Customer requests and complaints in intercultural BELF emails:

The case of American customers and Chinese sales managers

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Abstract

This descriptive study investigated requests and complaints in intercultural Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) emails. Sixty emails in English were collected, written by American customers addressed to Chinese sales managers who worked at a parent company in China. The emails were considered for study since the language and culture of the senders and recipients were different (Kecskes, 2014, p. 14). Results show that the American customers normally used bald on-record strategies when making business requests of the Chinese sales managers. The direct and unambiguous nature of these requests were attributed to American cultural values, classified by Hall (1976) as low-context and by Hofstede (2001) as highly individualistic. The American customers made explicit requests using direct language to ensure their requests were understood. Even though their complaints were explicit, the American customers also used negative politeness strategies so that the Chinese sales managers would feel less offended. In addition, the complaints in these BELF emails always co-occurred with other speech acts such as requests, suggestions, and warnings, producing a speech act set (Murphy & Neu, 1996). The aim of their complaints was thus not only to express dissatisfaction, but to seek solutions to problems and compensation for losses.

Keywords: customer requests, customer complaints, politeness strategies, cultural values, Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)

1. Introduction

The global economy is developing rapidly, making intercultural business activities more visible and vital (Xiao, 2012). As international trade and economic globalization develop, English has become a means of international business communication (Liu, 2020). The use of English for business purposes is called Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). Advances in technology and the Internet have precipitated a new era of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and there has been a proliferation of

forms of intercultural contact such as email, network communication, instant messaging, text messaging, hypertext, distance learning, and especially email writing (Baron, 2010, as cited in Chen, 2015). Business email, for instance, has become an essential means of communication in multicultural and multilingual workplaces, and has become indispensable in modern business activities due to its immediateness, low cost, and convenience (Xiao, 2012).

There has been little research analyzing politeness strategies in BELF emails between English native speakers and speakers of English as a foreign language, and most studies have examined politeness in business emails by focusing on a single speech act. Liu (2020) and Park et al. (2021) examined requests, which are directive speech acts, and also found that it is the most common speech act performed in business emails. De Leon and Parina (2016), Depraetere et al. (2021), and Vasquez (2011) explored customer complaints in business, but their focus was on quality of service. As seen in these studies, the speech acts of request and complaint in business have been studied separately. To thoroughly understand politeness strategies in business emails, this study examined politeness strategies used to perform two distinctive speech acts most commonly found in the business emails written by American customers in mattress companies who are customers of a furniture company in Zhejiang, China and addressed to Chinese sales managers in this company. There are three research questions in this study.

1. How did the American customers perform requests and complaints to the Chinese sales managers?

2. What politeness strategies were normally used when the American customers made requests of the Chinese sales managers?

3. What politeness strategies were normally used when the American customers complained to the Chinese sales managers?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Definitions of *requests* and *complaints*

According to Searle's (1976, p. 11) classification of illocutionary acts, a request belongs to the directive speech act category. It usually "imposes on the hearer's negative face" by requiring someone to do something. On a continuum of degrees, the request that someone does something is neither very modest nor very fierce. The benefactor is often the requester. In some cases, however, both the speaker and the hearer can be co-beneficiaries. In this study, requests made by the American customers in BELF emails were analyzed. The following is an example of a request in a BELF email.

[47]

Customer requests and complaints in intercultural BELF emails:
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Extract 1

Please advise when the samples for ISTA and production will be ready to be submitted to the lab for testing.

In Extract 1, an American customer asked a Chinese sales manager to confirm the date samples would be ready for laboratory testing. Asking someone to do something—to check the time when samples will be ready for testing—threatens the recipient's negative face because it induces the recipient to act. In this case, the beneficiary is the email writer because, having been notified as to when the samples would be ready, he could proceed with the work.

On the other hand, a complaint, according to Searle's (1976, pp. 12-13) classification of illocutionary acts, is an expressive speech act aimed at expressing the speaker's disapproval of actions, or lack of action, taken by the complainee or the complainee's company, such that the customers' expectation has not been met. Extract 2 illustrates a complaint.

Extract 2

It is too bad to see your quote price is becoming not competitive and even higher than our current price.

Extract 2 is considered a customer complaint, which threatens the hearer's positive face, while the propositional content, the customer's intention, also tarnishes the recipient's positive face. In this case, the customer was disappointed at receiving an exorbitant quote, higher than the current price. He expressed his disappointment by saying "It is too bad…" and then explained why he was disappointed.

2.2 Goffman's (1955) Face Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory derives from the concept of face proposed by Erving Goffman, who originally coined the term. According to Goffman, "face" is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. The face is a self-delineated image with respect to approved social attributes." (Goffman, 1955, p. 213).

Positive and negative face exist in all competent adults. A person's desire to be regarded and appreciated by others, the urge to be accepted, liked, treated as part of the same group, and to know that his or her desires are shared by others, is referred to as positive face. A negative face, by contrast, refers to a person's desire to avoid being hindered or imposed on. The word 'negative' here does not carry a bad connotation. Every competent adult has both a positive and negative face, which can be 'enhanced', 'maintained', or 'imposed' by the hearer as well as by the speaker during the course of social interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61).

2.3 Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 94-227) identified five politeness strategies: bald, on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and "do not do the face-threatening act." This present study analyzes written emails, so it does not discuss the fifth strategy. Two politeness strategies, on-record and negative politeness, are discussed in detail because they were the most frequently used to perform both types of speech acts by the American customers. In addition, results in the later section showed that the use of positive politeness strategies and off-record strategies was insignificantly found.

2.3.1 Bald On-Record Strategies

Speakers go on-record, in part, because they assume they have authority over the hearer as, for example, in the military. This is referred to as an explicit strategy without any modification. From a syntactic point of view, imperative forms are commonly used when someone performs a bald speech act, without redressive action, as shown in the following extract.

Extract 3

Confirm receipt of PO 696583.

In this extract, the customer asked a Chinese sales manager to make a confirmation for the receipt of a product. This imperative sentence clearly expresses the intended meaning; that the writer wants the recipient to confirm receipt of an item. It is considered bald on-record because it is not mitigated by any modifying device. If, however, the customer prefaces this imperative sentence with a politeness marker (i.e., "please"), or a polite phrase (i.e., "would you please"), or an adverb (i.e., "kindly"), the degree of face-threatening would be lessened and the recipient's positive face would be less damaged. Since this extract was not mitigated, the customer's intention was face-threatening.

2.3.2 Negative politeness strategies

Negative politeness strategies are impersonal and relatively formal, emphasizing the hearer's right to freedom, and an explicit strategy with a redressive action that aims at maintaining the negative face. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 69-71), there are 10 negative politeness sub-strategies, which are listed in Table 1 (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 131-213).

Table 1

Negative politeness sub-strategies

No	Categories	Definition	Example
1	Be conventionally indirect	Be direct	This is not sufficiently salty.
2	Question, hedge	Don't assume H is able or willing to do the act.	You could perhaps pass the salt?
3	Be pessimistic	Assume H is not likely to do A	You could not watch the baby for me, could you?
4	Minimize the imposition	Make explicit R, P, D values	It's just that I want to get a glimpse of you.
5	Give deference	Make explicit R, P, D values	Mrs./Mr.+ name
6	Apologize	Communicate S's want to not impinge on H	I know you wouldn't like it but can you accompany me to the station?
7	Impersonalize S and H	Dissociate S, H from the particular infringement	Can anyone give me a hand?
8	State the FTA as a general rule	Dissociate S, H from the particular infringement	Smoking is not allowed anywhere onboard.
9	Nominalize	Dissociate S, H from the particular infringement	Your performance impresses us.
10	Go on record as incurring debt, or as not indebting H	Redress other wants of H's derivative from negative face	I will be eternally grateful if you could arrange an appointment for me.

Considering the modifying devices, these 10 sub-strategies can be categorized into two major types: internal modifications and external modifications. For example, the second sub-strategy, the use of questions and hedges is discernibly internal. The insertion of some lexical elements such as an adverb, an auxiliary verb, or even a politeness marker in the propositional content helps reduce the severity of a face-threatening speech act. Under the sixth sub-strategy, the use of apology, the imposition is downgraded by the external modification. The preceding utterance, performing an apology before the propositional content, helps minimize the threat of the speaker's meaning.

2.4 Cultural Values Typologies

Studies on intercultural communication often begin by categorizing their research participants based on cultural values formulated by three related aspects: beliefs, values, and behaviors (Samovar et al., 2017, pp. 201-203). If, for example, someone believed that having tan skin represents a strong, sporty, and healthy physical

condition, they would lie in the sun to make their skin dark. If, by contrast, someone believed that having white or fair skin is a sign of prestige and luxury, they would apply sunscreen and minimize exposure to the sun. The two situations illustrate the interplay between beliefs, values, and behavior (Samovar et al., 2017). As a result, several typologies of cultural values have been developed, beginning with the beliefs and values that influence people's communicative behaviors. Among many, the two most frequently-cited typologies are Hall's (1976) low- and high-context culture, and Hofstede's (2001) individualist and collectivist culture.

2.4.1 Hall's (1976) low- and high-context culture

Hall (1976) classifies cultures into two types: low-context and high-context. He believes that people from these two opposite types of cultures differ in terms of their communicative behaviors. As cited in Samovar et al. (2017, pp. 220-222), "In low-context cultures, the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is conveyed through the context or the participant's nonverbal displays" and communication tends to be direct and unambiguous. "Americans depend more on spoken words than on nonverbal behavior to convey their messages," according to Hall. On the other hand, those from high-context cultures, particularly Asian cultures, emphasize social hierarchy and relations with others, in contrast to "the expression of self through direct communication." Figure 1 contains a list comparing 15 countries based on their levels of low- and high-context cultures (Hall, 1976, p. 91).

Figure 1

Countries ranging from low- to high-context cultures
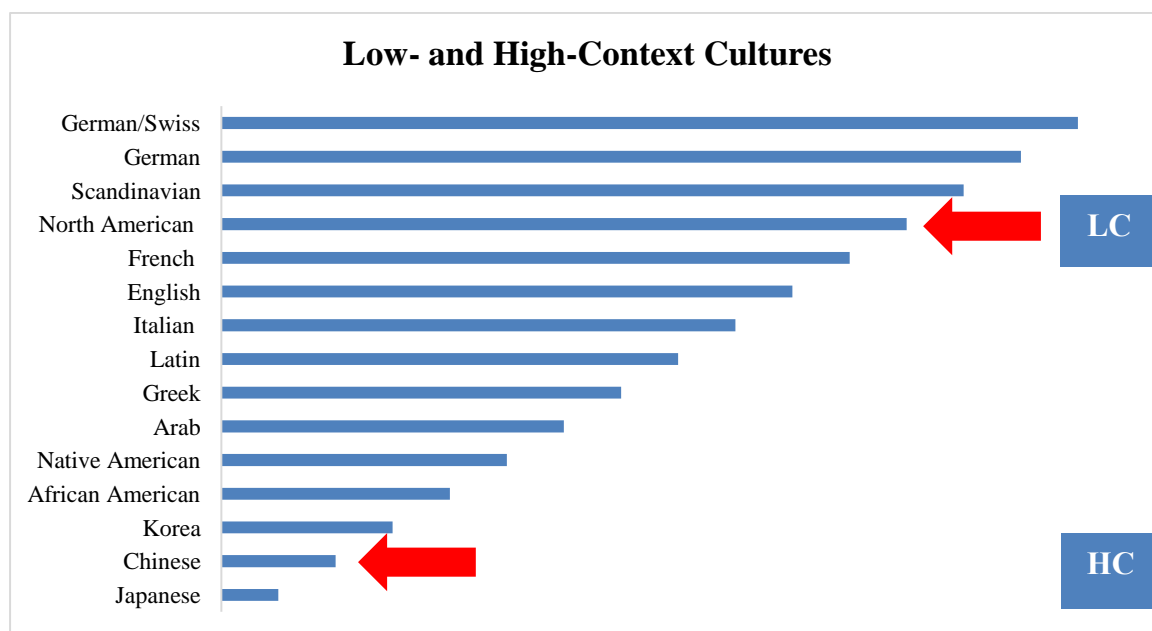
According to the list, the American culture is low-context, while the Chinese culture is high-context. In light of this analysis, one would expect email messages from

American customers to be direct and unambiguous and serving a social function, either asking Chinese sales managers to do something or to express displeasure. The opposite would be expected if the Chinese sales managers wrote email messages making requests or complaints, but this aspect of the hypothesis is beyond the scope of this study.

2.4.2 Hofstede's (2001) individualism and collectivism

Intercultural communication is generally defined as a situation in which people of different languages and cultural backgrounds communicate. Interactants can be a native speaker of a language and a non-native speaker, or two non-native speakers (Kecskes, 2014, p. 14). In this study, the American customers wrote email messages to make requests or complaints to the Chinese sales managers. The role of the Chinese sales managers in this interaction is to decode the messages and cooperate with the American customers. Not only are their first languages different, but their cultural values are also different. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions describe such differences in terms of beliefs and values that have an impact on people's communicative behaviors (Samovar et al., 2017, pp. 201-203), as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Cultural dimensions between the US and China
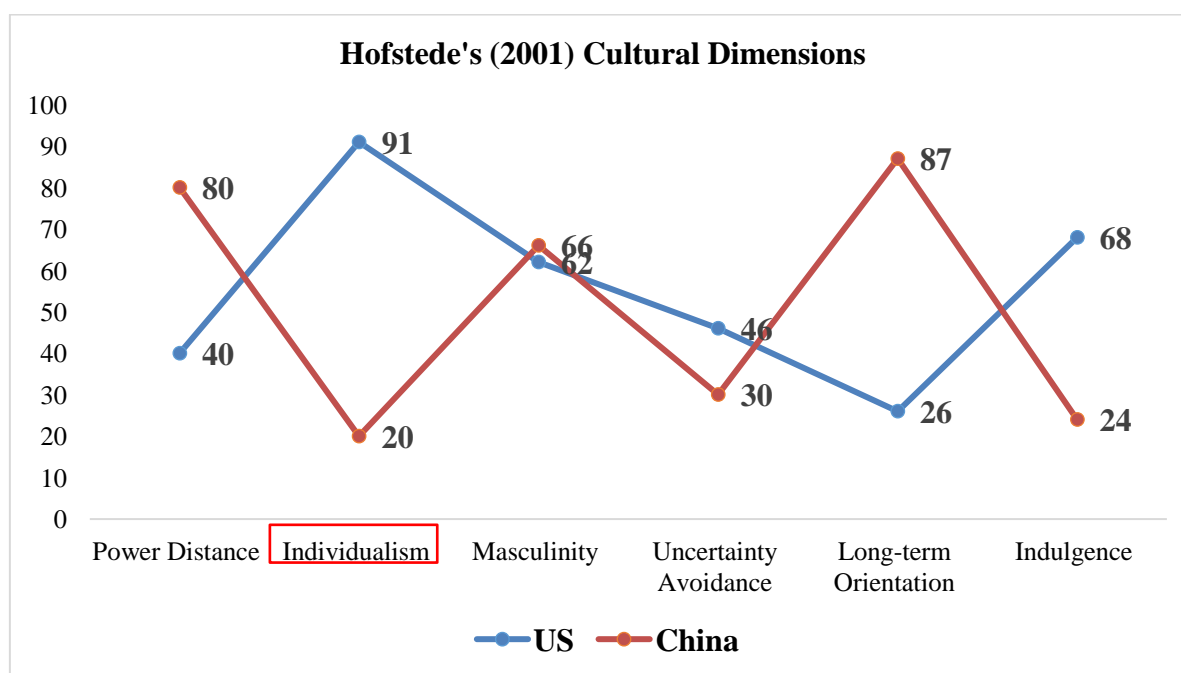
According to Figure 2, the American cultural values are in sharp contrast with the Chinese, especially with respect to individualism, in which Americans measure 91% while the Chinese only 20%. Although these figures based on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions reflect a somewhat superficial stereotype, they are reliable predictors of communicative behaviors. Highly individualist Americans are expected to be "informal", "direct", and "participative to a degree," and they are "accustomed to doing

business or interacting with people they don't know well" and "are not shy about approaching their prospective counterparts in order to obtain or seek information". By contrast, the Chinese, described as low-individualist, put strong emphasis on "relationships with colleagues," and they can be "cold or even hostile to out-groups" while "personal relationships prevail over task and company".

3. Related Studies

3.1 The Role of English in BELF

As mentioned above, many researchers have investigated BELF emails. Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009) pointed out that English has played an increasingly dominant role in general business affairs worldwide over the last two decades. BELF is a simplified, hybridized, and highly dynamic code (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) used in global business settings, regardless of Kachru's (1992) three concentric circles of English: inner, outer, and expanding (as cited in Roshid et al., 2018). Moreover, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, as cited in Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009) pointed out that BELF refers to English as a 'neutral' and shared communication code. For BELF users, their level of language competency was of considerable importance as it ensures successful communication with business partners (Liu et al., 2021). Additionally, Roshid et al. (2018) examined 92 email messages, examined using qualitative and quantitative content analysis, to study how the BELF community practices written discourse in business email. They revealed that unlike ELF academic discourse, or standard business letter writing, email messages are usually stylistically flexible, informal, personalized, and similar to ELF spoken discourse.

3.2 Politeness in Business Emails

Many researchers (e.g., Alafnan, 2014; Fan, 2012; Lindgren, 2014; Pariera, 2006; Xiao, 2012) have investigated politeness theory in email messages. Pariera (2006) compared the politeness strategies used in the email of 29 participants writing to both close friends and strangers. The author also explored the five features of language in the emails with respect to the three taboos of high, medium, and low seriousness. The author assessed these findings using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, and found that email itself was developing a special set of politeness conventions very different from those used in face-to-face communication, characterized by a decrease in intimacy, and a reduction in the use of negative politeness strategies.

Lindgren (2014) explored politeness strategies in a business setting by analyzing 46 BELF authentic emails, divided into internal and external groups, to determine whether the communication approach varied with different receivers. The author pointed out that the internal and external correspondence was very similar, and that the level of formality and directness seemed to depend on the sender. The results revealed that greetings were mainly informal, closings formal, and requests direct, for both internal and external correspondence.

Alafnan (2014) analyzed emails written in a Malaysian educational institute for the use of politeness as it related to power relations, social distance, and the ethnicity of the communicators. The study showed that these were important considerations in establishing connections and close relationships with the recipients. The Malaysian employees (i.e., Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians, and Malaysians) usually used negative and positive politeness strategies in their emails. Social distance played a more significant role than power in the use of politeness strategies, and the author concluded that Malaysians were more polite to distant colleagues than to close colleagues.

Xiao (2012), using quantitative and qualitative methods, analyzed 100 English business emails for their politeness strategies. He divided the email into four types: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. The author found that Brown and Levinson's (1987) face management politeness strategies were practical and widely used in business email, and that the frequency and distribution of politeness strategies varied with the different types.

In addition, Fan (2012) gave examples of the Cooperative Principle and politeness strategies used in business email while analyzing the definition and function of business English email. The author found that, in comparison to daily communication, the language of business email is more elaborate. Business email has carefully crafted phrasing and is typically more professional than face-to-face communication. Partners observe the Cooperative Principle and politeness strategy to a significant degree in the composition of business email.

3.3 Email Requests in a Business Setting

Park et al. (2021) examined 60 cross-cultural emails, 30 from Koreans and 30 from their American employers. The cross-cultural differences between these L1 and L2 request emails were analyzed with respect to move frequency, move sequence, move length, and other related lexical and syntactic characteristics of request email. The findings showed that L2 professionals made requests more concisely using direct language, while L1 professionals used supportive moves such as complimenting the addressee and promising compensation. In addition, Liu (2020) analyzed the request strategies of authentic business English emails, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including the use of request strategies in email. The researcher found that mood derivable was the most commonly used request strategy in business English email, and that query preparatory, under the non-conventionally indirect request strategy, was the second most common strategy. Moreover, the questionnaires revealed that there was no relationship between the degree of politeness and the degree of directness. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2021) analyzed 236 requests, made by 38 Chinese participants via WeChat. The participants were divided two groups, an older and a younger, in order to determine the effect of social status and age on social media requests. The results showed that both the younger and older group preferred to use direct strategies when making requests in Chinese on WeChat, and that preference was not affected by social status, nor did social status influence their use of modifications when making requests.

Ho (2018) analyzed 659 workplace request emails in Hong Kong, showing how professionals use metadiscourse in email to convince colleagues to comply with requests, using reason, credibility, and emotion. Persuasion through email is unlike that made via other channels in the use of metadiscourse. There may be a preferred pattern of persuasive strategies used in request email in the workplace.

3.4 Complaints on Social Media Platforms

Vasquez (2011) examined 100 CMC complaints taken from the travel website TripAdvisor to compare online complaints with complaints made by elicited means or by regular spoken interactions. The findings showed that complaints were often made in conjunction with advice and recommendations, rather than with warnings or threats. Also, more than one-third of the complaints gave some positive remarks, even in the context of a negative overall assessment. A similar proportion mentioned that the reviewers' expectations were not met. Also, a larger number of the complaints on TripAdvisor were indirect (or third party) complaints.

In addition, Depraetere et al. (2021) selected complaints made via Twitter between two railway companies and their customers. The two companies were SNCF, the French National Railway company, and SNCB, the Belgian National Railway Company. The study concluded that perceived (im)politeness or perceived face-threat had to be separated, and linguistic (in)directness should be analyzed in the context of complete complaint situations. The authors also devised a hypothesis regarding the differences between the two similar linguistic community complaints and the responses of the two companies.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants and Research Instruments

The researchers gathered authentic business English emails written by American customers. The data were collected through a contact in a furniture company in Zhejiang, China, from June 2021 to September 2021. Tables 2 and 3 give the details of the American customers who wrote the request and complaint email messages.

Table 2

Details of the American customers who composed business request emails

No	Nickname	Gender	Native language
1	Johanna	Female	English
2	Olivia	Female	English
3	Julie	Female	English

4	Kelvin	Male	English
5	Scott	Male	English
6	Eric	Male	English

Table 2 describes six American customers from different companies who wrote request email messages to the Chinese sales managers. All of them lived in the USA and their native language was English. They worked for Dorel, South Show, IKEA, and CB. Table 3 contains information about the customers who made the complaints.

Table 3

Details of the American customers who composed business complaint emails

No	Nickname	Gender	Native language
1	Johanna	Female	English
2	Olivia	Female	English
3	Julie	Female	English
4	Lucy	Female	English
5	Kelvin	Male	English
6	John	Male	English
7	Eric	Male	English
8	David	Male	English

Table 3 compares eight American customers from four different companies (i.e., Dorel, South Show, IKEA, and CB) who wrote complaint email messages. Half were female and half male and all were native speakers of English.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study took authentic business emails as the research corpus and analyzed politeness strategies used in business requests and complaints. The use of an authentic corpus, rather than oral or written Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), meant that the researchers could examine naturally-occurring data, replete with pragmatic resources. By contrast, research instruments that allow participants to pre-plan their email messages with email recipients are merely hypothetical. This method allows the researchers to analyze real American customers engaged in real communication with actual sales managers. In addition, the researchers obtained their consent directly

through email, asking for permission to analyze their email correspondence with the Chinese sales managers. Emails written by participants who expressed their intention not to take part in this research project were withdrawn from the analysis.

For reasons of confidentiality, the company did not allow the employees to disclose certain specific details of the emails, such as pricing and business procedures. To protect the company's privacy, real names, locations, and other identifiable information was also removed, replacing them with pseudonyms; however, the content of the emails, including grammatical mistakes, was unmodified to guarantee the authenticity of the data.

The 60 emails were selected and divided into two categories, requests and complaints, according to the definitions given in Section 3.1. The emails were numbered, such as "request email 1," and "complaint email 1," to make the management of the data sets more systematic. Then, the politeness strategies, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 94-227), were used to codify the data. Table 4 illustrates the coding scheme of the politeness strategies, and gives examples of requests and complaints in each politeness strategy. At each stage, a trained research assistant, classified, categorized, and analyzed the data to ensure the level of reliability.

Table 4

The four politeness strategies

No.	Politeness Strategy	Speech act	Example
1	Bald on record	Request	Rake the leaves (Terkourafi, 2015, p. 345)
		Complaint	There is no value here for the money. (Vasquez, 2011, p. 1711)
2	Negative politeness	Request	Could you please kindly check what you can do for us with the attached order? (Ho, 2018, p. 76)
		Complaint	Sorry to moan about it, but we were paying Euros 145 a night for our double room. (Vasquez, 2011, p. 1711)
3	Positive politeness	Request	How about letting me use your pen?
		Complaint	Your price is more than 50% higher. I believe we need to find out a better solution to it.
4	Off-record politeness	Request	Hmm, I wonder where I put my pen.
		Complaint	I would not recommend staying here if you are looking for a good night's sleep. (Vasquez, 2011, p. 1712)

The four politeness strategies were adopted from Brown and Levison (1987). In this study, bald on-record strategies refer to those used to perform requests or complaints unambiguously, without any redressive actions. "Rake the leaves" and "There is no value here for the money" are examples of a direct request and a direct complaint, respectively because their locutionary forces explicitly perform

unambiguous illocutionary acts. Negative and positive politeness strategies refer to those used to perform these speech acts unambiguously, while mitigating face-threats. "Could you please kindly check what you can do for us with the attached order?" and "Sorry to moan about it, but we were paying Euros 145 a night for our doble room" are a direct request and a direct complaint, respectively; however, their face-threatening acts were mitigated to save the negative face of the hearers. In addition, "How about letting me use your pen?" and "Your price is more than 50% high. I believe we need to find out a better solution to it." are a direct request and a direct complaint, respectively. However, their face-threatening acts were redressed in order to save the hearers' positive face. Off-record strategies refers to those used to perform requests and complaints ambiguously. "Hmm, I wonder where I put my pen." and "I would not recommend staying here if you are looking for a good night's sleep." are an indirect request and an indirect compliant because the act of saying and the speaker's intended meaning do not correspond to each other.

Based on Brown and Levinson (1987), the least polite strategy is the bald on-record strategy, while the most polite strategy is the off-record strategy. The use of one particular strategy over the others, according to Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 76-84), depends on the weightiness of the face-threatening act, which consists of three variables: power (P), social distance (D), and ranking of imposition (R). In this context, the power relationship between the American customers and the Chinese sales managers is asymmetrical because the customers can make a decision to continue or discontinue the service. Their social distance is wide because they have never met in person. The degree of imposition is not high because the requests and complaints are made in a business context.

The politeness strategies for requests and complaints were taken from various compatible resources to show how the data were codified. As mentioned in section 3.3.2, negative politeness strategies have at least 10 sub-strategies. Thus, the example in Table 4 shows how negative politeness strategies minimize the imposition on the hearer. Of course, the example given is only one way in which the speaker can make a speech act less threatening to the hearer's negative face. The same holds true for the positive politeness and off-record strategies.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Overall Performance of Requests and Complaints

In the 30 BELF emails, in which American customers asked the Chinese sales managers to do something (Searle, 1976, p. 11), more than 30 requests were found. However, there were only 30 complaints in the 30 BELF emails in which the American customers expressed resentment toward the Chinese sales managers. These preliminary findings are compared in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Number of requests and complaints in BELF emails

Requests and Complaints in BELF Emails
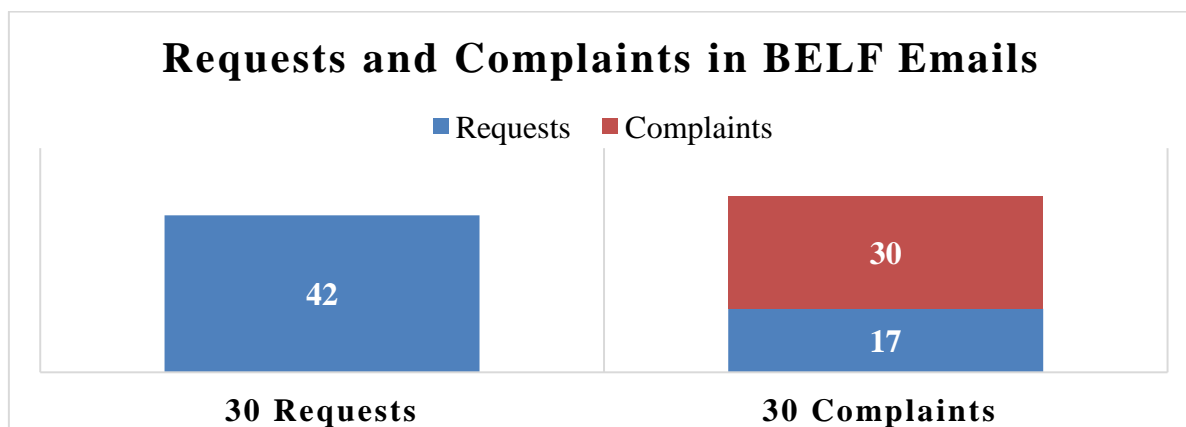
There were 42 total requests made in the 30 BELF emails, as the American customers sometimes made multiple requests in one email, as illustrated in Extract 4.

Extract 4

Can you please print and sign the attached document and resend it to me overnight and please advise when the samples for ISTA and production will be ready to be submitted to the lab for testing.

In this email, an American customer made two requests: he asked the recipient to print and sign the attached document, and then send it back. The writer also asked when the samples for ISTA and production would be ready for laboratory inspection so he could proceed with his work. As a result, the total number of requests was higher than the total number of request emails. By contrast, only 30 complaints were found in the 30 intercultural BELF emails, meaning that American customers did not make multiple complaints in one email. In line with Vasquez's (2011) major finding, "[user-generated] complaints [in the travel website—TripAdvisor] tended to occur in conjunction with other speech acts, such as requests." Not surprisingly, 17 requests, a modest form of directive speech act according to Searle (1976), were found, amounting to 56.66%. These were not classified as separate requests because the American customers expressed their resentments against the Chinese sales managers and their requests always appeared after the complaints. Briefly, the American customers usually made request in this way because they wanted the Chinese sales managers to tackle the problem, as seen in Extract 5.

Extract 5

As my engineering team is pushing, your samples completion for In-house testing is far behind the DHP expected timeline that we sent before, 01 month behind! Please advise me if you can catch up within the new timeline?

In Extract 5, an American customer expressed his resentment toward a Chinese sales manager regarding a one-month delay in the completion of the sample for in-house testing. The customer referred to the engineering team who had asked for the completed sample, since it had already exceeded the timeline. If this undue delay continued, the email writer would definitely be in trouble. To resolve the problem, a kind request followed the expression of resentment. The customer asked the sales manager whether the manager could meet the new timeline. It is clear that a complaint and a request can co-occur as a speech act set in intercultural BELF email (Murphy & Neu, 1996; Vasquez, 2011).

Apart from complaints co-occurring with a request, as illustrated in Extract 5, two other types of speech acts were found after the customers had made their complaint: a suggestion and a warning. In accordance with Vasquez (2011), other speech acts, apart from the directive requests or advice, can appear after business complaints, such as "suggestions" and "warning [of threats]." There were eight suggestions (26.67%) and five warnings (16.67%) that also appeared in conjunction with the business complaints. Examples are given below.

Extract 6

The sample test fee is a little expensive. I think it is better to have your team trained to do the ISTA 3A test. This will avoid a lot of testing costs.

In Extract 6, an American customer first complained explicitly that the sample test fee was expensive, but the complaint was not the only speech act in this email. The customer continued by offering a suggestion, saying "I think it is better to have your team trained to do the ISTA 3A test." The writer suggests a comprehensive solution to the problem, reducing the cost for the sample test. The implication is that if this problem-solving strategy is employed, both the customer and the sales manager would enjoy the benefits. The other example is when the customers gave a warning after expressing their resentment toward the sales manager.

Extract 7

Because of your frequent quality problems, we have decided to set a COPQ[1] the target for you. If the COPQ fails to reach the target value by a certain period, then we will UTG[2] the soft series.

In this extract, an American customer lodged an explicit complaint about frequent problems with the quality of mattresses, and established a 'COPQ' target. He then warned the sales manager that if he could not reach the target, they would no longer

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[1] COPQ is an acronym for the "cost of poor quality" in a business area.

[2] UTG is a business term, which means the goods will be eliminated.

accept the product from this company. Obviously, the complaint conveyed not only strong disapproval, but also warned the sales manager to improve the product quality immediately. The speech act sets (Murphy & Neu, 1996; Vasquez, 2011) used in business email perform multiple actions to solve problems, not only to express customer dissatisfaction.

5.2 Politeness Strategies used to Perform Business Requests

The American customers, when making customer-manager requests, applied various politeness strategies ranging from bald on-record to off-record strategies. Positive politeness strategies were the least frequently used. According to Xiao (2012), this type of email is known as a "collaborative business email." They are a modest directive speech act, as opposed to ordering, commanding, or prohibiting, which are fiercer than simply making a request (Searle, 1976, p. 11). Figure 4 shows the distribution of politeness strategies used when the American customers asked the Chinese sales managers to do something.

Figure 4

Distributions of politeness strategies used to perform requests
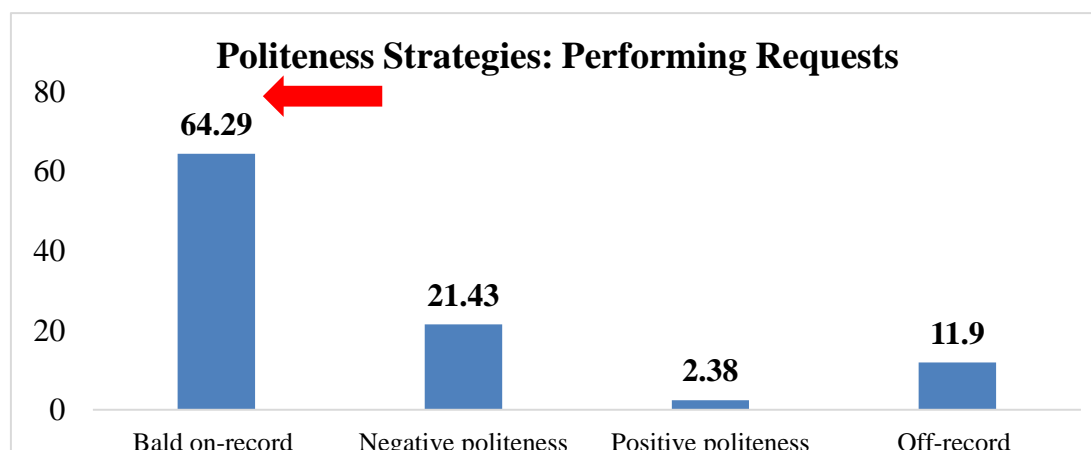
The American customers, when writing BELF emails to request Chinese sales managers to do something, normally used bald on-record strategies (i.e., 64.29%). This confirms the American cultural values prescribed by Hall's (1976) low-context culture and Hofstede's (2001) high individualism. Americans are "accustomed to doing business or interacting with people they don't know well and are not shy about approaching their prospective counterparts in order to obtain or seek information." In addition, the most common use of bald on-record strategies is facilitated by the fact that "BELF can be characterized as simplified, hybridized,..." (Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009). The use of internal or external mitigations, as well as ambiguous strategies, increases the complexity of communication and may cause miscommunication. This

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was confirmed by Liu et al. (2021) who stated that "[f]or BELF users, their level of language competency was of considerable importance as it ensures successful communication." As shown by Park et al. (2021), Korean professionals and American employees usually "make their requests more concise, using direct language." The American customers, moreover, used negative politeness strategies the second most (21.43%). Discernibly, there was a wide gap between the uses of bald on-record and negative politeness strategies. Extract 8 shows how an American customer used bald on-record strategies to make a request. In Extract 9, an customer used negative politeness strategies.

Extract 8

Advise the completion date of the final sample.

In Extract 8, the American customer asked unambiguously that the Chinese sales manager tell him the exact date for completion of the final sample. Considering the recipient of this email, whose first language is not English, the American customer made the request in English as explicitly as possible so the manager could decode the message accurately. As described by Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009) and Roshid et al. (2018), the role of English in BELF emails is 'simplified', 'flexible', 'informal', and 'similar to ELF spoken language'. Given American cultural values (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001), American customers can be expected to make their customer-manager requests as unambiguously as possible because direct requests can prevent misunderstandings. Sending a clear message is the primary objective as the Chinese recipients, despite their different language and culture, must for business reasons, cooperate with the customer. Perhaps direct and unambiguous communication in the BELF setting should not automatically be interpreted as impolite or rude.

Although negative politeness strategies were the second most commonly used, the American customers used them only 21.43% of the time. Although these requests were explicit, they were mitigated to lessen the level of face-threat. An example is given in Extract 9.

Extract 9

*Could you advise me if you can extend the below rate before the end of this year?*

In Extract 9, an American consumer made a customer-manager an unambiguous request; however, its level of face-threat was lessened by the conventionally polite phrase "could you" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 131-213). This gives an option to the recipient, lessening the force of the request. In addition, the presence of a hypothetical lexicon 'if' made the request more probable. Despite the direct request, its face-threat was diminished so the decoder of this email would feel less face-threat.

5.3 Politeness Strategies used to Perform Business Complaints

There were four politeness strategies, both explicit and implicit, that the American customers used when making customer-manager complaints. According to Xiao (2012), this is known as "conflictive business email" because the customers felt dissatisfied with business operations, product quality, and/or management systems. Then they expressed their resentment toward the company representatives. Negative politeness strategies were the most frequently used, followed by the bald on-record strategies. The difference between them was only 6.66%, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Distributions of politeness strategies used in complaint emails
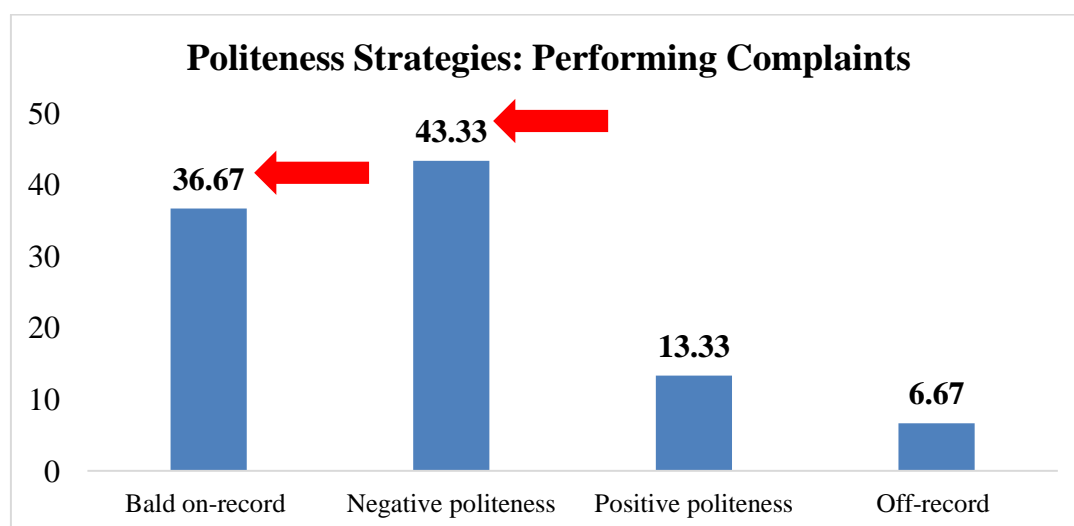
When the American customers wrote their BELF emails to express resentments to the Chinese sales managers, the customers normally (80%) used unambiguous politeness strategies. However, they commonly mitigated their complaints with some modifications to lessen the threat of their resentments (i.e., 43.33%). One example of the negative politeness sub-strategies frequently used by the American customers was 'apology', which was described as to "communicate the speaker's want" without wanting "to impinge on the hearer" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 131). The use of apology in front of the complaint is illustrated in Extract 10.

Extract 10

*I'm sorry to say this. You may feel offended, however, we couldn't let NAP be launched under this false qua*lity.

[63]

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In this extract, an American customer prefaced his complaint with an apology: "I'm sorry to say this". This sentence marks the writer's intention not to impinge on the recipient of this email as the recipient may resent the imposition. In the propositional content, the writer also used the modal auxiliary 'could' to rule out any possibility of launching the NAP given the low quality of the product. Although this complaint was mitigated by some external and internal modifications (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 131-213), this finding confirms what Alafnan (2014) observed in the literature, that Malaysian personnel utilized negative politeness strategies to develop bonds and closer relationships with their recipients when expressing resentment toward their customers. Lindgren (2014), argued that "the level of formality and directness seemed to depend on the sender [of business email]." This suggests that the American customers when dealing with "conflictive business email" also softened their complaints.

In addition, 36.67% of American customers complained without using any mitigating devices. Their complaints were unambiguous. Extract 11 shows how an American customer expressed his complaint.

Extract 11

The quality of mattress samples is poor.

Extract 11 shows an American customer using a bald on-record strategy to give a negative evaluation of the quality of the mattress samples. The linking verb 'is' shows that the subject complement, the predicative adjective 'poor', modifies the quality of the mattress samples. The recipient of this email message would have no difficulty understanding the writer's intent (Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; Roshid et al., 2018). The use of this unambiguous complaint can be attributed to the cultural values of the writer, described by Hall (1976) as low-context, and by Hofstede (2001) as high individualism. In the business sphere, Americans can be expected to be 'informal' and "direct to a certain degree". They are "accustomed to doing business or interacting with people they don't know well" and they "are not shy about approaching their prospective counterparts in order to obtain or seek information."

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the intercultural BELF emails shows how customer requests and complaints were made in business emails. Dealing with the directive speech act, the American customers sometimes asked the Chinese sales managers, in one email, to take a few actions. Further analysis showed that the bald on-record strategies were most commonly used, accounting for nearly two-thirds (64.29%). The Americans were most likely to use bald on-record strategies because requests formulated unambiguously are intelligible to Chinese sales managers, whose language and cultural backgrounds are

different from those of the customers. In addition, the lack of ambiguity was attributed to the cultural values of the Americans, described by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001) as low-context and high individualism, respectively. Another factor may relate to English used in BELF emails (Roshid et al., 2018). It is usually simplified, flexible, informal, personalized, and similar to ELF spoken discourse. These features of English in business requests help ensure a high level of intelligibility for the message decoders so they would have no difficulty understanding the customers' requests and would therefore cooperate with the customers. Complaints, expressive speech acts, were performed to express resentment toward the Chinese sales managers because they had failed to do something in the first place. In these emails, complaints always occurred in conjunction with requests, suggestions, and warnings, producing what Murphy and Neu (1996) and Vasquez (2011) called "speech act sets". Obviously, when the customers complained, they also looked for comprehensive solutions to problems. Results showed that negative politeness strategies were used most frequently (43.33%). Although the complaints were mitigated, they were performed rather unambiguously.

Although the study was carefully designed, there remain a few aspects that could be explored in more depth. The fact that the data were from a single furniture company is a primary limitation. Therefore, the results from this study cannot be generalized to other fields, even in a comparable context. As a result, rather than focusing on a single company with a particular business type, future researchers might consider gathering data from a variety of companies. In addition, the researchers did not interview the American customers to find out why they preferred the bald on-record politeness strategies when making requests and why they used the negative politeness strategies most frequently when making complaints. Future researchers can investigate the reasons for this choice of politeness strategies.

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