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ESL Learners Learning How to Compliment

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In order to investigate the effect of classroom instruction on actual encounters between native and non-native speakers of English, this study was conducted which compares the production of compliments and replies to compliments by two different groups of ESL learners during social interactions with native speakers of the target language. One group is given formal instruction in the rules of complimenting in American English, and one is not. Billmyer concludes that formal instruction of social rules of language use can assist learners in communicating more appropriately with native speakers of the target language in meaningful social interaction outside of the classroom.

Recent research in sociolinguistics and second language acquisition has provided compelling evidence that in order to acquire native-like competence, learners must not only develop their interlanguage at the levels of syntax, morphology, and phonology, but they must also acquire the target language speech community's rules for producing appropriate utterances and understanding them in a given social context (Canale and Swain, 1980; Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1971; Paulston, 1974; Taylor and Wolfson, 1978; Wolfson, 1983b). There is a growing body of evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, which shows that non-native speakers, even at the advanced level of linguistic proficiency, have considerable difficulty acquiring the rules for communicating appropriately (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz, 1985; Carrell and Konneker, 1981; Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Scarcella, 1979; Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Thomas, 1983, 1984; Wolfson, 1989).

Of interest to second language researchers and classroom teachers today is whether and in what ways formal instruction can promote the development of appropriate use of the target language. Although Cohen and Olshtain (1988) have shown positive effects for instruction in the rules for apologizing, their study was limited to learners' responses on written tests given in the classroom. To date no one has

ascertained whether this effect extends beyond the classroom into actual encounters with native speakers of the target language.

In order to investigate this question, a study was conducted which compared the production of compliments and replies to compliments by two different groups of ESL learners during social interactions with native speakers of the target language. One group was given formal instruction in the rules of complimenting in American English, and one was not.

Rationale for Compliments

There are several reasons compliments were targeted for this study. The first reason is that ethnographic research conducted in 6 English-speaking speech communities around the world has provided very detailed descriptions of the ways in which native speakers perform compliment routines, and the knowledge they have regarding the functions of compliments, appropriate topics and contexts for complimenting, and the social distribution of compliments (Herbert, 1986, 1987, in press; Herbert and Straight, 1989; Holmes, 1988a, 1988b; Knapp, et al., 1984; Manes, 1983; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Pomerantz, 1978; Wolfson, 1981a, 1981b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1989; Wolfson and Manes, 1980). The knowledge of compliments available to researchers today has come a long way toward achieving observational and descriptive adequacy.

The second reason compliments were selected for study is that they are useful for learners to know about. Wolfson and Manes (1980) have noted that complimenting serves as an important social strategy especially for women in creating or affirming social relationships. They are multifunctional and ubiquitous, and are heard as parts of greetings, farewells, and expressions of gratitude. Compliments can also be used to soften the effects of criticism (Wolfson, 1983a) or other face-threatening acts such as requests (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Perhaps more to the point for learners of a second language, compliments can serve as openers for conversational interactions with native speakers of the target language and in many cases can help sustain the interaction. The following exchange demonstrates this point.

NNS: I like your sweater. It's very nice.
NS: Oh, thank you.
NNS: Yeah, I like it.

NS: Yeah, I got this actually someplace on South Street.

NNS: Yeah, but I didn't see so many times.

NS: Yeah, so I was just shopping and I saw this in the store.

NNS: Yeah it's good. Oh you mean on the street or in the shop?

NS: In the shop.

NNS: Um hmm.

NS: It's just like, it's comfortable.

NNS: Yeah yeah I agree. Color is very nice I think. Pink is not so bright but not so mellow. It's a very clear pink. I like it.

NS: I usually wear, like last year I only wore black.

NNS: Oh really?

NS: Yeah, practically everything I owned was black. I really like black, but you know, after a while you want a bit of color.

NNS: Uh huh.

NS: So this was like my compromise. Pink and black.

NNS: So maybe next year less black. (Both laugh)

In the preceding example the non-native speaker gives seven compliments which are uttered in her first, second, sixth, and tenth turns. Both the adroit placement of these compliments and the content provide her conversation partner with multiple opportunities to disclose a number of details about the complimented item, and about her own personal preferences.

Therefore, learning to compliment and reply to compliments appropriately and effectively may assist learners in creating their own opportunities to engage in meaningful social interaction with native speakers. This may in turn lead to the sort of negotiated interaction that is most relevant to interlanguage development (Hatch, 1978; Krashen, 1981, 1982; Long, 1981; Pica, 1987; Pica, Doughty, Young, 1986).

Conversely, not knowing the rules for complimenting can sometimes result in awkward or uncomfortable moments for learners. Neglecting to give a compliment when one is expected can be interpreted as a sign of disapproval. Or, as Holmes and Brown (1987) demonstrate, giving a compliment which fails due to linguistic or pragmatic reasons can cause embarrassment or offense, as in the case of the male Malaysian student who said to his female teacher, "You are wearing a lovely dress. It fits you." This compliment failed on pragmatic grounds because the speaker was unaware of restrictions on compliments given by males to females and by lower status

to higher status individuals. It failed as well for sociolinguistic reasons because the speaker used the word "fits" rather than a more appropriate word such as "suits".

The Research Question and Design

The research question which motivated this study, stated in general terms is as follows: Will classroom instruction biased toward the explicit formalization of the rules of speaking for complimenting accelerate the development of second language learners' productions of compliments and replies to compliments in interactions with native speakers of American English?

The research design was quasi-experimental, consisting of two groups of research participants (a tutored and an untutored group) with 9 adult ESL learners in each group. Participants were selected from a pool of foreign students studying English as a second language at the University of Pennsylvania. There were 18 female Japanese learners of English from intermediate to advanced levels of English proficiency, and who had lived in the US for six months or less. The two groups were homogeneous with respect to native language, gender, level of English language proficiency, age, and length of residence. However, within each group there was a range of ages and levels of English language proficiency.

The choice of Japanese learners of English for this study was deliberate. To be able to show an effect for instruction the study needed a population of learners whose cultural and linguistic rules for complimenting differ from the target language speech community's rules. While no thorough description of Japanese complimenting behavior exists, there are a few empirical studies which indicate some fundamental differences between complimenting in English and Japanese (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Daikuhara, 1986). These differences include a tendency for the Japanese to compliment less frequently than Americans, and on different topics, to use a more restricted adjectival repertoire with frequent use of one semantically ambiguous adjective, and a tendency to deny or politely accept compliments more frequently than Americans.

During the twelve-week period in which data were collected, the non-native learners in both groups were enrolled in general skills ESL courses for a total of 140 hours of instruction. Learners in the tutored group received an additional six hours of instruction biased toward the explicit presentation of the rules for complimenting and

replying to compliments. Participants in the untutored group did not receive this supplemental instruction.

In addition to their enrollment in ESL courses these individuals also participated in a special Conversation Partners Program with native speakers of American English who were studying Japanese as a foreign language. The matched pairs met weekly over the course of a semester to practice their second and foreign languages and make friends.

The context for assessing the efficacy of instruction was the weekly conversation meetings learners had with their American partners. At these meetings participants in both groups were asked to perform certain compliment-inducing tasks such as showing photos of their homes and family members, reporting on an accomplishment, visiting each other's homes, teaching each other a proverb in their native language, and showing a recently purchased item of apparel. To collect both non-native and native baseline data each task was performed once by the Japanese partner and once by the American partner. Research participants recorded the first thirty minutes of their conversations in English. This included task-related and non-task-related talk. Compliment data from these recordings were later transcribed and compared for differences between the tutored and the untutored groups.

Instruction

The instructional component was organized as follows. The tutored group received six hours of instruction on complimenting during the 4th and 5th week of the study. Studies on non-native performance of speech acts such as refusing, thanking, and apologizing indicate that mastering the linguistic routines is only one of several essential aspects of speech act performance. Moreover, the difficulties learners encounter include failure to judge the pragmatic force of an utterance, and miscalculations regarding social and cultural norms and taboos (Holmes and Brown, 1987; Thomas, 1983). Some researchers regard the source of these failures to be the pragmatically inappropriate transfer of first language rules of speech act usage to the target language (Beebe, et al., 1985, Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Thomas, 1983, 1984). Therefore, keeping in mind the linguistic, social, and cultural differences in realizing the speech act of complimenting, the aims of instruction were:

1) to develop the learners' linguistic and sociolinguistic skills in interpreting and expressing compliments; and

2) to develop their metapragmatic awareness of the target culture's social and cultural norms and values related to complimenting.

The instructional component of the study included the following content:

Compliments:

1. Compliment forms (sentence patterns, intensifier-adjective, adjective-noun collocations)
2. Social and discourse functions: a social strategy used to create or maintain relationships; as invitations to talk; as greetings, farewells, expressions of gratitude
3. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of complimenting: appropriate contexts and topics; effect of social and situational variables (such as gender, age, status, social distance, setting)
4. Sociocultural assumptions: similarities and differences

Replies to Compliments:

1. Functional categories of response types: accept, deflect, reject
2. Effect of each type on interaction:
   Accept - polite but does not sustain talk
   Reject - a potentially face-threatening act
   Deflect - preferred by native-speakers; helps to sustain interaction
3. Repertoire of deflect types of replies:
   Comment/history
   Shift credit
   Downgrade
   Question/request reassurance
   Return

The materials and activities which were used to achieve these objectives provided opportunities for both implicit and explicit learning (Rutherford, 1987) and included:

1. **Authentic sources of native speaker compliment input**
   This included data collected by the learners outside the classroom as well as data provided by the investigator from studies of complimenting and from commercially prepared materials. Students themselves also generated compliment input through role plays and pair practice.

2. Opportunities for implicit learning

Students analyzed these data to deduce the social rules which govern the choice of compliment topics, contexts, relative frequencies, and variation as a function of gender, social distance, status, and role relationship. Students also compared non-native compliment data with native speaker data and made judgments on appropriateness.

3. Explicit instruction

The forms and functions of compliments and replies, the topics and contexts for compliments, and the social, cultural and situational factors which condition complimenting in American English were presented by means of teacher explanation and information sheets summarizing the points of the lessons.

4. Practice and feedback sessions

This component consisted of compliment-specific role plays as well as strategic interactions (Di Pietro, 1987) in which compliments were not specified but learners had to assess the situation and determine whether to compliment or not.

Analysis

In order to operationalize the generally-stated research question, several measures of learner performance of compliments and replies to compliments were selected for analysis:

Compliments

1. Frequency of occurrence of norm-appropriate compliments
2. Level of spontaneity: speaker-initiated, task-related, spontaneous, and addressee-induced
3. Level of appropriateness
4. Well-formedness of utterances
5. Adjectival repertoire

It was hypothesized that learners in the tutored group would produce a higher frequency of norm-appropriate, speaker-initiated compliments than learners in the untutored group, and that these compliments would be linguistically better formed, and make use of a wider range of semantically positive adjectives.

Replies to Compliments

Two aspects of replies given by the non-native speakers were examined:

1. Reply type and its effect on the interaction
2. Length of reply

It was hypothesized that learners in the tutored group would produce more compliment responses in the deflect category than learners in the untutored group, and that these replies would be longer and more effective at sustaining the interaction.

Three native speakers trained in sociolinguistics assisted the investigator in the initial classification and coding of utterances. The categories assigned to each compliment were jointly agreed upon.

Results

Compliments

1. Frequency of norm-appropriate compliments

As Figure 1 shows, on each post-instruction task (Tasks 3-9), learners in the tutored group, that is those instructed in the rules of complimenting, consistently produced a greater number of norm-appropriate compliments than learners in the untutored group.

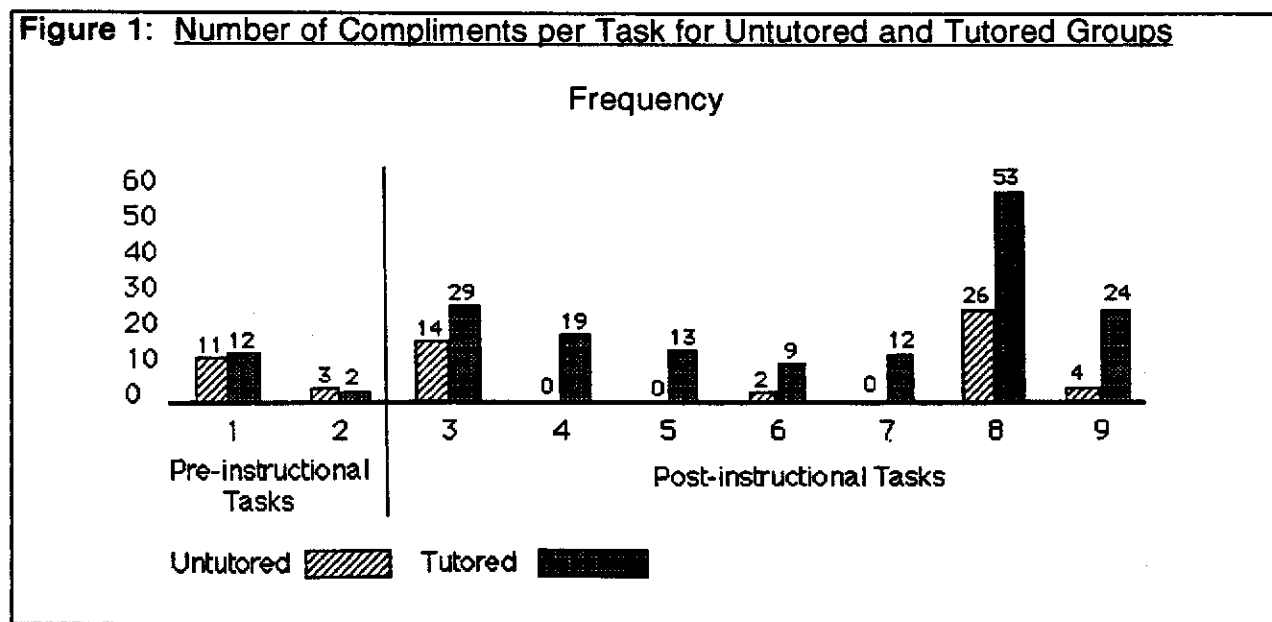Figure 1: Number of Compliments per Task for Untutored and Tutored Groups

Table 1 shows the cumulative frequency for compliments produced by each group to be: 46 compliments for the untutored group and 149 compliments for the tutored group. This represents a threefold difference between the two groups, significant at the .05 level of confidence, in the number of compliments given in appropriate contexts. Furthermore, the number of norm-appropriate compliments given by learners in the tutored group compared more favorably with the number given by the two groups of native speakers of American English in this study (109 and 131 compliments for each group).

Table 1: Mean Frequencies for Untutored and Tutored Groups						
	N	# Compliments	Mean	Min	Max	SD
Untutored	9	46	5.11	1	11	3.14
Tutored	9	149	16.6	4	39	13
$t= 2.57^*$ $p < .05, df=16$						

2. Level of spontaneity

This measure of performance reveals learners' tendencies to take advantage of opportunities to give contextually appropriate compliments, independently of cues which were present in the compliment-inducing tasks or those provided by their partners' direct elicitations. Table 2 shows that there were significant differences between the two groups. First, learners in the untutored group produced very few (less than 16%) truly spontaneous, self-initiated compliments. The vast majority of compliments given by untutored learners were induced by the addressee either indirectly by means of an attention-getting device, such as "This is my new coat." or more directly through elicitation as in "How do you like the tea?" or "This is really cute, isn't it?" In fact, these addressee-induced compliments accounted for 22% of the compliment utterances given by untutored learners.

By contrast, over half of the compliments given by the tutored learners were spontaneous. These learners were far more skilled in identifying appropriate topics and contexts for giving compliments to their American partners. Furthermore, only 2% of the compliments produced by the tutored learners were directly elicited.

Although there is no way to know for sure what caused this high occurrence of addressee-induced compliments among the untutored group of learners, one could hazard a guess that the Americans partners of these learners simply were not being

praised often enough in certain expected contexts. As a result they either complimented themselves or fished for compliments from their partners.

Table 2: Level of Speaker Initiation

	Untutored		Tutored	
	N	%	N	%
Spontaneous	9	(15.3)	80	(52.6)
Task-related	37	(62.7)	69	(45.4)
Addressee-induced	13	(22.1)	3	(2.0)

Chi square = 39.170* p < .001, df=2

3. Level of appropriateness

No significant differences were found in the level of appropriateness of compliments. As Table 3 shows most utterances produced by both groups of speakers were norm-appropriate. This finding indicates that speakers in both groups were mindful of the social and cultural rules that govern choice of topic, level of intimacy, and appropriate encoding.

Table 3: Level of Appropriateness

	Untutored		Tutored	
	N	%	N	%
Native norm appropriate	43	(93.5)	143	(95.4)
Troublesome	3	(6.5)	6	(4.0)
Non-normative	0	(0)	1	(0.6)

4. Linguistic well-formedness

This measure of performance also revealed no significant differences, as shown by Table 4. The vast majority of utterances for both groups of learners were native-like or contained minor errors in syntax, lexis or phonology which were not serious enough to interfere with comprehensibility. This finding is not too surprising considering that relatively little linguistic sophistication is required in order to give a well-formed compliment. In fact one or two words, not even a complete sentence, are all that is really necessary. This finding has important pedagogical implications in view of the

many commercially produced materials which endlessly drill the forms of these social routines.

Table 4: Linguistic Well-formedness				
	Untutored		**Tutored**	
	N	%	N	%
Native-like/Acceptable	44	(88)	147	(98)
Troublesome	2	(4)	2	(1.3)
Unintelligible/Failed Attempt	4	(8)	1	(0.7)

5. Adjectival repertoire

On this measure of performance there are differences between the two groups. Learners in the tutored group used a more extensive repertoire of semantically positive adjectives than learners in the untutored group. In total numbers only 7 different adjectives were represented in compliments given by the untutored group, whereas learners in the tutored group overall produced a total of 24 different semantically positive adjectives. In terms of mean scores, individuals who received instruction in intensifier-adjective and adjective-noun collocations on average used twice as many different adjectives as did learners who had not received this instruction. Table 5 reports these findings which were significant at the .05 level.

Table 5: Adjectival Repertoire Number of Different Semantically Positive Adjectives					
Untutored	7				
Tutored	24				
	N	Mean	Min	Max	SD
Untutored	9	2.56	1	5	1.33
Tutored	9	5.44	2	13	3.64

t = 2.23* p < .05, df = 16

Replies to Compliments

1. Reply type and its effect on the interaction

Before reporting these findings it would be useful to give some background on the meaning of this category. Previous studies on compliment responses have shown that speakers of American and New Zealand English prefer replies which deflect or

evade praise over replies which express agreement or appreciation (see Billmyer, 1990 for a review of this research). The least preferred type of reply is that which rejects or denies the compliment (Herbert, 1986). Deflect-type replies include commenting or giving some history on the complimented item ("I got it at Wanamakers"), shifting credit to another ("My mother gave it to me"), downgrading the complimented item ("It was on sale"), returning the compliment ("Yours is nice too"), or requesting reassurance ("Do you really think so?"). According to Pomerantz (1978), these responses are preferred by speakers of American English because they allow the recipient of a compliment to reconcile two conflicting conversational maxims which require her first to agree with the speaker and at the same time to avoid self praise. It has also been demonstrated (as seen in an earlier example in this paper) that replies of this type quite often lead into an elaborated sequence of exchanges whereby commentary on the complimented item provides new topics for conversation and further opportunities to interact. It is just this type of strategy that learners of second languages might find useful in their attempts to interact more successfully with native speakers and learn more about their second language.

Based on evidence about the rules for replying to compliments among speakers of Japanese, it has been suggested that this type of reply is not necessarily preferred (Daikuhara, 1986). In fact rules regarding deference and politeness often require the recipient of a compliment to avoid self-praise, leading in many instances to denial or rejection. Therefore, one of the goals of instruction in complimenting was to raise the learners' awareness of these differences and at the same time increase their repertoire of deflect response types which are preferred by speakers of American English.

Table 6: Reply Types				
	Untutored		Tutored	
Reply Type	N	%	N	%
Accept (Thanks, agree)	27	(43.6)	18	(25.7)
Deflect (Comment, shift credit, return, downgrade, question)	10	(16.1)	47	(67.2)
Reject (Deny, ignore, disagree)	25	(40.3)	5	(7.1)
Chi square = 38.809* p < .05, df = 2				

Table 6 compares the raw numbers and percentages of reply types for learners in both groups. Response types for learners in the untutored group were predominantly acceptance or rejection replies. In essence these learners relied on simple expressions of appreciation and agreement ("thank you" "yes") -- or denial ("no" "that's not true") -- or they ignored the compliment altogether by means of silence, laughter, or by shifting to a new topic. By contrast, learners in the tutored group responded to 67% of the compliments with replies in the deflect category. These learners exhibited skill in using a variety of deflect strategies. Furthermore, their responses were longer and more closely approximated the length of the native speakers' replies. Both the type of reply and its length appeared to have a salutary effect on sustaining interaction and sharing the conversational burden. An example from both groups shows this contrast more dramatically:

Untutored:

NS: Oh this is a really nice picture
NNS: Thank you
NS: I like it. I like it.
NNS: (silence)
NS: That's nice.
NNS: (silence)
NS: So you keep these in your room?
NNS: Yes.

Tutored:

(Re: the NNS's beach bag)
NS: I see them sell these at I like them
NNS: Really? It's made in Korea, and it I think it's useful and it lasts a long time
    and during summertime I think I can use this for several summertime at least
    for 5 years or something.
NS: yeah
NNS: so I think it's a good choice
NS: It would be fun to go to the beach with that
NNS: yeah

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NS: I like the colors

NNS: Uh huh yeah there's various colors and hard to find just this one.

NS: It's a beautiful bag. I love the colors. I see them selling //it

NNS: //yeah//

NS: //on 40th street and
they have such beautiful colors on the bag and they're handmade too which
is great. I love how they I wish I knew how to do more weaving and knitting
and things like that.

NNS: Oh yeah you do knitting?

Summary and Conclusion

On five out of seven measures of performance, subjects in the tutored group
exhibited behavior more closely approximating native speaker norms in
complimenting than did subjects in the untutored group. These findings lend
considerable support to the hypothesis that formal instruction concerning the social
rules of language use given in the classroom can assist learners in communicating
more appropriately with native speakers of the target language in meaningful social
interaction outside of the classroom.

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