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The Use of Compliment Response Strategies among Iranian Learners of English: Researching Interlocutors' Relative Power and Gender

SEYYED HATAM TAMIMI SA'D¹

☞ This article reports on a study that set out to investigate how Iranian EFL learners respond to compliments in English. The data were collected using a discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of a variety of situations that required the participants, 26 EFL learners (13 males and 13 females) to respond to compliments directed at them. The data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. To this end, the participants' responses were coded according to a coding scheme adopted from Yu (2004) which identified six compliment response strategies (CRSs). The findings indicated that, regardless of or concerning gender and power (-P and =P), the first three most frequent CR strategies included "Acceptance", "Combination" and "Amendment". These findings were then analyzed in light of previous similar studies that revealed that the participants had followed their first cultural norms not only in using the strategies mentioned above but also in employing very infrequently such strategies as "Face Relationship", "No acknowledgment", and "Non-acceptance". As regards the role of gender, a Chi-square test was run which showed that males and females differed significantly in their use of CRSs. Furthermore, males used more CR strategies compared to females. The qualitative analysis of the semantic formulas of the CR strategies also revealed that, by accepting a compliment, Iranian EFL learners sought agreement and consequently relied on positive politeness to foster rapport and solidarity.

Keywords: Compliment response strategies, EFL learners, politeness, pragmatic competence

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Uporaba strategij odzivanja na pohvale iranskih učencev angleščine: raziskovanje sogovornikove relativne moči položaja in spola

SEYYED HATAM TAMIMI SA'D

~ V prispevku je predstavljena raziskava o odzivanju iranskih učencev angleščine kot tujega jezika na pohvale v angleščini. Podatki so bili zbrani s pomočjo diskurza zaključevanja nalog; naloge so vključevale različne situacije z neposrednimi pohvalami, na katere so se morali udeleženci – 26 učencev angleščine (13 moških in 13 žensk) – odzvati. Podatki so bili obdelani kvantitativno in kvalitativno. Odzivi udeležencev so bili kodirani na podlagi kodirne sheme, povzete po Yuju, ki identificira šest strategij odzivanja na pohvale. Izsledki kažejo, da ne glede na spol in moč položaja (– P in = P) tri najpogosteje uporabljene strategije vključujejo »sprejemanje«, »kombinacije« in »spremembe«. Ugotovitve so bile nadalje analizirane glede na predhodne podobne raziskave. Pokazalo se je, da so udeleženci sledili njihovi primarni kulturni normi, in to ne samo pri uporabi že omenjenih strategij, ampak tudi pri zelo redki uporabi strategij, kot so: »neposredni odnos«, »brez potrditve« in »nesprejemanje«. Vpliv spola je bil preverjen s hi-kvadrat preizkusom, ki je pokazal, da se med moškimi in ženskami pojavljajo statistično pomembne razlike pri uporabi strategij odzivanja na pohvale. Poleg tega so moški tudi več uporabljali strategije kot ženske. Kvalitativna analiza semantičnih formul strategij je prav tako pokazala, da so s sprejetjem pohvale iranski učenci angleščine iskali strinjanje in se posledično zanašali na to, da s pozitivno vljudnostjo spodbujajo trdnejši odnos in solidarnost.

Ključne besede: strategije odzivanja na pohvale, učenci angleščine kot tujega jezika, vljudnost, pragmatične kompetence

Introduction

Communicative competence has been long an inevitably necessary part of language teaching, with sociolinguistic competence occupying an overwhelmingly important position (Wolfson, 1981). In this regard, the way that different speech acts, such as requests, refusals, complimenting, and so on are encoded in various and, more importantly, the problems that confront language learners in their attempt to encode or decode those speech acts have attracted the attention of a myriad of researchers (Ahar & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011; Al-Khateeb, 2009; Cheng, 2011; Golato, 2002; Huth, 2006; Jucker, 2009; Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996; Nelson, El Bakary, & Al Batal, 1996; Olshtain, 1993; Wolfson, 1981, to name only a few). Language learners' production of different speech acts and the demands on the learners that may prevent them from approximating native-speaker norms of realizing those speech acts have long been extensively investigated (Olshtain, 1993). Paying compliments has been evidenced to be a problematic aspect of language learning for second language (L2) learners, which justifies a consideration of this speech act in detail. Holmes and Brown (1987), for instance, stated, "Knowing whether a compliment is appropriate at all, as well as which linguistic strategy to select to express it, is part of the communicative competence learners need to acquire" (p. 528).

There is little doubt that studying speech act behaviour and, therefore, research on this aspect of interaction can be beneficial to our understanding of their nature. CR strategies have a special position in this regard. As Yu (2003) asserted, "Compliment responses are worthy of study because they are ubiquitous, yet frequently problematic speech acts. The fact that compliments are easily heard in everyday conversations indicates that responding to compliments is a common feature of discursal activities" (p. 1687). According to Morkus (2009), compliments preserve the speaker's positive face, which is defined as "a person's need to be treated as an equal or insider" (Verschueren, 2003, p. 45). Two decades earlier, Holmes (1988) had referred to the same fact; that is, compliments are positive politeness strategies.

Reviewing the literature on compliments, Yu (2004) identified six mutually exclusive ways of responding to compliments. Some of these six strategies consist of some sub-strategies in which the super-strategies are carried out. The compliment response (CR) strategies are as follows (adapted from Yu, 2004):

Acceptance Strategies

According to Yu (2004, p. 118), "utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment" are called Acceptance Strategies, and the

following subcategories are subsumed under this main strategy:

- *Appreciation Token*: Utterances showing gratitude and appreciation as in the following example: *Thank you.*
- *Agreement*: Utterances showing the complimentee's agreement to the complimenter's utterance: *Yeah, I know that.*
- *Pleasure*: Utterances indicating that the complimentee is pleased with the complimenter's utterance: *I'm so glad about that.*
- *Association*: Utterances that include more than one subcategory mentioned above. *I'm so happy you liked it. Thank you.* (Pleasure + Appreciation Token)

Amendment Strategies

In this kind of CR strategy, the speaker tries to *amend* the complimentary force of the compliment offered. This might be done in the following ways:

- *Return*: Utterances that *reciprocate* the act of complimenting by offering or returning praise to the complimenter as the following examples show: *You're doing a great job as well.*
- *Downgrade*: Utterances that reduce or scale down the complimentary force of the praise. Consider the following examples: *...but it wasn't that good, come on!*
- *Upgrade*: Utterances that increase the complimentary force of the praise. For example: *It's always like that.*
- *Question*: Utterances that query the genuineness, appropriateness, or sincerity of the compliment. *Really?*
- *Comment*: According to Yu (2004, p. 188), this is a feature of those utterances that, "while accepting the force of a given compliment, do not accept credit for the accomplishment or attitude that is praised. Rather, the speaker impersonalizes the force of that compliment". *I always ask good questions.*
- *Transfer*: Utterances that redirect or switch the force of the compliment to the complimenter. *Actually, you helped me a lot.*
- *Association*: Utterances that include one or more of the Amendment subcategories mentioned above. *Really? But I think it was not that good.* (Question + Downgrade)

Non-acceptance Strategies

Speakers might sometimes prefer to "deny, question, or joke about the content of the compliment or avoid responding directly to the praise" (Yu, 2004, p. 119). Non-acceptance strategies include the following subcategories:

- *Disagreement*: Responses that do not agree with the statement of the

compliment or show that the compliment is excessive, uncalled-for, or unjustified. For instance: *No, that's not true.*

- *Question*: Utterances that call into question the quality of the compliment and do not agree with its full complimentary force. Consider the following example: *You're pulling my leg?!*
- *Diverge*: Utterances that pose other acts and call into question the quality of the compliment this way. *Anyway, I did it haphazardly.*
- *Association*: Utterances that include one or more of the Amendment subcategories mentioned above. *I don't believe it. Are you pulling my leg?* (Disagreement + Question)

Face Relationship-related Response Strategies

These include strategies that do not appear to, as in the above main strategies, accept, amend, or reject the compliment. Rather, they deal with the compliment within the interaction, not with the propositional content of the compliment. *Yeah, that's what one is supposed to do in such situations.*

Combination Strategies

These constitute two or more of the compliment response strategies mentioned above. For example: *Thank you. But I don't think so.* (Acceptance + Disagreement)

No acknowledgment

Finally, speakers might choose to not respond to the compliment offered to him or her.

This study aimed to explore the complimenting behaviour of Iranian university EFL learners. More specifically, the present study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most and least frequent compliment response strategies by Iranian university EFL learners?
2. Do males and females differ in their use and choice of types of compliment response strategies?
3. Is there any significant difference between males and females in their frequency of use of compliment response strategies?
4. What compliment response strategies do individuals use in each power status; that is, in $-P$ and $=P$?

Theoretical Background

Compliments are among the most frequently studied speech acts in pragmatic research (Yu, 2003). A large number of researchers have systematically investigated this speech act from various aspects and in different contexts (e.g., Ahar & Eslami-Rasekh, 2011; Al-Khateeb, 2009; Chen & Yang, 2010; Cheng, 2011; Golato, 2002; Holmes, 1988; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Huth, 2006; Johnson, 1992; Jucker, 2009; Mustapha, 2012; Nelson et al., 1996; Nelson et al., 1996; Rees-Miller, 2011; Tang & Zhang, 2009; Wolfson, 1981; Yu, 2003, 2004).

In this connection, in an early study, Wolfson (1981) examined the cross-cultural differences in realizing compliments, with a particular attention to American English as the starting point of comparison, concluding that, from a cross-cultural perspective, "Speech acts differ cross-culturally not only in the way they are realized but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve" (p. 123). In the same vein, realizations of compliments that are said to vary from one culture to another have been examined. Holmes and Brown (1987), for instance, provided examples of how different culture realized compliments differently and, at times, this led to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Comparative studies of CR as utilized by speakers of different languages also abound. Nelson et al. (1996), for example, compared the realizations of compliment responses in English and Arabic and found that both the American and Syrian subjects of their study employed "Acceptance" strategies most frequently and "Rejection" strategies least frequently. The teaching of complimenting behaviour, whether explicitly or implicitly, has also been an area of research. Huth (2006), for instance, investigated the effect of teaching culture-specific compliments to American learners of German. Huth found that L2 learners are aware of the structural organization of compliments and apply their cultural norms when complimenting. Huth (2006) concluded that this "the inherently social nature of L2 interaction in the context of foreign language teaching" (p. 2025). Rees-Miller's (2011) study took gender as the departure point to compare men and women's ways of complimenting and the different settings in which they paid compliments. Recently, Mustapha (2012) attempted, by means of studying 1200 compliments in Nigerian English, to identify the defining characteristics that can be of help to those researching on compliments. Ahar and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) examined the effect on the gratitude of social status and the size of imposition among Iranian EFL learners and American native speakers. The results of their study indicated that the two variables mentioned above made Iranian EFL learners oversensitive, leading to pragmatic failure.

Studying compliments, especially if this is done in academic settings, can be of considerable significance as these are among the most common speech acts used on a daily basis. Furthermore, it has been found troublesome for L2 learners to appropriately pay compliments in an L2 (e.g., Holmes & Brown, 1987). As will be seen below, the focus of the current study was the interactants' relative power (P), and it was attempted that a full picture of how this factor can influence the utilization of CRs to be depicted. The participants' gender was also taken into account to examine how both genders respond to compliments.

Method

Participants

Participants of the current study included 26 Iranian BA language learners (13 males and 13 females) studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Urmia University, Urmia, Iran. Their age range was 19 to 22 years. For a better comparison of the results, the number of male and female participants was equal.

Instrument

Research into the pragmatic areas of language has witnessed an extensive use of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) as the main data collection tool (Kasper & Dahl, 1991), although this method not been without critics (see e.g. Chaudron, 2005). Therefore, the data for this study were obtained by use of a DCT that consisted of 8 situations in which the complimentees were either inferior or equal to the complimenter and that dealt mainly with everyday academic life. To realize the interlocutors' relative power, the complimentees were supposed to be inferior to the complimentee in four of the situations (1, 3, 5 and 7) and equal to the complimentee in the four other situations (2, 4, 6, and 8). Following Jalilifar, Hashemian, and Tabatabaee (2011), relative power (P) was shown using -P for asymmetrical power relationships, for example a university professor and a student (where most often a professor is often deemed to be more powerful than a student), and =P for equal interlocutors, for example two university students (who are considered equal in terms of social power). Table 1 summarizes the information about the DCT. The DCT appears in Appendix A.

Table 1. *Description of Compliment Response Situations*

No.	Situation	Power	
1	Student's essay returned by professor	-P	Speaker < Hearer
2	Class presentation	=P	Speaker = Hearer
3	Student asking for exam postponement	-P	Speaker < Hearer
4	Students attending an academic seminar	=P	Speaker = Hearer
5	Classroom project accomplished successfully	-P	Speaker < Hearer
6	School conference coordinated well	=P	Speaker = Hearer
7	Professor asking for a PowerPoint presentation	-P	Speaker < Hearer
8	Proposal outline presented in class	=P	Speaker = Hearer

Procedure and data analysis

To collect the data, the researchers distributed the purpose-built DCTs among 26 EFL learners and required them to imagine themselves in the DCT's scenarios and to respond to the compliments as realistically, appropriately, honestly, and immediately as possible. The data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. First, to identify the compliment response strategies employed by the participants in this study, the coding scheme was based on those CR strategies as identified by Yu (2004). These include six mutually exclusive strategies that can be used to respond to compliments in a socio-culturally appropriate way in various situations. This coding scheme along with examples of each strategy taken from the participants' responses appears in the Introduction above. The quantitative phase consisted of descriptive statistics elaborated on further below.

Results

The current study set out to investigate the complimenting behaviour of Iranian university EFL learners with the participants' gender and interlocutors' power status in focus. The findings are presented in this part.

Quantitative Results

Compliment Response Strategy Use

The first research question addressed the CR strategies employed most and least frequently by the participants. Figure 1 provides the answer to this question.

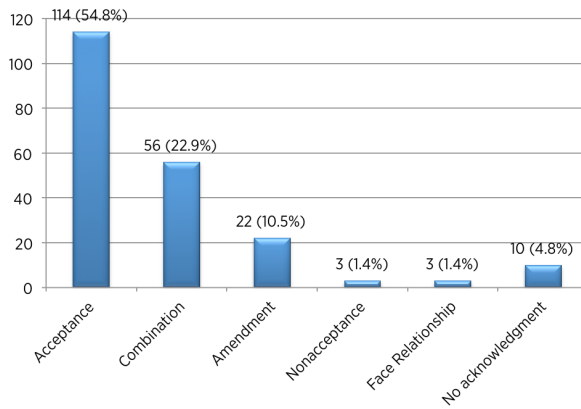


Figure 1. Compliment response strategy use

Figure 1 shows that the total number of CR strategies is 208 and that the first three most frequent CR strategies are “Acceptance” (114), “Combination” (56), and “Amendment” (22). Overall, these three strategies accounted for 92.2 per cent of the total number of strategies employed. This figure also shows that the least frequent CR strategies are “Amendment” and “Non-acceptance”, both employed with the same frequency (3).

Compliment Response Strategy Use: Gender in Focus

The role of gender, the subject of the second research question, was also considered in this study, and males and females were compared with regard to how they responded to compliments. The distribution of CRs across gender is presented in Figure 2.

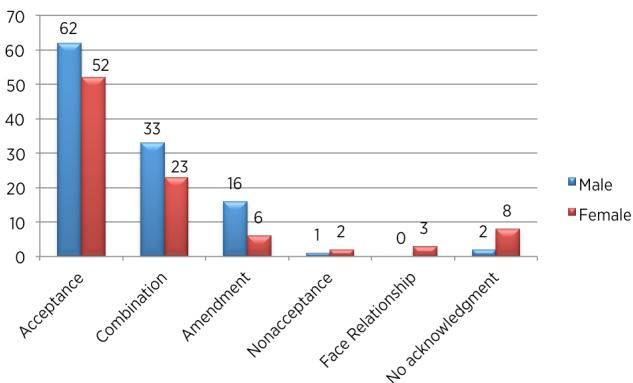


Figure 2. Compliment response strategy use across gender

As shown in Figure 2, both males and females used “Acceptance”, “Combination”, and “Amendment” CR strategies most frequently of all strategies. Furthermore, it can be seen that males outnumber females in all these three strategies. Males, as seen from Figure 2, used more strategies than females did (114 versus 94) and females used more “No Acknowledgment” strategies than males did (8 versus 2). Females also employed the “Face Relationship” strategy that males did not use at all.

As regards the role of gender in the use of CR strategies, addressed in the third research question, a Chi-square analysis was run which showed that there is a significant relationship between gender and the CRs employed, $\chi^2 (3.208) = 12.33, p = .03$. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Chi-square analysis of the role of gender in compliment response strategy use*

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	12.33	3	.03

$p < .05$ Critical Value: 7.81

Qualitative Results

Compliment Response Strategy Use: Power and Gender in Focus

The CR strategies were also examined in light of the individuals' status; that is, the relative power status they have. This was dealt with in the fourth research question. In this connection, it was attempted to determine which CR strategies are used with what status and how frequently. Since the DCT used in the present study realized two power statuses of individuals (i.e., -P and =P), then the CR strategies employed in these two statuses were identified and reported in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. *Participants' CRS Use across Gender and for Unequal Status (S<H; -P; Sit # 1, 3, 5 & 7)*

Status	Acceptance Strategies		Amendment Strategies		Non-acceptance Strategies		Face Relationship		Combination Strategies		No Acknowledgment	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
-P (S<H)	29	27	10	3	0	2	0	2	14	17	0	1
Total	56		13		2		2		31		1	

Note. CRS: Compliment response strategy; H=Hearer; M= Male; F= Female. S=Speaker; Sit= Situation.

Table 4 summarizes the results of CR strategy use across the power status of =P. In this status, both the speaker (complimenter or giver of the compliment) and the hearer (complimentee or receiver of the compliment) are equals.

Table 4. *Participants' CRS Use across Gender and for Equal Status (S=H; =P; Sit # 2, 4, 6 & 8)*

CRS Status	Acceptance Strategies		Amendment Strategies		Non-acceptance Strategies		Face Relationship		Combination Strategies		No Acknowledgment	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
=P (S=H)	33	25	6	3	1	0	0	1	9	16	2	7
Total	58		9		1		1		25		9	

Note. CRS: Compliment response strategy; H=Hearer; M= Male; F= Female. S=Speaker; Sit= Situation.

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4, the first three most frequently used CR strategies are “Acceptance”, “Combination” and “Amendment” in both power statuses of -P and =P. The CR strategy of ‘No Acknowledgment’ was used mainly when the complimenter and complimentee are equals (=P). This finding may be justified on the grounds that the participants did not wish to leave unanswered the compliment received from a higher status person, a university professor, for example, as this might have been deemed to sound impolite. In the same vein, the participants might not have found it impolite not to return a compliment, which explains, if not justifies, why compliments between equals were not acknowledged on some occasions.

Discussion

Briefly put, the results indicated that the first most frequently used CR strategies are “Acceptance”, “Combination”, and “Amendment”. In addition, it can be seen from Figure 2 that in all these three CR strategies, males outnumber females. Males used more “Acceptance”, “Combination”, and “Amendment” strategies than females did. However, what both genders had in common in the use of these CR strategies is that these are the most frequent for both. In the same fashion, the least frequent CR strategies for both genders are the same: “Non-acceptance” and “No acknowledgment”. Males, however, did not use “Face Relationship” while females did although very infrequently.

A comparative glance at the results obtained in the present study indicates that they are in line with some previous studies. For instance, the results of CR strategy use support Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols (1996) in that the

Americans in this study employed “Acceptance” strategies, most frequently of other strategies. The results are also consonant with Yu (2004) whose comparative study of Chinese learners of English and American native speakers of English demonstrated the tendency of both groups to use “Acceptance” strategies most of all. In another study of CR behaviour, Chen and Yang (2010) found that the overwhelmingly common way of responding to compliment in Chinese, which is accepting a compliment, might stem from the influx of the Western cultural norms into Chinese society.

In the same vein and with the increasingly wide spread of the Western ethos, it might not be irrelevant to construe the way Iranian EFL learners have responded to compliments in this study as having roots in the native educational materials, that is, textbooks, videos and so on, to which most, if not all, learners of English are exposed throughout the process of learning English. The findings also stand in contrast to Tang and Zhang (2009) who found that Mandarin Chinese speakers used few “Accept” strategies and more “Reject” ones; Iranian EFL learners in the current study are, however, more similar to the Australian speakers in Tang and Zhang’s (2009) study in that both groups, i.e. Iranians and Australians, employed more Combination Strategies.

In addition to congruities, there are inconsistencies between the findings of this study and other studies concerning the way males and females responded to compliments. For example, Al-Qahtani (2009) cited evidence based on which males were said to favour disagreement, and females favour questions in response to compliments. In contrast, the present study demonstrated that both genders tended more to accept a compliment than to disagree to or question it.

Examples of CRs Used by the Participants

In this part, examples of each CR strategy and sub-strategy as used by the participants are provided to cast more light on the way that the CR strategies mentioned earlier (Yu, 2004) have been employed.

Table 5. *Examples of CRSs Used by the Participants*

No.	Strategy	Sub-strategy	Semantic formula
1.	Acceptance	1. a) <i>Appreciation Token</i>	<i>Thank you, sir.</i> (S. #1)
		1. b) <i>Agreement</i>	<i>Yeah, I know that.</i> (S. #4)
		1. c) <i>Pleasure</i>	<i>I'm so glad about that.</i> (S. #2)
		1. d) <i>Association</i>	<i>I'm so happy you liked it. Thank you.</i> (Pleasure + Appreciation Token) (S. #5)
2.	Amendment	2. a) <i>Return</i>	a) <i>You're doing a great job as well.</i> (S. #6) b) <i>You're doing pretty well too.</i> (S. #6)
		2. b) <i>Downgrade</i>	<i>...but it wasn't that good, come on!</i> (S. #8)
		2. c) <i>Upgrade</i>	<i>It's always like that.</i> (S. #6)
		2. d) <i>Question</i>	a) <i>Really?</i> (S. #4) b) <i>Did you?</i> (S. #4)
		2. e) <i>Comment</i>	<i>I always ask good questions.</i> (S. #4)
		2. f) <i>Transfer</i>	<i>Actually, you helped me a lot.</i> (S. #6)
		2. g) <i>Association</i>	-
3.	Non-acceptance	3. a) <i>Disagreement</i>	a) <i>No, that's not true.</i> (S. #6) b) <i>I don't believe it.</i> (S. #5)
		3. b) <i>Question</i>	<i>You're pulling my leg?!</i> (S. #6)
		3. c) <i>Diverge</i>	-
		3. d) <i>Association</i>	-
4.	Face Relationship Related Response		a) <i>I had too much stress.</i> (S. #4) b) <i>Could you learn anything?</i> (S. #2) c) <i>I like to ask questions.</i> (S. #4)
5.	Combination		a) <i>Thank you. But was it that good?</i> (S. #8)
6.	No acknowledgment		a) [I just smile. I might say nothing to her.] (S. #6) b) [I just nod my head without saying anything.] (S. #4)

Note. S = Situation

Use of Politeness Markers in Compliments

Brown and Levinson (1987) construe compliments as “positive” politeness strategies. The CR strategies employed here, particularly the “Acceptance” strategies, were of a very frequent formulaic nature, revolving mainly around such expressions as “Thank you”. This finding further corroborates Johnson’s (1992) statement that “compliments are highly formulaic, both in their syntactic form and in the lexical items that carry the positive evaluation” (p. 52). One of the frequent politeness markers employed in the compliments here was the

use of the honorific “Sir” as a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) directed at a higher status complimentee to give him/her deference as the following examples indicate:

- *I’m happy you liked it, Sir. (Sit #1; S<H)*
- *Thank you, Sir. (Sit #3; S<H)*

Another politeness marker was the booster: the linguistic device that serves the purpose of intensifying an aforementioned statement (Watts, 2003). According to Watts, who discusses boosters under the label of “the structure of linguistic politeness” and who exemplifies them by citing “of course” and “clearly” (p. 169), boosters aim at “enhancing the force of the illocution in some way”. In the following examples of compliment responses, words such as “so” and “very” function as intensifiers or boosters:

- *Thank you so much. (Sit #2; S=H)*
- *I’m so glad about that. (Sit #8; S<H)*

Intensification can be deemed to have been accomplished in another way: by use of “Combination” strategies. Necessarily, this increases the length of the response to a compliment, which consequently results in longer strings of interaction. In elaborating on this feature in English, Willis (2003) explicated that lengthier strings are more polite in English: “In English there is a broad generalisation that longer is politer” (p. 19). It is noteworthy, however, that although Willis discusses the speech act of request in this way, this “length” principle might be generalizable to compliments as well. The following example illustrates an appropriate CR strategy:

- *Thank you very much, Sir. I’ll do my best. (Sit #3; S<H)*

The above response is appropriate and polite because first, the “Acceptance” strategy is intensified using “very” and second, it entails a promise (“doing one’s best”) that, according to Ogiermann (2009), appeals to the addressee’s positive face. The following response, however, might not be considered polite in the same situation, as the response is short and lacks any intensification:

- *That’s kind of you. (Sit #3; S<H)*

Conclusion

The current study sought to examine the complimenting response behaviour of Iranian university EFL learners. The study revealed that EFL learners, regardless of gender and relative power, used certain CR strategies. The

results also confirmed that the participants relied on certain lexical and syntactic structures to realize compliment responses in English. Iranian EFL learners' tendency to rely on positive politeness was evident through their extensive use of "Acceptance" strategy as a way of avoiding disagreement and seeking agreement with the complimentee, thereby establishing rapport and solidarity. In unequal statuses, however, some negative politeness markers were also used. The findings clearly showed the interplay of gender and power as two significant factors in speech act performance (here, responding to compliments).

Implications of Study

In line with other studies (Holmes & Brown, 1987), the findings of this study also indicated the highly formulaic nature of compliment responses. In practical terms, this might imply that language learners' lexical and syntactic repertoire be enhanced and their formulaic expressions that can come in handy in various situations be increased. This last issue has been documented by some scholars to be of significance in language teaching (Ellis, 2012). Holmes and Brown (1987) also emphasized the pivotal role of exposing learners to formulaic expressions in an L2 as exercises in complimenting and responding to compliments. Therefore, as Yu (2004) aptly pointed out, it is suggested that the current findings be taken into account by textbook writers, materials developers, language teachers and language learners. What is more, the findings might be of interest to both native English speakers and speakers of other different linguistic and cultural backgrounds who might be keen on finding out about the way Iranian speakers of English respond to compliments in English. A deep understating of pragmatic cross-cultural norms, differences and similarities is certainly a prerequisite for successful communication for both native speaker-non-native speaker interactions, for instance in cases involving native English speakers and Iranians, and non-native speaker-non-native speaker interactions, for example, Chinese speakers interacting with Persian native speakers. Such an understanding will certainly reduce the potential pragmatic failure witnessed in a plethora of cases (see, e.g. Yu, 2004).

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The data were elicited by the means of a DCT, which (despite its specific advantages) is a data collection tool the use of which has been criticized mainly because it "may also elicit a narrower range of pragmatic performance than learners are capable of" (Chaudron, 2005, p. 781). It is, therefore, recommended that future research be carried out using other data gathering tools

such as role-plays especially because these can provide more reliable data since what students write on paper (here, DCT) might be substantially different from what they say in a speech. Future research can focus on comparing the results obtained here with those obtained in other languages and cultures. Therefore, comparative studies are highly recommended. European context can, for instance, be a rich source of data in this connection. Finally, a more technical suggestion concerns the role of the interactants' power (P) which was the focus of this study. The attention of future research can be shifted to the other two important factors in research on pragmatics: namely, the rank of imposition (R) and social distance (D).

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Appendix A: Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

Please read all the situations below carefully and write down the possible form of response you would use for each compliment in such natural settings.

Situation 1: A male professor returns your essay to you and he says, "Great job".
You would say:

Situation 2: You have given a presentation in the class. After class, one of your friends says, "Your presentation was great".
You would say:

Situation 3: You are not ready for the exam. You ask your professor to postpone the exam and she says, "I'll postpone it just because you are a good student".
You would say:

Situation 4: You and a friend of yours attend an academic seminar. After that, he says to you, "I liked the questions you asked in the seminar".
You would say:

Situation 5: You accomplish a classroom project successfully. Later, the professor says, "Your project was the best one in the university".
You would say:

Situation 6: You are coordinating a school conference with a classmate. She says to you, "Wow, you are really handling things very well".
You would say:

Situation 7: A professor asks you to a PowerPoint presentation for him. Later, he says, "Thank you. It was great".
You would say:

Situation 8: After you present your proposal outline in class, a classmate says to you, "I think you will really do a great job. I really enjoyed your presentation".
You would say:

Biographical note

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