A Cross-cultural Investigation of Compliments and Compliment Responses: Comparing Persian Speakers, EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Rozana Shamsabadi, Abbas Eslami Rasekh
1&2 Department of English Language, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Corresponding email address
rozanashamsabadi@gmail.com

Abstract
Compliments are one of the speech acts which require tact as there are cross-cultural differences which make them different across languages. The research presented here is a comparison of compliment strategies across English and Persian. A cross linguistic comparison is made between three data types: Native Persian (NP), Native English (NE) and non-native English (NNE) to find the differences that exist between three groups of performances in the two languages. 30 advanced EFL learners, both male and female undergraduate and graduate students participated in this study. Family members were tape recorded for collecting natural data. An open-ended DCT was employed for collecting data for our inferential and descriptive statistical analysis. The results of the analysis of data collected suggested that EFL learners differ from NE speakers in their Politeness strategies in giving and responding to compliment. The reasons were discovered to be both communicative incompetence and L1 transfer. Persian learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they perceive these norms to be universal resulting from lack of awareness of the sociocultural norms governing compliments.

Index Terms: compliment, compliment response, speech act, cross-cultural differences

1. Introduction

Since the early 1980s, researchers have established that foreign language learners’ development of various aspects of pragmatic competence may be facilitated by the instruction of pragmatic routines and strategies in the foreign language classroom (Kasper & Rose, 2001). Communicative competence as the goal of second and foreign language teaching has gained much importance in language learning and use. This recognition has had an impact on program design and materials development. Before the mid-1960s, however, linguistic competence was defined narrowly in terms of the grammatical knowledge of idealized speakers which led linguists and others to become interested in extended notions of competence. Hymes was among the first to use the term communicative competence (Hymes, 1970; Hymes, 1974). For him, the ability to speak competently not only entails knowing the grammatical rules of a language, but also knowing what to say to whom in what circumstances, and how to say it.
There is variability across cultures regarding sociolinguistic norms and behavior patterns. People learn the rules of speaking from their native speech community when interacting with members of a speech community. The differences in sociolinguistic rules across cultures cause some difficulty for second language learners. Even if the learners have developed ability in phonology, syntax, and semantics of the target language, miscommunication may occur if they have not acquired the knowledge of when to speak what to whom appropriately. One of the sources of intercultural miscommunication emphasized by the findings of cross-cultural studies is sociolinguistic transfer. Sociolinguistic transfer is “the use of the rules of speaking of one’s own cultural group when interacting with members of another group” (Chick, 1996, p.332).

A compliment response (CR) is a type of speech act. This speech act can be a source of serious miscommunication when speakers of two diverse cultures, such as those of Iran and the United States, interact. Researchers such as Wolfson (1981) mention that in American English, compliments occur quite often and can even serve other functions, such as greeting, thanking, or apologizing. However, complimenting behavior varies cross-culturally in the sense that it may occur frequently and for various reasons as in different cultures. Inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values occurs when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express the speech act in a particular context. The problem occurs when a person says the right thing but at the wrong time. Something polite in L₁ might be impolite in L₂. A cross-cultural clash happens when polite verbal behavior is viewed as inappropriate in L₂.

Studies have shown that the same speech act has different realizations in different languages and cultures. For example, some researchers (e.g., Basso, 1979; Wolfson, 1981; Yang, 1987) demonstrate that a situation that could elicit a certain speech act in one culture could fail to do so in another culture.

This paper provides linguistic and sociocultural descriptions of the speech act of compliments and compliment responses in American English, and how these can be taught in English as a Second Language classroom. Since there have been few studies examining the effects of such formal instruction (e.g., Billmyer, 1990; Kubota, 1995; Lyster, 1994; Morrow, 1996), this study is intended to contribute to the existing body of research in interlanguage pragmatics.

The purpose of this research is to conduct a study to further our understanding of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences on the speech act of compliment and compliment responses. It is intended to bring the implementation of the results to language classroom.

**Research Questions**

The present research is going to address the following research questions:

1. What effects do cultural differences have on compliment and compliment responses used by Persian learners of English as a result of transfer?
2. What sociopragmatic differences are discovered by comparing three kinds of compliment speech data: (a) Persian, (b) Iranian EFL, and (c) English Native?
3. What misinterpretations are predictable cross-culturally in the compliment speech act across two language systems?

**2. Review of the related literature**

A speech act is an utterance that performs a locutionary (an utterance regarded in terms of its intrinsic meaning or reference, as distinct from its function or purpose in context) and an illocutionary (pertaining to linguistic act carried out by a speaker in producing an expression) meaning in communication (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). As an instance, ‘isn’t it hot here?’ is a locutionary speech act concerning a proposition about temperature with the illocutionary force of an indirect request (to open the door or window). The idea of speech act goes back to Austin’s (1962) concept of an illocutionary act. He notices...
that when we say something that has a sense and reference, we are performing an act other than just saying it. To take an example from Austin (1962), in saying ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’, the speaker performs the locutionary act of “issuing the utterance” (p.6), and the illocutionary act of naming. Austin also noted that by performing an illocutionary act, we often have some effects on the hearer. He writes “saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or other persons…” (p.101). The idea of speech act is as Fraser (1983) summarizes it: “when we use language, we characteristically do three things: 1) we say something; 2) we indicate how we intend the hearer to take what we have said; 3) we have definite effects on the hearer as a result” (p. 30).

Theoretical speech act studies examined from the concept of an illocutionary act, the constitutive rules for speech acts, indirect speech act, adjacency pairs, to the criticism of these theories. Proposed by Austin (1962), the theory of speech act was developed by many theorists. Empirical speech act studies elaborate on ethnography of communication, inductive speech act research, and issue of speech act universality. Unlike the theories of Searle, Hymes (1970) is interested in the interaction of linguistic acts with social and cultural factors and places great emphasis on the relationship among language. Thus in the 1970s, the L2 learners’ pragmatic performance began to be concerned to discover how they use word to achieve something in a second language and how the L1 affect this process, which is referred as interlanguage pragmatics. However there is only a limited number of speech acts have been studied within interlanguage pragmatics. Due to the difficulty in collecting extensive observational data, most data in these studies are collected via the “Discourse Completion Task” which is an elicitation technique. This article follows the received canonical methodology for interlanguage studies suggested by Kasper and Dahl (1991) comparing the Chinese learners’ interlanguage performance with parallel data from English and Chinese native speakers.

2.1 Politeness

Like other human interactions, paying compliments and responding compliments is motivated by social factors which may include politeness. Brown and Levisohn’s (1978, 1987) politeness theory is probably the most important model for explaining politeness occurrences in human interactions. Brown and Levisohn’s (1978, 1987) introduces introduce a theory of politeness based on the notion of face which is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for” (1987, p.61). They argue that in interacting with others the speaker has two “face wants” (p.13). “negative face” wants which are defined as the desire for freedom from imposition and disturbance and the desire to act unimpeded, and “positive face” wants which are defined the desires to be approved of. The authors add that in trying to satisfy their desires, people may threaten others’ face. Brown and Levinson call such acts Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), and define politeness as a “regressive action” that serves to counter the problematic effects of FTAs.

According to this theory, compliments can be both politeness devices and FTA. Compliments can be regarded as examples of positive politeness strategies to the addressee in that they pay attention to the addressee’s interests and desires. Compliments often “convey that some want of the hearer is admirable or interesting to the speaker too” (Brown & son ,1978,p.108). The speaker thus attends to the hearer's positive face and establishes or enhances solidarity with him/her.

The view adopted in this article is that the definition of politeness in a certain culture should be based on empirical studies of speech acts such as complimenting, requesting, apologizing, etc. The study will also explore how the sociocultural norms play an important role in different complimenting phenomena.
2.2 Compliments

Many studies have been conducted on compliments in different languages. Research has focused on issues such as functions, topics, types, syntax and lexicon of compliments. Compliments have also been approached in terms of their correlations with social variables such as gender, age, and status. The following is a review of many studies of compliments in different languages.

Holmes (1986, p. 488), along with many other scholars, notes that ‘complimenting is a complex sociolinguistic skill’. Further, she adds, speech acts of complimenting have ‘a darker side’, as they may be interpreted as offensive, patronizing, sarcastic, and ironic or even as put downs (Holmes, 1995, p.119).

2.3 Compliment Responses

Another focus of the complimenting behavior is compliment responses. Pomerantz (1978) carried out one of the first studies on compliment responses. She points out that the majority of compliment responses in American English include both agreement and disagreement tokens. Such compliment responses, the author explains, result from a dilemma in the mind of the speaker when having to respond to a compliment. That is, the complimentee has to meet two conflicting conversational conditions: a) agree with the complimenter, and b) avoid self-praise. Therefore, Pomerantz classifies compliment responses into three major categories: 1) acceptance, which includes appreciation or agreement elements, 2) rejection, which contains disagreement tokens, and 3) self-praise avoidance in which self-praise is avoided by reducing the positive evaluation in the compliment. Pomerantz’ categories have been the basis for many other studies of compliment responses.

2.4 Compliment across cultures

Wolfson (1981) observed that languages differ regarding how and what is complimented. Similarly, Holmes and Brown (1987) states that understanding topic differences, who to compliment and when, is not enough. What must be understood are the underlying cultural values these differences convey? A number of studies have compared the speech act of complimenting across cultures.

Differences among Persian and Australian English speakers in an academic context were investigated by Sharifian (2005) using both ethnographic methods and discourse completion tasks. The author was concerned with how Persian speakers communicate the notion of shekastehnafsi, which literally translates as ‘self-breaking’, the closest English concept being ‘modesty’. The author argues that although ‘modesty’ exists as a word in both Persian and English, it is conceptualized differently. The Persian schema encourages speakers who receive a compliment to downgrade it by attributing it to the speaker’s talent, which was interpreted as inappropriate by the interlocutors who were academics in an Australian university. Persian has attracted the attention of many scholars for its complex socio-cultural system, which is associated with a number of “key concepts” in the Persian language (e.g., Hodge, 1957; Beeman, 1976, 1986, 1988, 2001; Hillmann 1981; Koutlaki, 2002; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002). One of these key concepts is shekasteh-nafsi, which is close to the notion of ‘modesty’ in English. The phrase itself is composed of four morphemes, shekast-eh ‘break-PP’, nafs ‘~self’, and I (a marker of process/action/event). In response to a gesture of “modesty”, a person may use the following sentence:

\[ \text{khaa}^1 \text{heshnikonam, shekasteh-nafsimifarmaayin} \]

Please, broken-self doing-2PL

‘You are being modest.’

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and setting
First Oxford Placement test was administered to select the participants with a score above 80 participated in this investigation. This test consists of 60 multiple-choice questions. Many of the items test grammar and reading comprehension presenting both situational and linguistic contexts. The Grammar test comes in two parts. Within each part, there are several short sub-sections, with a different context for each. This version of oxford placement test has an important new feature. It has been calibrated onto the common European framework through a series of direct and indirect correlations.

Participants in the Discourse Completion Task were 30 undergraduate advanced level students of TEFL, both male and female chosen randomly. Participants were selected by a test of English language proficiency (quick oxford placement test). At the beginning, students were personally interviewed to ensure they have been placed at the correct proficiency level.

3.2 Data collection method

To examine the compliment event in Persian, naturally occurring compliment events were collected. An observation technique was used whereby the notes of compliment events were taken that occurred around me with or without my participation. The compliment event, the setting and topic of conversation were recorded. I also tape-recorded numerous conversations in friend and family gatherings and from TV and radio.

Data from the naturalistic observations were used to select ten DCT compliment situations representative of both cultures. An open-ended Discourse Completion Test was designed to elicit the realization of the specific speech act of complimenting; however, participants were not directly instructed to compliment. Each item consisted of a brief description of a situation and the beginning of a scripted dialogue, revised according to the result of the pilot study, to include a neutral exchange, thus allowing the participants to continue the conversation. The ten items used in the DCT tried to capture a variety of situations and a variety of roles with different social distances. These compliments were given for an achievement, a possession, or a talent. Each item described a situation and invited the participants to imagine themselves in the described situation and write down their most probable responses to the given compliment. In general, the scenarios and the people involved in them represented prototypical situations of compliment exchange and compliment response in Persian and English.

The Persian speakers received the Persian version of the instruction. Finally, the DCT provided some space for the participants to record any comments that they had regarding the situations. The situations included in the Discourse Completion Test are as follows: situation 1- A family friend compliments your cooking after dinner, situation 2- Your friend praises your child, situation 3- You have bought a new dress/suit and your colleague/classmate compliments, situation 4- Your friend is visiting your newly-built house, situation 5- You have received a prize for your outstanding work and your mother admires you, situation 6- Your friend has bought a brand new car, situation 7- One of your friends has an admirable talent for example a good handwriting or a beautiful voice, situation 8- A middle-aged man and two young men are introduced to each other in a party. One of the young men notices that the middle-aged man looks young, situation 9- Your friend is visiting you; offers to help you in moving to your new house. You appreciate the offer and mention that he/she is known for his/her helpfulness, situation 10- You are visiting your friend and you notice that her/his little daughter has grown remarkably since you last saw her.

3.3 Analysis of discourse completion task

The data from this Discourse Completion Test were coded and analyzed to find out how the speech act set is negotiated, to identify the semantic formula patterns that appear, and to investigate the politeness strategies used in compliment responses.
Instances of sociopragmatic failure, that is, when people do not know what to say or they guess what is appropriate, and pragmalinguistic failure, when they know what to say but do not have the language skill, were identified. Observational data was collected from people in a variety of settings (at home, neighborhood, university, friends, relatives…). The researcher often put herself on the periphery of the conversations to search for compliment events. Soon after a compliment exchange occurred, it would be documented verbatim and contextual information such as the setting, speakers, addressees, etc were included.

In addition, numerous interactions were tape-recorded, with the majority of them including two, three, or four participants. Although only a small number of compliment events were obtained in these circumstances, they were accurate and natural. Tape-recorded compliment events were usually transcribed at the end of the day. In non-participant observation, the researcher gathered naturally occurring compliment events in public places such as university campuses, offices, bus stations, family reunions, and streets. Crowded areas were preferred where a variety of people interacted with each other.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Compliments

The corpus of compliments collected in this study consists of 100 examples. To analyze the data, the literature was reviewed for the schemas that have been used in coding compliments. Most studies (Manes & Wolfson, 1980; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1991; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Nelson et al, 1993) have focused on topics and syntactic patterns of compliments, although a few others (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Nelson et al, 1993; Weiland, 1995) have addressed compliment strategies (i.e., whether direct or indirect), stylistic features used in compliments (i.e., simile, metaphors, metonymy, see Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989), and supportive moves adjacent to compliments (Kryston-Morales, 1997; Yuan, 1998). In many languages (American English, Manes & Wolfson, 1980; New Zealand English, Holmes, 1988; Polish, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989), compliments are shown to focus on only four topics: appearance, skill, personality, and possessions. This finding is replicated in Persian data, and another compliment topic, children, is often used. In the following section, their frequencies are presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessions</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Appearance* is the most common compliment topic, accounting for 45% of the compliments used. As in New Zealand English (Holmes, 1988), compliments on appearance are basically offers of solidarity with the complimentee, so their predominance in the data indicate that compliments are comfortable utterances, or more technically positive-politeness devices (Brown and Levinson, 1978). The second most common compliment topic is *skill* which includes 24% of the data. *Personality* ranks third, accounting for 17% of the compliments. *Possessions* are another frequent compliment topic that includes 10% of the compliment corpus. The topic of *children* occurs least with only 4% of the compliments used.
4.2 Strategies

As is the case in other languages, two main compliment strategies are identified: Explicit/Direct and Implicit/Direct compliments. Explicit compliments can be defined as utterances which unambiguously and directly serve as compliments and which contains one or more of the following positive semantic carriers: adjectives (e.g., khoshkel ‘pretty’), verbs (e.g., khoshkeshod ‘to become pretty’), and nouns (e.g., shazdeh ‘prince’).

On the other hand, implicit compliments are defined as remarks which, though allowing other interpretations, can often be interpreted as having a complimentary function.

Explicit compliments account for most of the data (88%) compared to implicit compliments which include only 12% of the examples. The high frequency of explicit compliments compared to implicit compliments is attributed to the solidarity function of compliments in Persian. In Persian, perhaps because compliments serve to establish harmony between the interlocutors, people prefer to compliment each other directly more than indirectly.

4.3 Compliment responses


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliment Response</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance comment</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrading</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessing</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-acceptance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale down</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No acknowledgement</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The frequencies of compliment responses in Persian are in contrast with data in American English, in which compliment responses other than acceptances account for almost two thirds of the data (Herbert, 1989). According to Pomerantz (1978), Americans prefer compliment responses other than acceptances due to two conflicting principles: 1) agree with the conversational participant, and 2) avoid self-praise. That is, since acceptance doesn’t avoid self-praise, it occurs less frequently than compliment response types that deflect the praise.

4.4 Analysis of discourse completion test

The analysis of the Persian DCTs showed that 8 of the Persian speakers started their responses by somehow thanking the friend, 2 either denied that their food was delicious or that they were good cooks, and 3 reassigned the praise to their interlocutor. One participant attributed her good cooking skill to her mother and another one apologized that the food was not enough. It is to be noted that 14 of the respondents wrote multiple expressions, even up to 4, in response to the compliment. For instance, one participant started with two expressions of gratitude (merci, kheilimamnun, “thanks, thanks very much”) followed by the formulaic lotf daarin ‘you are kind (to say that)’ and went on by somehow denying the praise (aslanintoraamkehmiginnist ‘it’s not at all like what you say’).

Among the Persian responses, 4 used the formulaic expression nushehjaan, which is functionally similar to “hope you enjoyed the food”, and 2 used the expression ghaabelinadaasht ‘it was not worthy (of you)’. The latter is a common formulaic expression in Persian conversations in general, which reflects the extent to which Persian culture encourages the speakers to hold their interlocutors, particularly their guests, in high esteem.

Overall, the comparison of the two sets of responses reveals a higher tendency on the part of the Persian speakers to somehow divert or deny the praise, which is again in consonance with the Persian cultural schema of shekasteh-nafsi. This schema encourages the speakers to downplay their talents and skills while praising the same skill in their interlocutors, or attributing the skill to their family members or friends.

The Persian included 9 expressions of either gratitude or heightened gratitude and 5 cases of the use of the formulaic lotfdaarin ‘you are kind’. Three participants attributed the child’s smartness either to themselves, jokingly, or to the participant’s father or spouse. One response put the friend’s child on top (na be andaazeyehbacheyehshoma ‘not as much as your child’). Among the other responses, five were the formulaic cheshmaatunghashangmibineh ‘your eyes see beautiful’, which is a form of reassigning the compliment to the complimenter. One complimenter liked the color of the dress and the complimantee said, “We both have the same taste”.

Among the EFL responses, 15 started with thanking the colleague/classmate and two expressed that it was not expensive and two remarked that their mother helped them choose the dress. Four responses included an element of humor such as ma inimdigeh ‘This is what I am’.

Overall, it can be seen that several of the responses given by the Persian speakers are in consonance with the cultural schema of shekasteh-nafsi in that they try to either deny or downplay the praise while somehow reassigning the praise to the interlocutor or to a family member. Overall, once again the majority of Persian responses reflect various aspects of the shekasteh-nafsi schema while the EFL responses were mainly expressions of gratitude and satisfaction. There is however
some degree of overlap in the two sets of responses in terms of downplaying the achievement. The EFL responses represented Persian culture more than American culture in expressing gratitude and acknowledging the support from the related complimenter. As in both cultures whenever one got any achievements, one showed gratitude toward those helped them in. Item 6 to 10 requires participants to give compliment. The compliments by Persian are followed with best wishes and religious statements. 10 participants used moharakbashe. ishalahcharkheshbaratbe- charkhe’ congratulations, may its wheel turn for you.

In the EFL responses most participants used the formulaic expression ‘touch the wood’ which is Persian one and continue with admiring the trait such as, ‘touch the wood! You look so young! You are 60? Unbelievable! The other used the same statement as in Persian like ‘when I saw you first, I thought you were 30. One admired the way he kept himself young, ‘you must have done exercises and paid attention to your food.

The EFL responses included thanking and admiring the person for the job he/she did. ‘You mean a world to me’; ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’. In item 10 again Persian used the common religious expression ‘mashallah’, My God bless her, followed by the main compliment. The EFL responses include surprise, ‘I was shocked! She is a young girl now’, ‘how fast time passes! She is a young girl now’; ‘your daughter has changed a lot’. Some again prayed him like Persian by saying ‘I hope God keeps your child safe for you’.

### 4.5 Compliments in New York English

It could be argued that the arguments advanced in favor of the use of written fiction and questionnaires for pragmatics research can be applied to the use of film as well. Film language is as likely to reveal norms of socially appropriate language use and the canonical shape of speech acts as either the language of fiction or responses to written questionnaires. Of course, whether it does is an empirical question.

As we are not living in a bilingual country and have no access to native speakers, we used films as a reliable source for getting native data. The positive semantic load in the compliments was found mainly by adjectives, with “great” used in the majority of instances. Good, nice, beautiful, excellent, and fantastic appeared so often while other adjectives appeared a few times each.

The majority of the compliments were found at the beginning of the dialogues. Compliments also appeared in the middle and end of the conversations. However, English conversations were comparatively short.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Great</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fine</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Fine</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Cute</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Cute</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>Fantastic</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabulous</td>
<td>Healthier</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Healthier</td>
<td>Fabulous</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonderful</td>
<td>Stunning</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Stunning</td>
<td>Wonderful</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrific</td>
<td>Amazing</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Amazing</td>
<td>Terrific</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6 Compliment responses in New York English

Among limitations of the study, not living in a foreign language company and having no access to native people can be pointed; therefore 42 American English films were watched and scrutinized for extracting English data. A few recipients of the compliment denied or rejected the compliment. A majority accepted with “thank you” or “thanks”. 16 agreed with the complimenter by saying “yes”, “yeah” or “yeah right.” 11 replied with pleased acceptance by stating, “I’m glad you like it” or something to that effect. 42 accepted the compliment but did not add any comment or question.

102 added an account which is a comment or explanation about the object of the compliment. The accounts usually provided a reason why the person had bought or done something or provided additional information. Sometimes the complimenter mentioned when they had gotten it, provided the place it was bought, provided the price, provided the brand or added other information about the object or accomplishment.

Other complimentees continued the conversation as if the compliment were not given. They usually continued the conversation by changing the topic, shifting the topic to something just mentioned or by asking a question about something not related to the object of the compliment. Some simply ended the conversation by leave taking comments. Below you may find classified types of compliment responses in films.

4.7 Interviews with local informants

The researcher conducted open-ended audio-taped interviews with native informants from Tehran. Each local informant was asked to examine the dialogues from one situation of the DCT. The situations were rotated so that all of the six situations of the DCT were examined during the course of the interviews.

The purpose of the interviews was to examine the dialogues written by participants to determine if the local informants believed that these were typical conversations realized by Persian, to examine compliment behavior in their particular culture, and to help in interpretation. These informants were graduate and undergraduate students from the same university.
5. Conclusion

5.1 Cultural implications

The present study shows that the Persian norms play an important role in complimenting behavior which makes it different from English. Sociocultural norms justify three main complimenting phenomena: invocation, offering, and returning. Invocations in Persian complimenting where many compliments invoke God to protect the object of compliment from harm, saying maashallah ‘the grace of God be upon you’. In responding to compliments, many people offer the item complimented to the complimenter, saying ghabelnadareh ‘it is worthless for you’. Such offering is an ostensible convention in that usually the one offering doesn’t really expect the offeree to take it seriously. Within the context of Brown and Levinson’s model, responding to a compliment with another compliment is a positive politeness device because the speaker’s want of being respected is fulfilled.

5.2 Pedagogical implications

Based on the findings of this study, a number of pedagogical implications can be drawn for EFL learners and teachers: Discussing socio-linguistic differences between Persian and English is an effective way to minimize potential communication breakdowns. For example, the Persian culture plays an important role in the phrasing of compliments and compliment responses in Iran. If this socio-linguistic phenomenon is highlighted to learners of English as a second language, the possibility of pragmatic failure will be minimized. Compliments in Persian are longer and more repetitive than those in American English. In Persian, people use elaborate compliments to convince the addressees of the sincerity of the praise, and this can lead to serious miscommunication; the complimentee might wrongly judge the complimenter as one who flatters for gaining profit.

Teachers are advised to use compliments to facilitate such things as academic performance, creative writing, and attention. If the student is complimented on certain ability, he/she will keep repeating or improving that action in the future. It appears that the politeness strategies for both English and Persian native speakers are congruent with what Brown and Levinson’s theory would predict; namely, that, on a relative scale, both Persian and American cultures are Positive Politeness culture. Positive Politeness is a rather unmarked, universal strategy in informal contact situations between friends of equal status, and that Negative Politeness is culturally specific and marked. Between native and nonnative speakers, it was observed that learners resort more to laughing or gap strategies than do the native speakers, which may indicate the learner’s uncertainty when the native practice differs dramatically from that of the learner’s L1.

The breakdown of each politeness type reveals interesting details. While speakers favor agreeing and accepting, only the EFL group favors avoid-disagreement. EFL students may find it more appropriate to use avoid-disagreement than negative politeness. EFL approximated by asking more questions and hedges, in other words, EFL learners show a moderate transfer of LI by including negative politeness within their positive politeness.

EFL students show non-preference of positive politeness in compliment responses by using gaps and hesitation before they agree to the compliment. This non-preference shown by the EFL learners seems to be a transfer effect from their LI, since Persian speakers show gaps and hesitation before a positive politeness strategy of compliment responses. For the Persian, the refusal of compliments seems to be a relatively prevalent choice in more formal registers. They favor self-mockery over refusal in casual registers involving friends. In the complimenting behavior between equals and friends in informal registers, the Persian speakers seem to prefer self-denigration spoken in a joking manner. For example, ‘chakeritim, koocheketim’ (I am at your service).

It is not hard to imagine situations where cross-cultural differences would lead to miscommunication. Drawing on the schema of shekasteh-nafsi, a speaker of Persian might be considered by an American as “stretching the truth too far”, “over the top”, or even “sarcastic”. Speakers of Persian, on the other hand, may find American responses to their compliments as “cold”, “arrogant”, or “impolite”. One would wonder how much of such intercultural miscommunication has happened in
the political arena. As mentioned before, Persians are used to offering the object complimented on to their complimen-
ters, but it may be considered as a genuine offer by English speakers.

As for the pedagogical applications of this study, it is suggested that instructors introduce sociolinguistic variables for any given speech acts in class and in textbooks as well as provide a clear explanation of the possible cause of miscommunication. For example, there is no English text book used in Iran that specifically explains how speakers respond to compliments or how to respond to compliments. Most CRs studied in the classroom settings are limited to those dealing with the speakers themselves in relatively formal situations. Teaching appropriate strategies of politeness in classroom is important in an effort to enhance the communicative skills of EFL learners and to avoid misunderstanding.

Finally the study of interlanguage pragmatics is a way of understanding the ethnography of speaking. Hymes defines the ethnography of speaking as “a question of what a foreigner must learn about a group’s verbal behavior in order to participate appropriately and effectively in its activities” (Hymes, 1972, p.101). The study of interlanguage pragmatics should focus on how to identify and analyze effectively and systematically the difficult problems that EFL learners face in their progress toward pragmatic competence.

References

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**Author Bio**

**Rozana Shamsabadi** is a PhD candidate in applied linguistics at University of Isfahan, Iran. She has been teaching English for 8 years. Her areas of interest are ESP, pragmatics and syllabus design.