

The Impact of Socio-Pragmatic Instruction on the Performance of Iraqi EFL Learners in the Compliment Response Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the impact of the instruction in the English sociopragmatic awareness among Iraqi EFL learners in the speech act of complimenting responses . It is well-known that sociopragmatic aspects of language use vary across different languages and cultures .Such aspects map out the socio-cultural norms and conventions as well as the strategies that underlie the pragmatic performance of different language speakers in a variety of target language situations . Being a teacher for more than ten years in an Iraqi university , the researcher has noticed that Iraqi EFL learners entertain a low ability to communicate effectively in responding to the speech act of complimenting , despite the fact that many of them have a perfect dominion of the target language grammar rules . However, it seems that L2 teachers often overlook pragmatics, which constitutes a crucial element of language ability of L2 learners ; this might be attributed to the difficulty of its teaching . The resulting lack of pragmatic competence of L2 learners can lead to pragmatic failure and , more importantly , to a complete communication breakdown . It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners are not proficient in responding appropriately to compliments when put in real-life situations due to their inadequate pragmatic competence .Hence , it is very necessary to provide them with socio-cultural knowledge incorporated into the EFL classroom if we are aiming at fruitful communication .The second hypothesis states that socio-cultural knowledge plays a significant role in enhancing Iraqi EFL learners' performance in responding to compliments in English appropriately .The



present study has shown that Iraqi EFL learners perform significantly different forms of compliment responses from those produced by native speakers of English in terms of quality . The results reached at validate the hypothesis put forward , and call for the importance of instructing Iraqi EFL learners concerning socio-cultural norms and conventions of L2 they are studying .

أثر التعليم الاجتماعي – التداولي في تحصيل الدارسين العراقيين للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في الاستجابة لأسلوب المجاملة

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قسم الترجمة

المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة أثر التعليم الاجتماعي – التداولي بين الدارسين العراقيين للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في الاستجابة لأسلوب المجاملة . تتباين الجوانب الاجتماعية لاستعمال اللغة بتباين اللغات والثقافات ، وهي التي تشكل المعايير والأعراف الاجتماعية – التداولية ، فضلا عن الآليات التي تستبطن الأداء التداولي لمتكلمي اللغة الهدف في المواقف الحياتية المختلفة . من هنا ، لوحظ أن أداء الطلبة العراقيين ممن يدرسون اللغة الانكليزية ويرومون التخصص فيها يفتقر إلى الإحاطة بالبعد التداولي لتلك اللغة والذي ينطوي على معرفة الجوانب المختلفة للغة الهدف من تقاليد وأعراف وسياقات ، وليس إتقان القواعد النحوية فحسب . تمثلت فرضية الدراسة الحالية من أن الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية لا يتمتعون بالمقدرة والكفاءة اللازمة في مجال الاستجابة لأسلوب المجاملة بوصفه أحد الأفعال المصاحبة للكلام ، وأن من اللازم أن يتلقوا تعليما على المستوى التداولي للغة يتساق مع الجانب النحوي الذي عادة ما يتم التركيز عليه في قاعة الدرس . أثبتت النتائج التي توصلت إليها الدراسة الحالية صحة الفرضية المذكورة آنفا ، ودعت إلى إيلاء الجانب الاجتماعي – التداولي حيزا مهما في مجال تدريس اللغة الانكليزية ، الأمر الذي من

شأنه الإسهام في تطوير مهارات الطلبة في التواصل بصورة أكثر فاعلية في استعمال اللغة الانكليزية عامة ، وأسلوب المجاملة خاصة .

1. Theoretical Section

1.1 Introduction

It is a fact beyond any dispute that the main purpose behind learning a foreign language is communication . Nevertheless , many foreign language learners are surprised when they come to realize that , in spite of having a perfect mastery of L2 grammar rules , they still encounter difficulties at the interpersonal level when establishing a conversation with native speakers . Hymes (1964) argues that this difficulty is attributed to the lack of communicative competence , that is to say , the necessary knowledge and experience to use the sociocultural norms of the L2 appropriately . These norms , according to Blum-Kulka (1982) vary from one culture to another . Hence arises the need for L2 learners to know not only linguistic knowledge , but communicative competence in order to communicate in the L2 . It is noteworthy that one of the major components of effectively the communicative competence is the pragmatic knowledge , without which English learners hardly avoid committing pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication (Thomas , 1983) . This view is also shared by HeZiran (1988) who states that pragmatic failure may cause misunderstanding , and thus sets up barriers to successful cross-cultural communication . Therefore, English teachers should pay adequate attention to improving students' proficiency in intercultural interaction in order to help them avoid pragmatic failure . This entails introducing EFL learners to the culture of the target society , such as social conventions , communicative rules as well as values of the target nation (ibid) .

According to Austin (1962) , when we speak a language, we do not say the words for no purpose , actually we use it for doing things as well .



However , the thing that an utterance does in one language may be different from another language due to culture diversities . As an expressive speech act , complimenting can be used by anyone , everyday and in many circumstances . Holmes (1988) 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 characteristics positively valued by the speaker and the hearer " . Speech acts are composed of two parts : making compliments , and responding to them . The present study is mainly concerned with the second part , i.e. , responding to compliments by Iraqi EFL learners . It is a pragmatic attempt to pinpoint the pragmatic strategies in a specific speech act . It is hoped that this paper will provide some useful implications in developing the ability of using English ; consequently , avoiding miscommunication as much as possible so as to achieve the basic purpose of language , that is , communication . Native speakers of English might consider the way Arabic speakers respond to compliments offending or bizarre , simply because they understand only the words without the cultural rules that rule them (Al Falasi ,2007) . Since cultures , as has been mentioned above , vary in many patterns, we expect Iraqi EFL learners who constitute the participants of the present study to encounter noticeable difficulties in producing the appropriate speech act of complimenting in English .

1.2 The Hypotheses :

The present paper hypothesizes the following :

1. Iraqi EFL learners respond to compliments in English in a way which is not appropriate and consistent with that made by native speakers of English .
- 2.Sociocultural instruction has a significant , pivotal role in developing Iraqi EFL learners' awareness in responding to the speech act of complimenting .



1.3 Significance of the present study

It is hoped that the results and findings of the present study will provide some pedagogical implications in cultivating and improving Iraqi EFL learners' communicative competence in the speech act of complimenting .

1.4 Literature Review :

One of the pioneer studies conducted in the field of compliments and compliment responses was that by Wolfson & Manes (1980) in their research on the United States English . They identified several lexical and syntactical features of this speech act as well as the functions they serve .On the other hand , Pomerantz (1978) studied the sequential organization of compliments responses in United States English .She observed that they pose a problem for the receiver because at the same time that the receiver wishes to avoid disagreement , s/he must also avoid self-praise . Pomerantz (ibid) classified compliment responses into two categories : acceptance and rejection . In their study , Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that compliment responses strategies used by Americans are : First , acceptance , which includes thanking , agreement , expressing gladness and joking . ; second , the returning which involves returning compliment , offering object of compliment and encouraging . The last strategy mentioned stated by the above mentioned study is rejecting . Herbert (1989) conducted a quantitative



study to examine compliment response strategies . His study showed the frequency of such responses . He claimed that what counts as appropriate culturally in one speech community depends on the sociocultural norms of language use .

Many scholars , based on contrastive studies , have pinpointed the reasons for pragmatic failure . Blum-Kulka (Op.Cit.) states that foreign language learners might not realize the cross-cultural differences between their native language and other languages . Consequently , learners convey their intention by using their own social norms . Holmes (1988) studied compliments in New Zealand .She noticed that women entertained a high frequency of compliment behavior. She justified that women are more sensitive to men's feelings about compliments from men to women. It was observed that acceptance was the most frequent of compliment response strategies .

To the best of the researcher's knowledge , no empirical study has been conducted on the compliment responses among Iraqi EFL learners. It is hoped that the present study will make a contribution to this field of inquiry based on insights derived from the literature and the data obtained from the discourse completion test (DCT) being the basic instrument of collecting data .

1.5 Pragmatic Failure :



J. Thomas (Op.Cit.) defines pragmatic failure as the " inability to understand what is meant by what is said " . She goes on to state that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion " on which H (the hearer) perceives the force of S's (the speaker's) utterance as other than S intended *she* or *he* should perceive it . On the other hand , Hi Ziran (Op.Cit.) points out that pragmatic failure refers to " failure to achieve the desired communicative effect in communication " . He further elaborates that such failures are not the errors in dictation , but those mistakes failing to fulfill communication because of incompatible expressions , and improper habit . Rose (2001) shares He Ziran's view by saying that pragmatic failure is committed when the speaker uses grammatically correct sentences , but unconsciously violates the interpersonal relationship rules , and social conventions .

1.6 Classification of Pragmatic Failure :

Thomas (Op.Cit.) classifies pragmatic failure into two major types : Pragmalinguistic failure and Sociopragmatic failure . The first type takes place when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from that made by native speakers of the target language or when conversational strategies are inappropriately transferred from the speaker's mother tongue to the target language . Sociopragmatic failure , on the other hand , results from various cultural norms and pragmatic principles that govern



linguistic behaviors in different cultures . As it is well- known , different cultures have different ways of thinking , rules of speaking , social values, etc. Such factors have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices , which finally leads to sociopragmatic failure . Thus , in a conversation , the speaker or the listener might commit a pragmatic failure simply because s/he thinks that the other party is able to understand his/ her meaning , making an inappropriate utterance . Here , sociopragmatic failure occurs when one party does not give due concern to the identity and social status of the other party during the conversation .

1.7 Sources of Pragmatic Failure :

1.7.1 *Cultural difference* . Cultural differences set up barriers to cross-cultural communication . Social conventions , value views , thinking patterns , social habits and costumes constitute sources of pragmatic failure . As it is well-known , cross culturally different assessments of social parameters have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices , which finally result in sociopragmatic failure .

1.7.2 *Negative pragmatic transfer* : Kasper (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as " the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of language and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension , production , and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information " . It refers to



the learner's use of prior linguistic information (his mother tongue) or some physical carryover of native language surface to a second language context (ibid) .

1.7.3 *Negative transfer of native linguistic knowledge* : The mother tongue of the sample of the present study (Arabic) has its own unique system of vocabulary and grammar , which is different from that of English . When Iraqi students start to learn English , they are confronted with a new language system . Since the linguistic knowledge of English is deeply rooted in their perception , they are likely to confuse it with their linguistic knowledge of English and apply it in their use of English .

1.7.4 *Negative transfer of native cultural conventions* : In accordance with the cultural norms of the speakers' native language , such speakers choose what to say in a conversation and evaluate what other people have said . Usually EFL learners subconsciously apply the conventions of their mother tongue to the target language while communicating with foreigners , which often results in misunderstandings or even breakdowns in communication .

1.8 The Speech Act of Complimenting :



One of the research areas in sociolinguistics is the study of speech acts .It is mainly concerned with the function of utterances and their relations with context . One of these speech acts is complimenting .

Holmes (1988) defines a compliment as 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 these topics of compliments may be found in almost all cultures , the degree of preferability and acceptability of these topics may vary from one culture to another , causing the difference in the frequency of these topics .

Compliments vary from one culture to another. They are expressions of positive evaluation that commonly occur in everyday conversational

encounters among interlocutors of equal or higher status . A compliment may be used to open a conversation or to smooth conversational interaction by reinforcing the links of solidarity between the interlocutors . People often compliment qualities related to personal appearance (e.g., clothes , hair , skill , possessions , or accomplishments. Previous studies conducted on the speech act of compliment in English have proved its formulaic nature , along with its most frequently used syntactic patterns and linguistic units (Rose , Op.Cit) .This means that one prominent feature of compliments is its lack of originality , which shows that they are performed by means of fixed patterns of formulaic expressions (ibid) .



1.8.1 Strategies of Compliments :

People usually compliment each other to achieve solidarity . Most compliments rely on a positive evaluation in expression of admiration . Such expressions come , mostly , in the form of adjectives . In addition to the strategy of admiration , appreciation and feeling expressions are additional strategies employed in the field of complimenting .

1.9 Compliment Response Strategies :

Herbert (1989) set a scale for compliment response formulas which contains (six) main strategies , in addition to other minor ones . These are :

1. Appreciation token : A verbal acceptance of a compliment , acceptance not being semantically fitted to the specifics of that compliment .
2. Comment acceptance : The addressee accepts the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment .
3. Praise upgrade : In this strategy , the addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient .
4. Reassignment : The addressee agrees with the compliment , but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object complimented itself
5. Return : The praise is shifted to the addresser / complimenter
6. Scale down : The force of the compliment is minimized or scaled down by the addressee .

Since Herbert's compliment response strategy formulas introduced in his study (Op.Cit.) adequately satisfies the requirements of the

present study , the researcher has adopted these strategies as the basis of data analysis .

II. Practical Section :

2.1 Discourse Completion Test :

The data were collected by the researcher himself via a questionnaire in a form of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consists of six situations with different sociolinguistic factors. Although the use of a DCT is criticized on the ground that it does not reflect natural speech ; yet it is necessary since it sheds light on the forms and realizations of compliment response strategies in different situations with different speakers (Olshtain ,1991) . Besides , it allows learners to exhibit their conversational knowledge without the pressures of face-to-face interaction . Data for the present study were collected through two instruments : personal information , and a DCT. In the personal information section , subjects were requested to give basic information about : name , age , and gender , . Participants in the present study were selected from the English Dept. of the College of Education / University of Wasit . The subjects for this study were (40) advanced students chosen from the fourth stage , both morning and evening studies .These were supposed to have studied at least four years in the English Dept. They were divided into two groups , each contains (20) students as an experimental and control groups . The selection of these (40) respondents has been on the assumption that they have both adequate competence , whether linguistic or communicative . It is noteworthy , in this regard , that the respondents in the present study were both male and female students equally .These participants were asked twice : once before they were given any socio-cultural knowledge about the correct pragmatic manner of making compliment responses ; the second time after six weeks of sociopragmatic instruction concerning the speech act of complimenting . This process took the form of pretest and posttest . Participants in this study were asked to write their responses for such situations using English .They responded by writing to what their oral



responses would be to each situation posed . They were asked to write their responses to match as closely as possible what they might actual

say . The purpose behind giving the pretest was to assess the respondents' initial pragmatic ability in terms of making appropriate compliment responses towards certain prompts given to them in a form of *DCT* before the intended instruction ; then , a posttest is administered to evaluate the participants' pragmatic competence in terms of responding after the instruction . The differences in results between the pretest and posttest serve to assess the effects of socio-cultural instruction of compliment responses as a speech act on the participants' pragmatics of producing appropriate compliment responses in relation to different situations . The situations provided in both the pre-test and post-test suggest equal or different social status in the relationship between the interlocutors . These scenarios imply either the subject and a friend ; the subject and a colleague ; the subject and a boss (professor) . These interactions are found in Appendices : (II , III) respectively .

The scenarios in the questionnaire were checked by a number of colleagues who have a long experience in the field of language teaching as a foreign language for the sake of checking its validity and reliability . Some of the items have been modified in view of their highly appreciated remarks .

2.2 Socio-cultural Instruction :

The aim behind giving the sample of the present study adequate instruction concerning making the speech act of compliment was to enable them to make compliment responses appropriately in English . The researcher has chosen this speech act because it hasn't received adequate attention in the teaching of Iraqi EFL learners , since without such knowledge , learners may express dissatisfaction and feel frustration in responding to compliments inappropriately ; a matter which leads to a pragmatic failure between the speaker – hearer relationship . Hence , the instruction in the field of socio-cultural comes as a step towards



awareness-raising in this regard .Consequently, participants were informed about cultural differences and how culture plays a role in

performing the appropriate compliment responses ; the factors which determine making compliments in various languages ; the impact of personal factors , such as age , gender , social status , etc. , on choosing the appropriate forms of compliment responses . Then , learners were shown how power , distance , and severity of offense affect the choice of appropriate formula of compliment responses . The last step constitutes giving the participants different strategies in making compliment responses ,

It is noteworthy , here , that Herbert's (1989) model , mentioned in (1.9) was adopted in this period of intensive socio-cultural instruction .

2.3 Data Analysis :

This section of the present study analyzes the data collected through the main instrument employed , that is , DCT . The compliment response strategies for both the pretest and posttest have been quoted from Robert (1989) and used as a criterion to pinpoint the level of appropriateness of the Iraqi EFL learners regarding the compliment response strategies .

The analysis of the compliment responses made by both model responses by native speakers (henceforth , NSE) and those of Iraqi EFL (henceforth , ILEFL) revealed the following results :

Table (1) : Frequencies & Percentages of Compliment Response

Strategies (Pre-Test)

	Compliment Response Strategies	

	Appreciation Token	Comment Acceptance	Praise Upgrade	Re- Assignment	Return	Praise Downgrade	Total
Experi- mental	11	9	5	8	18	7	58
	18.9 %	15.5%	8.6%	13.8%	31.0%	11.6 %	48.3 %
Control	14	11	6	7	15	8	61
	23.3 %	18.3 %	10 %	11.6 %	25 %	13.3 %	51.7 %
Total	25	20	11	15	33	15	119
	21 %	16.6 %	9.7 %	12.3 %	27.7 %	12.7 %	100 %



Table (1) clearly shows that there are no significant differences between the experimental and control groups as far as their ability to respond to compliments before they received any socio-cultural instruction in this regard . This result , in turn , validates the first hypothesis of the present study which states that : Iraqi EFL learners respond to compliments in English in a way which is not appropriate and consistent with that made by native speakers of English .

Table (2) : Frequencies & Percentages of Compliment Response

Strategies (Post-Test)

	Compliment Response Strategies						
	Appreciation Token	Comment Acceptance	Praise Upgrade	Re- Assignment	Return	Praise Downgrade	Total
	28	19	7	4	20	2	80
Experime- ntal	40 %	23.7 %	8.7 %	5 %	30 %	2.5 %	59.9 %

	12	9	5	6	13	6	51
Control	23.5 %	17.6 %	9.8 %	11.7 %	25.4 %	11.7 %	41.1 %
	40	28	12	10	33	8	131
Total	30.5 %	21.3 %	9.1 %	7.8 %	25.1 %	6.2 %	100 %

Table (2) illustrates that the total sum of response agreement strategies has increased for the experimental group from (48.3 %) in the pre-test into (66.7 %) in the post-test . This percentage represents the sum total of the first three strategies , i.e. , appreciation token , comment acceptance , and praise upgrade

Table (3) Differences in Percentages between Pre- and Post-tests in agreement responses

Group	Before Instruction	After Instruction
Experimental	48.3 %	66.7 %



Control	50.6 %	50.9 %

This proves that the explicit instruction has a positive impact on the Iraqi EFL learners' ability in responding to compliments appropriately . This result validates the second hypothesis of the present study which reads : " Sociocultural instruction has a significant , pivotal role in developing Iraqi EFL learners' awareness in responding to the speech act of complimenting

1.10 Conclusion

The present study has tried to contribute to the existing literature on speech acts , in general , and compliment responses , in particular . It has shown in concrete linguistic evidence that the Iraqi EFL learners' socio-cultural knowledge in EFL contexts does not increase with the increase of their grammatical knowledge in performing such illocutionary acts . It is , thus , very necessary to investigate pragmatic transfer and provide learners with sufficient instruction of this phenomenon in order to prevent them from experiencing its possible pragmatic failure .

1.11 Pedagogical Suggestions :

Having discussed the topic of compliment response strategies from all its aspects , the researcher recommends the following steps which , according to the researcher's own point of view , help in enhancing Iraqi EFL learners' knowledge ; consequently , developing their performance in responding to English compliments appropriately . These are :

1. In order to integrate cultural instruction with English one , specific requirements about the contents and methods of cultural instruction should be added to the syllabus .



2. Creating real learning environment . Teachers should exert more effort to help learners (students) to apply what they have learnt in practice by creating real situations for students to participate in .
3. Introducing socio-pragmatic knowledge . Teachers should convey information about the communicative function of different linguistic forms to their learners (students) .
4. Developing teachers' competence . Since teachers are responsible for transmitting linguistic as well as cultural knowledge about the target language , it becomes essential that English teachers meet the needs for their students This can be achieved by attending training programs , workshops , so as to update their knowledge and learn new teaching techniques .

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Appendix (I)

I. Personal Information :

1. Name (optional)
2. Age
3. Gender

Appendix (II) Pretest

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) :

Dear student ,

The researcher intends to conduct a study about the impact of socio-cultural instruction on the performance of Iraqi EFL learner in compliment response strategies . The researcher requests your kind help in responding



to the scenarios included within this questionnaire .Please , when you respond to each situation , imagine yourself talking to a real person , and thus use the most natural way to write down your responses. Thank you very much for your patience and cooperation .

1. How would you respond if you are wearing an expensive watch and your friend told you , " *what a beautiful watch you have ! I wish I had one like it* "
2. How you respond if your professor told you , " *you are a brilliant student* " .
3. How would you respond if a friend visited your new office , and told you that it was a nice office .

Appendix (III) Post-tes

Dear student ,

Please respond as naturally as possible to the following situations . Try to write your responses to match as closely as possible what you might actually say .

1. How would you respond if a classmate told you , " *you have an impressive character* " .
2. How would you respond if you helped your boss find a solution to a complicated problem , and he said , " *How did you get this idea ? It has never occurred to me !* "
3. What would you say if a student told you , " *you have a great personality* "



Appendix (IV)

Herbert's Compliment Response Strategies (1989)

No.	Strategy	Example
1.	Appreciation Token	Thanks , Thank you / or (smile)
2.	Comment Acceptance	Thanks , It's my favorite too
3.	Praise Upgrade00	Really brings out the blue in my eyes !
4.	Reassignment	My brother gave it to me
5.	Return	So , it's yours
6.	Scale Down	It's really quite old !

