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The Investigation of Compliment Response Patterns across Gender and Age among Advanced EFL Learners

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Abstract—Compliment responses (CRs) as manifestations of social-cultural standards and politeness varieties of a certain speech community are prevalent types of speech acts which are vulnerable to be misunderstood and therefore cause communication breakdown. Having this in mind, the recent study aimed at investigating compliment response strategies of Iranian advanced EFL learners across gender and age. The data were collected through application of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), borrowed from Chen and Yang (2010), with four situational settings (appearance, clothing, ability, and possession) to 50 male and 50 female advanced EFL learners of an English institute in Iran. Based on qualitative data analysis, no difference was shown between the CR strategies employed by male and female participants in terms of frequency. Likewise, it was revealed that the frequency of CR strategies used by teenage and adult groups was very close. However, scrutinizing the emerging themes, besides similarities between the given groups, some subtle differences in the terminology of the employed strategies were detected.

Index Terms—compliment response, interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic competence, speech acts

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse, interaction, pragmatics, and successful communication as the main objectives of teaching and learning endeavor have been the center of attention by linguists. Communicative competence, too, has been a topic of interest since Hymes (1972&1973), Munby (1978), and Canale & Swain (1980) presented their work in this matter. Recent trends for communicative competence “have put less emphasis on structural and cognitive characteristics of communication and more on the myriad social, cultural, and pragmatic implications of what it means to communicate in a second language” (Brown, 2007, p.218).

Hymes (1972), the sociolinguists who coined the term communicative competence (CC), argued that Chomsky’s (1965) declaration of competence which implies ‘knowledge of language is knowledge of rules’ was too limited as he proposed a distinction between knowledge about language forms and knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally and interactively. Later on Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990), to define CC, presented their own models of CC referring to abilities to control formal structure of language, including grammatical competence and discourse competence, and functional aspect of communication.

Based on discourse analysis, which refers to “the examination of the relationship between forms and functions of language” (Brown, 2007, p.226), it is not possible to analyze a single sentence without taking its context into account. To produce and comprehend language we need to have ability to perceive and process language in use. This definition of discourse analysis implies importance of pragmatics in conveyance and interpretation of meaning.

Pragmatics which deals with “the study of meaning in relation to the context” (Paltridge 2006, p.53) can be studied in three main fields: contrastive pragmatics which is based on comparing linguistic realizations of a particular language that is the object of study to other languages (Riely,1988); cross cultural pragmatics (CCP), which is developed out of the field contrastive pragmatics refers to the idea that people in different countries have different ways of speaking that is subject to different cultural norms; and interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which has its root in cross cultural pragmatics, concerns itself with the “ investigation of NNSs’ comprehension of speech acts, and the acquisition of L2-related speech act knowledge”(Kasper & Dahl,1991, P.215). Based on Thomas (1983), ILP pinpoints how learners realize speech acts and indicates that even advanced learners can fail to convey or comprehend intended meanings.

Pragmatic transfer is one of the fields of study in interlanguage pragmatics. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), much of what learners need to advance their pragmatic competence already exist in their pragmatic repertory, that is, positive transfer from L1 to L2 would ease acquisition of the socio-pragmatic knowledge.

‘Speech act’ is another key issue in the study of interlanguage pragmatic. Ellis (2008) claims that speech acts “constitute attempts by language users to perform specific actions, in particular interpersonal functions such as compliments, requests, or complaints” (p.159).

Compliments and compliment responses are two aspects of speech acts. A compliment is defined by Holmes (as cited in Phoocharoensil 2012) as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes 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”. A compliment response, on the other hand, has been referred to as adjacency pairs by Pomerantz (1978) in which, the compliment constitutes the first pair part and the compliment response constitutes the second pair part. Therefore, the way to respond to the compliments is an important issue and has been categorized based on different classifications like nationality, culture-bound specifications, level of politeness, and so on. In other words, compliment responses can be the demonstration of the social-cultural values and politeness varieties of the speakers.

Compliments as multifunctional speech acts and compliment responses as manifestations of social-cultural standard of a certain speech community which are prevalent types of speech acts are worthy of study and need special attention by the researchers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Compliment responses have been studied from different perspectives. Early works on compliment response by (Pomerantz, 1978; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1986) focusing on different varieties of English revealed different facets of CRs like the common syntactic structures used to respond compliments and the pragmatics of CR strategies used in the English speaking communities. Later on, in other languages, too, research on CRs became a center of attention. While some studies discovered many differences and similarities between the diversity of languages, others compared native and non-native speaker’s production for compliments and responses to compliments (jaworski, 1995; Herbert, 1997; Ruhi & Dogan, 2001; Farghal & Haggan, 2006 among others). Contrasting the CR patterns of English language to other languages, it was indicated that acceptance of compliments was widely used by native English speakers (Herbert 1986; Holmes & Brown 1997; Chen 1993) and the speakers of Asian regions like Japan, China, Taiwan and Vietnam were likely to devalue or reject compliments. (Chen 1993; Baba 1996; Tran 2006)

Moreover, there were also studies comparing compliment response patterns of ESL and EFL learners. For instance, Cheng (2011) explored CRs produced by Chinese ESL and EFL speakers as well as by the native speakers of American. The result of the study depicted that the reason for Chinese ESL participants’ strong cultural awareness in responding to compliments in English was their rich exposure to authentic input.

It is essential to mention that the variation of findings in the literature on CRs is determined in light of variety of theoretical orientations such as Leech (1983), Lakoff (1973), and Brown and Levinson’s (1987), politeness theories. Furthermore, a range of taxonomies to categorize CR utterances like Pomerantz’s, Herbert’s, and Holmes’ taxonomies were utilized by the researchers (Chen & Yang, 2010, P.1952).

With regard to Persian, one of the main studies was conducted by Sharifian (2005) who explains Persian CRs in terms of cultural schemas. In addition, some cross cultural studies compared Iranian production of CR to that of native English speakers. (Razi 2013; Shahsavari, Alimohammadi & Eslami Rasekh 2014), and some studies were conducted within Persian culture considering various factors such as: profession, cities, educational level and gender. ((Razmjoo, Barabadi & Arfa, 2013; Allami & Montazeri, 2012; Heidari-Shahsavari, Dastjerdi & Marvi, 2011). Surprisingly, however, few studies investigated the CR patterns used by Iranian advanced EFL learners across age and gender; the current study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. How do female and male advanced EFL learners differ regarding compliment response speech act?
2. How do adult and teenage advanced EFL learners differ regarding compliment response speech act?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

By means of FCE test, a total of 100 advanced Iranian EFL learners of English, that is, 50 females and 50 males with the age range of 16 to 40 were considered to take part in the study in order to yield more significant, and at the same time trustable results. In this study, the data were collected in one of the English institutes called Atlas, in Urmia, Azarbaijan-e-gharbi. The participants all had the experience of learning English for at least 4 years at English institutes.

B. Instruments

Conducting a research study entails utilization of some instruments which help it to smoothly run toward achieving its intended goals. With this in mind, and to put the theoretical aspects of the current study into practice, the following instruments were utilized to pave the way for data collection procedures:

- First Certificate in English (FCE).
- A discourse compliment task (DCT) borrowed from Chen and Yang (2010).
- Holmes’ (1988, 1993) framework of CR strategies.

C. Procedure

Before embarking on the study, the researcher made sure that all the participants were homogeneous by reading (part 5 to 7 of the Reading and Use of English section) and writing sections of a FCE test. In other words, more than 100

male and female learners with the age range of 16 to 40 were selected in advanced level to take the reading and writing part of a FCE test which lasted for more than 2 hours. Then, the researcher handed out the discourse completion task (DCT), presented as appendix A, to the learners to answer. Of course, as the number of participants who took the FCE test was more than 100, the researcher managed to choose 50 male and 50 females without considering their age, and 50 teenage and 50 adults without considering their gender. That is, in this study, all females are compared to all males regardless of their age and all teenagers are compared to all adults regardless of their gender. Besides, the reliability of the test scores was considered by applying inter-rater reliability; the students' writing and reading tests were scored by the researcher and one of her colleagues and the average score was used to make decision.

It should be mentioned that, 45% of the total mark was assigned for the reading part, which includes part 5, part 6, and part 7 of the Reading and Use of English section of the FCE test, and 30% and 25% of the total mark were assigned to the part one of the writing, which was an essay, and part two of the writing, which was a review of the book or an article or an email, respectively. The questionnaires of the students who gained 70 and up in the FCE test were considered as the raw data to analyze and answer the research questions.

Before answering the questionnaire, the participants were informed about the aim and scope of the study and were asked to imagine themselves in the situations and write down the answers they would naturally give in each situation. Participants were given 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire. They were required to mention their gender and age in the specified blanks in the questionnaire as well.

D. Data Analysis

Based on Holmes' (1988, 1993) classification of compliment response patterns (presented as appendix B) which consists of three macro strategies, namely, Accept, Evade, and Reject, and 10 micro strategies which are classified under each macro strategy, the CRs were coded and classified by the researchers and the frequency of each type of compliment responses employed by female and male participants was calculated to address the first research question of this study, and the frequency of CR types used by teenage and adult participants was totalized to answer the second research question. Furthermore, as a typical qualitative research to address the research questions, emerging themes were written down and examined.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To address the first research question of the study, which concerned with the differences between females and males regarding compliment response speech act, the researcher made an attempt to compare frequencies by which male and female advanced EFL learners applied the 10 CR strategies introduced by Holmes (1988, 1993). Similarly, to address the second research question, which focused on the differences between compliment response patterns employed by adults and teenagers, the frequencies of their responses to the mentioned strategies by Holmes were compared. Emerging themes were also referred to in both cases.

Research question 1: How do female and male advanced EFL learners differ regarding compliment response speech act?

The frequency of CR strategies employed by females and males is reported, illustrated and compared by table I which indicates that males and females used Accept: Appreciation Token strategy very often and with very close frequencies, females 39.8% and males 33.3%. The frequencies were even closer in Accept: Agreeing Utterance, 13.4% female utterances and 14.1% male utterances, in Accept: Downgrading Qualifying Utterance, 2.6% female utterances, and 3.8% male utterances, and in Accept: Return Compliment, 19% female utterances and 21.6% male utterances.

Regarding Reject compliment strategy, females used Disagreeing Utterance in .9% of their utterances and males used it with a slight difference, that is, 6.1%. However, regarding Question Accuracy, they were very close, that is, females, .4% and males .5%. A slight difference can be noticed in the realization of Challenging Sincerity strategy, though it was not significant, by both females and males who used in 3.1% and 1.4% of their utterances respectively.

Regarding Evade strategy, Shift Credit was used by females 6.5% compared to 5.2% used by males. Moreover, Informative Comment was 5.2% among females and 7.5% among males. In addition, females used Request Reassurance 8.2% and males used it 6.6%.

TABLE I.
COMPLIMENT RESPONSE STRATEGIES USED BY ALL FEMALES AND MALES

	Compliment Strategies	Gender	
		Female	Male
Accept	Appreciation Token	39.8%	33.3%
	Agreeing Utterance	13.4%	14.1%
	Downgrading Qualifying Utterance	2.6%	3.8%
	Return Compliment	19.0%	21.6%
Reject	Disagreeing Utterance	.9%	6.1%
	Question Accuracy	.4%	.5%
	Challenging Sincerity	3.9%	1.4%
Evade	Shift Credit	6.5%	5.2%
	Informative Comment	5.2%	7.5%
	Request Reassurance	8.2%	6.6%

In sum, males and females do not seem to have a noticeable difference in the type of compliment strategies they choose. However, emerging themes in the qualitative analysis present subtle differences which are well worth to mention.

Although the frequency of the strategies used by all female and all males (regardless of their age) to accept compliments were very close, there were some differences in the terminology used by each group: First, in almost all situations the expression ‘*Knock on the wood*’ was detected in the responses of all female learners. Whereas, what all male learners employed to accept a compliment (e.g. ‘*thanks man I know you would say that*’ and ‘*yeah buddy I know that*’) pinpoints a gender difference in responding compliments. Second, females considered the compliments on their clothes or possessions as offers of solidarity since they mostly addressed the market they bought them at using responses like ‘*If you want you can buy the same sweater at Ostadan mall.*’ While males considered them as praise or admiration since they used expressions like ‘*I guess you can’t find this sweater in Iran*’ and ‘*my other sweaters are even better*’. Third, in the case of compliments on their ability all females tended to use micro strategy of ‘Request Reassurance’ like ‘*oh, really?*’ more than ‘Informative Comment’ and ‘Shift Credit, to evade the compliment whereas all male learners employed informative comments like ‘*I tried a lot man*’ and ‘*I worked on it very hard.*’

Research question 2: How do teenage and adult advanced EFL learners differ regarding compliment response speech act?

The frequency of CR strategies employed by teenagers and adults, illustrated and compared in table II, indicates that adults and teenagers used Accept: Appreciation Token strategy the most, that is, adults 37.1% and teenagers 35.5%. Regarding Accept: Agreeing Utterance, adults used 11.3% in their utterances and teenagers used 14.8%; moreover, adults used 3.8% Accept: Downgrading Qualifying Utterance and teenagers used 2.8%. In addition, Accept: Return Compliment strategy was used 17.6% in adults’ utterances and 24.8% in teenagers’ utterances. Regarding Reject compliment strategy, adults used Disagreeing Utterance in 5% of their utterances and teenagers used it with a slight difference, that is, 2.4%. Furthermore, regarding Question Accuracy, adults used it 0% and teenagers .7%. A slight difference can be noticed in the use of Challenging Sincerity strategy, though it was not significant, by adults who used it 5% and teenagers in 1.4% of their utterances respectively. Regarding Evade strategy, Shift Credit was used by adults 6.3% compared to 5.5% used by teenagers. Moreover, Informative Comment was 6.3% among adults and 5.9% among teenagers. In addition, adults used Request Reassurance 7.5% and teenagers used it 6.2%.

TABLE II.
COMPLIMENT RESPONSE STRATEGIES USED BY ALL TEENAGERS AND ADULTS

	Compliment Strategies	Age	
		Adults	Teenagers
Accept	Appreciation Token	37.1%	35.5%
	Agreeing Utterance	11.3%	14.8%
	Downgrading Qualifying Utterance	3.8%	2.8%
	Return Compliment	17.6%	24.8%
Reject	Disagreeing Utterance	5.0%	2.4%
	Question Accuracy	.0%	.7%
	Challenging Sincerity	5.0%	1.4%
Evade	Shift Credit	6.3%	5.5%
	Informative Comment	6.3%	5.9%
	Request Reassurance	7.5%	6.2%

Similar to the result of the study on the differences between females and males’ use of CR strategies, the qualitative study depicts little difference between teenagers and adults. However, scrutinizing the learners’ responses to the

questionnaire descriptively, the fundamental difference between teenage and adult learners was the sense of humor in teenager's responses which was missed in all adult learners' responses. In other words, teens used kind of language that expressed their playfulness. For instance some of the teenagers' response to the question 4 of the DCT (You are wearing a Rolex watch. A friend of yours sees it and says to you: "what a watch! I wish I had one like that." You reply :) were

T1: *Yes, I'm a rich man.*

T2: *Yes Rolex Company is mine.*

T3: *I stole it, it's a stolen watch.*

And about the compliment on his clothing Teenage 4 using the micro strategy of 'Agreeing Utterance' responded:

T4: *Everything looks good on me.*

To summarize, the qualitative analysis showed no difference between CR patterns of female and male advanced EFL learners in terms of frequency. This result conforms to the findings of Heidari Shahsavari et al., (2011) in a way that they found similarities between female and male Persian speakers regarding the use of macro strategies (Accept, Evade, Reject) although their participants were all teenagers. Correspondingly, Razmjoo et al., (2013), by getting engaged in conversations with different people of different educational levels to compliment them found out that there were no significant differences between females and males compliment response patterns. Likewise, the frequency of the calculated data depicted no significant difference between teenage and adult learners.

Incidentally, as qualitative research is known to be process oriented with categories that emerge, the emerging items were scrutinized. The result depicted some similarities and some differences between the CR patterns of all groups under the study.

A. CR Patterns Commonly Used by All Advanced EFL Learners

One distinction quality implies that all gender and age groups accepted the compliment opting for the micro strategy of appreciation token followed by return compliment in almost all situations. (e.g. 'Thanks, I'm sure your presentation would be better.', 'Thanks, you look beautiful too.' This result depicts that the schema of 'Shekaste-nafsi' glossed as 'modesty' introduced by Sharifian (2008) is rooted in Iranian culture. The second characteristic of the CRs used by all advanced EFL learners was the cultural specific strategy of 'ta'arof', offering the property (the object of compliment) to the complimenter. Prominence of 'ta'arof' in the responses of advanced EFL learners testifies pragmatic transfer and attests positive correlation hypothesis introduced by Ellis (2008) that "the more proficient the learners the more likely transfer is to take place" (p.190). This result also attests the importance of politeness strategy in Persian culture and is compatible with the findings of Razmjoo et al. (2013) that "there were no significant differences between males and females' compliment response types, or the degree of modesty or ta'arof" (p.44).

Furthermore, as in almost all situations the responses to compliments (by all gender and age groups) often initiated by "thank you", it can be concluded that advance-level learners are willing to adopt target language norms. And additional expressions like 'it's kind of you', 'I've worked on it very hard', and 'it was not as good as yours' used right after saying 'thank you' can indicate that EFL learners feel tension in terms of pragmatic choice while responding to compliments. Comparing this to the findings of Yeong Kim (2014) in an ESL setting in Korea, one can conclude that both EFL and ESL learners feel tension in responding to compliments. "The act of giving compliments did not create much tension for learners in terms of pragmatic choice; however, learners did show tension when responding to compliments" (Yeong Kim, p.96). Albeit, the same finding contradicts the findings of Yeong Kim (2014) in that his findings showed age differences, that is, the response types to compliments differed depending on the ESL learner's age; younger learners often used 'thank you' alone and the older learners (older than 30) included humble expressions like 'you will do much better than me' after 'thank you' more often than did younger learners, whereas finding of the recent study shows the same frequency of using expressions of modesty preceded by thank you in the both age groups.

B. The Differences between Male and Female Participants

First, the terminology used by females and males, in almost all situations (appearance, clothing, ability, and possession) to accept compliments indicates a gender difference in responding compliments. For example, the expression like 'Knock on the wood' used by females, and 'thanks man I know you would say that', 'yeah buddy I know that' employed by males pinpoints what Lakoff (1975) stated in her book, Language and women's place, that women's language is different from men's language. And from the expression 'knock on the wood' which is used by a number of female participants in different situations it comes to mind that females are more superstitious than males. Second, as female learners mostly responded the compliments on their clothing by addressing the market they bought it at, it occurred to the researcher that females consider the compliments as offers of solidarity while males considered them as praise or admiration since utterances like 'This sweater is so hard to find in Iran' and 'I was in Paris last week' was salient among their response. This finding goes in line with the findings of Allami and Montazeri (2012).

C. The Differences between Teenage and Adult Participants

The single difference between teenage and adult learners signifies the sense of humor in teenager's responses which is missed in all adult learners' responses.

V. CONCLUSION

Compliment responses which act as adjacency pairs of compliments have been found to be of great significance in the area of pragmatics because they reflect the socio-cultural values and politeness consideration of the speaker. And based on cross-cultural studies, there is no universal model regarding CRs among communities. That is, different nations with varying cultures employ divergent strategies to responses compliments. Hence, responding to compliments without taking the communities cultural conventions and norms into account can cause misunderstanding and communication problems.

On the other hand, to be proficient, learners need to be competent both in grammar and pragmatic of the target language as communication breakdowns are the consequence of lack of socio- cultural knowledge and discourse aspects in different situations dependent on the language they produce. To circumvent this problem, learners of a foreign language need to be exposed to the authentic discourse and be provided with implicit or explicit instruction about pragmatic knowledge of the speech acts of the target language.

Considering potential differences between male and female’s CR strategies and neglect of age differences in most of the studies concerning compliment response speech act, the current study made an effort to examine CR strategies used by female and male advanced EFL learners as well as the strategies used by teenage and adult learners. To this end, a discourse completion task (DCT) was employed to elicit compliment response strategies used by the participants who were advanced EFL learners of an institute in Urmia, and Holmes’ (1988, 1993) framework of CR strategies was used to categorize the data after coding. The data were analyzed qualitatively and the result revealed no difference between the frequency of employed strategies between females and males. However, analyzing the emerging themes besides the similarities some differences were perceived.

Generally, all female and males differed in the kind of language they use, the consideration of the compliments on their clothes and possessions, and the usage of micro strategies of evade in responding to compliments on their ability. In addition, all females, based on the emergent themes of the qualitative study, appeared to be a bit superstitious. And about the differences between teenagers and adults, although the frequency of the employed strategies by teenage and adult learners implied no significant difference between them, descriptive analysis of the emerging themes characterized the teenagers as cheerful individuals. And dealing with comparability, all advanced EFL learners, regardless of their gender or age, seem to be similar in expressing modesty as in most of the cases they commonly used expressions like ‘you’re nicer than me’, ‘I’m sure you will have a better presentation’ and ‘but I struggled a lot’ after appreciation token (thank you) to devalue themselves and raise the status of their friends. Moreover, another CR strategy seen frequently in the responses of all advanced EFL learners from any age or gender was a politeness gesture namely ‘*ta’arof*’ by which Persian culture is characterized. This cultural specific response which usually follows appreciation token in the responses of EFL learners, as it occurs to the researcher, can imply: pragmatic transfer, lack of pragmatic competence in responding compliments, and inner struggle or tension felt by the learners in choosing pragmatic norms.

APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire (borrowed from Chen and Yang, 2010).

Male

Female

Age:

Direction: please respond to the following situations. For each situation, you might find more than one response socially appropriate. In that case please write all of them in the space provide.

1. You meet an acquaintance you haven’t seen for some time. After exchange of greeting, s/he says: “you look so nice! Even nicer than when I saw you last.” To this you reply:

- A.....
- B.....
- C.....
- D.....

2. You are wearing a sweater. One of your friends meets you and says “what a nice sweater! You look great in it!” You reply:

- A.....
- B.....
- C.....
- D.....

3. You have given a presentation in your biology class. After the presentation one of your classmates comes to you and says: “that was a great presentation. I really enjoyed it.” You reply:

- A.....
- B.....
- C.....
- D.....

4. You are wearing a Rolex watch. A friend of yours sees it and says to you: “wow! What a watch! I wish I had one like that.” You reply:

- A.....
 B.....
 C.....
 D.....

APPENDIX B

HOLMES' (1988, 1993) FRAMEWORK OF CR STRATEGIES	
Macro level	Micro level
Accept	1) Appreciation token
	2) Agreeing utterance
	3) Downgrading/qualifying utterance
	4) Return compliment
Reject	1) Disagreeing utterance
	2) Question accuracy
	3) Challenging sincerity
Evade	1) Shift credit
	2) Informative comment
	3) Request reassurance

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