

# *Say What?: Filipino ESL Learners' Semantic Formula in Expressing Complaints*

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## **Abstract**

Complaining is one of the difficult tasks one has to do because when one complains, one does not only express some displeasure but also expects some form of repair. Hence, it is important for language learners to be taught how to effectively do so. Despite this, the teaching of the speech act of complaint has been taken for granted: either very little is included or it is absent in the language classroom instruction. This study attempts to examine how Filipino ESL learners structure their complaints. Featuring 18 situations calibrated on three social variables (interlocutors' social power and social distance, as well as the complainable acts' degree of severity), the discourse completion task elicited respondents' written expression of complaints, which were then analyzed using Schaefer's (1982, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000) framework for analyzing the semantic formula of complaints. Results of the study provide a baseline data on respondents' language of complaining, which provides many pedagogical implications and serves as a springboard for the development of classroom resource materials leading to an informed and judicious teaching of pragmatics.

**Keywords:** complaints, pragmatics, speech act, speech act of complaints

## **Introduction**

In his lecture in 1955 at Harvard University, the philosopher John L. Austin argued that there are various ways people do with language and that messages could not only be interpreted as either true or false. For him, when people say something, they do something. For example, if someone says, "It's cold," s/he may not only be commenting on the weather but may also be subtly requesting the hearer to either shut the window or turn up the temperature of the air conditioner. Thus, the idea of speech acts was borne.