A Study of Compliment Responses in English among Iraqi Postgraduates at USM

Hiba Qusay Abdul Sattar
Universiti Sains Malaysia
hibaqusay@yahoo.com

Salasiah Che Lah
Universiti Sains Malaysia
salasiah@usm.my

Abstract

The development of pragmatics rules for language learners is very important. Language learners must not only acquire the correct forms and sounds of the target language, but also the knowledge of how language is pragmatically used in the target culture (Lee, 2002). It is important to develop learners' pragmatic competence in the classroom so as to increase their intercultural communicative competence in English. Learning English involves learning a variety of communicative acts, or *speech acts*, to achieve their communicative goals in real life, including: requests, refusals, apologies, etc.

A speech act is an utterance that serves a function in communication (e.g., apology, request or greeting). Compliments have been chosen as the topic of the present study. Olshtain and Cohen (1991) define compliments as one of the speech acts to express solidarity between speaker and hearer and to maintain social harmony. It is obvious that there is a wide variety of compliments within one culture in terms of their roles and usage. Responding to a compliment poses a dilemma for speakers (Pomerantz, 1978) because they have to balance two diametrically conflicting conversational principles: to agree with one's conversational co-participants and to avoid self-praise (Herbert, 1989). This study investigates compliment responses among Iraqi postgraduates in English. The data is collected through the use of written discourse completion tasks (DCT), with four situational settings. A total of 25 university students participated in the study. It is found that the group employed a variation in the use of strategies responding to compliments elicited by situational settings. Finally, the study recommends second language teachers to help learners enhance their knowledge or competence of appropriate use of speech acts in the target language. The enhanced intercultural competence is necessary for not only avoiding communication errors, but also for establishing a fertile ground for increased interaction between native speakers of English and their non-native interlocutors.

1. Introduction

Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behavior that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Most of the problems that EFL learners face in intercultural communication are mainly pragmatic. Intercultural miscommunication is often caused when learners fall back on their L1 sociocultural norms in realizing speech acts in a target language. This is referred to as pragmatic transfer. Rizk (2003) defines pragmatic transfer as "the influence of learners' pragmatic knowledge of language and culture other than the target language on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information" (p. 404).

Pragmatic transfer can be either positive, which is considered an evidence of sociocultural and pragmatic universality among languages, or negative, which indicates inappropriate transfer of L1 sociolinguistic norms into L2. This often results in pragmatic failure, or being unable to understand the meaning of an utterance in the target language. (Liu, 1997) Negative pragmatic transfer, as Rizk (2003) explains, takes the form of translating some "formulaic expressions/phrases" functioning to express different speech acts in (L1) to express the equivalent speech act in L2. (p.405)

For example, a number of studies on native speakers of Arabic have indicated that they face difficulties when speaking in English. These difficulties are the result of Arab non-native speakers' errors in morphology or syntax, or their inaccurate pronunciation in English language, but the result of ignorance of the appropriate use of linguistic forms in different situations. The inappropriate use of linguistic forms may evoke impressions of rudeness and awkwardness with whom they are communicating.

Studies on native speakers of Arabic have shown that Arabs do indeed have problems when speaking in English. They find it extremely difficult to produce or sometimes understand a speech act. This is because of their inability to use English language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand it in context which in turn may lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). In the field of ccompliment responses, "Native speakers of English might consider the way Arabic speakers respond to compliments offending or bizarre, because they understood only the words without the cultural rules that govern them and vice versa". (Hessa, 2007:29)

The present study is a continuation of this line of research. It focuses on one single NNSs of English group, in a non- native English speaking country, in this case Malaysia where there is a widespread use of English in all areas. It is an investigation of the way native speakers of Arabic, in this case "Iraqi postgraduates" at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), respond to compliments, whether they can produce target like compliment responses and is there an evidence of pragmatic transfer. As they come to study at a university abroad to obtain a degree in a specific field, and to work in that field, they do not focus on the pragmatic function of English language but on the use of that language to access knowledge in their respective academic fields. Yet, these students encounter situations in real life in which pragmatic competence comes into play. Responding to compliments is one of these situations.

Hessa (2007:31) states that on the surface level, there is not much difference between Arabic and English cultures in the use of compliments. However, if we look at compliment responses, differences arise. When communicating in English, Arabs may sometimes sound bizarre or offending. This is due to some differences in the way the two cultures use compliment responses. In the Arab society, it is a deeply rooted religious belief that humility is a virtue. Even when accepting a compliment, Arabs tend to return the compliment (which might sound insincere to NSs), or insist on offering the object of the compliment to the speaker (something that might be embarrassing to the NSs who did not expect this behavior). Therefore, differences may result in serious communicative interference in cross Arabic and English culture communication

2. Compliments Responses

Holmes (1988:446) states that ''a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer''. While a compliment may be regarded as a positive speech act, it may also be regarded as a face-threatening act (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1987:247) point out that compliments may be significant FTAs in societies where envy is very strong and where witchcraft exists as a sanction. Holmes (1988:448) remarks, ''[c]ompliments can be regarded as face threatening to the extent that they imply the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like to have something belonging to the addressee''.

As greeting expects greeting in response, compliment expects a "compliment response (CR)" in response. This compliment-response sequence can perhaps be seen as an "adjacency pair" in which one initiation utterance is expecting a conventionalized response. Unlike greeting, a complimenter is usually expecting the compliment recipient to respond with a different second pair-part. It can be generally divided into two types: agreement and non-agreement. As the compliment response types across a number of cultures have been studies for almost three decades, there are a number of categorization of response types.

Holmes (1986, 1988) developed three main categories of compliment responses, based on the credit attribution component of compliments: Accept, Reject, and Deflect or Evade. She analyzed complimenting behavior in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness

Theory and considered compliments to be, on the one hand, positively affective speech acts, and on the other, potentially face-threatening acts, which account for the variety of compliment responses. Her data indicated that in New Zealand, by far the most frequent response to a compliment was Accept (1986, 1988). She further examined gender characteristics in the interaction between the gender of complimenter and complimentee and found that males will ignore or legitimately evade a compliment more often than women will (Holmes, 1986). The results of her study reveal the existence of sex-preferential strategies for compliment responses. Specifically, New Zealand men tend to interpret compliments as FTAs more readily than their female counterparts, with the latter usually treating them as strategies for maintaining solidarity.

Herbert (1989, 1990) distinguished 12 types of compliment responses: (1) appreciation token ("Thanks," "Thank you"), (2) comment acceptance ("Yeah, it's my favorite too"), (3) praise upgrade ("Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?"), (4) comment history ("I bought it for the trip to Arizona"), (5) reassignment ("My brother gave it to me," "It really knitted itself"), (6) return ("So's yours"), (7) scale down ("It's really quite old"), (8) question ("Do you really think so?"), (9) disagreement ("I hate it"), (10) qualification ("It's alright, but Len's is nicer"), (11) no acknowledgment, and (12) request interpretation ("You wanna borrow this one too?"). They were subsumed within three broad categories: agreement, nonagreement, and request interpretation. Herbert conducted a contrastive study on American and South African compliment responses spoken by college students (1989, 1990). His data suggested that Americans exhibit a high frequency of compliment-expression but a low frequency of compliment-acceptance; South Africans exhibit a low frequency of compliment-expression but a high frequency of compliment-acceptance. He explained the contrast in terms of ideological differences between Americans and South Africans. That is, the high frequency of compliments and the low rate of acceptance in the U.S. data reflect American notions of equality and democratic idealism, whereas the low frequency of compliments and the high rate of acceptance are tied to elitism in South Africa.

2. Studies on compliment responses by native speakers of Arabic

Empirical investigations of compliment responses have been carried out by many scholars using different approaches. Some studies have been conducted on Arabic native speakers. These studies indicate the following points. Firstly, examining the compliment responses

behavior of a specific culture. Secondly, comparing the speech act of compliment responses also across cultural groups. Thirdly, investigating the characteristics of non-native speaker compliment responses in English. Finally, language learners tend to transfer their sociopragmatic strategies in their first language to compliment responses in second languages Nelson (1993) investigated Egyptian and American compliments using both qualitative and quantitative methodology. Extended interviews were conducted with 20 Egyptian and 20 American university students. Egyptians were interviewed in Arabic in Egypt and Americans were interviewed in English in the United States. On audiotape, subjects described in detail the most recent compliment given, received and observed, providing a corpus of 60 Egyptian and 60 American compliments. Interview data were analyzed to determine 1) compliment form, 2) attributes praised, 3) relationship between the compliment giver and recipient, 4) gender of compliment giver and recipient and 5) compliment frequency. Interview data were used to construct six forms of a questionnaire, varying the recipient of the compliment between a male/female family member, a male/female close friend and a male/female acquaintance. Approximately 240 Egyptian students and 240 American students, about 50% male and 50% female, completed the questionnaire using a variation of Barnlund and Araki's (1985) Complimentary Mode Questionnaire for responses. Students' responses indicated preferences for direct or indirect means of complimenting. The Egyptian questionnaires were in Arabic and the American questionnaires in English. Major findings suggest that both Egyptian and American compliments tend to be adjectival; both frequently compliment personal appearance; Egyptian compliments tend to be longer than American compliments and contain more comparatives, references to marriage and metaphors; Americans tend to compliment more frequently than Egyptians; Egyptians tend to compliment personality traits, whereas Americans tend to compliment skills and work; and both Egyptians and Americans prefer direct rather than indirect means of complimenting.

Farghal and Al-Khatibb (2001) provides a preliminary analysis from a pragmatic and sociolinguistic point of view, of compliment responses in Jordanian Arabic as they are used by Jordanian college students. It focuses upon the relation of the individual's sexual identity to her/his compliment behavior and the attitudes and values attached to it. The phenomenon has been investigated in terms of simple vs. complex responses, macro- vs. micro-functions and intrinsically- vs. extrinsically-complex responses. Explanations are placed within a broad framework of sociocu1tural differences between male and female college students. The

semantic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic characteristics of compliment responses are highlighted based on an analysis of 268 responses. Also, an attempt has been made to shed light on the kinds of social relationships and the range of strategies which elicited the compliment responses in the corpus. As in a number of other speech communities, the gender of the speaker in Jordanian society seems to be a crucial parameter in the formulation and acceptance or rejection of a compliment.

Al Falasi (2007) conducted a study which aims at finding out whether Arabic learners of English (Emarati Females in particular) produce target like compliment responses in English and whether pragmatic transfer can occur. Discourse completion tests (DCTs) and interviews were used to study the strategies employed when responding to compliments by native speakers (NSs) and Arabic nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English. Findings suggest that Arabic (L1) expressions and strategies were sometimes transferred to English (L2). This study also indicates that Emarati female learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they perceive these norms to be universal among languages rather than being language specific. It also indicates that Arabic NNSs of English have some misconceptions about NSs that affect the way they respond to their compliments.

3. The study

This study aims at finding out whether Iraqi postgraduates produce target like compliment responses in English and whether pragmatic transfer can occur. In other words, when speaking in English, will Iraqi postgraduates' compliment responses be closer to Arabic or English?

3.1. Subjects

25 Iraqis served as the subjects for this study. The whole group consists of males, aged between 25 and 39. The subjects are confined to postgraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), both master and doctoral degree for the year 2007/2008. They are pursuing studies in a subject not related to languages or linguistics.

The subjects have been staying in Malaysia for a period of time between 6 months to one year. They all had studied English for 12 years in government schools in Iraq before joining the university. They all are Iraqi native speakers of Arabic. None of the them have ever travelled to any English-speaking country other than Malaysia.

For the sake of homogeneity, the subjects are confined to both pure science and applied science field of studies. This is because the number of the students is relatively high in these two fields and to achieve a homogenous group as these students have studied English at the university level.

3.2. Instrument

The data for this study will come from participant compliments response on a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which was used in study by Zhang (2008). In a DCT, subjects are provided with situations and are then asked to supply what they would say in them.

There are two reasons for using DCT. As Lorenzo-Dus (2001) argues, DCTs can provide a sound template of stereotypically perceived requirements for socially appropriate CRs in the group studied. It also enables the researcher to obtain sufficient data in a relatively short period of time. That is, DCTs are effective and efficient when they suit the purpose of the study.

In the DCT, four situational settings relating to four different topics were employed: ability, appearance, character and possession:

1. You have just finished presenting your research paper. At the end of the class (when you were just leaving the classroom), one of your classmates say: "You did an excellent job! I really enjoyed your presentation".
2. Your friends have organized a party to celebrate the end of the semester. You've dressed up for the party. As you arrive at the party one of your friends says: Hey, you look great! You're really handsome/ beautiful today."

3. You have helped your friends (a couple) to look after their child for whole day at your place. When they come to pick up the child, they say: "Thank you! You're really helpful, patient and caring."
4. You have bought a new mobile phone. When you receive a call, your friend notices that your phone is a different one. Having looked at it and tried some functions, s/he says: "Wow, how smart! My mobile does not have such functions. It is really great!"

It is worth mentioning that questions on the DCT in this study involve 'a friend/classmate says', rather than other types of potential speakers. The factors of power and distance here are more of equality and solidarity. Consequently, findings in this study would be less representative for groups outside the 'friends/classmates' category.

4. Coding scheme

The data were analyzed using the coding categories established by Herbert (1986 & 1990). He gave a three-category, twelve-type taxonomy of compliment response by speakers of American English upon which the present research is conducted. The classification of the types of compliment responses is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of compliment responses

A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise	Upgrade Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Compliment responses in four situations:

a. Most used compliment responses in four situations

Table 2: Most used compliment responses in four situations (%) (N=25)

Compliment responses	Frequency	S1 %	Frequency	S2 %	Frequency	S3 %	Frequency	S4 %
appreciation token	25	100.0	22	88.0	6	24.0	10	40.0
agreeing	3	12.0	-	-	-	-	9	36.0
Return	2	8.0	13	52.0	4	16.0	1	4.0
Scale down	1	4.0	1	4.0	1	4.0	1	4.0
request	1	4.0	2	8.0	-	-	1	4.0
others	1	4.0	2	8.0	4	16.0	7	28.0
informative	-	-	1	4.0	2	8.0	6	24.0
Disagreement	-	-	1	4.0	7	28.0	-	-
Question	-	-	2	8.0	-	-	-	-
Qualification	-	-	-	-	9	36.0	-	-
Advice	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.0
offer	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	28.0

The results of the first analysis of the compliment responses data collected from 25 subjects are presented in Table 2. They indicate the percentages of the subjects' choice of each subcategory of compliment responses. Each frequency and percentage represents the number of choices made out of the total number.
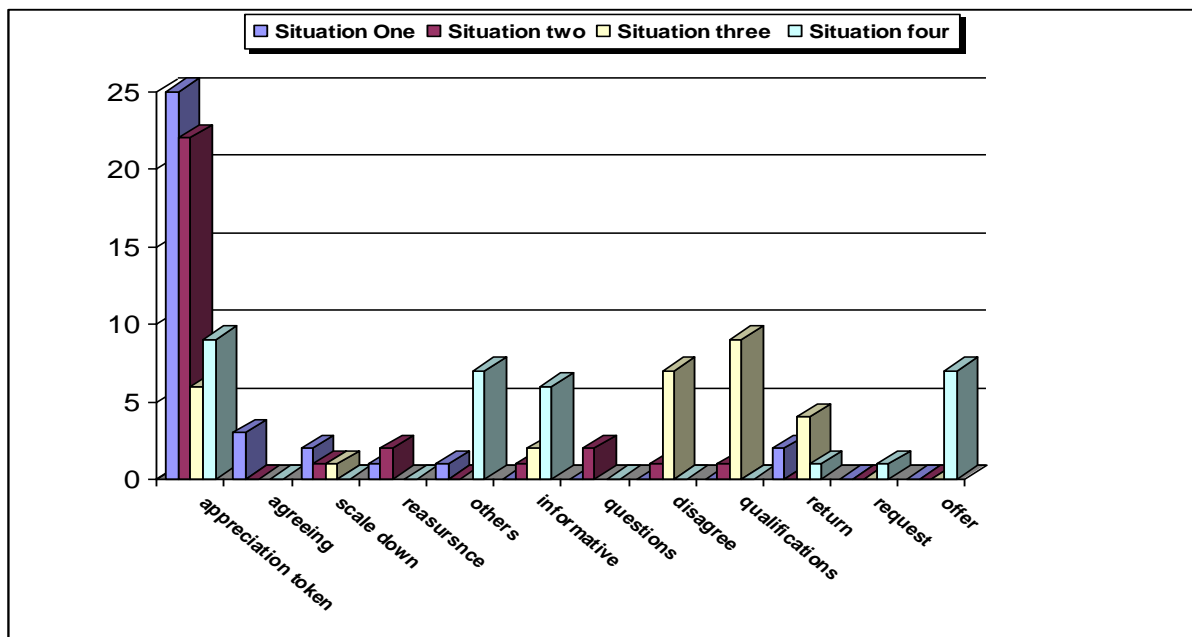

Figure 1: compliment responses in four situations

From examining the data presented in Figure 1, it is found that appreciation token appeared in all situations in rather high percentages. The use of appreciation token varies from high percentages- in S1 to a lower one in S4. Also, by comparing the four situations it is clear that saying "thank you" is the most used response in S1 and S2. The option for a simple response may indicate, other things being equal, decisiveness on the part of the complimentee, because simple responses can be taken to be straightforward expressions of

one illocutionary force, e.g. offering as (I offer it to you), returning compliment (*You look great too*). Decisiveness should be taken here as a functional correlate of the complimentee's intentions whereby a sole, straightforward speech act is carried out.

b. Some examples of Compliment responses used by respondents:
1- The use of advice and suggestions
Thank you, should buy one.
Thank you, you should consider buying one .
You should get one.
I advice you to buy one.

2-The use of return
Thank you, you look beautiful too.
Thank you, you handsome too.
Thank you very much, you can do the best also.
You look great too.
I think you seem handsome too.

3-   Wish
I wish you can get like it.
I wish you will do better.

4-Reassurance
Really? I am handsome today.

5- Informative /history comment
I just bought this dress from the shop in front of my school.
It's a new generation of mobile.

6- Agreeing
That's why I bought it.
Yes, thank you.

5.2. Evidence of transfer

When responding to compliments in English, Iraqi postgraduates reflect their L1 behavior to some extent. The accurate extent is not possible to define, as we cannot quantify the difference of language use. The result is in accordance with the previous studies, that is, the second language learners do transfer their L1 behaviors to L2 and it can be both negative and positive.

1-   The extensive use of the word thank you which is equal to *shukran* in Arabic.

2-   The use of offers, as in Arabic one can say: *m'addam* ([It is] presented [to you]), offering the object of the compliment to the complimenter. This offer comes in a formulaic expression and is not likely to be accepted. It is an expected polite response to certain compliments. The complimenter typically says: *shukran! Ala saahibtu*

ahiaa (Thank you! It looks much nicer on its owner) or *Tithanni fiiha. InshaaLLaah tihriiha bi-l-hanaa* (May you enjoy it. May you, God willing, wear it out in happiness). Examples:

Thank you, you can take it.
Thanks, take it if you want.
Do you need it, if so I can give you as a gift because you are my friend.
It's for you if you needed.
Really, I can give it for you as a gift.

6. Conclusions

This study has investigated the way Iraqis respond to compliments in English and explored the kinds of response types preferred by subjects. It is found that the group employed a variation in the use of strategies responding to compliments elicited by situational settings. Pragmatic transfer does exist in compliment responses in English by Iraqi postgraduates. This is due to learners' lack of knowledge of different sociolinguistic rules among cultures and then dependence on their L1 sociocultural norm in realizing speech acts in L2 (i.e., pragmatic transfer) can cause intercultural misunderstanding and lead to serious consequences. As Richard (1980) states, ''transfer of features of first language conversational competence into English may have much more serious consequences than errors at the levels of syntax or pronunciation, because conversational competence is closely related to the presentation of self, that is, communicating an image of oneself to others''. Thomas (1983) also called attention to the seriousness of the violation of sociolinguistic rules. She pointed out that the pragmatic failure is more detrimental than linguistic errors in that, while the linguistic errors show that the speaker is less proficient in the language, pragmatic failure may result in the misjudgment of a person being rude, unfriendly or even dishonest.

Thus, Iraqi postgraduates tend to have difficulty understanding the intended meaning communicated by a speech act (i.e. responding to compliments), or producing a speech act using appropriate language and manner in English. It was very important to know how we should response to compliments in a target language because sometimes an appropriate way of response in one language could be recognized inappropriately in another language.

Research has found that classroom instruction on speech acts can help learners to improve their performance of speech acts and thus their interactions with native speakers.

As language teaching professionals, we must therefore deepen our understanding of contexts of language use, developmental pragmatic processes, and ways in which second language

learners can be equipped to use language both appropriately and strategically. Teaching them useful linguistic forms within context is as important as teaching certain types of behavior, communicative strategies and sociocultural norms.

Therefore, in teaching English as a foreign or a second language, it is important to present the authentic models in the context to the learners. In addition, learners should be trained to recognize the context, and be able to choose appropriate forms, strategies based on the contextualized cues; and teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice using what they have learned. So it is crucial for the teachers to set up the context for the practice, assign roles, and explain the relationship between the roles students are playing.

7. Implication

The development of pragmatics rules for language learner is very important. Language learners must not only acquire the correct forms and sounds of the target language, but also the knowledge of how language is pragmatically used in the target culture (Lee, 2002). It is important to develop learners' pragmatic competence in classroom so as to increase their intercultural communicative competence in English. Learning English involves learning a variety of communicative acts, or *speech acts*, to achieve their communicative goals in real life, including: requests, refusals, apologies, etc.

The study recommends second language teachers to help learners enhance their knowledge or competence of appropriate use of speech acts in the target language. The enhanced intercultural competence is necessary for not only avoiding communication errors, but also for establishing a fertile ground for increased interaction between native speakers of English and their non-native interlocutors.

The necessary condition for pragmatic learning to take place is conscious attention to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic information to be acquired. As a result, a direct approach to teaching the pragmatics of the L2 is in order. As Kasper and Schmidt (1996: 160), cited in Qu and Wang (2005), put it: "pragmatic knowledge should be teachable." The idea seems to be that if the non-native student is consciously aware of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic similarities and differences between his/her native and target languages, then outcomes of transfer will most probably be inhibited.

Teachers have the responsibility of providing the student with the necessary tools to make the appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic decisions in the target language. One way in

which teachers can help students become pragmatically aware and improve their pragmatic knowledge is by providing them with the sort of metapragmatic information such as the social value judgments of the western society, etc. Another way is through experience such as reading, listening, watching movies or interacting with native speakers.

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