

Complaining Successfully

Negotiating Redress in Service Encounters

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Level: Intermediate to advanced

Time: Two 50-minute lessons

Resources: Internet access for teacher and possibly students

Goals: To learn how to make complaints during service encounters

Description of the Activity

This activity develops students' awareness of both written and oral complaint forms as they are used during service encounters. In this lesson students become aware of both the general sequence of a formal written complaint and the linguistic forms common to the different segments.

As a warm-up activity, ask students about problems they have had with different commercial products or services, if they did anything about the problem, and if they were satisfied with the result. Focus on any lack of confidence they may have felt about complaining and problems they may have had in knowing what to say. This will make clear to them the need for the activity as well as help them formulate specific questions regarding useful language formulas.

The activity begins by having students analyze examples of written complaints, which are easily available via Internet sources. Some Web sites post complaint letters specifically directed towards a business and even help consumers write the letter through an input form (e.g. <http://www.planetfeedback.com/consumer/>), whereas others allow site visitors to post unedited descriptions of problems they have had with a company (e.g., <http://www.complaints.com/>). Both types of postings can provide useful sample authentic texts for students to study and discuss.

A typical formal letter of complaint has three principal segments: a statement of the problem, a request for redress, and a statement about future intentions. The first segment is usually an explanation of the circumstances that led to the complaint, sometimes preceded by an opening sentence identifying the letter as a complaint and providing a general description of what the complaint is about. The actual description of the problem is most often delivered as a narrative and includes details about the time and participants involved as well as expressions that reveal the complainer's state of mind. Linguistic forms that can be highlighted and discussed when working on this segment include time adverbials and tense forms. An interesting question to pose is why would the writer of a complaint use present perfect instead of simple past (most likely, it is a way of conveying the present impact of the

event on the writer's mental state).

The next segment of a written complaint is usually a request for action by the offending party. This segment may contain imperatives, if clauses, and other forceful statements (implications may convey a strong sentiment). Students could be asked to consider alternative directives and different politeness markers that could be used in a formal complaint, for example, I would like, I expect, I think you should.

The final segment is a statement about future intentions. In written complaints this often includes how to contact the writer, a conditional statement about what the writer will do if the complaint is not addressed satisfactorily, and a positive statement about what the writer will do if redress is provided. Discussion of this section may focus on how to balance threats with rewards.

The sample texts available online provide input for learners to help them recognize the functional segments of complaints and identify forms such as imperatives and conditional statements that may be useful when making complaints. Note that inconsistencies can appear in complaints that when it is not completely clear if the intended audience for the complaint is other consumers or the offending company. Such inconsistencies can be handled initially by asking the students to edit the texts and, subsequently, through group discussion.

After working with the sample authentic texts students can be directed to a consumer handbook, such as the U.S. government's Consumer Action Handbook, for prescriptive guidelines on how to make a successful complaint (<http://pueblo.gsa.gov/crh/respref.htm>).

The second part of the activity, which is usually best left to a second lesson, uses the sample authentic letters and linguistic forms as a springboard to make face-to-face oral complaints. In face-to-face interactions complainers need to show deference to the recipient of the complaint through polite but formal address terms, modalized verb forms, and strategic pauses to allow the recipient to respond. Complainers may need to know how to escalate their complaints if redress is not granted initially. Because it is hard to get examples of oral complaints for students to analyze, the content for this lesson is generated from student role plays based on scenarios taken from the written complaints analyzed during the first lesson or suggested by students during the initial warm-up activity. The follow-up discussion for this lesson should focus on segments present in the face-to-face encounters. They include the negotiation phase, the order of the segments (oral complaints often begin with the action request, then use the explanation of circumstances as a justification), and the role of politeness markers in managing the conversation.

Procedure

1. Analysis of written complaints (Lesson 1)

a. Prior to class

Visit Internet sites that specialize in delivering consumer complaints to businesses (e.g. <http://www.planetfeedback.com/consumer/> or <http://www.complaints.com/>) and print out

complaints posted on the site. Try to choose complaints from different categories.

b. Warm-up

Open with a discussion of problems students have had with specific products or services; focus on what, if anything, they did about the problem and whether they felt their actions were successful; make a list of problems for use later as role-play scenarios.

c. Sample Text Analysis

i. Organize the class into pairs or small groups and give each group a sample text of a written complaint.

ii. Ask them if they think the sample complaints will be successful and to note any inconsistencies or nonstandard uses of English in the samples. This can be done as an editing exercise if time permits.

iii. Have the students divide the texts into segments and provide a label for the purpose of each segment. (At this point teachers may wish to explicitly present the three segments: 1) statement of the problem, 2) request for action, and 3) statement of future intentions, or continue working inductively until step (iv).

iv. Compare written complaints about different products and services to arrive at a generic complaint script. (If teachers haven't presented the three segments earlier, it can be done here.)

v. Have students make lists of useful vocabulary according to function (e.g., words that reveal writer's feelings, directives, contingency statements) and note in which segment(s) the vocabulary is likely to occur.

d. Have students research on-line consumer advocacy sites (e.g. <http://pueblo.gsa.gov/crh/respref.htm>) for advice about making complaints. (These sites should provide useful examples of the three-part formal complaint, but not as much information about the linguistic formulas.)

2. Role play oral complaints (Lesson 2)

a. Choose scenarios from the students' opening discussion or from the sample texts analyzed in the preceding lesson that can be role-played by pairs of students, such as complaining to a store manager about not being waited on, or complaining to an airline gate agent about lack of information on a flight delay.

b. Specify that the role play begin when the complainer enters the service encounter location and end when the complainer leaves.

c. While the role play is being performed, ask other students to reference the script prepared for written complaints and check off any of the linguistic formulae that they hear the complainer use

d. Ask students in the audience to rate each role play on how likely the complainer is to achieve a satisfactory resolution using a scale from 1 (highly unlikely) to 5 (most probably).

Learners could also be asked to provide an explanation for their ratings.

e. As a wrap-up, discuss with students how face-to-face complaints are different from written complaints (see if they can write a new script) and the factors that seem to affect encounter success (focus on politeness and directness).

Rationale

Language learners need to be able to negotiate the intricacies of complaining, whether carried out through an exchange of letters or through face-to-face interaction. In an era of multi-national corporations and on-line purchasing, EFL learners may need to complain in English about goods and services they have purchased. For many learners, success in commercial service encounters demonstrates that they can take care of themselves in the target language culture and may encourage them to engage in even more difficult interactions.

Alternatives and Caveats

The lesson outlined above is a general model that could be modified in a number of ways. For the first part of the lesson, students could be given a list of Web sites where complaints are posted and be asked to select examples of complaints they might need to make at some point in the future. Also if time permits, sample texts can be analyzed by more than one group of students and then the analyses compared. For the second lesson focusing on face-to-face service encounters, it may be useful to instruct some of the students playing the roles of business representatives to initially refuse to offer redress for the complaint. This allows for a focus on how to be forceful when necessary.

As follow-up activities, students could be instructed to write their own letters of complaint, which would then be answered by other students. If students are studying in a target-language context they might be asked to visit the Consumer Service desk of a large department store or supermarket and observe the encounters that take place there. Finally, teachers may wish to brainstorm with students about complaints that take place in non-consumer situations, such as a grade complaint with a teacher. Whatever the source of the material, keep in mind that discussion should focus on the sequencing of segments of a complaint, the effects of different linguistic forms, and the types of information that should and should not be provided during a complaint.