


## A Discourse Analysis of Complaint Letters Written by Native Speakers

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the major political and economic changes in the world, international relations have expanded significantly, and English is widely recognized as a global language by many countries. Hence, in order to succeed in international relations, non-native writers should be proficient in using English in different types of discourses including their letter writing. The purpose of this study was to analyze features of complaint letters written by native English speakers and explore the politeness strategies of those letters, which learners of English may fail to use appropriately. For this purpose, thirty authentic letters were chosen from the book “How to write better letters” edited by Chappell (2006). Through Halliday’s notion of lexical density, Cook’s expressed features of genre identification and Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness strategies, the collected data were analyzed. The analysis of the results showed that the native complaint letter writers mostly relied on ‘personal references’, ‘conjunction cohesion’, ‘repetition’, ‘substitution cohesion’, and ‘indirect negative politeness strategies’ in their writings. Language teachers and syllabus designers can use these results to help the foreign learners of English learn about the social aspects of language and direct them to use the pragmatic elements in their letters.

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### 1. Introduction

Discourse is a “term in linguistics which refers to a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit, such as an argument, joke or narrative” (Crystal, 2008, p.134). According to Crystal (2008), numerous linguists have sought to identify patterns in discourse by applying grammatical, phonological, and semantic criteria, such as cohesion, anaphora, and inter-sentence connections. Discourse

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Analysis (DA), also known as discourse studies, became widely recognized after Zellig Harris published a series of papers in 1952. It serves as an umbrella term for various methods used to examine language in written, spoken, or signed forms.

Letters as one of the written forms of language use involve written messages from one party to another. Different authors have proposed different divisions for the various types of letters. Some have divided letters into three types of personal, formal and business letters. In this division, letters of complaint are under the category of business letters. However, some others have suggested another type of division for the letters. They have determined personal, social and business letters. For them, letters of complaint are considered as one of the branches of social letters. In letters of complaint, the writers generally complain about either the quality or quantity of the goods or services they have received. Also, they may complain about late or short deliveries of the goods or services that have been supplied (Alexander, 1974).

Writing complaint letters in a professional manner is beneficial to both consumers and companies. By complaint behavior, consumers may get the redress for the wrong that the company has done (Mattila & Wirtz, 2004). Besides, writing complaint letters can lower the consumers' feelings of disappointment for the service experience that did not meet what they expected (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). There are also some benefits of the complaints for the companies: (a) they can find out what the consumer service lacks and how to improve the quality of their product, (b) they can increase consumer loyalty, and (c) they can also find out the habits and behavior of consumers who use their product/service. According to Masjedi and Paramasivam (2018), because of the sensitivity of complaining and its impacts on the emotions of both the complainer and complaine, the performance of complaint letters is more difficult compared to other types of discourses. Hence, when writing a complaint letter, besides including appeals to the receiving party, writers need to consider the structure, tone, and context of the letter (Hooi & Shuib, 2014).

If non-native writers do not know how to complain in L2, they are likely to apply their L1 strategies; therefore, incorrect understandings may occur (Yamagashira, 2001). Despite significant research on written discourses, there are hardly studies dealing with the analysis of English complaint letters produced by native speakers (Thumvichit & Gampper, 2019). With the arrival of the 21st century, globalization in science, technology, and economics has expanded worldwide, leading to an increased prominence of the English language in cross-cultural and intercultural communications. To reach successful communication, "language users have to master both linguistic and pragmatic competence" (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4). However, when it comes to foreign language contexts, letter writing often presents the greatest challenge to the students at all stages since they are not too much familiar with discourse features of different types of letters. Karatepe (2016), who examined request forms used by non-native and native speakers of English in complaint letters, found that the majority of native speakers made indirect requests, while non-native learners used explicit performative statements in their writing. Her results indicated that non-native learners have difficulty in choosing the right verb forms to indicate indirectness appropriately.

The need for the analysis of complaint letters written by native speakers is very important since non-native learners require guidance on what constitutes an appropriate complaint in order to minimize potential misunderstandings when communicating with native speakers and can produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate in international communications. To give a small guide to these types of learners, the

researcher has made an attempt to focus on letters of complaint in her study. In other words, this study aims to find out how the complaint letters differ in their surface features and to investigate some discourse features (i.e., the degree of occurrence of cohesive devices) and politeness strategies employed by native speakers in their complaint letters. Based on these purposes, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are the surface features of the native English complaint letters?

**Research Question 2:** What are the discourse features of the native English complaint letters?

**Research Question 3:** What are the types of politeness strategies in the native English complaint letters?

## **2. Review of Literature**

To understand the structure of written discourses linguistically and pragmatically, a number of studies have analysed various types of discourses including letters. Salam El-Dakhs and Ahmed (2023) examined how university students complain and how their professors answer these complaints in the context of student-professor written interaction at a private university in Egypt. The results showed that half of the students' complaints were in the form of requests for repair, preferring direct over indirect messages. This was followed by expressing disapproval, making accusations and casting blame. Furthermore, the social variables of gender and age did not influence the realization of the speech acts of complaint.

Nham, Cai, and Wannaruk (2022) investigated the rhetorical structure and politeness strategies used in complaint letters by international students in Thailand. It was found that in the moves of Complaint and Request, students used more negative strategies, while in Introduction, Attention getter, and Background, they mostly applied positive strategies. Besides, the factors like social rank, the level of familiarity between speakers, the influence of L1 cultural norms, and exposure to L2 played a role in determining which politeness strategies were chosen.

Khamees Khalaf (2020) conducted a study to identify the function of grammatical cohesive devices used at the discourse level. To this end, business letters were analyzed to show the communicative functions of the grammatical cohesive devices. The results indicated that reference and conjunction had the highest recurrences among grammatical cohesive relations, while substitution and ellipsis were utilized with a low percentage and received the lowest recurrences. The frequent use of reference indicated that the selected business letters were written to address shared concerns between the sender and the recipient. The second most commonly used grammatical cohesive device was conjunction, which the sender employed to meet the receiver's needs by adding information, clarifying points, providing justification, and organizing ideas in sequence. In contrast, the minimal use of substitution and ellipsis suggested that business letters were expected to be direct and unambiguous, leaving little room for rhetorical or stylistic expressions.

Goudarzi, Ghonsooli, and Taghipour (2015) examined how politeness strategies were applied in a collection of English business letters written by Iranian non-native speakers, comparing them with those written by native English speakers. The results revealed that although both groups made use of both positive and negative politeness

strategies, the non-native speakers used them more frequently especially positive politeness strategies, which appeared more often than negative ones. Moreover, the study highlighted that social distance significantly influenced the choice of politeness strategies, particularly when selecting greetings or salutations, which often require the use of positive politeness to soften potential face-threatening acts.

Koriche (2015) explored the key characteristics that appeared in the language used in business e-mails. The study, which analyzed a corpus of 175 business e-mails, identified recurring features that formed a recognizable structure typical of business e-mail communication. The findings also indicated that the digital medium influenced the selection of language forms. Various abbreviations often involving letter and number homophones, as well as consonant-based spellings, were commonly observed. Additionally, syntactic simplifications, such as the omission of subject pronouns and conjunctions, were present. The e-mails served functions that, at times, resembled spoken language and, in other instances, aligned more closely with formal written communication.

Arvani (2006) carried out a discourse analysis of business letters written by native English speakers and non-native Iranian writers. Using Halliday's concept of lexical density, he calculated the proportion of lexical versus functional words. In addition, based on the schematic structure model, he identified the various moves and steps within the letters. The study also examined the use of politeness strategies. The findings indicated that Iranian writers tended to concentrate primarily on the surface-level linguistic features of the letters, often neglecting pragmatic elements such as the application of politeness strategies in their communication.

### 3. Methods

#### 3-1. Sample

The sample of this study contained 30 authentic complaint letters which were written by native English speakers and were chosen from the book, "How to write better letters" edited by Chappell (2006). The sample was selected using purposive sampling, and as Dornyei (2007) mentioned, a sample size of 30 is considered sufficient for this type of sampling. Based on the defined purpose of the study, the researcher searched a lot to find those authentic complaint letters which shared a similar thematic emphasis. That is, they all represented the complaints of customers to companies or organizations. The writers of the letters involved both genders, and they were either from the United States or the United Kingdom.

#### 3-2. Data Collection Procedure

According to Halliday (1985), spoken and written languages differ in the proportion of content words to grammatical or function words. To handle the analysis of surface features of letters, the researcher computed the number of *lexical, grammatical and total words* and then calculated the *lexical density* of letters. Lexical density, which shows the complexity of human communication in a spoken and written discourse, was measured by calculating the ratio of lexical items to the total number of words in a text.

To recognize the genre of the letters, seven features (*sender, receiver, function, situation, physical form, pre-sequence & cohesion*) proposed by Cook (1989) were considered in the sample letters. To identify the cohesive devices used in the letters, the researcher applied Halliday and Hassan's (1976) classification for different types of

cohesion. That is, she considered the range of occurrence of *referential cohesion*, *substitution cohesion*, *ellipsis cohesion*, *conjunction cohesion* and *lexical cohesion* in each letter.

Finally, to identify the amount and type of usage of politeness strategies in the letters, she applied Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model presents an interactional model based on two aspects of "face": positive and negative. Positive face represents an individual's desire for acceptance and inclusion. Through positive politeness strategies, a speaker affirms this need by emphasizing shared goals and cooperation with the listener. In contrast, negative face pertains to a person's wish for autonomy and freedom from interference. Negative politeness strategies demonstrate respect by acknowledging and preserving the listener's independence and freedom of action. In this study, the present researcher considered the occurrence of positive politeness strategies including *directness* and *optimism* and negative politeness strategies including *indirectness* and *modals*.

### 3-3. Data Analysis

To answer the first research question, the researcher counted the number of lexical, grammatical and total words and calculated the lexical density of the letters. And to analyze the collected data for the second and third research questions, she used descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages. She, moreover, applied bar charts to provide a visual display of the distribution of the research variables.

## 4. Results

### 4-1. The Surface Features of Complaint Letters

The sample of this study comprised thirty complaint letters written by native English-speaking writers. They consisted of a total of 3870 words. The number of content words of the letters was 1657, and the number of function words was 2212. The lexical density of the letters was 42.81.

### 4-2. Identification of the Genre of the Letters

**4-2-1. Sender:** The senders of all of these letters were customers of different stores and organizations who had written these letters to show their complaint about the product or service they had received.

**4-2-2. Receiver:** The receivers of some of the letters had an official position, for example, within a bank (the manager of a bank) or a company (the manager of a telephone and internet service company). However, the receivers of some others did not seem to have the higher degrees of education which are mostly needed by the managers of an official position. For example, those letters were sent to the owners of electrical supplies or shoe stores.

**4-2-3. Function:** The function in all of those letters was the same. They reflected the senders' complaint about the service that they had received.

**4-2-4. Situation:** The situation for all of the letters was identical. That is, in all of those cases, the letter arrived in a mailbox.

**4-2-5. Physical Form:** The letters were folded and enclosed in envelopes, with the sender's address and date in the top right-hand corner. However, the name and the address of the receiver were included under the sender's address, but against the left-hand margin.

**4-2-6. Pre-sequence:** Each letter employed the idea of pre-sequence (e.g., Dear Sirs, Dear Sir, Dear Mr. Martin, and so on).

**4-2-7. Cohesion:** Coherent texts which comprise connected sequences of sentences or utterances employ text-forming devices. These are specific words and expressions that allow the writer or speaker to create links between sentences or utterances, thereby contributing to the overall unity and cohesion of the text (Nunan, 1993). Five different types of cohesion including referential, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion, were part of the analysis in this study.

#### **4-2-7-1. Referential Cohesion**

Halliday and Hasan (1976) categorized referential cohesion into three subtypes: personal, demonstrative, and comparative. These cohesive devices allow writers or speakers to refer to people or objects multiple times throughout a text, thereby maintaining clarity and connection. The result of the analysis of referential cohesion in the letters is shown in Table 1.

**Table1**

*Frequencies and Percentages for Referential Cohesion in Letters*

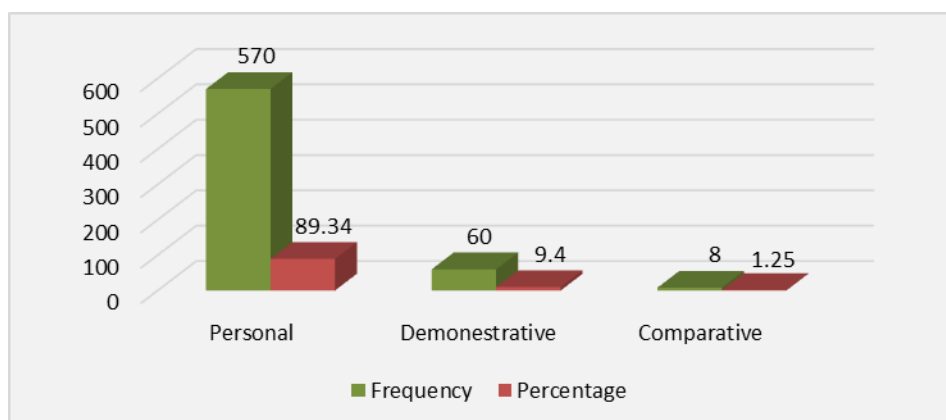
<b>Referential Cohesion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Personal	570	89.34
Demonstrative	60	9.40
Comparative	8	1.25

As is shown in Table 1, native English-speaking writers applied personal reference more than the other types of reference in their letters. After the personal reference, the occurrence of demonstrative and comparative reference was the most respectively in the letters. The following figure shows clearly the results of the analysis of referential cohesion in the letters.

**Figure 1**

*Frequencies and Percentages for Referential Cohesion in Letters*





#### 4-2-7-2. Substitution Cohesion

Substitution occurs when part of a text is replaced by other elements which can be interpreted concerning what has gone before (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). The result of the analysis of this type of cohesion showed that substitution cohesion had been applied 82 times in the total of thirty letters.

#### 4-2-7-3. Ellipsis Cohesion

Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain ellipsis as the omission of a necessary element from a sentence or clause, which can be understood by looking at a corresponding element in the preceding text. In this study, the total number of occurrences of ellipsis cohesion in the letters was 60.

#### 4-2-7-4. Conjunction Cohesion

Unlike reference, substitution, and ellipsis, conjunctions do not serve to recall previously mentioned people, objects, or actions. Nevertheless, it functions as a cohesive device by indicating logical connections that rely on the reader's understanding of earlier parts of the text (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). After personal reference (570), the occurrence of conjunction cohesion (255) in the letters was the most.

#### 4-2-7-5. Lexical Cohesion

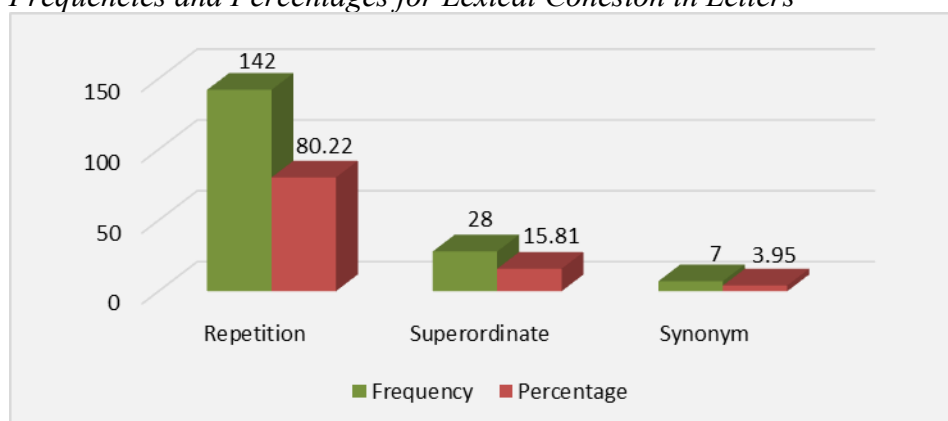
According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), lexical cohesion arises when two words within a text are connected through a semantic relationship. Three major subcategories of lexical cohesion (i.e., Repetition, Synonym & Superordinate) were considered in this study. Table 2 shows the result of the analysis of these subcategories in the letters.

**Table 2**

*Frequencies and Percentages for Lexical Cohesion in Letters*

Lexical Cohesion	Frequency	Percentage
Repetition	142	80.22
Superordinate	28	15.81
Synonym	7	3.95

As can be seen in Table 2, repetition under the category of lexical cohesion is used more than the other two categories (i.e., Synonym & Superordinate) in the native writers' letters. Figure 2 provides a better understanding of the results of analysis of lexical cohesion in the letters.

**Figure 2***Frequencies and Percentages for Lexical Cohesion in Letters*

### 4-3. The Use of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

#### 4-3-1. Positive Politeness Strategies

*Directness* of the speaker/writer and sense of *optimism* are strategies of positive politeness.

**4-3-1-1. Directness:** Directness as a positive politeness strategy is expressed through the phrase “Please+ [action verb]”, “Kindly+ [action verb]” and some of the most direct linguistic structures are sentences that begin with “I”, “You”, and “My” (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Analysis in this study showed that just half of the letters included these two phrases (kindly/please +action verb), and the other letters had not benefited from them. Moreover, the number of occurrences of direct linguistic structures in the thirty letters was 90.

**4-3-1-2. Optimism:** According to Brown and Levinson (1987), optimism is viewed as a form of positive politeness strategy because it aligns with the speaker’s or writer’s desire for their needs to be fulfilled. It also reflects an effort to reduce the social distance between the speaker and the listener by emphasizing shared intentions or goals. Optimism is commonly conveyed through expressions like “look forward to” and the word “hope.” It is noticeable that optimistic expressions were not found in most of the letters, and only 8 letters benefited from these expressions.

#### 4-3-2. Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies can be indicated through the *indirectness* of speech and *modals*.

**4-3-2-1. Indirectness:** Indirectness is regarded as a negative politeness strategy used to show deference to the listener. This approach often involves sentences that begin with words other than “I”, “you” or “my”, which contribute to a more indirect tone. The total number of indirect linguistic structures in the letters was 105. In comparison with the direct linguistic structures, the indirect linguistic structures were used more by native writers in their complaint letters.

**4-3-2-2. Modals:** Modals that modify statements help to soften the message being conveyed. Common modals used for this purpose include: would, could, may, might, shall, and should (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In Table 3, the number and percentage of qualifying modals in the letters are shown.

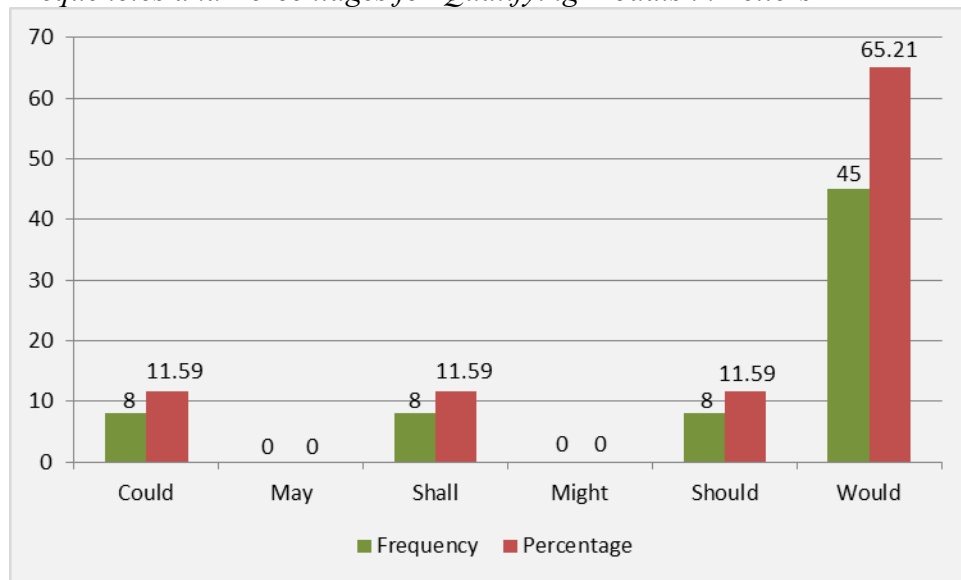
**Table 3**



*Frequencies and Percentages for Qualifying Modals in Letters*

Modals	Frequency	Percentage
Could	8	11.59
May	0	0
Shall	8	11.59
Might	0	0
Should	8	11.59
Would	45	65.21
Total	69	

As it is revealed in Table 3, the number of qualifying modals in the letters was 69. “Would” had been applied more than the rest of the modals in the letters (45 times). “Could”, “shall”, and “should” had been equally used in the letters (8 times), while “may” and “might” had not been applied at all. Figure 3 vividly displays the landscape of the distribution of qualifying modals in the letters.

**Figure 3***Frequencies and Percentages for Qualifying Modals in Letters*

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined some discourse features and politeness strategies in complaint letters employed by native speakers. The investigation of the surface features revealed that the letters had nearly the same lexical identity, and the lexical density of the letters was 42.81%. In other words, 42.81% of the letters was comprised of content words. According to Sholichatun (2011, p. 25), “a high lexical density measures of around 60–70%, medium lexical density measures of around 50–60%, and a lower lexical density measures of around 40–50%”. Therefore, the letters considered in this study had a low lexical density. It means that the difficulty level of the letters was low, and they were easily comprehensible. This aligns with Johansson (2008), who argued

that texts with higher lexical density are harder to comprehend. This is due to their greater information load.

Regarding the cohesive devices, the study showed that native writers mostly benefited from ‘personal reference’, ‘conjunction cohesion’, ‘repetition’ and ‘substitution cohesion’ respectively in their complaint letters. This finding is compatible with Khamees Khalaf’s (2020) findings, who conducted a study to identify the function of grammatical cohesive devices in business letters. The results indicated that reference and conjunction had the highest recurrences among grammatical cohesive relations. Also, Moindjie (2019), in a comparative study of English and French literature on personal reference, found that English employs personal reference more cohesively than French. This difference is attributed to linguistic characteristics, such as the abstract and wordy nature of French, in contrast to the more concrete and concise style of English. Shirazi and Mousavi (2017) analyzed the use of adversative conjunctions by native English and Persian speakers across 200 research articles. Their findings showed that native English writers used adversative conjunctions twice as often as their Persian counterparts. They attributed this difference to the influence of the Persian language writing culture. It can be inferred that the reason for using conjunction cohesion and repetition by the writers of the letters was to transfer more claims to the recipients of the letters and persuade them more. Besides, by using repetition, the writer tells the reader that mentioned words are central enough to be repeated. This result is consistent with Magdalena (2007), who reported the highest frequency of repetition in business letters. After repetition, substitution cohesion received the highest frequency in complaint letters. Based on Buitkiene’s (2005) idea, it can be justified that the letter writers in this study applied substitution cohesion to refuse overuse of repetition.

In order to reveal the pragmatic discourse features of complaint letters written by the native, the use of positive and negative politeness strategies in letters was investigated. This part of the study showed that the range of occurrence of ‘*indirect linguistic structures*’ was more than that of direct linguistic structures in native writers’ complaint letters. Generally, native writers were mostly interested in using ‘*negative politeness strategies*’ rather than positive politeness ones in their writings. This result supports Goudarzi et al’s (2015) findings, who examined the use of politeness strategies in English business letters written by Iranian non-native speakers and compared them with those written by native English speakers. Their study revealed that while both groups utilized both positive and negative politeness strategies, the non-native speakers relied more heavily on positive politeness to mitigate face-threatening acts. This difference is likely due to cultural variations between native and non-native speakers.

The information provided here highlights the significance of discourse analysis in language instruction and its potential to enhance the quality of content, particularly in teaching how to write complaints. In essence, the syllabus should aim to achieve broader objectives beyond merely teaching linguistic structures to learners. The authorities should consider the criterion of lexical density and select the content and activities according to the level of the language learners, because long texts with high lexical density cause students to have problems in understanding the content, and the learning process will be boring for them. On the other hand, introducing cohesive devices and politeness strategies used by native writers to non-native language learners can be widely effective in international interactions. Non-native learners need to bear in mind that they are involved in a different culture which needs their adjustment for smooth exchanges; otherwise, possible misunderstanding in intercultural

communications can occur (Yuan, 2011). Meaningful learning experiences incorporating authentic materials could help achieve this goal.

The primary limitation of this study lies in the lack of direct communication with the customers who submitted the complaints. While content analysis offers some insight into their sentiments, it lacks the depth that face-to-face interviews can provide. Furthermore, the analysis was limited to a single database composed of complaints from dissatisfied customers of specific stores and organizations, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. To broaden the applicability of the results, it is necessary to examine other types of complaints and determine whether the findings are consistent across different sources. Additionally, employing other research methods, such as surveys or experimental designs, could contribute to a deeper understanding in this area. Finally, it is recommended that other factors including gender and age between the complainer and the complaineer are taken into consideration.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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