corpus thus gathered amounts to 50 compositions, with a total number of 9,800 words (5,500 produced by female participants and 4,300 by males). On average, students' compositions amount to 180–200 words per email. All the examples are reproduced as they appear originally, without any modification or correction.

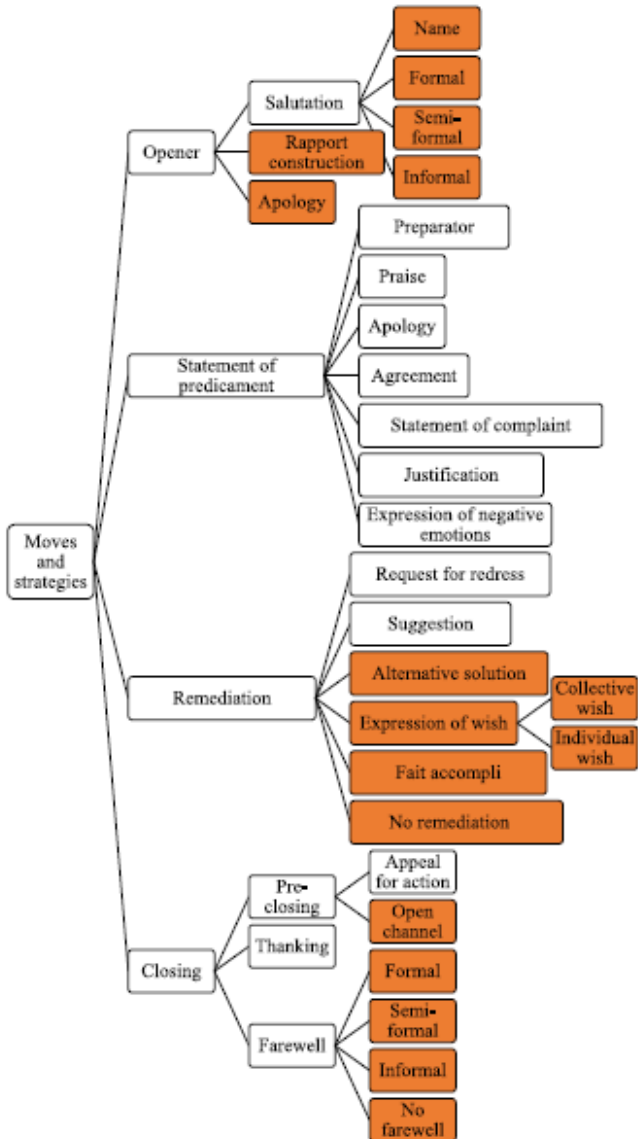
The dataset is a convenience sample which was analysed from a mixed-method approach. Once compiled, all the emails were tagged according to the move and strategy taxonomy put forward by Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García (2023). The corpus was tagged by the authors individually. Results were then compared, and the scarce discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. The tagging of the corpus was aided by the software NVivo. NVivo was chosen for two main reasons. On the one hand, it allows for a semi-automatic codification. On the other hand, it provides researchers with the possibility to correlate data to obtain quantitative results. In the present study, correlations between gender and strategies were established and both a quantitative and qualitative analysis was collaboratively carried out.

Before presenting the results, however, the next subsection describes the taxonomy of moves and strategies employed in the codification of the corpus.

3.2. Taxonomy of moves and strategies in emails of complaint

Informed by previous research (see section 2) and their own analysis of a dataset of emails of complaint by Spanish EFL learners, Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García (2023) put forward a comprehensive taxonomy of moves and strategies in emails of complaint, summarised by Figure 1.

Figure 1. Moves and strategies in emails of complaint (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023: 32)



As shown in Figure 1, emails of complaint follow the customary four-move structure, with a set of strategies and sub-strategies in each of them. Some of the strategies seem recurrent in all emails of complaint, according to the literature, while others (in orange) may derive from the contextual constraints where the interaction is produced and become apparent in the EFL Peninsular Spanish sample investigated by Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez García (2023). Thus, the opening move (or opener) typically includes a salutation in different degrees of formality. In the case where the relationship between the interlocutors is not distant, it may include both rapport construction (“I hope this finds you well”) and even an apology for addressing them (“I’m sorry to bother you by email”). Rapport construction and the need to apologise in order to repair a possible threat to the recipient’s negative face seem quite related to Spanish culture’s tendency towards positive politeness –e.g., as a way to preserve group harmony (Iglesias Recuero, 2007).

The second move (or statement of the predicament) is where the writer expresses their complaint. Even though the expression of the complaint is the main strategy in this move, it may also include other strategies such as preparing the terrain before the actual complaint is aired (“I am writing to you to express my disappointment”), offering justification for the complaint or expressing negative emotions.

The third move is also known as the remediation, and it is where the writer asks for compensation and a redress of the predicament. As in the previous moves, this main strategy can often be accompanied by others such as providing some alternative solutions to remedy the problem.

Finally, the fourth move closes the email and is often structured along three main strategies: a pre-closing where the writer usually appeals for future action (“I look forward to hearing from you”), thanking the recipient for reading the email and actually closing it with a farewell, which can also vary in terms of formality in line with the greeting.

Taking these moves and strategies as a point of departure, the dataset was tagged accordingly. Results are presented in the following section which, for the sake of clarity, has been divided into four sub-sections according to each of the moves.

4. Results

4.1. Opening move

As summarised in Table 1, results show that the contextual variables of distance and power play an important role in how students open their email of complaint as they refrain from creating any rapport with their interlocutor or apologising for writing to them. The reason for this is that, as customers, they feel empowered to file the complaint without the need to create rapport with the addressee. This reduces the opening move to just the strategy of greeting or salutation.

According to Chen (2015) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015), salutations can be formal (“To whom it may concern”, “Dear Sir/Madam”), semi-formal (“Dear workers of Scot-holidays”) or informal (“Hello”). Results show that, as expected, both groups of students opt for formal and semi-formal salutations. As they do not know the name of the addressee, the strategy “name” is never employed. All the emails include a salutation, which may indicate students are aware of the distance and formality of the situation. Table 1 summarises these results in raw numbers and the corresponding ratio.

A closer look at the results, however, shows interesting differences between both groups, with female students preferring a formal approach more frequently than their male counterparts (64.3% versus 50%) even if results are not statistically significant (p value= .59). Male students opt for semi-formal salutations more often than female ones, as in example (1) from the dataset, where the

Table 1. Salutation and gender

Salutation	Gender = F (28)	Gender = M (22)	Total (50)
Formal	18 (64.3%)	11 (50%)	29 (58%)
Semi-formal	7 (25%)	8 (37%)	15 (30%)
Informal	3 (10.7%)	3 (13%)	6 (12%)
Name	0	0	0
No salutation formula	0	0	0
Total	28 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (100%)

writer addresses the manager of the company, even if this was not prompted as part of the task:

(1) Dear Manager, [30170M]

A related finding is that students are aware that the level of formality demands a formal salutation, hence evidencing their pragmatic competence in the L2, even if their linguistic competence is insufficient and their production renders a non-idiomatic expression as in example (2) by a female student, who transfers a formal expression (“*a la atención de*”) (“to the attention of”) from her L1:

(2) At the attendance of customer service of Scotholidays.com [301717F]

From a qualitative perspective, it is interesting to point out that formal salutations present some differences between both groups. Thus, male students often address their email to a more individualised recipient (often male himself) while female candidates either address a complete team or perform a dual salutation, as illustrated in examples (3) to (5), produced by a male and two female candidates:

(3) Sir. [30179M]

(4) Dear Sir/Madam, [30117F]

(5) Dear customer service, [30191F]

Although the sample is undeniably too limited to reach general conclusions, these patterns seem to evidence the resilience of certain gender stereotypes -i.e. people in charge are male, especially among the male candidates.

3.2. Second move: Statement of the predicament

The second move can be considered as the main body of the complaint, as the writer uses it to perform the complaint itself. However, it rarely appears in isolation, but is carried out by means of different strategies and sub-strategies (see Figure 1 above). Given the contextual constraints of the task at hand, it comes as no surprise that some of the strategies put forward by Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García (2023) are not employed by these learners such as praising the other or expressing agreement. Other strategies, however, are employed (see Table 2):

Table 2. Move 2 and gender

Strategies	Female (N= 28)	Male (N=22)	Total (50)
Preparator	19 (60.7%)	15 (68%)	32 (64%)
Apology	2 (7.14%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)
Statement of complaint	6 (21.4%)	2 (9%)	8 (16%)
Justification	12 (64.3%)	16 (73%)	34 (68%)
Expression of negative emotions	22 (71.4%)	9 (41%)	29 (58%)
Total	28 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (100%)

As shown in Table 2, both groups are aware of the importance of using a preparator to introduce their complaint. In fact, 32 students include this strategy in their email (64% of the dataset). However, male students seem to be more prone to using this strategy before explicitly stating the complaint in a direct way, with 68% versus 60.7% in the case of the female participants. Some of them even mention this, as in example (6):

- (6) Last weekend I went to Scotland in order to celebrate the end of the academic year. I needed a place to stay three days, so I booked a flat by your web page. I am going to be direct, what I found was very disappointing. [30175M]

Apologies are rarely employed following the ethos that “the client is always right”. However, it is interesting to point out that it is only two of the female students that include an apology prior to making their complaint, as in (7) and (8):

- (7) I am writing to complain about a flat that I rented from your website Scotholidays.com [preparator]. I am really sorry too say that I am truly disappointed with your services. [apology] [30185F]
- (8) I am writing with reference to a flat that I rented from your agency “Scotholidays” the last weekend in the city of Scotland. [preparator] I am truthly sorry to need to write this email because I know that this situation is quite uncomfortable for anyone [apology] [30164F]

In contrast to previous studies (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023), students in this specific context tend not to express the complaint directly but prefer to describe the situation they encountered and how the difference between the expected service and the current experience justifies their complaint. Thus, justification becomes the most recurrent strategy in both groups (68%), used by 18 out of 28 female students (64.2%) and 16 out of 22 male students (73%), as can be seen in (9), which adopts a narrative structure, in line with other studies such as that by Orthaber and Márquez Reiter (2011), who argue that complaints often resemble story-telling:

- (9) First of all, when I arrived to neighbourhood I felt insecure because people were drunk in the street. They tried bet on me and I was frightened. Despite this episode, I went to flat to hide me and forgetting that. [30181F]

The expression of negative emotions is the third most recurrent strategy (58%). Entwined with justifying their complaint, students

express their disappointment and how the situation negatively impacted their experience. Interestingly, however, almost all the female students in the sample (20 out of 28, hence 71.4%) resort to this strategy, which is less frequent among male participants (9 out of 22, 41%). Moreover, female students often refer to their whole family being negatively affected, even though being a family vacation was not prompted in the original task, as illustrated by (10) and (11):

- (10) This flat situation really stressed me out, and my family, who I was visiting, could appreciate that upset feeling on me, so indirectly this also affected to them. [30185F]
- (11) For that reason and for yours mistake, we couldn't enjoy our travel in the form that we wanted. For example, I needed to slept with my sons when I only wanted to slept with my husband for had a good time in the night. [30200F]

Male students, however, often refer to their travelling either individually or with other friends rather than with family:

- (12) Thanks to not having 3 beds one of my friends woke up with a tremendous pain in the back. For instance, that is the reason why he missed the activities planned for that day. And the other friend cought a cold for taking a shower with the broken heater. [30202M]

It could be argued that both referring to family or friends and the expression of negative emotions mostly by female students show learners are inadvertently perpetuating gender stereotypes (Kotek et al., 2021). Differences, however, are not statistically significant, as Pearson's X^2 test renders a *p* value of .116.

4.3. Move 3: Remediation

Together with the statement of the predicament, move 3 is crucial in the formulation of complaints as it is the stage where the writer asks

for a compensation or remediation of the predicament. In the present context, where students have already experienced the problem (i.e. the accommodation did not live up to expectations), there is no chance of remediation on the spot but of a future compensation (e.g. in the form of a voucher for a future holiday). Five strategies were used in this move: request for redress, demand for redress, suggestion, threatening the service provider and providing evidence (in the form of photographs taken by the dissatisfied customer). Table 3 summarises the strategies found in the third move according to gender.

Table 3. Move 3 and gender

Strategies	Female (N= 28)	Male (N=22)	Total (50)
Requesting redress	16 (40%)	6 (17.6%)	22 (30%)
Demanding redress	6 (15%)	9 (26.4%)	15 (20%)
Suggesting a solution	5 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	5 (7%)
Threatening the provider	1 (2.5%)	9 (30%)	10 (13.5%)
Providing evidence	12 (30%)	10 (45.4%)	22 (29.5%)
Total	28 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (100%)

Although both requesting and demanding for compensation are directive speech acts where the addresser expects a future action on the addressee's part, the main difference between them is that requests politely mitigate the face-threat on the recipient of the directive whereas demands do not. Requests were employed by 16 out of the female students (40%) and 6 out of 22 male students (17.6%), as in (13) by a female student, and (14), a demand formulated by a male student. As can be seen, the student in (13) employs a great deal of mitigating strategies to make her request less face-threatening for the recipient, in what could arguably be considered an over-polite request:

- (13) In order to find a solution, I was wondering if exist any possibility to return our credit from your agency, or if you

have other suggestions I would be grateful if you could send me more information. [30180F]

- (14) This is why, after this experience, I demand a compensation. [30170M]

It is interesting to point out an isolated case of a male student who, although lacking the linguistic ability, realises this speech act by means of Spanish transfers (“*exijo una compensación monetaria*”) (“I demand monetary compensation”):

- (15) By the way I exigy a monetarium compensation. [30169M]

Arguably, suggestions also belong to the macro category of directives, albeit their face-threat is politely mitigated (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In the dataset at hand, only 5 female students perform this speech act, as in (16):

- (16) In order to find a solution we propose getting a new flat in Scotland with a 75% discount and the reimbursment of the quantity paid for the previous flat. [30201F]

This seems to contradict previous studies, where male learners were shown to favour suggestions as a possible solution to a predicament (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023). However, it could be argued that, in the sample under scrutiny, the choice is determined out of politeness for female learners whereas male participants see this particular situation as a context where they have a right to demand compensation, as dissatisfied clients, without any need for polite mitigation. The directness of complaints by male participants is, in fact, in line with previous studies, where they are also shown to be more aggressive than their female counterparts (e.g. Kakolaki and Shahrokhi; 2016).

The higher level of directness and aggression by male learners may also account for the remarkably higher use of threats as opposed to the female students of the dataset. Thus, 9 out of 22 male students (30%) threaten the service provider in contrast to only one female student doing so. Threats are quite direct and face-

threatening and range from taking legal action to posting a negative review in social media, as illustrated by examples (17) to (19), all of them by male students:

- (17) Or else I will take this case to the courts. [30170M]
- (18) If not, I will write a negative comment on Scotholidays.com and next travellers will not come at your flats. [30173M]
- (19) As long as you paid me the compensation of two thousand dollars, there will not be consequences. If you unpaid me, for sure I am going to talk with my advocade [30167M]

Finally, this move includes a context-bound strategy -i.e. providing evidence for the complaint. Although this was included as part of the prompt for the task, not even half the students (29,5%) complied with the instruction. Regarding gender, however, male students were more prone to include this reference to photographic evidence than their female counterparts (45.4% versus 30%, respectively), as illustrated by (20) and (21) by a female and male student, respectively:

- (20) I will put in this mail some photos to see the terrible flat's conditions [30187F]
- (21) Please see the photos attached below [30189M]

After carrying out Pearson's X^2 test, it was found that the differences in Move 3 were statistically significant, with *p value* rendering .002. This means gender does affect the way these participants perform Move 3.

3.4 Move 4: Closing

The final move in a complaint email or letter is closing, which may be performed by one or a combination of the following strategies: pre-closing, which includes the sub-strategies of appeal for action such as "I look forward to hearing from you" and of opening a channel for future communication as in "we can discuss it further",

thanking and, finally, a farewell formula like “Kind regards”. This formula often goes in line with the salutation of the opening move and can be formal, semi-formal, informal or include no farewell at all. Table 4 summarises the main results according to gender:

Table 4. Strategies in the closing move according to gender

Strategies	Gender = F (28)	Gender = M (22)	Total (50)
Appeal for action	17 (61%)	10 (45%)	27 (54%)
Open channel	1 (3,5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Thanking	4 (14%)	4 (18%)	8 (16%)
Farewell	24 (86%)	16 (73%)	40 (80%)
Total	28 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (100%)

As can be observed in Table 4, more than 50% of the students seem to be aware of the need to include this formulaic appeal, although this is slightly more frequent among the female participants. Thus, 17 out of 28 female students (61%) include this strategy, which is employed to a lesser extent by their male counterparts (10 out of 22, 45%). The linguistic form students employ may not always be often grammatically correct or may even be completely unidiomatic, being a transfer from their L1, as illustrated by (22) and (23), where the student is transferring the Spanish expression “*Espero su respuesta*” (“I await your response”):

(22) I look forward to hear from you soon [30184F]

(23) I'll be wait for your answer. [30187F]

As opposed to other contexts, in the situation at hand, it seems pragmatically inappropriate to open the channel for future discussion, given that there is no relation between both interlocutors apart from that of service provider and customer. One female student, however, includes this strategy before the appeal for action, as a transition between Move 3 and Move 4:

- (24) However, I am open to hear other options.
I look forward to hearing from you.
Yours faithfully. [30166F]

Thanking the addressee –in this case, the service provider– for the attention or reading the email seems a rather unfavoured strategy, as it is employed by less than 20% of the students. The reason behind this choice could be that students perceive their role as complainants as angry customers that do not need to ‘do politeness’ with their addressee. However, 14% and 18% of the female and male participants respectively include this strategy in their closing move, as illustrated by examples (25) and (26), by a female and male student even if their expressions are not fully idiomatic and show transfers from the students’ L1. Thus, in (25) the student is transferring from “*gracias por su tiempo en leer mi email*”, although it is difficult to determine whether the use of the verb “waste” in English is an attempt at sarcasm or an error from “*emplear su tiempo*” (use your time). In (26) the student seems to be transferring from “*gracias por tomar en consideración mi email*” (“thank you for considering my email”):

- (25) Thanks you for waste your time in read my email,
Yours feauthfully,
DM. [30164F]

- (26) Thank you for taking into account my email
Yours faithfully,
D.M. [30173M]

Finally, the majority of students are aware of the importance of employing a farewell formula to close their email. Thus, 80% of them perform a farewell, with female students resorting to this strategy slightly more frequently than their male counterparts (86% versus 73%). The differences, however, are not statistically significant, as a Pearson’s test reveals a *p-value* of .77.

Echoing Chen’s (2015) and Economidou-Kogetsidis’ taxonomy of salutation, farewells have likewise been classified as formal, semi-

formal or informal. As in the case of salutations, most students choose to end their email with a farewell formula, which can be formal (“yours sincerely”), semi-formal (“kind regards”) or informal (“bye”). Table 5 sums up the main frequencies according to the participants’ gender:

Table 5. Farewell according to gender

Farewell	Gender = F (28)	Gender = M (22)	Total (50)
Formal	19 (68%)	10 (45%)	29 (58%)
Semi-formal	7 (25%)	8 (36%)	15 (30%)
Informal	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No farewell	2 (7%)	4 (18%)	6 (12%)
Total	28 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (100%)

As shown in Table 5, students often opt for a formal email given the fact that they do not know their addressee. Sociopragmatic competence seems to activate this strategy, albeit more frequently in the case of female students, who include a formal farewell in 68% of the cases in contrast to 45% of the male participants. This is in line with previous studies, which conclude that female writers are often more formal (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023). Pragmalinguistic competence is occasionally at fault, with students failing to reproduce the correct formula, as in (27) by a female student or (28) by a male learner, who resorts to the Spanish formula equivalent to “yours faithfully” (“*atentamente*”) in its abbreviated form (“att”):

(27) Yours feauthfully, [30164F]

(28) Att, DM [30169M]

Semi-formal farewells are employed by both genders, although slightly more frequently by male students (36% versus 25% by female students) and informal farewells are completely avoided by both groups, which shows they are sociopragmatically aware of the

importance of the situational context at hand. Finally, the most interesting difference is found in the case of emails which are abruptly finished without any kind of farewell, as in examples (29) and (30):

(29) I wait your response.

D.M. [30189M]

(30) Thanks

D.M. [30194F]

In contrast to (30), where the student includes an acknowledgment before abruptly closing her mail, the student in example (29) opts for an appeal for action directly transferred from his L1 (“*espero su respuesta*”) (“I await your response”). As shown in Table 5, abrupt endings without any farewell are most frequent among male students (18% of the cases) than female ones (7%), in line with previous studies (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023), where male learners often mistake the pre-closing strategy of “appeal for action” for the farewell itself; or in the case of (31) the learner chooses to end his email with a direct criticism (and implied threat) to the addressee, even if these differences between both groups are not statistically significant (p value being 0.24):

(31) I hope you learn about that,

D.M. [30178M]

4. Conclusion

In response to the first research question and its corresponding hypothesis, this study shows that students are aware of the need to structure their email of complaint into four moves, although there are differences regarding the strategies and sub-strategies employed. This reveals that, while moves may be determined by the genre itself, strategies and sub-strategies may be more context-bound. For

example, strategies such as agreement, which were frequently found in other studies (Maíz-Arévalo and Méndez-García, 2023) are absent in the dataset at hand. Other strategies, however, such as rapport construction or apologies seem to be commonly present in EFL Spanish writings, independently of the context. This could be a result of transferring positive politeness strategies typically related to Spanish culture (Iglesias Recuero, 2007).

In response to the second research question, this study proves the second hypothesis, as it reveals important gender differences in the expression of Spanish EFL students' email of complaints. In the opening move, certain gender stereotypes are discerned, such as the notion that people in charge of organisations or companies are male, a stereotype perpetuated by male students themselves.

As to the statement of the predicament, the preferred formula is justification of the complaint in combination with expression of negative emotions such as disappointment. This study concurs with Orthaber & Márquez Reiter (2011) that issuing a complaint often entwines with venting the complainer's emotions. The difference lies in how frequently these negative emotions are displayed, which is much higher in the case of females. A further gender-related finding is females' reference to family vacation (an aspect that was not prompted in the guidelines to the task) versus male students' reference to travelling solo or with friends. Both aspects also contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes (Kotek et al., 2021). In the remediation move, regardless of gender, most students adopt a new strategy prototypical of service-related complaint emails: presenting evidence, such as attaching photos, to support their claim. This may be attributed to the inclusion of this data in the prompts provided to students. However, results also show significant gender differences. Indeed, male students tend to adopt a more direct approach in formulating the remediation move by demanding compensation, whereas females prefer requesting it, often accompanied by the strategy of offering suggestions. Besides, male students often accompany this move by including threats to the

service provider, a highly face-threatening act which underscores males' elevated level of directness and assertion.

A prominent discovery in the closing move is the prevalent tendency among male students to abruptly conclude their emails without any farewell. This aligns with Morales Ruiz (2023), who suggests that Peninsular Spanish speakers intentionally choose to omit a closing sequence to convey their annoyance and dissatisfaction.

Empirical research like the current one might help develop didactic materials to raise students' pragmatic awareness. For instance, the instruction of EFL complaint emails could involve an explicit examination of texts authored by individuals of varying genders. This would directly impact on raising the students' awareness towards gender stereotypes, hence promoting equality to comply with the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which focuses on gender equality.

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