

**Individual Paper Session 24**  
**Pragmatics**  
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**3:45-4:15pm**

**Learning to complain: Development of awareness of English pragmatic strategies  
among Japanese EFL students**

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Complaining about a perceived problem can be extremely face-threatening for both speaker and hearer. Studies of spoken discourse have shown that expressing negative judgments is socially dispreferred. Although saying nothing (opting out) or hinting subtly are safer (face-saving) strategies than explicitly calling attention to the problem (Brown & Levinson, 1987), both run the likely risk that the problem will remain unresolved. On the other hand, complaining too directly could be seen as criticism or otherwise offend the hearer (Murphy & Neu, 1996), leading to a similarly unsatisfactory outcome.

This study aims to (1) determine what English complaint strategies are perceived as most appropriate by Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at various proficiency levels, (2) compare their perceptions with previously collected data from native English speakers (NES), and (3) determine which strategies might prove to be most problematic for these learners.

In a previous study, English complaint formulations in two fairly serious situations that differed in terms of social distance were collected from American, Japanese and Singaporean respondents. At the next stage, prototypical and potentially problematic responses from the earlier study were used for the construction of English questionnaires, which were administered online to elicit judgments of appropriateness and effectiveness from NES. In the present study, selected items from the same questionnaire were used to collect responses from Japanese EFL students.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the responses indicates the relative importance to the two groups (NES and EFL) of three types of pragmatic strategies: choice of component (initiator, complaint, request, or their combinations); level of directness; and amount of mitigation (softening). The discussion suggests ways in which the findings might be used to raise learners' pragmatic awareness of complaint strategies and the consequences of their use in particular situations.