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Iranian EFL learners' compliment responses

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Abstract

The present study aimed at examining the knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in responding to compliments in English, with a focus on the variables of gender, age and educational background. The data were collected through a 24-item English Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to which 40 male and female EFL learners were asked to provide short responses. The responses were coded based on micro (17 categories) and macro (7 categories) coding scales. Learners' confidence in their own pragmatic ability was assessed through self-assessment scores. Appreciation token and comment acceptance (micro-level), and acceptance and positive elaboration (macro-level) were the most highly used strategies. Intermediate learners were the most self-confident group. This study can shed light on the effective role of setting speech acts, and compliments in particular, as part of curriculum design to help EFL learners enhance their pragmatic knowledge.
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1. Introduction

Successful communication has recently become the predominant objective underlying any language teaching and learning endeavor. Achievements tend to be mainly assessed in terms of the ability to appropriately produce and comprehend language in interactional situations. Earlier beliefs concerning the effectiveness of purely syntactic, phonological and morphological instructions were further accompanied by beliefs on the effectiveness of teaching the "rules of speaking" (Hymes, 1972), to improve learners' ability to sustain communication. Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) mainly deals with the study of NNSs' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993) and has expanded its scope to include the study of the emergence of intercultural styles and the use of L2 communication strategies. One of the most frequently addressed issues in interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper and Rose, 1999) refers to the impact of pragmatic transfer. According to Wolfson (1989), an error in grammar or pronunciation may be easily forgiven by the native speakers of a language, yet a pragmatic one can cause offence. Ostensibly, lack of the necessary pragmatic knowledge in a given situation would leave the EFL learners helpless, forcing them to resort to the patterns and norms of their own native language. This sort of pragmatic transfer may result in pragmatic failure, that is, not understanding the illocutionary force of an utterance and/or the

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speakers' intention (Thomas, 1983). EFL learners may fail to repair the interaction as a result of their inadequate pragmatic knowledge (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986).

Speech acts are of special relevance in that they contribute to the construction of every day communication. Complimenting, as a multifunctional speech act, is one of the well studied speech acts in the pragmatics literature. Complimenting has the potential to show gratitude, open or close a conversation, or even soften a criticism or request (Billmyer, 1990; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Wolfson, 1983). The contrast between compliments in American English and compliments in other languages has been frequently laid in their higher frequency as well as in the lack of use of proverbs and ritualized phrases in American English (Wolfson, 1981).

A few studies have dealt with the use of compliments by EFL learners, yet some parts of this puzzle have remained unsolved. Moreover, the investigation of possible pragmatic failure records among Iranian EFL learners is still vague. Thus, compliments were chosen for this study to evaluate the development of the EFL learners' ILP knowledge status. We hope that this investigation of the learners' awareness and production of appropriate complimentary speech strategies will pave the way for further exploratory studies.

This study was, thus, developed with the purpose of presenting a clear picture of the fairly well researched area of pragmatic failure arising from pragmatic transfer, among Persian speaking learners of English. Following Leech (1983), pragmatic failure occurs due to the fact that some "regulative norms" are subject to both inter and intra-cultural variation. The present study, hence, investigates the compliment response strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in an attempt to examine the extent to which their responses are similar to appropriate responses in a L1 context.

2. Background

Kasper (1997) defined pragmatics as "the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context". These communicative actions could include not only speech acts such as greeting, apologizing, complimenting, etc. but also participation in conversation, maintenance of the conversation, and active involvement in different types of discourse. In a broad sense, while learners try to understand and carry out linguistic actions in a target language, they may begin to acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge, that is, ILP is formed (Kasper, 1992). In other words, the main concern of ILP is both pragmatic acquisition and the use of L2 pragmatic knowledge.

During the course of communication, transfer occurs as a result of the "similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired" (Odlin, 1989, p. 27). For Kasper (1992), Leech's (1983) distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, applied by Thomas (1983) to classify pragmatic failure, set the ground for the investigation of pragmatic transfer. Therefore, "*pragmalinguistic transfer* shall designate the process whereby the illocutionary force or politeness value assigned to particular linguistic material in L1 influences learners' perception and production of form-function mappings in L2" (Kasper, 1992, p. 209). As far as sociopragmatic transfer is concerned, for Kasper this included both context-external and context-internal factors: "*Sociopragmatic transfer*, then, is operative when the social perceptions underlying language users' interpretation and performance of linguistic action in L2 are influenced by their assessment of subjectively equivalent L1 contexts" (Kasper, 1992, p. 209).

Two obvious manifestations of pragmatic transfer are positive and negative transfers. Positive transfer will be a causal factor in miscommunication only if native speaker-like pragmatic behavior is assumed inappropriate for non-native speakers. However, positive transfer often leads to successful communicative outcomes. On the other hand, negative outcomes are brought about through L1 sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge being projected onto L2 contexts while differing from the pragmatic perceptions and behaviors of the target community. Consider an exchange between two Iranian friends who use the following:

S: Your shoes are very nice.
A: It is your eyes which can see them nice.

In this exchange, the Iranian cultural value of 'modesty' seems to prevent the recipient from directly accepting the compliment. Such a response would appear strange for an American whose native culture favors accepting the compliment as a common signal of establishing rapport between the speakers.