

Using Compliment Responses in Arabic and English: Focusing on Male and Female EFL Learners in Iraq

Saman Ebadi *

Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Ahmed Rawdhan Salman

MA Student of TEFL, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Abstract

Paying compliments is probably a universal phenomenon. However, differences arise when the interlocutors attempt to respond to the compliments in different cultures. This study extracted and categorized the types of Compliment Responses (CRs) that the Iraqi EFL learners produced both in English and Arabic. It also examined the effect of gender on the variation use of these strategies. To this end, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was adapted and designed to elicit the data from 100 undergraduate students (50 males and 50 females), majoring in general English from University of Babylon, Iraq. For eliciting the Arabic CRs, the DCT was translated into Arabic. The collected CRs were then categorized based on Herbert's (1986) taxonomy. The results showed that the Iraqis accepted the compliment more in English than in Arabic. The results also evidenced the effect of gender on CRs. Given the English responses, females used more *appreciation tokens* than the males. They also transferred the Arabic formulaic expressions more than their male counterparts, hence showed a high interest of modesty. Females also preferred to question the compliments frequently more than the males. This might be an indication of females' interest to expect the reassurance or repetition of the compliments (Han, 1992). Given the Arabic responses, although there were not significant differences among the genders' responses, males used more praise upgrade responses. The study recommended English language teachers to help learners enhance their knowledge or competence of appropriate use CRs in the target language. Based on the research limitations, some suggestions were also considered for further research.

Keywords: compliments, compliment responses, discourse completion test (DCT), gender

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that different cultures have different norms of interactions in terms of pragmatic devices (Sharifian, 2005). One of these pragmatic devices is compliment speech act. Compliments are the common feature of our daily discourse,

and they are naturally used and heard everywhere. It seems that they are used to reduce the social distance and reinforce the solidarity between the speaker and hearer (Holmes, 1988). People often use complements to give “expressions of good will” (Herbert, 1986, p. 76) or “to flatter superiors” (Holmes, 1988, p. 445).

As greeting expects greeting in response, compliment expects a Compliment Response (CR) in response. It seems that studying CRs can “enhance our understanding of a people’s culture, social values, social organization, and the function and meaning of language use in a community” (Yuan, 2001, p. 273). Therefore, since its introduction in 1970s, an overwhelming body of pragmatic research has dedicated itself to discover and analyze this particular speech not only in English but also in other different language.

Given the rapid development in international communication in the modern world, particularly at the turn of new millennium, a remarkable numbers of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) researchers have paid due attention to pragmatically analyze the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners responses to the English compliments across different cultures.

For example, in his doctoral dissertation, Salameh (2001) followed this issue among the Saudi Arabic EFL learners English CRs. Analyzing the Persian speakers English and Persian CRs, Sharifian (2005) developed the Persian cultural schema of *shekasteh nafsi*. Moreover, Cedar (2006) compared the Thai’s English responses to American English and found out that the Thais resorted to their normative expressions in responding to the English responses.

Alkhatteb (2009) also studied the speech of thanking as a CR among the Palestinian EFL learners in her MA thesis. In an empirical pragmatic analysis of CRs, Yousevand (2010) confirmed the Iranian Persian speakers’ general tendency to the modesty both in their Persian and English responses.

The present study is a continuation of this line of research. It attempts to extract and categorize the types of communicative strategies that Iraqi EFL learners employ when they respond to compliments in different socio-cultural situations both in English and Arabic languages. It also investigates the effect of gender in the variation use of CRs patterns. Put differently, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do Iraqi EFL learners use different types of compliment responses in Arabic and English?
- How does gender influence the English complement response patterns of Arabic EFL learners?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Compliment Speech Act

It seems that the complements “grease the social wheels” and therefore, they might function as “social lubricants” (Wolfson, 1983, p. 89). Holmes (1986), thereby, 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” (possessions, characteristics, skills, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer” (p.485).

While a compliment may be regarded as a positive speech act, it may also be interpreted as a face-threatening act (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 247) point out that compliments may be significant FTAs in societies where envy is very strong.

According to Holmes (1988, p. 448), “compliments can be regarded as face-threatening to the extent that they imply the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like to have something belonging to the addressee”. This particular phenomenon is obvious in cross-cultural context (Holmes, 1988, p. 448); for instance, in Arabic culture an expression of admiration for an object imposes an obligation on the addressee to offer it to the complimenter.

Consider the following hypothetical situation in which an American woman may express her admiration of an Iraqi woman’s necklace:

American: What an unusual necklace. It's beautiful!

Iraqi: It is yours!

In this context, American woman (complementer) might be very embarrassed at being offered as a gift the object she had admired if she is not familiar with Arabic cultural norms with respect to complimenting behavior.

Therefore, the casted complements may imply the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like to have something belonging to the addressee (Holmes, 1988).The reason behind this argument is probably that the “praise, like criticism, is an evaluation or judgment of another person and compliments thus can be threatening. ... [Since] the act of judgment is often associated with persons of unequal status, compliments can create distance between people” (Knapp et al., 1984, p. 13).

Given the fact that it is in everyone’s interest to maintain each other’s face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), therefore, factors such as “who gives the compliment to whom and on what occasion as well as the context and the kind of provided compliment” (Shahsavari, et al., 2014, p. 1746) must be of great significance in relation to the interpretation of the compliment.

Compliment Response

Pomerantz (1978) was the first researcher who conducted contrastive research on Compliment Response (CR) speech act. She claimed that two general maxims of speech behavior, namely, “agree with the speakers’ and “avoid self-praise” conflict with each other when responding to English compliments (1978, pp. 81-82). She further hypothesized that recipients of compliments use various solutions to solve this conflict, such as *praise, downgrade and return*.

Criticizing the Pomerantz (1978) suggestions, Holmes (1988) argues that although Pomerantz provides many examples of different types of compliment exchanges, she does not give precise proportions of each type of response.

Therefore, Holmes (1988) developed three main categories of compliment responses, based on the credit attribution component of compliments: *Accept*, *Reject*, and *Deflect or Evade*. She analyzed complimenting behavior in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and considered compliments to be, on the one hand, positively affective speech acts, and on the other, potentially face-threatening acts.

To be in detail, in discussing a corpus of 484 New Zealand compliments, Holmes (1988) focused on the distributional evidence that women and men may interpret compliments differently. The contextual analysis showed that women tend to perceive compliments as solidarity signals, while men were more likely to experience them as FTAs.

Her data further indicated that in New Zealand, the most common response to a compliment was to accept it with the next most frequent response being to deflect the credit; it was relatively rare that New Zealanders overtly reject compliments. Examining gender characteristics in the interaction between the complimenters and complementees, she discovered that there were no significant differences between the sexes in choice of overall strategy.

However, there were a couple of within-category differences. Men ignored or legitimately evaded a compliment more than a woman did (19.3% vs. 11.2%). She hypothesized that compliments were more often experienced as FTAs by men than by women. The study further revealed that there were no sex differences in the proportion of reject responses used overall.

As one of the distinguished figures in analyzing the CRs from a conversational perspective, Herbert (1986) conducted a large-scale study on American English compliment response patterns. The corpus of his study was 1,062 compliment responses collected in three years at the state university of New York. Building on Pomerantz (1978) preliminary schema and on the data supplied by his corpus, Herbert (1986) distinguished twelve types of compliment responses and proposed a three-dimensional framework with twelve subcategories in the following taxonomy (Table 1).

In his taxonomy, Herbert distinguished 12 types of CRs among American native English speakers: (1) *appreciation token* (Thanks, Thank you), (2) *comment acceptance* (Yeah, it's my favorite too), (3) *praise upgrade* (Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?), (4) *comment history* (I bought it for the trip to Arizona), (5) *reassignment* (My brother gave it to me, It really knitted itself), (6) *return* (So's yours), (7) *scale down* (It's really quite old), (8) *question* (Do you really think so?), (9) *disagreement* (I hate it), (10) *qualification* (It's alright, but Len's is nicer), (11) *no acknowledgment*, and (12) *request interpretation* (You wanna borrow this one too?). They were subsumed within three broad categories: *agreement*, *non-agreement*, and *request interpretation*.

Table 1. Herbert' (1986) American English CRs Framework

Response type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks, thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Non-agreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Non-acceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

In a nutshell, the above studies suggested that the native English speakers benefit a dominant use of positive strategies in responding to the complements. Furthermore, it is heartening to note that although the normative data of American speech behavior state that the appropriate response to a compliment is to say "*Thank you*", speakers will often downgrade the compliment or return it to the complimenter (Herbert, 1986, p.77).

Cross-cultural Studies on Complement and CRs between English and Other Languages

Reviewing the literature, it is quite evident that there are a lot of studies dedicated themselves on analyzing the types of strategies people of different languages use in giving and receiving the English language complements.

Using Discourse Completion Test (DCT) along with interviews, Han (1992) examined CRs of Korean females living in the USA to discover whether any possible pragmatic transfer occur while Korean female respond to the American English complements in interaction with Americans. 10 Korean students and 10 American female students took part in the study. Her findings showed that Korean females were most likely to accept compliments in English interactions while they reject or deflect compliments in Korean interactions.

Chen (1993) contrastively compared the CRs between American and Chinese by using DCT with four conversational interactions. The American data produced 339 responses,

and the Chinese data produced 292 responses. Categorizing the Chinese data into three super-strategies, namely, *Accepting*, *Thanking-Denigrating* and *Returning*, the study demonstrated that *Rejecting* “e.g., I am older and uglier” was the most preferred strategies, followed by *Thanking-Denigrating* (e.g. “Thank you. But the sweater is not that nice” and *Accepting* “e.g., Thank you”. However, in American responses *Accepting* (e.g. “Thank you”) had the most occurrences, followed by *Returning* “e.g., Your shirt looks good, too”.

Interpreting the findings based on Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principles, Chen suggested that *Acceptance* in American English is motivated by the Agreement Maxim, which is described by Leech as minimizing disagreement between self and other and maximizing agreement between self and other; while *Rejection* in Chinese is motivated by the Modesty Maxim, which is described by Leech as minimizing the praise of self and maximizing dispraise of self.

In another study, Lorenzo-Dus (2001) examined the compliment responses of British and Spanish male and female undergraduates. The results showed the existence of cross-cultural and cross-gender similarities as well as differences between the four groups of participants. For example, Spanish males tended to upgrade compliments ironically more frequently than their female counterparts do.

Cedar (2006) also conducted a contrastive study on compliment responses used by Thai nonnative speakers of English and American native speakers of English. The study revealed significant differences in response to English compliments between the two groups. While Americans tended to accept compliments and elaborate positively in their responses, Thai speakers of English refrained from elaborating and used formulaic expressions in their responses.

Yousefvand (2010) categorized the range of strategies used in responding to compliments in Persian. 30 undergraduate students majoring in English-Persian translation from Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan and state University of Isfahan participated in the study. Their responses to different scenarios presented in DCT resulted in 540 compliment responses. The results of her study indicated that although Persian speakers who participated in her study tended to respond to the compliments given them with “agreement”, they showed their agreement with some sort of modesty which is the characteristic of Iranian culture. She also noted that there is some variation across gender in responding to compliments in a sense that males were more likely to reject a compliment by using a set of formulaic expressions.

Using DCT, Jin-Pei (2013) wanted to investigate the compliments and CRs in Philippine English. The study indicated that 40% of the participants accepted the compliments. Jin-Pei suggested that the most commonly used sub-strategy in Philippine English CRs speakers’ acceptance strategy was “*appreciation token*”, which accounts for nearly half of raw tokens of compliment response.

Still in a recent cross-cultural investigation, Ebadi, Beigzadeh and Sabzevari (2015) intended to extract and categorize the types of CRs in Persian and English. They further

wanted to investigate the effect of cross-gender variations in realization of compliment response patterns. 50 BA undergraduate students majoring in English Literature, from Razi University in Kermanshah participated in the study.

Answering to 16 hypothetical situations, the participants produced 800 CRs. All these responses were divided into Herbert's (1986) taxonomy. Comparing with the results of Herbert's (1990) study, the findings showed that Persian speakers' general tendency was to express their agreement (42.25%) in response to a compliment and its acceptance (32.7%).

The results also evidenced the effect of gender on compliment responses. Females generally accepted the compliment (45.5% vs. 39%) by appreciating the complimenter; hence establishing friendship and rapport; while male preferred use of set of formulaic expressions (42.75% vs. 31.75) and strategies to avoid self-praise and express their modesty.

Research on Compliment and CRs in Arabic and English

Using DCTs along with interview, Al-Falasi (2007) carried out a study to find out whether Arabic learners (Emirati females) of English produce target like compliment responses in English and whether pragmatic transfer can occur. Her findings proposed that Emirati female learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they might have perceived these norms to be universal among languages rather than being language specific. She also surmised that Arabic non-native speakers of English probably had some misconceptions about native speaker that affect the way they responded to their compliments.

Al-Khateeb (2009) investigated the speech act of "*thanking*" as a CR used by Palestinian EFL learners. Her findings showed that the Palestinian EFL learners utilized some L1 conventionalized expressions in responding to English compliments. The responses were either simple or long literal translations of the Arabic semantic formulas into English.

Regarding to the gender influence on the variation use of strategies, the study suggested that when it came to the physical appearances, house decors, clothes styles, food and diet, women were more sensitive to compliments and thanking responses in such situations.

Reviewing the literature on, it was not found it any study (at least to the best knowledge of the researcher) to further examine the frequency and variation use of strategies in responding to English compliments in Iraqi. Therefore, this study may provide a solid foundation for other researchers to further investigate the issue in other Arabic language dialects and varieties.

METHOD

Design

This study used a similar approach to that of Herbert (1986) to explore the Compliment Response (CR) patterns to meet the purpose of the study. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used in order to explore CRs. Herbert's (1986) taxonomy of CRs was adapted and adopted to analyze the data. This taxonomy had three macro strategies (*Agreement, Non-agreement and Other Interpretations*) and 12 micro-strategies. All the CRs were coded using Herbert's (1986) taxonomy.

Participants

The participants of the present study comprised a group of 100 undergraduate students (50 males and 50 females), majoring in general English from University of Babylon, Iraq. The participants were chosen randomly from a pool of students, who were in their first, second, third as well as fourth year class of their academic education. The age range of the participants was from 18 to 25 with an average age of 22.5. They were native Arabic speakers learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

As an ethical consideration in this research, pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. The participants were asked to respond to a DCT consisting of 12 hypothetical situations in which students were required to put themselves in and respond. In each situation, a compliment addressed the students, and the students were asked to say how they would answer that compliment.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), adapted (from Al-Falasi, 2007; Heidari, Rezazadeh & Eslami Rasekh, 2009; Al-Khateeb, 2009) and designed by the researcher, was used to elicit the required data. This questionnaire was consisted of 12 hypothetical situations containing a compliment.

The compliments were given for appearance, possession, ability or accomplishment. Each item described a situation and invited the participants to imagine themselves in the described situations and write down their most probable responses to the given compliments.

The DCT has some characteristics that motivated the researcher to elicit the data required. First, it is a controlled elicitation procedure for collecting the data necessary to represent socially differentiated situations. Second, DCT enables the researcher to obtain sufficient data in a relatively short period of time (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Third, according to Mackay and Gass (2005), "perhaps the most common method of doing pragmatics-based research has been through the use of a DCT" (p. 89). Finally, DCT enables the researcher to control independent variables, such as age, gender and social status (Blum-Kulka et al.; as cited in Altalhi, 2014, p. 22).

The questionnaire was presented both in English and Arabic with the same content. The English version was used to elicit English responses, whereas the Arabic version was used to elicit Arabic responses.

Data Collection Procedures

It is worth mentioning that conducting the main experiment, both of the DCT questionnaires, English and Arabic versions went through 2 pilot phases. In the first phase, the English version was validated by 2 university professors holding PhD in TEFL and 6 MA students majoring in TEFL. By the same token, the Arabic version was also validated by an Arabic native speaker professor holding PhD in linguistics and translation of English language.

In the second phase of the piloting procedure, the English version of the validated questionnaire was administered among 20 male and female BA students selected randomly from English Department, College of Education, Babylon University. The Arabic version was also conducted by the same participated students, however, in the next day. Of course, the selected participants had similar characteristics to the target sample of the study.

Analyzing the data in the second phase of the piloting, the researcher found that there is a need to exert some modifications. Consequently, both the English and Arabic questionnaires were accordingly modified and the numbers of the hypothetical situations were thereby extended to 12. At this stage the reliability of the DCT was calculated through Cronbach's Alpha (0.703). In addition, one category, namely, *formulaic expression* was added to the Herbert's (1986) framework for CRs classification.

Before conducting the major test, the participants were instructed to put themselves in each hypothetical situation and reply as though they would in a natural setting. In addition, they were not informed of the exact purpose of the study due to this reason that it would raise participants' metacognitive awareness in data elicitation procedures (Cohen; as cited in Yousefvand, 2010).

With the assistance of six professors (2 females and 4 males), the researcher administered the English version of the DCT within 30 minutes. The Arabic version of the same DCT was administered to the same group after one week. The required time for answering Arabic version was also 30 minutes. Moreover, any subject who did not participate in both versions of DCT was excluded from the corpus.

Data Analysis

The corpus of Compliment Responses (CRs) upon which the analysis of present study rests consists of 2400 examples (1200 in English and 1200 in Arabic). All the CRs were coded manually using Herbert's (1986) taxonomy (Table.1) plus one more category, namely, *formulaic expression*.

The realization of Arabic formulaic expressions in the Iraqi EFL learners' responses is probably due to the Arabic cultural norms as well as the Islamic religious teachings. More details in this regard are presented in the discussion section.

Concerning the reliability of the manually coding procedure, at least two raters, including the researcher and an AM student in TEFL, coded the CRs according to Herbert's modified taxonomy. They agreed on 95% categorized data. In the cases of disagreement, where a few discrepancies arose (5%), two linguistic colleagues were consulted and consensus reached on the coding. In order to determine whether the gender difference would affect the individual's use of different strategies of response, the data analyzed statistically, using percentage values.

To answer the questions of the present study and to code CRs, the researcher adopted Herbert's (1986) classification of CRs plus one more category, namely, *formulaic expression*.

1. Appreciation Token: A verbal acceptance of a compliment, acceptance not being semantically fitted to the specifics of that compliment, (e.g. *Shukren*, i.e., *Thanks* or *Thank you*)

2. Comment Acceptance: The addressee accepts the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment (e.g., *alazragh howa lawni al mofazal ayzan*, i.e., *blue is my favorite color, too*).

3. Praise Upgrade: The addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient (e.g., *ana daemen jameel*, i.e., *I am always beautiful*).

4. Comment History: The addressee, although agreeing with the complimentary force, does not accept the praise personally; rather, he or she impersonalizes the complimentary force by giving (maybe irrelevant) impersonal details (e.g., *na'am ana eshtartaho min Iran*, i.e., *yes, I bought it from Iran*).

5. Reassignment: the addressee agrees with the compliment, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object complimented itself (e.g., *haza howa zoghe okhti*, i.e., *this is my sister taste*).

6. Return: the praise is shifted to the addresser/complimenter (e.g., *esmoka jameel ayzan*, i.e., *your name is nice, too*).

7. Scale Down: the force of the compliment is minimized or scaled down by the addressee (e.g., *ennahou laysa bi haze altarigh ahaghan ghadim jeddan*, i.e., *it isn't that way, it's really quite old*).

8. Question: addressee might want an expansion or repetition of the original compliment or question the sincerity of the compliment (e.g., *haghan?*, i.e., *really?*).

9. Disagreement: the addressee directly disagrees with addresser's assertion (e.g., *la motlaghan*, *No, not at all*).

10. Qualification: the addressee may choose not to accept the full complimentary force offered by qualifying that praise, usually by employing *but, yet*, etc. (e.g., *na'am, wa lakin ana oheba lakhzaralthar*, i.e., *yes, but I like green more*).

11. No Acknowledgement: the addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment; that is, he or she employs the conversational turn to do something other than responding to the compliment offered, e.g., shifts the topic (e.g., *saamit*, i.e. *silence*).

12. Request interpretation: the addressee interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment (e.g., *hal toridouuni ana'ateeh laka?* i.e., *do you want me to give it to you?*).

13. Formulaic Expression: addressee shows his or her modesty by using a set of prefabricated utterances. It is an expected polite response to certain compliments (Abdul Sattar & Chela, 2009, p. 179). (e.g., *oyounak hunna aljamilat wa tara kul shey jamil*, i.e., *your eyes are beautiful and they see everything beautiful*).

RESULT

In this section, the overall CRs of the Iraqi EFL learners, both in English and Arabic, will be reported in frequency and percentage.

English CR Patterns among Iraqi Arabic EFL Learners

The following table (Table 2) shows the actual frequencies of the various response types' occurrences among Iraqi EFL learners:

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of English CR Patterns among Iraqi EFL learners

Response Type	Frequency	Percentage
A. Agreement		
<i>I Acceptance</i>		
1. Appreciation Token	288	24
2. Comment Acceptance	103	8.58
3. Praise Upgrade	104	8.6
Subtotal	495	41.18
<i>II Non-acceptance</i>		
1. Comment History	7	.58
2. Reassignment	36	3
3. Return	39	3.25
Subtotal	82	6.83
Subtotal	577	48
B. Nonagreement		
1. Scale Down	13	1.08
2. Question	12	1
3. Disagreement	26	2.16
4. Qualification	19	1.58
5. No Acknowledgement	121	10.08
Subtotal	191	16
C. Other Interpretation		
1. Request	18	1.5
2. Formulaic Expressions	414	34.5
Subtotal	432	36

As shown in table 2, it is quite evident that the most frequent type of CR among Iraqi EFL learners is “*agreement*” amounted to 48% and among this main category, the subcategory of “*acceptance*” roughly makes up 42% of all CRs. This value strongly suggests that Iraqi EFL learners are more likely to accept rather than to reject a compliment in English. “*Other Interpretation*”, which is the second main type of CRs, makes up 36% of the English CRs in our data. It consists of two subcategories, namely, “*request*” and “*formulaic expression*” in which the latter, which is the most frequent one, amounted to 34.4% of the whole of this category. Therefore, we can claim that at least one third of Iraqi EFL learners have followed up their Arabic normative expressions in responding to English compliments. Finally, the “*Non-Agreement*”, which is the third frequent CR strategy in the Iraqi EFL learner English responses, includes 16% of the whole collected responses.

Arabic CR Patterns among Iraqi Arabic EFL Learners

Table 3 indicates the frequency and the percentage of the different types of strategies which Iraqi EFL respondents employed as they responded to compliments in their native language.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Arabic CR Patterns among Arabic EFL learners

Strategy Type	Frequency	Percentage
A. Agreement		
I. Acceptance	153	12.75
1. Appreciation Tokens	115	9.58
2. Comment Acceptance	98	8.16
3. Praise Upgrade	366	30.49
Subtotal		
II. Non-Acceptance	3	0.25
1. Comment History	34	2.83
2. Reassignment	52	4.3
3. Return	89	7.41
Subtotal	455	38
Subtotal		
B. Nonagreement	3	0.25
1. Scale Down	15	1.25
2. Question	0	0
3. Disagreement	12	1
4. Qualification	127	10.5
5. No Acknowledgement	157	13
Subtotal		
C. Other Interpretations	36	3
1. Request	554	46
2. Formulaic Expression	588	49
Subtotal	1200	100
Total		

As shown in Table 3, the most frequently used compliment strategy by Iraqi Arabic native speakers is “*Other Interpretations*” amounted to 49% of the 1200 Arabic CRs elicited through DCT. Among this category, the “*formulaic expression*” is the most

frequent response employed by Iraqi native speakers (46%). “*Agreement*” is the second strategy (38%) frequent among Arabic native speakers. It is obviously evident that “*acceptance*” makes up more than half of this category (30.49%). Finally, the “*Non-agreement*” includes 13% of the whole responses among which the frequent use of “*No acknowledgement*” roughly amounted to 10%, is meaningful. In addition, none of the respondents employed “*disagreement*” as a rejection strategy in their Arabic CRs.

The CR Patterns across Genders

Another aspect of our analysis focuses on the variation in the CRs given by Iraqi males and females. Thereby, given the gender influence, we will report our English and Arabic DCTs results in this section.

The English CR patterns among Iraqi Male and Female EFL Learners

The following table (Table 4) indicates the frequent use of CRs among Iraqi female and male EFL learners.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage of English CRs across Iraqi Male and Female EFL Learners

Strategy Type	Male		Female	
	No	%	No	%
A. Agreement				
a. Acceptance				
1. Appreciation Token	85	14.1	175	29.1
2. Comment Acceptance	46	7.6	43	7.1
3. Praise Upgrade	84	14	12	2
Subtotal	215	35.7	269	40.2
b. Non-acceptance				
1. Comment History	4	0.6	2	0.3
2. Reassignment	13	2.16	12	2
3. Return	13	2.16	13	2.1
Subtotal	30	4.92	27	4.5
Subtotal	352	40.6	318	44.8
B. Nonagreement				
1. Scale Down	4	0.6	8	1.33
2. Question	4	0.6	18	3
3. Disagreement	15	4.5	10	1.6
4. Qualification	13	2.1	5	0.83
5. No Acknowledgement	95	15.8	48	8
Subtotal	101	23.4	89	14
C. Other Interpretation				
1. Request	6	1	7	1.2
2. Formulaic Expression	210	35	240	40
Subtotal	216	36	247	41.2
Total	600	100	600	100

The quantitative analysis of the Iraqi EFL learners’ responses to compliment in terms of “*agreement*” revealed some variations across genders. Table 4 indicates that males and

females' CRs comprise 40.6% and 44.5% of *agreement* type, respectively. Among these responses, females used more appreciation tokens" (29.5%) than the males (14%) in responding to the English compliments. In contrast, males used more praise upgrade strategies (14%) than the females (2%) in their English complimentary exchanges. However, there was no significant difference in utilization of "*comment acceptance*", as an English CR, among the Iraqi female and male EFL learners.

Considering "*other interpretations*" as the second main type of CRs, our data shows that the female participants utilized more "*formulaic expressions*" than the males in receiving the English compliments. Males used 35% while females employed 41.2% of the Arabic ritual expressions in their English CRs.

Given the "*non-agreement*" category, our data further shows that the male participants' preference for rejection of the compliments was rather higher than the female participants in English language. Accordingly, up to 23.4% of the male participants were disagreement with the compliments in English while this value was relatively 15.8% for the female learners. Among this category, 3% of the females "*questioned*" the compliments while the male participants only "*questioned*" 0.6% of the compliments in English. The female participants also used more "*scale down*" responses than their male counterparts (1.33% vs. 0.6%). On the other hand, however, 15.8% of the male respondents applied "*no acknowledgement*" strategy while this proportion for female participants was exactly 8%. In addition, males used 13 "*qualification*" responses (2.1%) whereas females used only 5 instances (0.83 in their English CRs. Still males also used more disagreement responses such as flat "*no*" or "*not at all*" than the females in responding to the produced compliments in English (4.5% vs. 1.83%).

Arabic CR Patterns among Iraqi Male and Female EFL Learners

The following table (Table 5) indicates the variation use of CR strategies that Iraqi female and male EFL learners utilized when they behaved in their native language.

According to the table 4, both genders showed a high tendency to accept the compliments. Accordingly, 46.56% of the males and 43.2% of the females were agreement with the compliments made in Arabic. Both genders utilized "*comment acceptance*" roughly with the same value (male 16.1%; female 16%). Whereas females preferably used more appreciation tokens (13.5), male participants relatively enjoyed more in praising upgrade (12.5). In addition, female participants (4%) used more reassignments than male respondents (2%) in answering the compliments in Arabic language.

Given "*Other Interpretations*" as the second main frequent strategy across the genders, it was not seen any significant variation among the females and males in applying the CR strategies included in this category. For example, males employed 39.3% and female used 40.6% of Arabic "*formulaic expressions*" in responding the compliments in their mother tongue.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage of Arabic CRs across Iraqi Male and Female EFL learners

Strategy Type	Male		Female	
	No	%	No	%
A. Agreement				
<i>a. Acceptance</i>				
1. Appreciation Token	68	11.3	81	13.5
2. Comment	99	16.5	96	16
Acceptance	75	12.5	34	5.6
3. Praise Upgrade	242	40.3	211	35.1
<i>Subtotal</i>				
<i>b. Non-Acceptance</i>				
1. Common History	1	0.16	5	0.83
2. Reassignment	12	2	24	4
3. Return	25	4.1	23	3.8
3. Return	40	6.6	52	8.6
Subtotal	280	46.56	263	43.2
Subtotal				
B. Non-Agreement	8	1.3	7	1.3
1. Scale Down	10	1.6	13	2.3
2. Question	0	0	0	0
3. Disagreement	4	0.6	3	0.5
4. Qualification	61	10	57	9.5
5. No Acknowledgement	83	13.1	79	13.3
Subtotal	17	2.8	19	3.1
C. Other Interpretation	236	39.3	244	40.6
1. Request	247	40.1	261	43.5
2. Formulaic Expression	600	100	600	100
Subtotal				
Total				

Furthermore, our participants did not show any significant difference in rejecting the compliments in their native language. Almost 13.3% of the females and 13.1% of the males were in disagreement with the compliments produced in their mother tongue. Accordingly, they utilized the rejection strategies approximately with similar frequencies. Considering “no acknowledgement”, for example, male participants employed 10% and male participants 9.5% of this strategy in rejecting the responses. Surprisingly, none of the genders answered the Arabic compliments with a blatant “no” in their disagreement strategy use.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the first question, the results of this study revealed that the Iraqis overall strategies in responding to the English compliments were in the order of “Agreement”, “Other Interpretation” and “Non-Agreement”, however, when they responded the compliments in their own native language, they followed “Other Interpretation”, “Agreement” and “Non-Agreement” strategies in the twelve situations.

In English responses, almost 48% of the all CRs fall into the agreement category, while in Arabic responses this proportion is 38% of the whole CRs (Table 2 & 3). If we examine the preferred strategies within this general category, only there is a significant difference in choice of *appreciation token* response which deserves a comment (Table 2 & 3).

It seems more likely that the Iraqi EFL learners may show a higher tendency to graciously accept the English compliments with the extensive use of appreciation tokens such as “*thanks you*” than they might do in their mother tongue (24% vs. 12.75%). It is in line with Holmes (1988), and Jin-Pei (2013) studies in which almost 66% of the American college students, and 42% of the Philippine English CRs were appreciation tokens. However, this finding is in stark contrast with Daikuhrrar (1986) and Chen (1993) in which Korean and Chinese respondents EFL learners’ frequent super strategy was rejecting.

The low frequent use of *appreciation token* in EFL learners’ Arabic responses indicates that the Iraqis follow up the Arabic culture’s low frequency use of appreciation token in their responses. Arabs low frequent use of appreciation token is probably rendered more when they are expected to deliver their gratitude to unknown people in a formal situations than they may do to the intimates in informal contexts.

This feature is clearly evident in situations of six and seven in which the participants receive the praise for their appearance on the part of the unknowns. The former represents 41% and the latter includes 51% of the whole Arabic responses to these situations, although a significant proportion of the responses were nonagreement.

In the case of unknown people, appreciation token strategy is usually characterized in the form of gratitude (*e.g., shukren, i.e., thank you*) or heightened gratitude (*e.g., shukren jazillan, i.e., thank you very much*) expressions in Arabic complimentary interactions.

This is likely due to the reason that Arabs, at least the Iraqis, might desire to satisfy the unknown hearer’s negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and thereby to avoid or minimize the imposition of a face threatening act on an unknown header. This finding maintains the Herbert’s (1986) prediction that “*Acceptance* [italicized in origin] especially APPRECIATION TOKENS [capitalized in origin], should be most common among strangers, that is, those who do not share solidarity” (p. 82).

Our data also shows that an overwhelming majority of the responses, both in English and Arabic, are divided into the *Other Interpretation* category (Table 1 & 2). Probing within the subcategories, it is straightforwardly evident that a large number of Iraqi EFL learners have followed up the Arabic *formulaic Expressions* in responding the English and Arabic compliments (Table 1 & 2). However, this feature is more frequent in Arabic responses than the English ones (46% vs. 34.5).

The frequent occurrence of *formulaic expressions* is probably due to reason that the Iraqi EFL learners in a compliance with the Modesty Maxim (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

intended to avoid or at least minimize the praise of self and hereby be modest in their responses.

Perhaps, the use of these formulaic expressions comes from the Arabic Islamic culture which has been discussed as the transparent evidence of pragmatic transfer in responding to third question.

This aspect of our findings corroborates the Cedar (2006) findings that Thai speakers of English refrained from elaborating and used formulaic expressions in their responses. It also strongly lends support to the Yousefvand (2010) study in which Persian speakers utilized Persian formulaic expression to express their modesty, which is deeply rooted in their culture.

According to data displayed in Figure 4, however, there is not a significant difference in utilizing the Non-agreement strategy frequent in English and Arabic responses.

Accordingly, if we examine the preferred strategies within this general category (Tables 2 & 3), it is obviously evident that the Iraqi EFL learners have utilized the “*no acknowledgement*” strategy roughly with a similar proportion in English and Arabic CRs (10.08% vs. 10.5%).

This feature is more frequent in the situations of six and seven in which our Iraqi EFL participants are praised for their appearance on behalf of unknown people.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon may be that in Arab society it is not common to accept the praise on behalf of an unknown person. The Arabs may consider it as an offence and thereby they might ignore or sometimes they may react with offending behavior. Here are some of the English CRs:

(1) It is not a matter for you. Also who allow you to give me your opinion? If you are going to do such things I will insult you, impolite person.

(2) The matter doesn't concern you.

The use of offending behavior on the part of Iraqi EFL learners probably supports Yousefvand (2010) and Ebadi et al., (2015) investigations in which they found some of the Persian EFL learners disrespected in receiving the praise from the strangers.

The data also shows that the Iraqi EFL learners did not utilize any “*disagreement*” response in their own native language (Table 3). Our assumption is that, in Arabic culture, it might be severely an indication of impoliteness if somebody responds to a compliment with a blatant “*laa, i.e., no*”. More precisely, the compliment giver may interpret the flat “*no*” response as an indication of the fact that the addressee has probably regarded the compliments put forth to him/her as insincere. Therefore, to avoid such an interpretation, or more precisely, to enhance the interlocutor’s face the participants likely resort to their Arabic normative expressions to make the compliment giver feel good too.

This finding is in line with Yousefvand (2010) findings in which she suggested that, instead of rejecting the compliments with a flat *no*, Persian speakers utilized the Persian culture's formulaic expressions in responding to Persian compliments.

Given the second research question of this study which examines the gender influence on the variation use of the CR strategies, we observed some differences between men and women in how they respond to a compliment both in English and Arabic. For a better picture, some of the major differences are descriptively reported as follows.

Given their English responses, our data indicated that the Iraqi female EFL learners show a high tendency to use more appreciation tokens far more often than the male learners (29.1% vs. 14.1%, Table 4) do.

This females' preference for appreciation tokens was often common in the situations in which they were praised for appearance, food, or ability.

Perhaps, this finding maintains the suggestion that women are traditionally assumed to be more concerned than men with personal topics (Liu's; as cited in Al-Khateeb, p. 75). One possible reason for this feature is that it may be a feminine habit to be appreciated in the styles and the decor of each other's houses, and the taste of the food they make (Al-Khateeb, 2009). This is in line with Holmes (1988), Yousefvand (2010), Ebdai et al, (2015) in which the female participants showed a general tendency to accept the compliment by appreciating the complimenters' statement.

Considering the male responses in English, our data also confirmed that males showed a preference for using praise upgrade far more often than female EFL learners use in their English responses (14% vs. 2%, Table 5).

This preference is obvious in the situations in which the participants are praised for their possessions although an overwhelming majority of the respondents utilized Arabic normative expressions in their responses. This finding lends support to Lorenzo-Dus (2001) investigation in which he found out that Spanish males tended to upgrade compliments ironically (a type of compliment response absent in the British data) more frequently than their female counterparts do.

We also noticed that females utilized more *questions* in their English responses whereas males showed a high tendency to use *disagreement* sub-strategy. The female use of the question as a refusal strategy is probably due to the hypothesis that women are more concerned about face than are men when they reject a compliment (Holmes, 1986) and thereby the females expect the reassurance or repetition of the compliments (Han, 1992).

Our findings also indicate that the males' "*no acknowledgement*" responses were more frequent than the females in their English response. This might be due to the fact that the females may have considered it as an impolite behavior to provide the compliment givers with no responses. Because as Yousefvand (2010) stated "the absence of compliment responses often leads to situations that threaten the positive face ... of

complimenters, [therefore,] it is important for complimentees responding to the compliments to minimize the sense of threat” (p. 108).

Our study also further revealed that the females showed a significant interest to use Arabic formulaic expressions in their English responses (Table 5). One possible explanation for this finding may be that similar to Emirati EFL learners, our Iraqi EFL participants have might wrongly assumed that they would be considered as much polite if they response in more Arabic formulaic expressions (Al-Falasi, 2007).

Our study further demonstrates that gender has no significant influence in the utilization of general strategies in responding to Arabic compliments. However, if we examine the within category responses, there is a significant difference in the use of the praise upgrade response between the females and the males (Table 5). This difference was also characterized in their English responses (Table 4). The male participants frequently utilized this strategy as they received praise for their possessions.

For example, in one of the situations, in which the complimentee receives the compliment on the part of a friend, almost more than one third of the males' English and Arabic response were *praise upgrades*.

It is also heartening to note that in Iraqi Arabic Islamic culture it is usually not common that the females accept the compliments on the part of an unknown man particularly when the target of the praise is on their appearance. However, our findings show that a considerable number of our female participants accepted the compliments in the situation in which they were praised for their appearance on the part of an unknown people.

This finding probably corroborates Al-Khateeb's (2009) suggestion that “there is a trend among the Arab youth to imitate the west believing that they can appear civilized and open-minded in the way they communicate with others” (pp. 68-69).

Pedagogical implication

The results of the present study confirm the idea that though the speech act of compliment response is universal, ways of expressing it are cultural-specific (Herbert, 1986; Holmes, 1988). In line with the findings of this study, many studies in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (Al-Falasi, 2007; Al-Kateeb, 2009; Chen, 1993; Ebadi, et al., 2015; Jin-Pei, 2013; Saito & Beeken, 1997; Salameh, 2001; Sharifian, 2005; Yousefvand, 2010;) concluded that in order to be communicatively competent in the target language, foreign language learners need to become knowledgeable not only in the rules of grammar but also in the sociolinguistic rules of language use.

More specifically, the Iraqi EFL learners should learn more about the pragmatic rules that are applied in English culture. Because although they indicated a strong linguistic competence in their response, that is to say, they have reached a comparatively high level in English learning, they are still inclined to think in Arabic way, which means their interlanguage pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence is not enough.

By the same token, Iraqi EFL teachers should pay more attention to the language use. They should take a more interactive teaching methodology in oral course, intensive reading, and western cultural course and they are expected to give students more information about foreign cultures and patterns of naturally occurring talk. Therefore, it is useful for the Iraqi EFL teacher listen for and note such the students pragmatic failure cases because “the best examples for a particular class will be those drawn from the personal experiences of class members as they are learning English” (Holmes & Brown, 1987, p. 528).

It may also be useful to comment that in many cases it is only a myth that native speakers of English language often employ a certain usage when performing a CRs act. Because as Saito & Beecken (1997) mentioned, “Language usually allows speakers to draw on a wide variety of choices in the same situation” (p. 372) as they may want to perform in different CR speech acts. Therefore, our last word is that the Iraqi EFL learners should keep this premise in mind that well-known typical uses of CRs are just the tip of the iceberg and they need to learn how to perform the English CRs in different sociolinguistic situations.

Limitations and some Suggestions for further studies

Since all the participants of this study were Iraqi Arabic EFL learners, we do not seek to generalize or make claims about other Iraqi English learners on the bias of this study. Therefore, we recommend that future contrastive studies of speech acts include subjects from all walks of life with a wider range of subjects in term of age, education, and socioeconomic background in order to give the research findings more credibility and generalizability.

In addition, the main tool of collecting data was the DCT it was written responses that were investigated. Giving more weight to spoken responses (including intonation and other phonological features) and gestures including smiling, nodding and hugging in future studies might widen the range of data and lead to a set of unpredicted findings in the area of spoken compliment responses.

Furthermore, the future studies may approach the topic from different points of view by combining quantitative data from DCT and qualitative data from interviews. The interviews provide supplementary perspective and it may bring additional insights into the questions of the current research project.

There is evidence that even within English-speaking cultures, there are differences in the frequency with which it is acceptable to give and accept the compliments. Therefore, the future studies could further assess and contrast the Iraqi EFL learners' CRs with those producing by English language's different dialects such as New Zealanders, American or British native speakers.

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