

A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF COMPLAINT STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: EVIDENCE FROM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic realization and implementation of complaint strategies in academic discourse, focusing on how university students articulate dissatisfaction in peer and instructor interactions. Based on naturally occurring data and simulated responses collected from students at universities in North Macedonia, the analysis applies a speech act framework incorporating politeness theory and a taxonomy of complaints. The study explores the linguistic forms, mitigation devices, and face-saving strategies employed by students when expressing complaints in formal and semi-formal academic settings. Results reveal a strong preference for indirect, hedged, and positively polite complaint forms, especially when power asymmetries are salient, such as in communication with faculty members. In contrast, peer-to-peer complaints show more variation, including instances of directness framed by humor or solidarity. These findings highlight the role of cultural norms, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional context in shaping complaint behavior. This study also addresses a notable gap in the existing literature by investigating the complaint behavior of university students in North Macedonia, with an emphasis on interethnic and intercultural dimensions in educational contexts. Through the analysis of both naturally occurring and simulated interactions, the research examines the linguistic and pragmatic strategies employed in the formulation and mitigation of complaints, thereby shedding light on underlying patterns of pragmatic competence and culturally influenced communicative norms. The findings contribute to the growing field of intercultural pragmatics by demonstrating how students navigate the tension between expressing dissatisfaction and maintaining social harmony in multilingual academic environments.

Key words: *Pragmatics, complaint strategies, academic discourse, Politeness theory, intercultural communication*

1. Introduction

Complaints represent a significant speech act within interpersonal communication, often functioning as a means of expressing dissatisfaction, asserting social norms, or negotiating responsibilities in a given context. In academic settings, particularly in peer-to-peer or student-instructor interactions, complaints are not only frequent but

also pragmatically complex, as they require the speaker to navigate between expressing discontent and maintaining politeness, face, and social harmony. This tension makes complaints an especially rich site for the exploration of pragmatic strategies and interpersonal dynamics.

The study of complaints from a pragmatic perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how language users manage the social act of criticism or dissatisfaction in culturally and institutionally sensitive contexts. Drawing on the framework of speech act theory (Searle, 1975) and politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), this paper examines the linguistic forms, politeness strategies, and interpersonal considerations involved in student complaints within academic discourse. Previous researchers (e.g., Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987; Boxer, 1993) have emphasized the variability of complaint realizations across languages and contexts, but relatively little attention has been paid to complaint strategies among university students in multilingual or multicultural academic environments, particularly in the Balkan region.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing complaint behavior among university students in North Macedonia, focusing on interethnic and intercultural dimensions in classrooms. The study draws on naturally occurring and simulated interactions to investigate how students construct and mitigate complaints, and how these strategies reflect broader patterns of pragmatic competence and socio-cultural expectations.

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. What types of complaint strategies do university students use in academic discourse?
2. What politeness strategies accompany these complaints?
3. Are there observable interethnic or pragmatic style differences among students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

By identifying and analyzing these patterns, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how pragmatics operates in real-life academic communication and to offer insights for improving intercultural competence in multilingual education settings.

2. Defining and Conceptualizing *Complaints* in Speech Act Theory

Unlike other speech acts such as requests or apologies, complaints are difficult to define due to their diverse forms and the absence of clear linguistic or contextual markers (Laforest, 2002; Edwards, 2005; Vasquez, 2011). As Edwards (2005) points out, speakers often avoid labeling their utterances as complaints, which further complicates their identification. Despite this ambiguity, scholars have offered various definitions, ranging from broad interpretations — such as any expression of dissatisfaction (Heinemann and Traverso, 2009) — to narrower ones requiring unmet expectations (Laforest, 2002; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987). A complaint is thus generally viewed as a response to a perceived offense, where the speaker expresses dissatisfaction with the hearer's actions. This study adopts Trosborg's (1995) definition, aligning with the more specific conceptualizations of Laforest (2002) and Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), treating complaints as illocutionary acts that convey negative evaluation toward the hearer.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory classifies complaints as face-threatening acts because they involve expressing negative evaluations about a perceived offense committed by the hearer. Such acts endanger both the positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and the negative face (the desire to be free from imposition) of the complaine. This is particularly evident when the speaker explicitly asks for a correction or requests that the behavior will not be repeated (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Chen et al., 2011).

Given their threatening potential, complaints vary in directness. Complainers often adjust the degree of directness to preserve face and maintain social harmony during interaction (Meinl, 2010). As Trosborg (1995) notes, the level of directness plays a crucial role in shaping the interpersonal dynamics of complaints. Trosborg summarizes the issue of directness level of complaints as follows:

... in a complaint, the utterance may only indirectly express the complainer's ill feelings towards the complaine, or these may be phrased in terms of a straightforward accusation or in terms of moral judgment. In the former case, the complaine has to perform an inference process to establish a link between what is said and what is intended on the basis of the situational context. By choosing a particular level of directness, the complainer decides on the conflict potential of the complaint (1995, p. 315).

Many existing taxonomies categorize complaint strategies according to their degree of directness (e.g., House and Kasper, 1981; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987; Trosborg, 1995; Meinl, 2010; Albert, 2016), often assuming a correlation between indirectness and politeness. In this view, the complainer adjusts the complaint's directness based on factors such as the severity of the offense, social distance, and relative power (Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, this correlation has been questioned. Critics argue that: a) politeness is not a universal orientation applicable in all contexts (Geluykens, 2007); b) most taxonomies are based on English-language data and may not be transferable across cultures (Grainger and Mills, 2016); and c) the perceived level of directness by the hearer may differ from the speaker's intention (Decock and Depraetere, 2018). These critiques have also influenced the design of the complaint strategy taxonomy adopted in this study.

Over the past few decades, the complex nature of complaints has prompted researchers to develop various taxonomies aimed at a deeper analysis of this speech act (House and Kasper, 1981; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987; Trosborg, 1995; Murphy and Neu, 1996; Meinl, 2010; Chen et al., 2011; Decock and Spiessens, 2017). According to Searle's (1976) classification, complaints can be viewed as expressive acts since they primarily convey the speaker's feelings about the offense or the offender. However, Wagner (2001, as cited in Decock and Spiessens) argues that complaints also serve a directive function. Beyond expressing dissatisfaction or unmet expectations, complainers frequently seek some form of redress or compensation (Decock and Spiessens, 2017). Thus, complaints embody both expressive and directive elements. This dual nature is acknowledged in several complaint taxonomies (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Decock and Spiessens, 2017), while others adopt a more integrated, holistic perspective (e.g., Meinl, 2010; Chen et al., 2011).

3.Methodology

This study involves university students enrolled in language and communication-related programs at the Goce Delcev University in Stip and at the South East European University in Tetovo, the Republic of North Macedonia. Participants came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including both native and non-native speakers of Macedonian and Albanian, all of whom are also proficient in German and English as foreign languages. A total of 70 students participated in the study, representing a mix of age groups, genders, and fields of study.

The primary research instrument was a self-designed questionnaire comprising four sections:

1. *Background information:* Collected demographic and linguistic data, such as age, gender, native language, additional foreign languages spoken, academic program, and experience with learning German or English as a foreign language.
2. *Attitudes and preferences:* Included closed-ended questions to assess students' views on the acceptability of complaints in academic contexts, their preferred level of directness when addressing peers, and commonly used strategies in complaint situations (e.g., use of softeners, emotional expression, or humor).
3. *Situational responses:* Comprised open-ended scenarios requiring participants to describe how they would respond in various complaint-related situations (e.g., unfair grading, unclear instructions, disruptive group members).
4. *Reflections:* Included two open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants' self-awareness of cultural and linguistic influences on their complaint behavior, as well as the perceived importance of politeness in academic complaint contexts.

The questionnaire was distributed online (or in paper form) to students at two aforementioned universities. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Respondents were encouraged to answer all sections thoughtfully and honestly.

Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages) to identify trends in students' attitudes and strategies. The results were visualized through tables and bar charts for clearer interpretation. Qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, expressions of politeness, directness levels, and cultural influences in students' responses.

The study followed ethical research standards, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

4. Background Information — Description and Analysis (Section 1)

The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic and linguistic background information from participants (70 students) enrolled at Goce Delcev University in Stip and the South East European University in Tetovo in the Republic of North Macedonia. The respondents, aged 18 and 27, represented a diverse student population from various faculties and academic programs. A majority of participants were female, reflecting a gender imbalance often observed in language-related disciplines. Most respondents reported multilingual competence, with Albanian or Macedonian as their native language and varying levels of proficiency in additional languages, including German and English as foreign languages. This section provided crucial contextual information for analyzing patterns of pragmatic behavior in relation to individual linguistic profiles and institutional settings.

5. Attitudes and Preferences (Section 2)

This section explored students' attitudes toward complaint behavior in academic contexts and their preferred communicative strategies. The majority of participants indicated that complaining to a teacher about a poor grade is acceptable, particularly when justified by strong reasons, reflecting a tendency to balance assertiveness with respect for authority. In peer interactions, most students reported being somewhat direct when complaining about group work, suggesting a moderated style of expression influenced by social proximity and group dynamics. When asked about specific complaint strategies, respondents most frequently selected options such as providing reasons, using softeners, and starting with a compliment, indicating a preference for politeness and mitigation in potentially face-threatening acts. Fewer students admitted to using direct emotional expressions or sarcasm, which implies a general orientation toward maintaining social harmony and avoiding conflict. These responses highlight a pragmatic awareness of context-sensitive politeness strategies and illustrate the influence of both individual agency and culturally shaped norms in complaint behavior.

Table 1: Acceptability of Complaining to a Teacher About a Grade

Question	Response Option	Percentage (%)
Acceptable to complain to teacher	Yes, always	20%
	Sometimes, if reason is strong	60%
	Not appropriate	15%
	Other	5%

As shown in Table (1), the majority of respondents (60%) reported that they would complain to a teacher only if the reason is strong, indicating a pragmatic and situational approach to authority. A smaller percentage (20%) said they would always complain, while 15% found such behavior inappropriate. An additional 5% selected "Other," reflecting a small but noteworthy diversity in attitudes.

Table 2: Directness when Complaining to Classmates

Question	Response option	Percentage (%)
Directness when complaining to classmates	Very direct	10%
	Somewhat direct	50%
	Indirect	30%
	Avoid complaining	10%

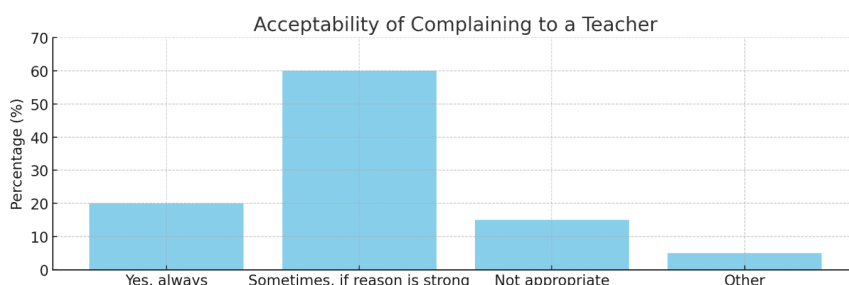
Regarding peer interactions, half of the students (50%) indicated they would be “somewhat direct,” whereas 30% preferred an indirect approach (see Table 2). Only 10% chose to be very direct, and another 10% stated they avoid complaining altogether. This suggests a tendency toward indirectness and face-saving strategies in peer communication.

Table 3: Complaint Strategies (*Multiple responses allowed*)

Question	Response option	Percentage (%)
Strategies used when expressing complaint	Compliment first	30%
	Use softeners	45%
	Apologize first	25%
	Give reasons	60%
	Express emotions	20%
	Use humor	15%
	Other	5%

Table (3) illustrates a range of pragmatic strategies used when formulating complaints. The most common strategies were giving reasons or explanations (60%) and using softeners (45%). Other frequent tactics included starting with a compliment (30%) or apologizing beforehand (25%). Less frequent were expressing emotions directly (20%) and employing humor or sarcasm (15%). The following chart (1) provides a summarized overview of the key findings presented in the tables, offering a visual representation of the complaint strategy patterns identified in the study.

Complaint Behavior in Academic Settings: Student Responses



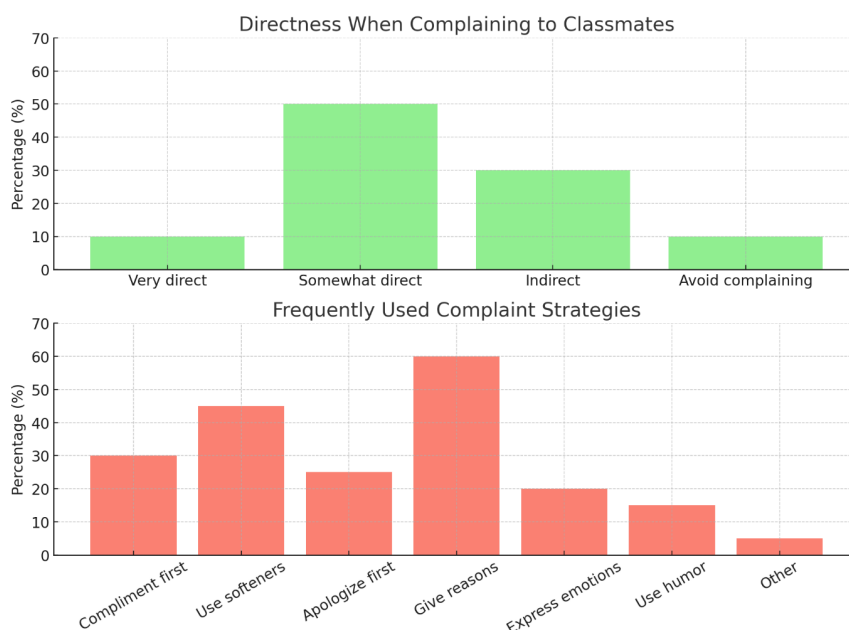


Chart 1: Patterns of complaining in academic settings: a comparative overview of acceptability, directness, and pragmatic strategies

The Chi-square test as a statistical method was used to determine whether there is a significant association between categorical variables, which in this study helps analyze the relationship between students' ethnic backgrounds and their perceptions of politeness strategies. This test of independence was conducted to examine whether there was a significant association between students' ethnic background (Macedonian, Albanian) and their perception of the acceptability of complaining to a teacher about a grade. The results showed a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(3, N = 70) = 8.21, p = .042$.

Macedonian students were more likely to consider complaining acceptable “always” or “if the reason is strong,” whereas Albanian students more frequently selected “not appropriate” or expressed hesitation (“other”). This suggests that Macedonian students may feel more confident asserting their views within academic hierarchies, while Albanian students demonstrate greater cultural deference to authority figures. Table (4) presents the results of this scenario.

Table 4: Acceptability of Complaining to a Teacher

Response option	Macedonian (N)	Albanian (N)	Total (N)
Yes, always	8	6	14
Sometimes	22	20	42
Not appropriate	3	7	10
Other	2	2	4
Total	35	35	70

A Chi-square test was also performed to determine whether Macedonian and Albanian students differed in their preferred level of directness when complaining to classmates. The test yielded a statistically non-significant result, $\chi^2(3, N = 70) = 4.17, p = .244$. While no significant difference was found, the descriptive data indicated that Macedonian students were slightly more likely to report being “very direct” or “somewhat direct,” whereas Albanian students more often opted for “indirect” responses. This pattern aligns with broader intercultural tendencies toward directness in Macedonian and indirectness in Albanian communicative styles. Table (5) presents the results of this scenario.

Table 5: Directness when Complaining to Classmates

Directness Option	Macedonian (N)	Albanian (N)
Very direct	4	3
Somewhat direct	18	17
Indirect	10	11
Avoid complaining	3	4
Total	35	35

Chi-square tests were also run for each individual strategy to examine group differences in how Macedonian and Albanian students formulate complaints. Results showed a significant association for the strategy “Use softeners,” $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 4.38, p = .036$, and “Express emotions,” $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 5.12, p = .024$. Macedonian students were more likely to express emotions and give direct reasons for their complaints, whereas Albanian students more frequently relied on softeners and formal politeness strategies. These findings support the observation that Macedonian students balance assertiveness with politeness, while Albanian students prioritize face-saving and deference in line with collectivist cultural norms. Table (6) presents the results of this scenario.

Table 6: Complaint Strategies (multiple responses allowed)

Group	Used softeners	Did not use	Total
Macedonian	14	21	35
Albanian	18	17	35

6. Intercultural Pragmatics and Politeness in Academic Complaint Scenarios (Section 3)

To analyze the responses to Section (3), we employed qualitative content analysis — supported by pragmatic theory (e.g., speech act theory, politeness theory by Brown and Levinson, 1987) and intercultural pragmatics as the study involves students from different linguistic/cultural backgrounds (Macedonian/Albanian).

The analysis of each situation follows a structured framework. First, the speech act is identified (e.g., complaint, request, or reprimand), followed by an examination of the politeness strategy employed, such as positive or negative politeness, off-record,

or bald-on-record. The analysis also considers the degree of directness or indirectness, any intercultural or linguistic patterns, and the emotional tone of the response, such as whether it is assertive, mitigated, or apologetic.

Scenario (1) – “Challenging Authority: Responding to an Unfair Grade”

For our analysis, the first situation of the third section was interesting because we observed some differences in language use, formality, politeness, and face concerns between the Macedonian- and Albanian-speaking students. In the scenario (1) where a student receives an unfair grade from a professor, the common speech act is a complaint or a request for justification. A direct response was commonly used, such as: *“I think the grade is unfair. Can you explain why I lost points?”*, while a more indirect or off-record approach was: *“I wasn’t sure why I got that grade...”*. The predominant politeness strategy is negative politeness, as students tend to mitigate their complaints to show respect for the authority figure, and non-native speakers may use more formal or overly polite language.

Based on the responses received for Scenario (1), Macedonian students tend to be somewhat more direct in expressing dissatisfaction. They often use clear, straightforward complaints or requests for justification, such as: *“I think the grade is unfair. Can you explain why I lost points?”* This reflects a relatively balanced approach between asserting their viewpoint and respecting the professor’s authority. On the other hand, Albanian students often prefer a more indirect or cautious way to raise the issue, favoring subtle hints or off-record comments like: *“I wasn’t sure why I got that grade...”* This indirectness serves to avoid potential confrontation and maintain harmony, reflecting cultural norms that value preserving social relationships and showing deference.

Macedonian students typically employ negative politeness by softening their complaints with polite mitigators or modal verbs (e.g., *“I think,” “Could you please”*), to minimize imposition on the professor while maintaining assertiveness. Their language may blend informal tones with respect, especially in familiar academic environments. Albanian students tend to use stronger negative politeness strategies, often incorporating formal language and honorifics to show greater respect for authority. They may also use elaborate politeness markers and hesitation devices to reduce the face threat inherent in complaints, which can result in more formulaic and courteous expressions. This scenario was particularly interesting for analysing the expression of emotions and face concerns, as well as the level of language formality used in students’ responses to receiving an unfair grade from a professor.

A) Expression of emotions and face concerns

Macedonian students may express mild frustration or disappointment more openly but still carefully, balancing honesty with politeness. Their complaints may include explanations or justifications reflecting their academic self-confidence. Albanian students often downplay emotional expressions when addressing the professor, emphasizing respect and humility. This restraint aligns with cultural norms prioritizing collectivist values and the maintenance of social hierarchy.

B) Use of language formality

Macedonian students might switch between formal and informal language depending on the professor's attitude and the institutional context, showing flexibility in register, while Albanian students more consistently use formal and respectful language, regardless of the professor's tone, as a way to ensure politeness and avoid conflict.

Scenario (2) – “Addressing peer responsibility: Responding to incomplete group work”

To analyze responses to Scenario (2), we also apply a qualitative pragmatic analysis grounded in speech act theory and politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), taking into consideration the intercultural pragmatics due to the ethnolinguistic diversity of the participants (Macedonian and Albanian students). This scenario — addressing a group member's failure to complete their part of a project — typically involves a complaint or reprimand speech act, where face concerns and politeness strategies are especially salient.

In Scenario (2), responses revealed clear differences between Macedonian and Albanian students in how they balance assertiveness and politeness when addressing a peer. Macedonian students tend to use more direct language to express dissatisfaction or request accountability, for example: *“You didn't finish your part; we need you to complete it by tomorrow.”* This approach often combines straightforwardness with mitigating politeness markers (*“please,” “could you”*), reflecting a pragmatic style that balances clarity and respect within peer interactions.

Conversely, Albanian students more frequently adopt indirect or mitigated approaches to avoid open conflict, employing strategies such as hinting or emphasizing collective responsibility: *“Maybe we could all check if everyone finished their parts?”* or *“I'm not sure if your section is done yet.”* These responses align with cultural values emphasizing group harmony and deference, where negative politeness is stronger and formal language is often used even in peer settings.

A) Expression of emotions and face concerns

Macedonian students may express mild frustration openly but temper it with politeness to preserve peer relationships. Their complaints tend to be framed as requests or reminders rather than accusations, showing awareness of face needs both for themselves and the addressee. Albanian students often avoid direct emotional expressions of dissatisfaction, preferring to maintain social harmony and avoid embarrassing the group member, which reflects collectivist cultural norms that prioritize face-saving.

B) Use of language formality

Macedonian students exhibit flexibility in formality, varying their register based on the familiarity with the peer and the immediacy of the task. Albanian students, on the other hand, generally maintain a more formal and deferential tone, even with classmates, to demonstrate respect and minimize interpersonal tension.

Scenario (3): "Request for clarification (unclear teacher instructions)"

This scenario involves a speech act of request or clarification, where students must navigate the asymmetrical teacher–student relationship.

A) Expression of emotions and face concerns

Macedonian students tend to express confusion more directly, using formulations like: *"I didn't quite understand the instructions — could you clarify?"* This shows moderate assertiveness and reflects a willingness to challenge ambiguity while maintaining politeness. Albanian students, however, are more likely to soften their requests and avoid direct questioning to preserve the teacher's positive face, using expressions like: *"Sorry if I missed something, but I wasn't sure about the task."*

B) Use of language formality

Macedonian students usually use semi-formal or informal language, particularly in class, depending on familiarity with the teacher. In contrast, Albanian students consistently use formal and deferential language (especially in written emails), reflecting cultural norms of respect toward authority and a preference for indirectness in teacher–student communication. This scenario illustrates how pragmatic choices in requests are shaped by both the institutional context and cultural expectations surrounding authority, clarity, and politeness.

Scenario (4): "Managing peer interruptions in group work"

This scenario involves the speech act of complaint or reprimand, where students are expected to respond to peer behavior that disrupts collaborative dynamics.

A) Expression of emotions and face concerns

It has been noticed that the Macedonian students often adopt a more assertive tone, expressing irritation or setting boundaries with statements like: *"Can I please finish my point first?"* or *"Let me speak, and then I'll hear you out."* These responses indicate an emphasis on fairness and individual voice, while still employing polite mitigators. In contrast, Albanian students tend to be more indirect and emotionally restrained, using face-saving strategies such as softening or deflection: *"Maybe we can take turns so everyone has a chance to speak?"* This reflects a preference for preserving group harmony and avoiding confrontation.

B) Use of language formality

Macedonian students may use informal and spontaneous language, particularly in peer contexts, prioritizing clarity and direct communication. Albanian students typically maintain a more formal or neutral tone, even with peers, using polite forms and indirect cues to address disruptive behavior. This scenario highlights cultural variation in managing peer conflict, with Macedonian students favoring direct politeness strategies and Albanian students preferring indirect, deferential approaches to uphold group cohesion.

Analysis of all four scenarios reveals clear intercultural differences emerge in how Macedonian and Albanian students employ pragmatic strategies to manage complaints, requests, and interpersonal challenges in academic settings. While both groups demonstrate awareness of politeness norms, Macedonian students tend to adopt more direct and assertive communicative styles, particularly when addressing perceived unfairness or peer-related issues. In contrast, Albanian students consistently favor indirectness, formal language, and face-saving strategies, reflecting greater deference to authority and sensitivity to group harmony. These patterns indicate that pragmatic behavior in academic discourse is shaped not only by individual linguistic competence but also by culturally embedded norms related to hierarchy, conflict avoidance, and emotional expression. Understanding these differences is essential for fostering effective and respectful communication in multilingual and multicultural learning environments.

7. Cultural Perceptions of Complaints and Politeness in Academic Contexts: A Comparison of Macedonian and Albanian Students (Section 4)

Section (4) of the questionnaire consists of two open-ended questions designed to elicit students' metapragmatic reflections on the act of complaining in academic contexts, with a particular focus on the role of politeness. These questions aim to uncover how students perceive and perform complaints within hierarchically structured institutional settings, and whether their responses reflect culturally specific communicative norms. The following sample responses illustrate how Macedonian and Albanian students perceive the influence of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds on their ways of complaining in academic settings.

One student's answer to the first question: *"Yes, I think my way of complaining is influenced by my culture. In Macedonian, we often express dissatisfaction openly but still use softeners or explanations. It's not too direct, but we don't hide our feelings either."* serves as a valuable example of metapragmatic reflection. The student is explicitly discussing how he/she performs the speech act of complaining, positioning the response as a self-assessment of culturally embedded communication norms, particularly in relation to the expression of dissatisfaction.

A closer look at the student's formulation reveals several key pragmatic features. First, the person clearly acknowledges that their complaint behavior is shaped by their cultural background. This awareness indicates an understanding of cultural pragmatics and suggests that the person/speaker has been exposed to or has reflected on intercultural differences in communication.

Secondly, the student describes a balance between openness and mitigation. The phrase *"we often express dissatisfaction openly"* indicate a moderately direct communicative style, where dissatisfaction is not avoided. However, this directness is qualified by the use of *"softeners or explanations"*, which implies the employment of mitigation strategies such as hedges, justifications, or conditional language. This reflects an awareness of how to maintain politeness while still addressing a problem. Furthermore, the clause *"It's not too direct, but we don't hide our feelings either"*

emphasizes a careful balance: the communication is not blunt — thus avoiding impoliteness — but also not excessively indirect, which could lead to ambiguity or communicative inefficiency. This balanced approach suggests that the speaker seeks to be clear without being confrontational, in line with many sociocultural norms found in Macedonian communication.

From the perspective of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), this statement illustrates a positive politeness strategy. The speaker acknowledges the potentially face-threatening nature of complaints but explains that these are typically delivered in a way that maintains solidarity and minimizes offense. The use of softeners and explanations supports the interpretation that the speaker adheres to sociopragmatic norms common in Macedonian culture, where emotional openness is accepted but framed with relational sensitivity.

The response also reveals important intercultural pragmatic implications. The described style of complaining differs from more direct cultural styles (e.g., in some Germanic or Scandinavian cultures) and from more indirect styles (e.g., in East Asian or Arab cultures). The Macedonian approach, as characterized by the student, is situationally direct, emotionally expressive, and contextually sensitive. Complaints are not suppressed, but are managed in a way that acknowledges both the speaker's feelings and the listener's face needs.

From a cultural dimension perspective, this communicative behavior reflects a moderate power distance — complaints are permitted, even in hierarchical relationships, but are framed with politeness. It also suggests a low- to medium-context culture (Hall, 1976), where meaning is conveyed relatively explicitly, although still with an emphasis on relational harmony. In Hofstede's terms (1980), this reflects a blend of collectivist tendencies (valuing group cohesion and harmony) and expressive individualism (allowing for personal expression within social norms).

The statement implies several linguistic features typical of Macedonian complaint strategies. These may include the use of modals and conditional forms (e.g., *"It would be better if..."*), diminutives and hedging particles (e.g., *"I just wanted to say..."*), as well as emotionally marked intonation and narrative structures that allow complaints to be embedded in broader conversational contexts.

In conclusion, the student demonstrates a nuanced understanding of their native pragmatic style. Their approach can be summarized as emotionally open, yet mitigated; direct enough to express dissatisfaction, yet polite enough to preserve social harmony. This culturally situated use of specific complaint strategies reflects a high level of metapragmatic awareness, which is a key component of intercultural communicative competence. Such insight is particularly valuable for learners navigating different politeness conventions in second language (L2) contexts and for educators designing pragmatic instruction in multilingual classrooms.

The statement *"Yes, I think my way of complaining is influenced by my culture. In Albanian, we try not to complain directly, especially to people we respect. I usually hint that something is wrong or use humor to show that I am not satisfied. Being too direct*

can be seen as rude or disrespectful.” is a clear example of metapragmatic reflection, where the student consciously analyzes how culturally specific norms shape their use of the speech act of complaining. The response highlights a strong tendency toward indirectness, especially in hierarchically sensitive contexts, where direct confrontation is avoided in favor of hints, humor, or non-verbal cues. This reflects negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987), aimed at minimizing face threats and preserving interpersonal harmony — particularly when speaking to superiors or respected figures. From an intercultural pragmatics perspective, the student’s description aligns with features of high-context communication (Hall, 1976), where meaning is conveyed through implication, shared understanding, and subtle contextual cues rather than direct language. In terms of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions, this communicative behavior reflects a collectivist orientation, a higher power distance, and a feminine cultural value system, emphasizing empathy, modesty, and relationship maintenance over assertiveness. Although expressed in English, the response implicitly points to linguistic patterns typical of Albanian, such as modesty formulas, mitigated expressions, and rhetorical strategies. Overall, the student demonstrates a culturally grounded awareness of complaint behavior — emotionally expressive yet relationally cautious — highlighting the importance of intercultural communicative competence, particularly in multilingual or L2 learning contexts.

In the following paragraphs, we analyze students’ answers to the second question — *“In your opinion, is politeness important when complaining in academic settings? Why or why not?”* — highlighting key pragmatic features and pointing out the differences in responses between Macedonian and Albanian students.

In our analysis and discussion, we focus exclusively on those responses that were particularly relevant and insightful for the purposes of our research. The response¹ of the Macedonian student illustrates a clear metapragmatic awareness, as the student reflects not only on their communicative behavior but also situates it within a cultural framework. The response provides insight into how social norms and hierarchical sensitivities shape complaint strategies in academic contexts in North Macedonia.

The student’s mention of the “social unspoken rule” against openly criticizing authority figures, such as professors or academic institutions, is consistent with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, particularly the notion of negative politeness. Here, politeness serves as a strategy to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as complaints, especially when directed toward someone with higher social power.

The phrase *“we usually complain in a more polite, indirect way”* implies a preference for indirectness, which aligns with Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimension of power distance. Macedonian society typically exhibits moderate to high power distance, meaning students may feel the need to soften critiques to preserve respect and avoid

¹ “Yes, I believe politeness is important when complaining in academic settings. In our culture, it’s not acceptable to openly criticize professors or institutions, so we usually complain in a more polite, indirect way. For example, we might say something like ‘Maybe this could be improved’ instead of directly saying ‘This is bad.’”

confrontation with authority figures. The example “*Maybe this could be improved*” is a classic case of hedging, which functions pragmatically to reduce the imposition of the complaint. This indirect speech act avoids assigning blame and instead presents the critique as a suggestion — a form of mitigation strategy common in many Balkan cultures.

Moreover, this communicative strategy reflects contextual sensitivity typical of Hall’s (1976) low- to medium-context cultures: the message is clear, yet still framed within socially appropriate cues that signal politeness and deference. The response reflects a balancing act between honesty and harmony, where the student feels a need to express dissatisfaction but only through culturally sanctioned, softened forms. In terms of linguistic realization, such complaints in Macedonian often use modals (e.g., “*maybe it should...*”) and conditional structures to downplay the assertion. These structures allow the speaker to maintain relational harmony while still voicing concerns.

The Albanian student’s response² displays a strong orientation toward deference and relational politeness, revealing deep cultural underpinnings in Albanian communicative norms. The statement reflects a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies, showing both respect and solidarity. The remark “*we don’t go straight to the point*” suggests a preference for indirectness and mitigation, key features of politeness in hierarchical relationships. This aligns with Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, particularly negative politeness, as the student aims to avoid imposing on the professor’s face.

At the same time, the student mentions “*we might first thank them for their effort*”, which is indicative of positive politeness — strategies that emphasize common ground, appreciation, and mutual respect. This combination is strategic: the speaker softens the complaint through gratitude and then eases into criticism, maintaining the social bond.

This pragmatic behavior is culturally rooted in Albanian values, which often emphasize respect for elders and authority, a trait consistent with high power distance societies. Within the academic hierarchy, students are expected to show reverence toward professors, and complaints are typically framed to preserve this dynamic. Furthermore, the phrase “*Even if something is not fair...*” acknowledges that complaints may be justified, but politeness still takes precedence. This shows a cultural tension between assertiveness and harmony, where truth is subordinated to relational appropriateness.

In terms of linguistic strategies, Albanian complaints often begin with expressions of appreciation or honorifics (e.g., “*Thank you for your dedication...*”), followed by modulated suggestions (e.g., “*Maybe it can be improved...*”). These reflect both strategic politeness and contextual adaptation. From an intercultural pragmatic perspective, this style of complaining reflects a collectivist orientation where maintaining group harmony and saving face — both one’s own and the other’s — is prioritized over direct expression. The response also suggests emotional regulation, where negative feelings are channeled through culturally acceptable forms.

² “Yes, I think it’s necessary to be polite when complaining in academic settings. Even if something is not fair, we don’t go straight to the point. We try to show respect, especially to professors. For example, we might first thank them for their effort and then mention what could be better.”

8. Importance of Politeness when Complaining in Academic Settings

Politeness plays a crucial role in shaping how complaints are expressed within academic environments, where hierarchical relationships and institutional norms influence communicative behavior. Examining the pragmatic strategies students use when formulating complaints reveals not only their awareness of social conventions but also culturally embedded attitudes toward authority and conflict. Macedonian students generally view politeness as important because it maintains respect for the professor’s authority and ensures that complaints are received constructively. Politeness serves as a pragmatic tool to avoid conflict and preserve a positive student-teacher relationship. The emphasis is on being respectful but also clear and assertive.

In contrast, Albanian students regard the politeness as essential, often more strongly emphasized than by Macedonian students, because it reflects cultural values of respect for authority and helps maintain good interpersonal relationships. Politeness protects both the speaker’s and the professor’s face, avoiding potential embarrassment or offense. Albanian students thus tend to prioritize formal politeness and indirectness to navigate academic hierarchies sensitively. While politeness is important to both groups, Albanian students attach greater weight to formal politeness and indirectness as essential to preserving social harmony, whereas Macedonian students balance politeness with clear communication and assertiveness.

Table 7: Overview of Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects of Complaints Among Macedonian and Albanian Students in Academic Settings

Aspect	Macedonian students	Albanian students
Complaint style	Moderately direct but polite, using mitigation	Indirect and formal, avoiding directness
Cultural influence ³	Moderate emphasis on clarity and respect	Strong emphasis on face-saving and hierarchy
Politeness in complaints ⁴	Important for respect and constructive dialogue	Crucial for respect, social harmony, and face protection
Communication style	Assertive with softened language	Cautious, deferential, and formal

9. Conclusion

The analysis of the questionnaire responses reveals notable differences in the complaint behavior of Macedonian and Albanian students in academic settings, shaped by their respective cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While both groups demonstrate

³ Both groups acknowledge the influence of culture and language, but Macedonian students lean towards balanced directness, while Albanian students prefer indirectness and formality.

⁴ Both emphasize politeness as a key strategy to maintain positive relationships and facilitate successful communication, confirming the role of negative politeness in mitigating complaints in academic contexts. The responses highlight the importance of preserving face for both the student and the professor, which aligns with Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory and your observations on face-saving strategies.

an awareness of the need for politeness and context-sensitive communication, their strategies diverge in key ways. Macedonian students tend to adopt a more direct but polite approach, using softening devices and expressing dissatisfaction clearly, reflecting a communication style that balances assertiveness with respect. In contrast, Albanian students show a stronger preference for indirectness, formality, and deference, guided by cultural norms that prioritize hierarchy, social harmony, and face protection. Politeness emerges as a central pragmatic strategy for both groups, though it is more formally expressed by Albanian students. These findings underscore the importance of understanding intercultural differences in pragmatic behavior, particularly in multilingual academic environments, where effective and respectful communication is essential for maintaining positive student-teacher relationships and supporting equitable academic discourse.

The analysis of the four scenarios (in the third section) reveals distinct patterns in how university students from different ethnic backgrounds pragmatically navigate academic and peer-related challenges. While both Macedonian and Albanian students demonstrate awareness of appropriate communicative norms, their strategies vary in terms of directness, emotional expression, and formality. Macedonian students tend to employ more straightforward and assertive approaches, particularly in interactions involving fairness or peer accountability, often balancing clarity with polite mitigation. In contrast, Albanian students prefer more indirect, deferential strategies that emphasize respect for authority and group harmony, frequently relying on formal language and face-saving techniques. These findings underscore the importance of cultural background in shaping pragmatic competence and highlight the need for intercultural sensitivity in academic communication.

An analysis of the responses provided in Section (4) reveals that both Macedonian and Albanian students highlight the importance of politeness when complaining in academic settings, but the nuances differ: Macedonian students tend to adopt a moderately direct style softened with hedges, reflecting emotional openness framed by politeness, while Albanian students favor a more ritualized indirectness, often embedding the complaint in gratitude and deference, reflecting strong respect for hierarchies norms. Both responses illustrate culturally embedded pragmatic competence and provide insight into how students navigate complaints in a face-sensitive academic environment, adapting their strategies to uphold relational norms.

This study adopts an intercultural pragmatic perspective to examine how students from different cultural backgrounds express complaints in academic settings. By focusing on Macedonian and Albanian students, it explores the role of politeness, cultural norms, and communication styles in shaping complaint behavior. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of culturally embedded pragmatic strategies and their implications for academic communication and language teaching.

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Questionnaire: Complaint strategies in academic communication

Section 1: Background Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other / Prefer not to say
3. Mother tongue (native language): _____
4. Other languages you speak: _____
5. Program of study: _____
6. Have you studied German/English as a foreign language?
 - Yes
 - No

Section 2: Attitudes and Preferences

1. In your opinion, is it acceptable to complain to a teacher about a bad grade?
 - Yes, always
 - Sometimes, if the reason is strong
 - No, it's not appropriate
 - Other: _____
2. When you complain to classmates about group work, how direct are you usually?
 - Very direct
 - Somewhat direct
 - Indirect
 - I avoid complaining
3. Which of the following strategies do you often use when expressing a complaint?
(You can check more than one)
 - I start with a compliment
 - I use softeners (e.g., *maybe, I think*)
 - I apologize before complaining
 - I give reasons or explanations
 - I express my emotions directly (e.g., *I'm frustrated*)
 - I use humor or sarcasm
 - Other: _____

Section 3: Situational Responses

(Please write how you would respond in the following situations)

1. You received an unfair grade from your professor. What would you say?

2. A classmate in your group did not complete their part of the project. What would you say to them?

3. Your teacher gives unclear instructions for an assignment. You are confused. What would you say in class or in an email?

4. A fellow student repeatedly interrupts you during group work. How do you react?

Section 4: Reflections

1. Do you think that your way of complaining is influenced by your culture or language background?

2. In your opinion, is politeness important when complaining in academic settings? Why or why not?

Thank you for participating in this study!