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AN INVESTIGATION OF RESPONSES TO COMPLIMENTS BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS AT UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL; A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The principal objective of the present research was making an effort to investigate the responses to compliments by Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate level; a discursive study. To do so, 50 upper - intermediate students were chosen. After administration of OPT test, 34 upper-intermediate students who were between 19 up to 30 years old were selected (in their selections, age, their mother tongue that all of them spoke Persian with no dialect, and their levels were focused). They were divided into two groups- namely group a) and b) and each group consisted of 17 EFL learners (participants). After making sure of their proficiency level the second test, DCT, was administered. The data obtained from the DCT were analyzed to test the CR Continuum Hypothesis (Tran, 2007), which posits that the CR strategies at or towards both ends of the acceptance to denial continuum are likely to be transferred from L1 into L2 CR use. In order to answer the other study questions, the researcher analyzed the data statistically using the SPSS statistical program, specifically using the following statistics:

1- Frequencies and percentages, and

2- Chi-square tests.

And the results showed both of the hypotheses; a) EFL learners' compliment responses will not be closer to their L1 and b) Language proficiency does not play a role in the use of compliment responses were rejected.

Keywords: *Compliment - Compliment Responses (CRs) - Discursive Study*

INTRODUCTION

The present study is conducted to investigate the responses to compliments by Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate level; a discursive study. Culture is communication, and vice versa because it influences social practices in general, and discourse in particular.

Moreover, cultural factors play a role in the development of diverse ways of talking and communicating. For example, in some cultures it is considered very bad to speak when another person is talking, while in others, this is an expected part of a conversationalist's work.

In general, we can say that there exists a certain, rule-governed linguistic behavior that allows us to deal with similar situations in similar ways across cultures, such as thanking, requesting and apologizing (Mey, 1998). However, when it comes to a certain speech act between two languages like English and Persian, problems arise. Nonnative language users including translators tend to face such problems when they use the speech acts that differ from their own languages in terms of cultural differences and expressions.

Statement of the Problem

Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behavior that requires both linguistic and communicative competence. Whether we speak in a first or second language, we are influenced by sociocultural norms and constraints that affect the way we communicate. For example, what is considered appropriate in one language might not be so in another. Praising a girl for being fat, for instance in a Western African Community, is considered a compliment; while in an American context, it is perceived as an insult (Rizk, 2003).

An effective language user is competent in not only linguistics but also pragmatics. As Yule (1996) put it, "nothing in the use of the linguistic forms is inaccurate, but getting the pragmatics wrong might be

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offensive” (p. 5-6). To be able to use a target language appropriately in terms of communicative competence, language users should employ a variety of speech acts. Complimenting is one of them.

Compliments not only express sincere admiration of positive qualities, but they also replace greetings, thanks or apologies, and minimize face-threatening acts (henceforth FTAs), such as criticism, scolding, or requests (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988a; Wolfson, 1983, 1989). Complimenting is a tool of establishing friendship that creates ties of solidarity in American culture. It is also an important social strategy that functions as an opener for a conversation, allowing meaningful social interactions to follow. Americans pay compliments so frequently that neglecting to do so can even be interpreted as a sign of disapproval (Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1989; Wolfson and Manes, 1980) and a wrong use of compliments may cause embarrassment and offense (Holmes and Brown, 1987).

Each culture requires various kinds of speech act behavior. Blum-Kulka *et al.*, (1989) found that "culturally colored interactional styles create culturally determined expectations and interpretative strategies, and can lead to breakdowns in intercultural and interethnic communication" (p. 30). In other words, when people from different cultures interact, breakdowns in communication may happen due to signaling different speech act strategies that reflect the cultures distinctive interactional style. Complimenting is a particularly suitable speech act to investigate because it acts as a window through which we can view what is valued in a particular culture. Thus, it is essential for EFL students to know how to give appropriate compliments and responses in English.

The problem here is that EFL learners do not produce target-like compliment responses, and so pragmatic transfer can occur due to many factors one of which is culture. Hence, this study examines compliment responses among Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

Research Question

In order to tackle the problem of the research in a much consolidated way, the following research questions have been formulated as follows:

- will EFL learners' compliment responses through speech be closer to their L1 or English?
- Does language proficiency play a role in the use of compliment responses?

Research Hypotheses

To answer the research questions of the study, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

H0) EFL learners' compliment responses will not be closer to their L1.

H0) Language proficiency does not play a role in the use of compliment responses.

Review of the Literature

Austin was the first of many provocative philosophers in the 60s who began to realize that there is more to language than 'sense' - the literal meanings attached to language. In his world famous book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), he proposes the idea that all utterances are indeed actions. Austin distinguishes three aspects of meanings in language use: 1) the locution, 2) the illocution and 3) the per locution. The locution can be understood at the semantic level: the literal meaning of the words uttered. He suggests that language has 'forces' to perform actions (the illocutionary force), and this usually produces some effects on the hearer (the per locution).

Austin also initially anticipated that many utterances contain performative verbs in utterances, e.g., 'apologize', 'object', 'promise' and so forth. For instance, through the utterance "I hereby apologize", the speaker clearly performs an action of apology. Austin's other contribution was the notion of felicity conditions' that make these performative utterances possible.

He proposed that there are certain rules available to interlocutors to make sense of the speech acts. For instance, sincerity conditions, one of the components of felicity conditions, require speakers to perform speech acts in a sincere manner: these performative verbs are only effective if speakers mean what they say.

However, as one can readily find counter examples, speech acts need not be realized with performative verbs or performed with sincere intentions. In the case of complimenting, it is more common to find compliments in forms such as "I love your dress" without any performative verbs, rather than "I (hereby) compliment you on your dress" with the performative verb, *compliment*.

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Searle, one of the many students of Austin's studying at Oxford at the time, attempts to solve this problem by introducing the notion of "indirect speech act" (1969). Indirect speech acts can be explained as some linguistic activity manifested through the use of non-prototypical forms. The utterance "Would you mind not smoking in here?" uttered by a restaurant owner to a customer is a declarative ("I order you not to smoke here") performed indirectly by an interrogative form as a request. In the case of complimenting also, these indirect patterns are readily found and my corpus partly consists of this type of compliments.

According to Manes and Wolfson's (1981) and Wolfson's (1983) studies on compliments in American English, the greatest number of appearance/possession compliments are given and received by acquaintances, colleagues, and casual friends, especially by females. Upper-status males rarely received compliments, and these were nearly never associated with appearance. By contrast, women are the recipients of the great majority of compliments on appearance/possession. In this case, however, the status of the woman seems to have little if any effect, since she can be complimented on her appearance by virtually anyone. Similarly, Holmes (1986) find that 92.5% of 517 compliment responses were about appearance, ability and possessions, with the first two accounting for 81.3% of the data. Her study suggests that there is agreement between the New Zealand and American norms at this very broad level concerning appropriate/acceptable topics of compliments. In another study examining the distribution of compliment topics by gender, Holmes (1988) point out that there is a clearly observable tendency for women to receive compliments on their appearance and to complement each other on their appearance. To be specific, 56.7% of all the compliments women received in the New Zealand data related to aspects of their appearance, and 61% of all the compliments between women related to appearance, compared to only 36% of the compliments between males. In addition, Holmes and Brown (1987) identified the cultural differences in what constitutes a socially appropriate topic for a compliment. For instance, while weight loss is considered a suitable topic for a compliment in Western societies, in Tokelan society it is a reason for concern.

The definition for the dissertation is mostly taken from the definitions that Holmes (1988, 1995), Kodama (1996), Kim (2006) and Wierzbicka (1987) draw. Firstly, complimenting is an intended speech act. The speaker tries to convey positive evaluations or judgments about the addressee. Secondly, the addressee is always the person complimented the direct receiver of compliments present in the interaction. Thirdly, the speaker can compliment not only qualities which are directly related to the addressee (e.g. the addressee's appearance, personality, performance), but also a various matters which are indirectly related to the addressee (e.g. addressees' possessions, family members). Fourth, the way compliments are paid can be explicit and/or implicit. Finally, to give a judgment as to whether or not a particular utterance is a compliment, - of course, we shall not forget - requires contextual- and cultural-dependant assessments. This leads us to the following definition:

Complimenting is a speech act in which the speaker explicitly and/or implicitly attempts to convey positive evaluations/judgments about the addressee's quality and a variety of matters closely related to the addressee.

According to Bachman (1995), pragmatics is concerned with the relationships between utterances and the acts or functions that speakers intend to perform through these utterances. As stated by Bachman and Palmer (2000), pragmatic knowledge enables us to create or interpret discourse by relating utterances or sentences and texts to their meanings, to the intentions of language users, and to relevant characteristics of the language use setting. Based on their views, there are two areas of pragmatic knowledge, functional and sociolinguistic. Functional knowledge or illocutionary competence makes us enable to interpret relationships between utterances or sentences and texts and the intentions of language users. Functional knowledge includes knowledge of four categories of language functions, ideational, manipulative, instrumental, and imaginative.

Pragmatic and discourse transfer is likely to occur when L1 and L2 cultural norms differ noticeably (Tran, 2002b). For example, there are observable differences in Vietnamese and English CRs. In Vietnamese culture, people often respond to compliments negatively or reject the compliments to show modesty

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(Tran, 2004d, 2006a). In English, a simple CR — “thank you” — is preferred as described in Johnson’s etiquette book (1979). The preference for a simple “thank you” in replying to compliments was demonstrated in American English (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Herbert, 1986, 1989; Knapp *et al.*, 1984; Saito and Beecken, 1997), British English (Herbert, 1986), New Zealand English (Holmes, 1986) and Australian English (Soenarso, 1988). Specifically, the percentages of acceptances out of the total number of CRs studied were 66% versus 88% for Americans and South Africans (Herbert, 1989), 61% for New Zealanders (Holmes, 1986) and 58% for Americans (Chen, 1993). Therefore, although there might be exceptions, Herbert’s (1989) generalization about English CRs apparently holds true.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Design of the Study

The design of the study is quasi-experimental design, in which two groups are tested.

2. The Tools

The topic is approached by using Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and quantitative data from Discourse Completion Test (DCT i.e. a tool used for collecting data through responding to real like situations). In addition to that, the researcher uses theories and background knowledge from other researchers and writers' studies, which contributes to leading the topic in the right way. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consists of 10 situations, in which participants, EFL learners, are expected to respond to compliments in English.

3. Participants

The participants of the study were 50 upper -intermediate students. After administration of OPT test, 34 upper-intermediate students who were between 19 up to 30 years old were selected (in their selections, age, their mother tongue that all of them spoke Persian with no dialect, and their levels were focused). They were divided into two groups- namely group a) and b) and each group consisted of 17 EFL learners (participants). After making sure of their proficiency level the second test, DCT, was administered.

4. Procedure

After making sure of the reliability and validity of the instrument of the study i.e. the DCT, the following procedures were conducted in the course of the present investigation:

- 1- Distributing the tool (i.e. discourse completion test-DCT) to the study samples through the Directorate of Education Simin institute in Chaboksar.
- 2- Collecting and classifying the data in order to be analyzed,
- 3- Concluding, analyzing and discussing the study findings,
- 4- And finally, offering recommendations for readers, teachers, students, translators and foreign language users.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis and Result

1. Introduction

To find out the results of the study, the researcher divided the participants into two groups named a and b, both of which were upper intermediate, based on a OPT test scores. For two reasons the OPT was administered. Firstly, to make sure that whether the learners level of proficiency is upper intermediate. Secondly, to answer the second study question that is; does language proficiency play a role in the use of compliment responses?

After administration of OPT, 34 learners were selected (in their selections, age, their mother tongue, and their levels were focused) and they were randomly assigned into two groups, each group consists of 17 learners, and calculate the mean of each group to see that which group is more proficient than the other.

Table 1: Mean of the two groups

	Group A	Group B
Mean	16	16/80

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The above table shoes that the mean of group B is more than group A, so it’s been concluded that although both of them are in the same level, upper intermediate, group be is a little more proficient as shown in the table.

2. Frequencies

In order to facilitate reading and interpreting these tables, firstly, the researcher introduces the criteria exist in the tables. In the left column, the first one, we can see the coded strategies used by the learners in answering the situations. Each table which is in fact one situation assessment not necessarily contains all of the ten strategies because it is possible more than one time using the same strategies in each of the questions. The second column which is called observed numbers shows that how much time a single strategy used in a situation. Third one shows the expectancy of the strategies and the last one, residual, shows that when the mathematical number of a strategy is higher than the others, it has been used more than of them.

Because there are many tables due to the DCT test questions, it has been shown a table as an example.

Table 2: Response type to the first question

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
complement upgrade	1	2.1	-1.1
agreement	7	2.1	4.9
appreciation token	1	2.1	-1.1
return	1	2.1	-1.1
explanation/comment history	1	2.1	-1.1
disagreement	2	2.1	-.1
doubting question	3	2.1	.9
you're welcome	1	2.1	-1.1
Total	17		

The above table illustrates that the strategy and agreement are more used by the learners, with one of the strongest residual of 4.9 in the all tables, than the other strategies in situation one and then strategy doubting question and disagreement are in next levels. The other strategies were used as the same.

Table 3: Test Statistics

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Chi-Square	14.529 ^a	4.176 ^a	4.706 ^b	9.824 ^a	5.765 ^b	8.882 ^a	5.647 ^c	8.118 ^c	3.235 ^a	3.235 ^a
df	7	7	8	7	8	7	6	6	7	7
Asymp. Sig.	.043	.759	.788	.199	.674	.261	.464	.230	.862	.862

This table illustrates a holistic view of chi-square statistics of group A

Table 4: Test Statistics

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Chi-Square	5.647 ^a	2.294 ^b	4.824 ^a	3.235 ^b	4.706 ^c	2.588 ^c	4.176 ^b	2.294 ^b	2.294 ^b	7.882 ^c
df	6	7	6	7	8	8	7	7	7	8
Asymp. Sig.	.464	.942	.567	.862	.788	.957	.759	.942	.942	.445

This table illustrates a holistic view of Chi-Square statistics of group B.

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3. Inferential Analysis

As it has been completely stated in previous part, 4.2, there was a table for each of the situations of DCT. These tables show the Chi-square statistics of them that the researcher shortly described them. For both of the groups A and B, there is a table of total test statistics. In this section, we investigate them in another way as the table below to make it more tangible.

Table 4.24: Percentage of CR strategies, sum of two participant groups

CR strategies	Observed N Group A	Observed N Group B	Percentage of G.A	Percentage of G.B
Compliment upgrade	17	30	10%	17.64%
Agreement	25	20	14/70%	11.76%
Appreciation token	38	21	22/35%	12.35%
Return	19	9	11/17%	5.29%
Explanation	19	34	11/17%	20%
Reassignment	5	8	2/94%	4.70%
Compliment downgrade	5	24	2/94%	14.11%
Disagreement	8	13	4/70%	7.64%
Doubting question	23	6	13/52%	3.52%
You're welcome	11	5	6/47%	2.94%
Total	170		100%	

(Group A) LPL low-proficiency Persian EFL learners
 (Group B) HPL high-proficiency Persian EFL learners

Table 4.24 illustrates the total data gathered of group A and B. The left part consists of CR strategies used by the participants of the study and we have observed number of the groups as well as the percentage of them.

There are statistically significant differences between LPL, group A, and HPL, group B in most of CR strategies. So it's been concluded that the research hypothesis, Language proficiency does not play a role in the use of compliment responses, was rejected.

4. Evidence of Transfer

When responding to compliments in English, Iranian EFL learners 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.

The extensive use of the word you're welcome which is equal to *kharesh mikonam* in Persian language. Thus the second hypothesis EFL learners' compliment responses will not be closer to their L1 was rejected. It means that Iranian EFL learners' compliment responses are closer to their L1 rather than English.

Conclusion of the Study

1- Non-native English learners did not produce target-like responses. They brought about some L1 strategies and expressions, which might result in negative pragmatic transfer and thus communicative breakdown. They literally translated Persian formulaic expressions, which were not always suitable for the compliment given in English. They intended their responses to be polite, but they were not appropriate.

2- Compliments in the Persian culture had turned into routine as a means of making people feel good and they are perceived to be insincere most of the time. That is why there were responses like 'oh, this not true, you are only complimenting me!'

3- It was obvious that language proficiency play a role in producing target-like compliment responses. The responses were either simple ones or lengthy literal translations of the Persian semantic formulas into English. This is because the EFL learners of English acquired only the linguistic competence and not the

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pragmatic one. Even if they were proficient ones, they were linguistically proficient which is due to the quality of education that neglects the pragmatic side.

4- Compliment responses used by Persian were lengthy because there was a general understanding that the longer the response to the compliment, the more sincere it was.

5- Some responses were mere transference of L1 pragmatic competence to the target language, which- if misunderstood by native speakers- might cause embarrassment to the non-native and offense to the native.

Limitations of the Study

For doing this study, the researcher faced some problems, he could observe more participants, but he could not do that because the researcher did not have enough space for running the treatment and using more participants.

Recommendations of the Study

1- It is not enough to build the learners' linguistic competence, but it is also necessary to develop their sociocultural and pragmatic competence.

2- Raising the learners' awareness levels of pragmatics and appropriateness regardless of how proficient they are in the target language can be achieved by enriching the classroom input with real-world materials, such as recordings of native speakers' conversations and radio and television programs.

3- Syllabus developers should pay greater attention to this area of second language acquisition by providing authentic concrete lessons and activities and by focusing on learner-centered activities like role-plays and real discussions.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. Further studies on the influence of social power, curriculum, age or social distance on the use of speech acts can be investigated between Persian and English.

2. Other comparative-contrastive studies can be conducted to investigate the use of various speech acts, such as requests, refusals, promises, apologies etc. between the two above-mentioned languages interculturally.

3. Studies should be conducted on how to incorporate teaching pragmatics in classrooms.

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