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Criticizing in an L2: Pragmatic strategies used by Vietnamese EFL learners

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Abstract

Criticizing has been a rather under-represented speech act in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) literature. Native speakers (NSs) find this speech act challenging, often needing to pre-plan how to perform it (Murphy & Neu 1996). Thus, it can be expected that second-language (L2) learners will also experience considerable difficulty. This paper reports a study of the pragmatic strategies used by Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) when criticizing in English with a view to shedding light on the pragmatic properties of this under-researched act. Interlanguage data were collected from 36 adult learners via a peer-feedback task, a written questionnaire, and a retrospective interview. First and second language baseline data were collected from two respective groups of 12 Vietnamese NSs and 12 NSs of Australian English, via the same peer-feedback task and questionnaire. Results showed that the English language learners criticized in significantly different ways from the Australian NSs in terms of their preference for realization strategies, their choice of semantic formulae, and their choice and frequency of use of mitigating devices. A number of interplaying factors might explain these differences: learners' limited L2 linguistic competence and lack of fluency, which seemed to load their processing capability under communicative pressure, their lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge, and the influence of L1 pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Previous ILP research generally supports the claim that L2 speech act knowledge is incomplete for many learners, including those with fairly advanced grammatical competence (Ellis 1994; Rose 2000; Kasper & Rose 2002). It also shows that pragmatic failure may have more serious consequences than grammatical errors because NSs tend to treat prag-

matic errors as offensive rather than as simply demonstrating lack of knowledge (Thomas 1983). In many cases, pragmatic failure may deprive learners of the opportunity to interact with NSs, thus adversely affecting their learning (Wolfson 1989; Boxer 1993).

These findings compel us to teach the rules of appropriate language use. In so doing, the use of research-based instructional materials is important as they inform non-native speakers (NNS) of realistic and representative speech act realizations and make the task of teaching L2 speech acts easier for NNS teachers (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor 2003). However, it seems that previous speech act realization research has not given equal attention to all speech acts. Earlier investigations are confined to a fairly 'well-defined' set, including requesting, complimenting, inviting, and thanking. Thus, little has been known about complex speech acts such as complaining and criticizing, even though they may pose more difficulty to intercultural communication and are at least equally worth teaching.

The study reported in this paper has been conducted in an attempt to meet the need to expand the scope of speech acts given consideration. It is part of a larger scale ILP study on a special type of criticisms and criticism responses, which is giving and responding to critical feedback in a learning environment (Nguyen 2005a). Giving critical feedback is an important communicative task in university contexts, and given that even NSs find it difficult, often needing to pre-plan their performance, it is expected that L2 learners will also experience considerable difficulty and need pedagogical help with it.

The present study focuses on a group of Vietnamese EFL learners who were going to Australia for university study. In Nguyen (2005b) I discussed the same group of learners but emphasized developmental issues in learner use of criticisms. This study, however, mainly compares learners and NSs in the way they use the given speech act with a view to shedding light on its pragmatic properties and proposing teaching implications. The main research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

- 1) How do Vietnamese EFL learners differ from the Australian NSs in performing the speech act of criticizing in English?
- 2) What factors may explain the learners' pragmatic choices?

To date, criticizing has been addressed in only a few linguistic and interpersonal communication studies (House & Kasper 1981; Tracy, van Dusen, & Robinson 1987; Tracy & Eisenberg 1990; Wajnryb 1993, 1995; Toplak & Katz 2000; and Nguyen 2005a, 2005b). Of these studies Nguyen (2005a, 2005b) has dealt with L2 learners and provided a typology of criticizing realization strategies.

Tracy *et al.* (1987) investigated the characteristics of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ criticisms as perceived by people from different cultural backgrounds via an open-ended questionnaire. They found five stylistic characteristics that distinguish ‘good’ from ‘bad’ criticisms. First, a ‘good’ criticism needs to display positive language and manner. Second, the changes suggested in it must be specific enough and the critic must offer to help make them possible. The reasons for criticizing must usually be justified and made explicit and the criticism compensated for by being placed in a larger positive message. A ‘good’ criticism also does not violate the relationship between interlocutors and is accurate.

These findings correspond well to Wajnryb (1993), who reports that an effective criticism, in his teachers-participants’ view, must be kept simple, specific, well-grounded in the lesson, linked to strategies for improvement, and delivered as an attempt to share experience. It also needs to be softened by means of a number of strategies. These include ‘measuring words’ (to avoid being too negative), ‘soft-pedaling’ (i.e., using internal and external modifications to lessen the harshness of the criticism), ‘using affirmative language’ such as comforting messages, ‘distancing and neutralizing’ (to depersonalize the criticism) and ‘using negotiating language’ (to avoid imposing on the addressee). To save students’ face, one teacher even emphasized that a criticism should be “oblique and approached via the third person” (1993: 60). Interestingly enough, this perception seems to clash with what the student in Wajnryb’s (1995) case study expected. She preferred to receive a direct and ‘economical’ criticism to rather than indirect, wordy, and ‘time-wasting’ one.

Toplak and Katz (2000) focused on the communicative effects of direct and indirect criticisms (i.e., sarcastic comments). They gave the participants a set of passages in which one of the interlocutors criticized the other in two ways, directly (“You are not really helping me out”) or sarcastically (“You are really helping me out!”). Then they required the participants to complete a questionnaire for each passage about what the participants thought the critic’s intent and the effect of the given criticism were from the perspectives of both the critic and the recipient. Similar to Wajnryb (1993, 1995), Toplak and Katz found a difference between the speaker and the addressee in their judgments of the criticisms given. The addressee tended to view sarcasm (as opposed to a direct criticism) as more severe than the speaker intended. However, they also found that sarcasm was not perceived by the recipient as having as negative an impact on the relationship between the interlocutors as direct criticisms.

Tracy and Eissenberg (1990) investigated the preferences for message clarity and politeness in giving criticisms in a workplace context among

people from different races and gender. They found that superiors tended to give more weight to message clarity than did subordinates. However, this preference also varied according to gender and race. For example, in either role, females were found to be more face-attentive than men and whites were more concerned about others' positive face (i.e., the desire to be approved or accepted by others; Brown & Levinson 1987) than nonwhites.

Overall, although the above studies have provided valuable insights into criticisms, many of them have not given an explicit definition of this speech act. The researchers tended to imply rather than explicitly define what constitutes a criticism. This makes it difficult to compare and contrast the findings of the various studies.

One study in which the researchers try to discuss what constitutes a criticism as opposed to related speech acts such as a complaint is Tracy *et al.* (1987). Tracy *et al.* define both complaining and criticizing as the act of 'finding fault' which involves giving "a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed responsible" (1987: 56). However, they make two main points to distinguish the speech acts. The first one is whether an utterance can be taken as a complaint or a criticism seems to depend on its "content and form and the salient role identity" (1987: 56) of the giver and the recipient: criticisms are usually associated with higher social status and complaints with lower social status, although there may also be exceptions. For example, a subordinate may act 'atypically' by criticizing his or her supervisor and signaling this linguistically.

There seem to be some reservations about this point. First, Tracy *et al.* are inconsistent in suggesting that a distinction can be made between criticisms and complaints based on content and linguistic form because, as they suggest earlier, both criticisms and complaints are concerned with the same content, i.e., 'finding fault'. Thus, it can be argued that they may also be realized by similar linguistic structures. Second, it does not seem convincing to define a speech act based on the relative social status of the speaker (S) and hearer (H) because social role identity does not seem to constitute an exclusive defining criterion. While it is the case that certain speech acts can only be performed by a particular person (e.g., those highly institutionalized speech acts tied to laws, religions, or highly official ceremonies), this may not be true for many everyday speech acts, including criticisms and complaints. Indeed, Tracy *et al.* acknowledge that criticisms may also be given by subordinates. More importantly, the attempt to assign a particular social status and specific linguistic form to a speech act and to draw on these criteria to interpret it seems to overlook the fact that speech acts are context sensitive and dependent. In fact,

contexts can sometimes be a more influential factor in determining the illocutionary point and force of a speech act, especially in the case of non-conventional indirectness (i.e., hints).

The second point that Tracy *et al.* make about the differences between a complaint and a criticism is the focus of the negative evaluation. They correctly argue that those utterances in which “the self-involvement is transparent” (1987: 56), i.e., if S perceives the act done by H as bringing negative or undesirable consequences to him or her, are more appropriately categorized as complaints.

Another definition of criticisms is found in House and Kasper (1981), who consider criticisms, accusations, and reproaches as different kinds of complaints. Their reasons for this are that all of these speech acts share the same two features, namely ‘post-event’ (i.e., the ‘complainable’ has already happened before the negative evaluation is expressed) and ‘anti-speaker’ (i.e., the event is at cost to the speaker). However, one might argue against this definition at least on the following grounds. First, a criticism does not necessarily have to be targeted at an event which happens earlier in the sense used by House and Kasper. It can also be made about something static, permanent, and independent of chronological time, such as a person’s personality or appearance (see Wierzbicka 1987). Second, the feature ‘anti-speaker’ seems more applicable to complaints than to criticisms as pointed out by Tracy *et al.* (1987). Both the illocutionary force (i.e., the communication effect) and the illocutionary point that a critic and a complainer intend are inherently different. In criticizing, S may intend H to try to improve to his or her own benefit, or S just may wish to express his or her opinion. In complaining, S implies that something bad has happened to himself or herself, or that H has done something bad to him or her and therefore expects a repair from the latter (Wierzbicka 1987). Thus, criticisms are usually, though not necessarily, associated with constructive attitudes or at least with non-self involvement, which is not the case with complaints.

In the present study, criticizing is defined as an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation of the hearer’s (H) actions, choice, words, and products for which he or she may be held responsible. This act is performed in the hope of influencing H’s future actions for H’s betterment as viewed by the speaker (S) or to communicate S’s dissatisfaction with or dislike regarding what H has done, but without the implicature that what H has done brings undesirable consequences to S (Nguyen 2005a, 2005b; adapted from Wierzbicka 1987). From S’s point of view, the following preconditions need to be satisfied in order for the speech act of criticizing to take place:

1. The precipitating act performed, or the choice made, by H is considered inappropriate according to a set of evaluative criteria that S holds, or a number of values and norms that S assumes to be shared between him/herself and H.
2. S holds that this inappropriate action or choice might bring unfavorable consequences to H or to the general public rather than to S him/herself.
3. S feels dissatisfied with H's inappropriate action or choice and feels an urge to let his/her opinion be known verbally.
4. S thinks that his/her criticism will potentially lead to a change in H's future action or behavior and believes that H would not change or offer a remedy for the situation without his/her criticism.

Precondition 2 makes criticisms inherently distinct from both complaints and blaming, while the other three preconditions may be shared by all three speech acts. In complaints, the inappropriate action done by the complainee is seen as being at cost to the complainer. On the other hand, blame is given mainly to assign the responsibility for a bad situation, which can lead to further bad effects for the blamer or both the blamer and the blamee or for somebody else, or to shift the responsibility away from the blamer.

It should be helpful to distinguish the type of criticisms given consideration in the present study from other types of the same speech act. Giving critical feedback in a learning environment might be expected to be constructive and supportive in nature. Thus, the type of criticisms under inquiry in the present study may involve a lower level of 'infraction' than the more 'biting' types of criticisms such as criticizing about one's appearance or behavior.

A criticism can be realized by either direct or indirect strategies. Following Blum-Kulka (1987), the directness level of a criticism in the present study was determined by the degree of illocutionary transparency, and thus the amount of effort needed to interpret the illocutionary point of this criticism. That is, it assumes that "the more indirect the mode of realization, the higher will be the interpretive demands" (Blum-Kulka 1987: 133).

Table 1 presents the taxonomy of criticisms used in the present study, illustrated with samples from the current data. The taxonomy was developed based on my previous study of L2 New Zealand English criticisms and modified to fit the fresh data of the current study. It should be noted that a criticism may be made up of a number of formulae (CF). For example, the following criticism consists of three formulae (two *statements of problem* [that the writer had two conclusions and there were structural

Table 1. *Taxonomy of criticism*

Type	Characteristics	Examples
1. <u>Direct criticism:</u>	Explicitly pointing out the problem with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc.	
a. Negative evaluation	Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with negative meaning or evaluative adjective with positive meaning plus negation.	" <i>I think ah it's <u>not a good way</u> to support to one's idea (L), "Umm that's <u>not really a good sentence</u>" (NS).</i>
b. Disapproval	Describing S's attitude towards H's choice, etc.	" <i>I <u>don't like</u> the way you write that (L).</i>
c. Expression of disagreement	Usually realized by means of negation word "No" or performatives "I don't agree" or "I disagree" (with or without modal) or via arguments against H.	" <i>I <u>don't quite agree</u> with you with some points (.) about the conclusion" (L), "<u>I don't really agree with you</u> <as strongly as> you put it here" (NS).</i>
d. Statement of the problem	Stating errors or problems found with H's choice, etc.	" <i>And <u>there are some incorrect words</u>, for example "nowadays" (L), "You <u>had a few spelling mistakes</u>" (NS).</i>
e. Statement of difficulty	Usually expressed by means of such structures as "I find it difficult to understand . . .", "It's difficult to understand . . ."	" <i>I <u>can't understand</u>" (L), "<u>I find it difficult to understand your idea</u>" (L).</i>
f. Consequences	Warning about negative consequences or negative effects of H's choice, etc. for H himself or herself or for the public.	" <i>Someone who don't— <u>doesn't agree with you</u> (.) <u>would straight away read that and turn off</u>" (NS).</i>
2. <u>Indirect criticism:</u>	Implying the problems with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc. by correcting H, indicating rules and standard, giving advice, suggesting or even requesting and demanding changes to H's work/ choice, and by means of different kinds of hints to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice.	

Table 1 (Continued)

Type	Characteristics	Examples
a. Correction	Including all utterances which have the purpose of fixing errors by asserting specific alternatives to H's choice, etc.	" <u>safer</u> " <u>not</u> " <u>safe</u> ", <u>comparison</u> " (L), " <u>And you put</u> " <u>their</u> " <u>I think t-h-e-r-e</u> " (NS).
b. Indicating standard	Usually stated as a collective obligation rather than an obligation for H personally or as a rule which S thinks is commonly agreed upon and applied to all.	" <u>Theoretically, a conclusion needs to be some sort of a summary</u> " (L).
c. Demand for change	Usually expressed via such structures as "you have to", "you must", "it is obligatory that" or "you are required" or "you need", "it is necessary".	" <u>You must pay attention to grammar</u> " (L), " <u>You have to talk about your opinion in your summary</u> " (L).
d. Request for change	Usually expressed via such structures as "will you ...?", "can you ...?", "would you ...?" or imperatives (with or without politeness markers), or want-statement.	" <u>I still want you to consider some points</u> " (L), " <u>What I would have liked to have seen is like a definite theme from the start like you're just TA:LKING about it</u> " (NS).
e. Advice about change	Usually expressed via the performative "I advise you ...", or structures with "should" with or without modality	" <u>You should change it a little bit.</u> " (L).
f. Suggestion for change	Usually expressed via the performative "I suggest that ..." or such structures as "you can", "you could", "it would be better if" or "why don't you" etc.	" <u>I think if you make a full stop in here the ah (.) this sentence is clear is clear</u> " (L), " <u>It could have been better to put a comma (.) so ah ((laugh))</u> " (NS).
g. Expression of uncertainty	Utterances expressing S's uncertainty to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	" <u>Are there several paragraphs ah not sure about the paragraphs</u> " (NS).
h. Asking/presupposing	Rhetorical questions to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	" <u>Did you read your writing again after you finish it?</u> " (L).
i. Other hints	Including other kinds of hints that did not belong to (h) and (i). May include sarcasm.	" <u>I prefer a writing style which are not too personal</u> " (L).

problems] and a *suggestion* [that it might be better if the writer ordered the two conclusions in a certain way]): “umm I’ve just got through this ah and then *it’s once again in the end of the structure I thought you had two conclusions as well* (.) so (.2) but they’re both good (.) *so I thought maybe if that one came after that one* cause that was more of a conclusion than that one *perhaps that would be better so they were more like the structural problem*” (NS).

A criticism can also be mitigated by different types of modifiers. Table 2 presents a taxonomy of mitigating devices adapted from House and Kasper (1981). These modifiers were categorized according to their relative locations within the criticisms. A CF may contain more than one modifier. In the above cited example, the *suggestion* “*so I thought maybe if that one came after that one* cause that was more of a conclusion than that one *perhaps that would be better*” contained a total of 6 modifiers: one *grounder* (“cause that was more of a conclusion than that one”), two past tense structures with present time reference (“I thought” and “if that one came . . . would be better”), two *downtoners* (“perhaps” and “maybe”), and one *subjectivizer* (“I think” in past tense).

2. Methodology

This study recruited a group of Vietnamese learners of Australian English as a Foreign Language, who provided IL data, one group of Vietnamese native speakers, who provided L1 baseline data, and one group of Australian English native speakers, who provided L2 baseline data.

Learner participants, all randomly selected¹, comprised 36 adult learners, who were attending an English program run by a collaborative team of Vietnamese and Australian teachers in Hanoi, Viet Nam at the time of data collection. This program was intended for those learners who were preparing to go to Australia for university study. It therefore specialized in general English skills, academic English skills, and some on-arrival and cross-cultural skills. All the learning and teaching materials were designed by the teachers based on available Australian-made English textbooks and reference handbooks. Given this learning context and the learners’ future study plans in Australia, it was assumed that they were exposed mainly to Australian English.

Among the learners, twenty-four were females and twelve were males. Also, twenty-four of them were prospective postgraduates and twelve were prospective undergraduates for their study programs in Australia, with various majors. They all originated from different parts of Vietnam and spoke different dialects of Vietnamese. Their mean age was 24.1.

Table 2. *Taxonomy of mitigating devices*

Type	Characteristics	Examples
1. <u>External</u> :	The supportive moves before or after the head acts.	
a. Steers	Utterances that S used to lead H onto the issue he or she was going to raise.	“ <i>I read your essay and <u>here are some my own ideas of this</u>” (L), “<i>Ah <u>I have some comments about your writing</u>” (L).</i>”</i>
b. Sweeteners	Compliments or positive remarks paid to H either before or after a criticism to compensate for the offensive act.	“ <i>There are quite <u>good relevant ideas</u> that you presented (.) ah but . . .” (NS).</i> ”
c. Disarmers	Utterances that S used to show his or her awareness of the potential offense that his or her speech might cause H.	“ <i>You had a few spelling mistakes (.) but I think <u>that’s because you’re writing too quickly, (.) nothing too major.</u>” (NS).</i> ”
d. Grounders	The reasons given by S to justify his or her intent.	“ <i>I think “is” is better than “are” there <u>because traffic (.2) ah single?</u>” (NS).</i> ”
2. <u>Internal</u> :	Part of the criticism and criticism response.	
a. <u>Syntactic</u> :	Syntactic devices to tone down the effects of the offensive act	
– Past tense	With present time reference.	<i>I <u>thought</u> you missed out something.</i>
– Interrogative		<i><u>Should we</u> change a little for its clearness?</i>
– Modal	All structures showing possibility.	<i>May, could, would</i>
b. <u>Lexical/ phrasal</u> :		
– Hedges	Adverbials	<i>Sort of, kind of</i>
– Understaters	Adverbial modifiers	<i>Quite, a (little) bit</i>
– Downtoners	Sentence modifiers	<i>Maybe, possible, probably</i>
– Subjectivisers		<i>I think, I feel, in my opinion</i>
– Consultative	Usually ritualized	<i>Do you think? Do you agree?</i>
– Cajolers		<i>I mean, you see, you know</i>
– Appealers		<i>Okay? Right? Yeah?</i>

The L1 and L2 groups comprised 12 Vietnamese and 12 Australians who were respectively attending university in Vietnam and Australia at the time of data collection. The L1 group included seven females and five males, with the mean age being 23.9. Four of them were post-graduates and eight were undergraduates from various disciplines. Like the English language learners, they also came from various parts of Vietnam and spoke different Vietnamese dialects. The L2 group included

Table 3. *Background information on the participants*

Groups		Vietnamese NSs (<i>N</i> = 12)	Learners (<i>N</i> = 36)	Australian NSs (<i>N</i> = 12)
Total No of participants		12	36	12
Gender	<i>M</i>	5	12	3
	<i>F</i>	7	24	9
Courses of study	<i>Undergrad</i>	8	12	7
	<i>Postgrad</i>	4	24	5
	<i>Major</i>	Various	Various	Various
Mean Age		23.9	24.1	22.8
Location in home country		Various	Various	QLD

nine females and three males, with the mean age being 22.8, originating mainly from Queensland, Australia. Five of them were postgraduates and seven were undergraduates from various disciplines. Like the English language learners, all of them were randomly selected². Table 3 summarizes background information on the three groups of participants.

Criticisms were elicited via a peer-feedback task and a written questionnaire. Learners’ pragmatic decision-making, on the other hand, was probed via a retrospective interview. All three instruments were validated in a pilot study³ before being employed in the present study. Data collection took place after class because the pilot study showed that conducting research during lessons did not produce good quality audio-recording. Before the data collection session started, participants in each group were randomly arranged in dyads. Then each dyad was invited to the data collection meeting individually. Data collection started with the peer-feedback task, continued with the written questionnaire, and ended with the retrospective interview.

For the peer-feedback task, the participants were first required to write a 250-word argumentative essay on the benefits of public as opposed to private transportation. Then in their dyads they were required to give feedback on each other’s essays. The feedback was based on three main assessment criteria: the organizational structure of the essay, the quality of argumentation, and grammar and vocabulary. Their conversations were audio-taped for later analysis.

It should be noted that giving peer feedback was a common learning task in the programs where the participants were undertaking their studies. Therefore, it was expected that they were all familiar with this type of task, making the data more natural. Also, this task allowed for researcher control of relevant social and contextual variables, such as the relative social power (equal) and distance (neutral) between the

participants (peer-to-peer), and the topic of criticism (an English essay), thus making the data more comparable.

The researcher's presence did not seem to affect the participants' performance. They had become quite familiar with her due to her visits to their classes to invite their participation and because of their individual contact when negotiating meeting details. Additionally, commenting on their peers' essays and having their own essays commented on by their peers in front of a third party was a familiar classroom task. Therefore, they appeared to concentrate on the task rather than on the presence of the researcher, and to perform the task very naturally.

After the peer-feedback conversations, the participants were required to complete a written questionnaire consisting of four criticizing situations. These situations were constructed based on the peer-feedback data taken from the pilot study. The purpose was to make the situations as comparable to the peer-feedback task as possible. The questionnaire was used to provide additional criticism data for the purpose of triangulation. Finally, the learners were interviewed about their pragmatic choices in the peer-feedback task. During the interview, the peer-feedback conversations were played back to refresh the learners' memories. The interview was conducted in the learners' mother tongue (Vietnamese).

3. Results

The following results section will be based mainly on the peer-feedback data. The questionnaire and interview data will be used only to explain and supplement the peer-feedback data. First, at test run for the English language learners' and the Australian NS group's use of criticizing strategies revealed a significant difference between them in the use of both direct and indirect criticisms ($p < .0035$, the significance level after Bonferroni correction). Table 4 indicates that, generally, the learners produced fewer direct criticisms but more indirect criticisms than the target group.

Table 4. *Results of Independent Samples T tests with Bonferroni correction for differences in the mean number of direct and indirect criticisms between learners and Australian NSs*

Group: Criticism strategies:	<i>Learners</i> (N = 36)				<i>Australian LI</i> (N = 12)				<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%		
Direct criticism	328/597	.55	.17	55	83/120	.77	.21	69	3.435	.001
Indirect Criticism	269/597	.44	.17	45	37/120	.22	.21	31	3.538	.001

Indeed, on average, the learners produced a mean of .55 for direct criticisms, compared to .77 for the Australian NS group ($t = 3.435$, $df = 46$ at $p = .001$) and a mean of .44 for indirect criticisms, compared to .22 for the Australian NS group ($t = 3.538$, $df = 46$, at $p = .001$).

When the English language learners and the Australian NSs were compared in their use of five major CFs (which occurred in at least 9% of the total number of CFs for one group), significant differences were found only in the frequency of their use of *statement of problem* (under the category of *direct criticisms*) and *demands* (under the category of *indirect criticisms*) ($p < .0035$). No difference was found for *expression of disagreement* (under the category of *direct criticisms*), *advice*, and *suggestion* (under the category of *indirect criticisms*), although the difference for *advice* was quite substantial ($M = .09$, $SD = .11$ for the learners as opposed to $M = .01$, $SD = .03$ for the Australian NSs, $Z = 5.712$, $p = .017$).

As shown in Table 5, the learners produced a considerably smaller number of *statements of problem* ($M = .32$, $SD = .18$) than the Australian NSs ($M = .57$, $SD = .27$) ($Z = 2.930$, $p = .003$). They also made use of a great number of *demands* ($M = .07$, $SD = .10$), which the latter totally avoided ($M = .00$, $SD = .00$) ($Z = 2.958$, $p = .003$).

When compared within the groups, the learners seemed to vary slightly among themselves. In the case of *statement of problem*, for example, almost half of them (42%) were above the mean, while more than half (56%) were below it. Meanwhile, the Australian NSs seemed to be skewed toward above the mean rather than evenly distributed around it (67% were above the mean and 25% were below it). In the case of *demand*, the Australian group was still constant in their non-use ($M = .00$, $SD = .00$) whereas the English language learners continued to be scattered around the mean. 39% (14 cases) of them scored well above the mean, while 25% (nine cases) fell below it and 36% displayed a mean of .00 (Table 6).

Table 5. Results of Mann Whitney U tests with Bonferroni correction for differences in the mean number of selected CFs between learners and Australian NSs

Group: CFs:	Learners (N = 36)			Australian L1 (N = 12)			Z	p
	F	M	SD	F	M	SD		
Statement of the problem	218/597	.32	.18	62/120	.57	.27	2.930	.003
Demand	56/597	.07	.10	0/120	.00	.00	2.958	.003
Expression of disagreement	61/597	.06	.09	13/120	.12	.30	.998	.318
Advice	54/597	.09	.11	2/120	.01	.03	5.712	.017
Suggestion	64/597	.10	.11	25/120	.15	.17	.627	.531

Table 6. Distribution of “identification of problem” and “demand” by learners and Australian NSs

Descriptive CFs		Range of Mean		Distribution around Mean		
		Highest	Lowest	Above Mean N	Below Mean N	Mean = .00 N
Statement of the problem	NS (<i>N</i> = 12)	1.0	.00	8	3	1
	NNS (<i>N</i> = 36)	.88	.00	15	20	1
Demand	NS (<i>N</i> = 12)	.00	.00	0	0	12
	NNS (<i>N</i> = 36)	.33	.00	17	2	17

In those instances where the English language learners used the same CFs as the Australian NSs, they produced strikingly different wording. A number of illustrative examples were found in the learners’ and the Australians’ use of *statements of problem*. It was observed that when addressing the problems in their interlocutors’ essays, the Australian NSs would rather describe problems than announce them. However, the learners chose to do the opposite. For instance, when pointing out a spelling mistake to the interlocutor, a learner explicitly mentioned that this was a mistake: “*and ah (.) ah there are some incorrect ah (.) incorrect words, for example ‘nowadays’*”. In contrast, an Australian explained where the problem was: “*You put ‘their’ but I think ‘t-h-e-r-e’*” but did not announce the existence of the problem.

In cases where participants were unsatisfied with their interlocutors’ essay organization, the Australian participants frequently provided a description of the problem: “*I’ve just got through this ah and then it’s once again in the end of the structure I thought you had two conclusions as well (.) so (.2) but they’re both good.*” In contrast, the learners tended to use a statement of the error without describing it: “*I think your essay ah many ideas ah accurate (.) accuracy ah hmm (.) accurate but I think the organize the way you organize this essay is ah (.) is some ah (.) is incorrect ah in some part.*”

Another example of the differences in actual wording that the learners and the Australian NSs produced occurs in their *expressions of disagreement*. While an Australian *disagreement* was mitigated as much as this: “*I wouldn’t necessarily agree with you on the point that ...*” or “*I wouldn’t agree as strongly as you put it here,*” a learner’s disagreement was most of the time realized by bare performatives, for instance “*I don’t agree/disagree with you.*”

Similarly, when it came to linguistic realization of the CF *suggestion*, the learners did not use a lot of modality compared to the Australian

participants, which made their *suggestions* a lot simpler in structure. For example, while the Australian NSs employed a wide variety of suggestion realization structures with modal verbs that express possibility, ranging from the lowest level of modality such as *can* (12%) and *could* (16%) to higher level of modality such as *could have done* (16%) and *would have done* (4%), the learners drew solely on structure *can* (31%) and made no use of the others. Likewise, when it came to structures with infinitive verbs (e.g., *It's better + Verb infinitive*) and conditional structures (e.g., *If + Clause, Main Clause*), the Australian NSs used these structures only in combination with modal verbs. By contrast, a majority of the learners did not and only a small percentage of their suggestions contained modality (under 5%). C.f.: Infinitive structure: "*It's better to have noun and then Verb-ing like adjective*" (learner) and "*It could have been better to put a comma (.) so ah ((laugh))*" (Australian NS). Conditional clause: "*I think if you make a full stop in here the ah (.) this sentence is clear*" (learners) and "*I think if they were together they would make more sense ((laugh))*" (Australian NS). Interestingly, 3% of the learners' suggestions were realized by the question "*Why don't you,*" which the Australian NSs did not use at all (Table 7).

Advice was another CF that was verbalized differently by the learners and the Australian NSs. While the Australian *advice* (two out of two instances) was mitigated by the structure *should have done* (with past tense expressing modality), none of the instances of this CF in the learners' data showed the same realization. On the contrary, 85% (46 out of 54

Table 7. "*Suggestions*" used by learners and Australian NSs (by percentage)

Group: Realization structures:	Learners (N = 36)		Australian L1 (N = 12)	
	F	%	F	%
Can (e.g. <i>You can + V</i>)	20/64	31	3/25	12
Could (e.g. <i>You could + V</i>)	0/64	0	4/25	16
Could have (e.g. <i>You could have + V pp</i>)	0/64	0	4/25	16
Would have (e.g. <i>I would have + V pp</i>)	0/64	0	1/25	4
I suggest (e.g. <i>I suggest that you + V</i>)	1/64	2	0/25	0
Infinitive (e.g. <i>It's better + V inf</i>)	5/64	8	0/25	0
Infinitive + modal (e.g. <i>It can/could/would be better + V inf</i>)	3/64	5	4/25	16
Conditional (e.g. <i>If-clause</i>)	17/64	27	0/25	0
Conditional + modal (e.g. <i>If-clause with modal verb</i>)	3/64	5	3/25	12
Why don't you	2/64	3	0/25	0

instances) of the learners' advice was expressed by grammatically simpler and pragmatically less mitigated structure *should*.

Furthermore, learners' *requests* were expressed by either bare imperatives (e.g., "yes put 'firstly', 'secondly', 'finally' if you have three arguments or two arguments") or *want-statement* without modality (e.g., "but I still want you to consider some points that I think it's not suitable for an academic essay"). A similar Australian *want-statement* request, in comparison, was substantially mitigated with double past tense markings: "What I would have liked to have seen is like a definite theme from the start like you're just TA:LKing about it".

Looking at criticism modifiers, the English language learners tended to mitigate their criticisms significantly less frequently than the Australian NSs. This was the case when the two groups were compared on the measures of the total number of modifiers ($Z = 4.777$, $p = .001$) as well as the number of external ($Z = 3.955$, $p = .001$) and internal modifiers ($Z = 4.265$, $p = .001$). Table 8 demonstrates that on average, learners made use of 1.6 modifiers per CF (including .83 external modifier and .81 internal modifier per CF) whereas Australians produced two and a half times as many, 3.9 modifiers per CF (including 1.8 external modifiers and 2.0 internal modifiers per CF).

Table 9 indicates that as a group, the learners tended to vary more than the Australian NSs in the frequency with which they mitigated their criticisms. The range between the highest and the lowest means of modifiers on the total found for this group was just above ten times (5.3 and .46) whereas that the range for the Australian NS group was only roughly three times (6.0 and 2.6). Looking at external modifiers, the range between the two means was more than 50 times for the learners (3.6 and .07) whereas that for the Australian NS group was less than four times (3.4 and .90). Likewise, in the case of internal modifiers, the range between the two means was almost ten times for the learners (1.8 and .25) but only four times for the NS group (3.2 and .80).

Table 8. Results of Mann Whitney *U* tests with Bonferroni correction in differences in the mean number of criticism modifiers between learners and Australian NSs

Group:	Learners ($N = 36$)			Australian L1 ($N = 12$)			<i>Z</i>	<i>P</i>
	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Criticism modifiers								
External modifiers	382/597	.83	.79	213/120	1.8	.75	3.955	.001
Internal modifiers	476/597	.81	.40	234/120	2.0	.80	4.265	.001
Total number of modifiers	858/597	1.6	.94	447/120	3.9	1.1	4.777	.001

Table 9. *Distribution of criticism modifiers around the mean by learners and Australian NSs*

Descriptive Modifiers		Range of Mean		Distribution around Mean	
		Highest	Lowest	Above Mean N	Below Mean N
External modifiers	NS (<i>N</i> = 12)	3.4	.90	6	6
	NNS (<i>N</i> = 36)	3.6	.07	12	24
Internal modifiers	NS (<i>N</i> = 12)	3.2	.80	7	5
	NNS (<i>N</i> = 36)	1.8	.25	14	22
Total number of modifiers	NS (<i>N</i> = 12)	6.0	2.6	6	6
	NNS (<i>N</i> = 36)	5.3	.46	15	21

Table 10. *Results of Chi-square tests for the distribution of criticism external modifiers by learners and Australian NSs*

Group:	Learners (<i>N</i> = 36)		Australian L1 (<i>N</i> = 12)		Chi-square	<i>P</i>
	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%		
Steers	36/382	9	8/213	4	35.640	.001
Sweeteners	191/382	51	150/213	70		
Disarmers	74/382	19	42/213	20		
Grounders	81/382	21	13/213	6		

The English language learners did not differ much from the Australian NSs, however, in their order of preference for a particular type of external modifier. Indeed, they displayed the same distinct preference for *sweeteners* (51%) over all the remaining types as the Australian L1 speakers (70%). Their next choices included *disarmers* (19%) and *grounders* (21%), finally followed by *steers* (9%). This was relatively similar to the Australian ranking of choices (Table 10).

The learners differed from the Australian NSs only in that they seemed to provide a more even distribution of the various types of external modifiers. On the other hand, the Australian NSs tended to rely heavily on *sweeteners* (70%) and more or less ignored the rest, especially *steers* (4%) and *grounders* (6%). A Chi square test for relatedness or independence was run to determine whether this distribution was statistically significantly different. The result revealed that it was ($\chi^2 = 35.640$, *df* = 3, *p* = .001).

Table 11. Results of Mann Whitney U tests (with Bonferroni correction) for the distribution of criticism internal modifiers by learners and Australian NSs

Group: Internal modifiers	Learners (N = 36)			Australian LI (N = 12)			Z	P
	F	M	SD	F	M	SD		
Syntactic mod.	15/476	.03	.10	68/234	.52	.23	5.505	.001
Hedges	27/476	.04	.09	27/234	.25	.30	2.859	.004
Understaters	126/476	.23	.18	57/234	.54	.31	3.408	.001

Table 11 illustrates the distribution of criticism internal modifiers by the whole *learner group* and the *Australian NS group*. Of the compared modifiers, *syntactic modifiers*, *hedges*, and *understaters* were distributed differently between the English language learners and the Australian NSs ($p \leq .05$). There was no difference between the two groups in their distributions of *downtoners*, *appealers*, *cajolers*, and *subjectivizers*.

While the Australian NSs employed *syntactic modifiers* fairly frequently, the learners rarely drew on this modifier type. Indeed, *syntactic modifiers* constituted the largest percentage of the Australian criticisms (29%), but contributed only a modest quantity of 3% to the learners' total use of criticism internal modifiers. Out of 36 learners, only seven employed this modifier type, whereas it was employed by every Australian NS in the group. Compared with *syntactic modifiers*, *understaters* were employed more frequently by the learners (27% of the time). However, when compared with the Australian NS group, the learners still employed this type of modifiers far less frequently. *Hedges* were also much more favored by the Australian NSs than the learners (12%, $M = .25$ for the former as opposed to 6%, $M = .04$ for the latter).

A qualitative examination of the wording of various types of external modifiers produced by the two groups suggests that learners' *sweeteners* might not sound as *complimentary* as those given by the Australian NSs, probably because the language that they used was quite neutral and lukewarm. Let us take two examples of the *sweeteners* given by a learner and an Australian NS:

Australian NS:

"I thought it was VERY CLEAR (.) and I really liked the way (.) you know it all flowed and each paragraph had a separate point yeah VERY easy to read what you are going to (.) you know what to—to determine what you were trying to say"

Learner:

“OK I read your essay and here are some my own ideas of this. Firstly about the organization it's so clear you have ah introduction, body, and conclusion, and in the body you have three paragraphs with three reasons to support your ah support your ah (.) topic”.

In another case, a learner tried to use ‘complimentary’ words such as ‘good’ and ‘carefully’ when giving her friend a *sweetener*. Yet, her phrase ‘I’m glad to say’ made her sound superior although this might not necessarily be what she intended: *“I have read your essay and I’m glad to say it’s a G:OOD essay. You have written it very carefully and ah YO:U have made all the requirements”.*

Similarly, when closing the conversation, an Australian interactant tried to compensate for her criticism by reaffirming the good points of her friend’s essay as follows: *“But generally it was really good, really it’s taught me a lot/ looking at the rigor of writing/ yeah it’s very nice.”* However, the English language learner did it only by reaffirming her friend’s efforts: *“So ah but in general you have tried your best/ <I see your effort ah you devote in to this ah essay>”.*

When it came to *disarmers*, the English language learners also tended to defuse their interlocutors in a different way from the Australian group. For example, while 75% of the Australian *disarmers* (31 out of 42 instances) consisted of problem minimizing statements such as *“it’s nothing too major”* or *“it’s certainly not easy to do off the top of your head”*, 68% of the learners’ *disarmers* (52 out of 76 cases) were constituted by token agreements such as *“I understand your point of view but ...”* or *“I see what you mean but ...”*. In 4% of the instances, the learners even forewarned and apologized before giving a criticism (e.g., *“hmm well, since ah ((laugh)) to err is human ((laugh)) so I’m very I mean very afraid of ah say (.) recognizing or correcting the mistakes with grammatic ah grammatical mistakes and vocabulary mistakes”*, *“I’m sorry but ...”*) and in 5% of the cases they drew on a self-effacing strategy such as *“I’m ah no good at this problem but ...”* which the Australian NSs did not do at all.

An analysis of the range of internal modifier realization structures used by the learners and the Australian NSs revealed a much more restricted usage on the part of the learners. For example, the learners tended to employ only a few structures such as *modal* ‘may’, *hedges* ‘something like that’, ‘that sort of thing’, *understaters* ‘some’, ‘few’, *downtoners* ‘maybe’, and rarely made use of or even excluded some other structures from their use (e.g., *modal* ‘would’, *could*, *hedges* ‘sort of’, ‘kind of’, *downtoners*

Table 12. *Range of internal modifier realization structures used by learners and Australian NSs*

Group: Range:	<i>Learners</i> (N = 36)		<i>Australian LI</i> (N = 12)	
	<i>F</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%
<i>1. Syntactic modifiers:</i>				
<u>Modal:</u>				
May	11/476	2	4/234	2
Might	3/476	0.7	6/234	3
Would	0/476	0	12/234	5
Could	0/476	0	12/234	5
<u>Past tense</u>	1/476	0.2	34/234	15
<i>2. Hedges</i>				
Sort of (kind of)	2/476	0.4	21/234	9
Something (like that), that sort of thing	25/476	5	6/234	3
<i>3. Understaters</i>				
A little (bit)	8/476	2	13/234	6
Some, few	77/476	15	7/234	3
Not very (really), not many (enough), almost, slightly	17/476	4	17/234	7
Just/only	14/476	3	16/234	7
Quite/rather	10/476	2	4/234	2
<i>4. Downtoners</i>				
Maybe	36/476	7	12/234	5
Perhaps, probably, possibly	2/476	0.4	6/234	3

‘perhaps’, ‘probably’ and so on). The Australian NSs, in comparison, made a wider and more regular use of various internal modification realization structures (Table 12).

4. Discussion

This study tends to support the claim made in the current ILP research that L2 pragmatic knowledge is incomplete for many learners, not excluding advanced ones (see Ellis 1994 for a review). Indeed, the English language learners in this study seemed to exhibit very different sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic choices from the NS group in realizing criticisms. A number of interplaying factors may explain these differences. They include learners’ limited L2 linguistic competence and lack of fluency in the L2, which seemed to load their processing capability under

communicative pressure, their incomplete L2 pragmatic knowledge, and especially their reliance on a synergism of both L1 and L2 pragmatic competence in performing the given speech act (Kecskes & Papp 2000; Cook 2001).

In terms of criticism realization the learners tended to be less direct than the Australian NSs. This was evident from their use of a smaller number of direct criticisms such as *statements of problem*. However, this lower level of directness did not necessarily mean that their criticisms were softer, according to the target norms. On the contrary, the learners tended to resort to quite 'offensive' indirect criticisms such as through a *demand* (e.g., "you must pay attention to grammar", "you must give more fact more evidence"), the use of which, according to Murphy and Neu (1996), may create an impression that they dictated the behavior of the hearer when they actually did not intend to do so. They also appeared to make fewer attempts to reduce the potential disruptive effects of their criticisms by employing noticeably fewer modifiers than the Australian L1 group. As Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out, face needs to be continually attended to in the process of communication, and face-threatening speech acts, therefore, need to be softened so that politeness can be achieved. The learners' under-use of modifiers seemed to fail them in this regard.

Notably, the learners also tended to vary more in their choice of criticism strategies and formulae compared to the Australian NSs. It seems that they were uncertain of the appropriate norms of criticizing in the target language. Thus, there did not appear to be a common rule of choice within the group. For example, when criticizing, while 100% of the NSs consistently avoided giving *demands for change*, only 47% of the learners did so. This variety among the learners became even more obvious when the learners were interviewed about their choice of *demand*. Of 19 learners who employed this CF, 12 respondents thought it was an appropriate choice in the case where one wishes to emphasize his or her criticism or mention rules and obligations. Only seven respondents thought it was too strong a criticism. Obviously, they were very different in their L2 perception of *demand*, thus suggesting a lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge. These findings were very much in line with Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), who also found a larger variability in learners' behavior as compared with NSs.

The English language learners also tended to deviate strikingly from the NSs in the way they linguistically realized and mitigated their criticisms. This was the case even when they employed the same criticism formulae as the Australian NSs, a finding that would support what Cohen (1996) claimed. For instance, when the learners opted for *statements*

of problem to criticize their peers, they were more likely to announce the problem rather than just describe it (e.g., “*You use some wrong words in spelling, yeah?*”, “*You put the advantages and disadvantages in the wrong way*”, “*Yeah wrong word use*”, “*Ah you have incorrect using phrase*”, etc). This could have made their criticisms sound quite untactful to the interlocutor. Also, their *suggestions* were at times more imposing (“*Why don’t you ah break up the paragraph from “however” here?*”) and *expressions of disagreement* more assertive: (“*I don’t agree with you about this word*”).

Likewise, they also did not seem to use the same modifiers as their NS counterparts, for example, *past tense with present time reference*, and made use of those that the NSs did not often use such as *appealers*. Interestingly, even when they used the same modifiers, the linguistic features were also so noticeably different as to possibly produce a different effect. An illustrating example would be the case of *sweeteners*, which seemed to replicate Takahashi and Beebe’s (1993: 141) finding that the ‘positive remarks’ that Japanese ESL learners gave to preface a criticism “were so lukewarm that a native speaker would hardly call them positive or feel comfortable with them”. They also tended to rely on lexical forms (*understaters*, *subjectivizers*, *downtoners*, and so on) rather than syntactic structures (modal verbs and past tense) in realization of these modifiers.

Generally, there may be a number of intertwining factors that contribute to the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic decisions that the learners make in performing criticisms in the target language. First, it could be their limited L2 linguistic competence, as seen in their restricted range of linguistic devices for realizing modifiers. Second, it could be their lack of the necessary L2 pragmalinguistic knowledge to be able to perform more sophisticated and tactful criticisms as shown in their simplified *sweeteners* that NSs tend to consider ‘lukewarm’ and ‘insincere’. In another example, when commenting on the use of such bald *expressions of disagreement* as ‘I don’t agree’ or ‘I disagree’, many learners reported generalizing this use due to a lack of the knowledge of how to perform disagreements: “*From the beginning I learned the verbs ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’, so when I want to express my agreement and disagreement I just say ‘I agree’ or ‘I disagree’.*” Furthermore, learners might have also drawn on their L1 sociopragmatic knowledge when choosing certain strategies and semantic formulas to realize criticisms. For example, the interview data tended to confirm that the learners’ substantial use of *advice* was perhaps informed by their L1 socio-cultural perception of this CF. In this post-hoc interview, a majority of the learners (69%) reported considering *giving advice* as a polite indirect way of giving criticism because

“Vietnamese people usually advise one another, seniors advise juniors, people of the same age advise one another. This is a good way which is accepted by the society. It is soft.”

Learners were unaware that *giving advice* was not always desirable according to NS norms.

Another factor of no less importance was what Kasper (1982) referred to as the practice of modality reduction due to a lack of control over language production under communicative pressure. Indeed, the abundant number of demands made by the learners would be a good example of this practice. In the post hoc interview, while many learners revealed a sociopragmatic misconception of *demand*, a majority of them also mentioned that they were unable to make other choices due to the competing demands on information processing under the pressure of spontaneous language production. When they could exert control over their speech, for instance, as in the written questionnaire, they obviously decreased the use of this ‘offensive’ CF. Interestingly, however, the learners’ under-use of criticism modifiers might not have been entirely attributed to this factor. Although when asked, a number of learners reported deliberately reducing modality to give priority to message clarity when prompt speech was needed, they did not use a greater number of modifiers in the written questionnaire, the pressure-free condition of which might have enabled them to attend to ‘politeness’ in addition to conveying intended messages. This finding seems to suggest that besides processing difficulty, another explanation for the learners’ little use of L2 modifiers can be their lack of full awareness of the power of modifiers in softening a face-threatening speech act since modifiers carry only minimal propositional meaning. Thus, they tended to rely more on semantic formulae, which carry more explicit propositional meaning, for the same purpose and under-used modifiers.

Overall, like many other ILP studies (see Ellis 1994; Rose 2000 for a review), the present study also found a number of idiosyncratic pragmatic features which adversely affected how the learners expressed their intentions via speech act realizations. Although a few similarities were found between the learners and the target group, (e.g., their frequency of use of some CFs such as *expression of disagreement, advice, suggestion*), these similarities were outnumbered by the idiosyncrasies. This should not come as a surprise, though, as the complexity of a speech act like criticism often creates considerable difficulty for speakers including NSs. As Murphy and Neu (1996) put it, even NSs need to preplan how to perform challenging speech acts. Thus, it is to be expected that the learners may at times find it hard to express themselves appropriately.

Nonetheless, it would be unreasonable to equate every pragmatic feature in the learners' criticisms that is different from the NS use with a pragmatic failure. In fact, the learners' *disarmers* may have been as effective as any *disarmers* used by the Australian NSs although they did not necessarily sound the same (and learners may not attempt at doing so). Likewise, their lack of a variety of linguistic structures for realizing some internal modifiers such as *understaters*, *downtoners*, their avoidance of the NS use of past tense structures to express modality, their non-use of modal structures, and over-reliance on lexicalized modifiers may reflect their incomplete L2 knowledge rather than a failure to be polite.

In light of the above discussion, this study raises implications for pragmatics teaching. On the one hand, it is quite well-documented in ILP literature that unlike grammatical errors, pragmatic errors often pass unchecked by the teacher or worse, are attributed to some other cause such as rudeness. In many cases, pragmatic failure may even deprive learners of the opportunity to interact with native speakers, which adversely affects their L2 learning (Wolfson 1989; Boxer 1993). The findings of this study prompt us to assume that we should teach the rules of appropriate language use, since in most instances learners produced non-native like speech acts as a consequence of their blending L1 and L2 pragmatic requirements in the absence of complete L2 pragmatic knowledge.

However, there is also a question about the optimal degree of instructional intervention. In other words, how much intervention is too much? Should teachers 'fix' every pragmatic error that is different from the target norms? It is generally agreed among theorists and teachers that learners have their own preferences when it comes to the choice of identity and that they do not always desire total convergence with the target culture. Rather, they may only attempt at becoming competent language learners (Ellis 1994) and at times may even deliberately fall back on their L1 rules of speaking to mark their cultural identity (Kasper & Rose 2002; Lo Castro 2003). Thus, pragmatics teaching should not be about adopting a NS model or insisting "on conformity to a particular language norm" (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor 2003: 2). Instead, instruction, besides offering authentic input to enable learners to make an informed choice, should also allow learners to overlook pragmatic conventions, or express "their unique status as people who can function in two cultures" (Cook 2001: 196) as long as this does not interfere with successful communication. This is to acknowledge their individuality and respect their system of values and beliefs (Thomas 1983). After all, successful communication sometimes means optimal rather than total convergence (Giles *et al.* 1991).

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Notes

¹ and ²: All the participants were volunteers and randomly selected. However, before they were included in the selection round, they were required to satisfy a number of screening criteria (i.e., stratified random selection). First, they needed to fall within the same age group. Second, in the case of the English language learner participants, it was necessary for them not to be studying a foreign language other than English. These screening criteria helped to ensure that extraneous variables would not interfere with or cloud the effects of the variables under investigation. This screening also helped to make the participants more comparable in terms of the controlled variables. The participants were not the researcher's students.

³ The pilot study was conducted with four dyads of Vietnamese EFL learners and three dyads of NSs of Australian English one month prior to the main study.

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