New insights on compliment responses: A comparison between native English speakers and Chinese L2 speakers

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ABSTRACT

This study explored compliment responses (CR) produced by Chinese ESL and EFL speakers as well as by the native speakers of American English in oral communicative contexts through a naturalistic role-play task. The ESL speakers’ rationales for adopting the CR strategies were further examined through retrospective interviews. The role-play results showed both L2 groups differed from native speakers in multiple ways in their impromptu responses to the compliments carefully embedded in the role play task. While almost all L2 speakers knew how to say “thank you/thanks” to others’ compliments, a number of them, especially the EFL speakers, had difficulties in utilizing a variety of response strategies, such as credit-shifting (e.g. My pleasure/Thanks for having me over). Results from the retrospective interview indicated the two major factors that influenced ESL participants’ CRs, which were their L1 culture and limited L2 linguistic forms.

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1. Introduction

Compliment responses (CRs) are intricate speech acts because they are “multifunctional and ubiquitous” (Yu, 1999). Based on Wolfson’s (1983) corpus findings, native English speakers apply multiple types of compliments in a wide range of contexts, such as initiating conversation, greetings, farewells and expressing gratitude. Responses to compliments usually mirror the social-cultural values and politeness varieties of the speakers. While acceptance of the compliment was shown to be most commonly adopted by native English speakers (Chen, 1993; Herbert, 1986; Holmes and Brown, 1987), downgrading and rejections were usually used by speakers of other languages, especially those from Asian regions such as China, Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam (Chen, 1993; Baba, 1996; Tran, 2006; Yu, 2004). This distinctive difference in CRs produced by speakers of different L1s was given as one of the main reasons for difficulties faced by L2 learners in producing target-like compliment responses (Baba, 1996; Tran, 2006; Yu, 2004). Also, EFL learners were found to have more difficulties in their CR performances compared to ESL learners with equivalent English language proficiency, who benefited from more exposure to the authentic language input (e.g., Yu, 2004).

Among all languages, compliments and responses in mandarin Chinese have been relatively well studied. Researchers identified the influence of various contextual factors on the different CR types. For example, female Taiwanese college students tended to respond to compliments using questions showing surprise, while their male counterparts used more rejections (Wang and Tsai, 2003). Those who were highly educated were more likely to agree with the compliments compared to those with low-level education background (Gao and Ren, 2008). The CR types also demonstrated variety in regards to the different compliment subjects or objects. Wang (2002) discovered that her participants were more likely to disagree with or show surprise towards the compliments on appearances; they more often accepted the compliments on...
possessions. Furthermore, mandarin Chinese speakers in Taiwan were shown to respond to compliments differently based on the interlocutor’s social status. For example, more accepting and returning strategies were used when the interlocutor was of equal status, whereas more rejections were used when the interlocutor was of higher status. Finally, social-cultural changes were found out to be a possible major contributor to the shift of CR patterns (from rejections to acceptances) by mandarin Chinese speakers in the City of Xi’an, China over a period of 17 years (from 1991 to 2008) (Chen and Yang, 2010).

Previous studies (Yu, 2004; Yuan, 1996) described Chinese L2 learners as being heavily influenced by a different concept of politeness in their native culture than in English while producing CRs. Although accepting compliments could easily be interpreted according to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Model of Politeness (i.e., The respondent avoids offending the interlocutor by appealing to his/her positive face), this model cannot justify the other types of CRs. As Gu (1990) proposed, politeness phenomena in modern Chinese are quite different from those in western countries, with self-denigration as one of the core and distinctive features.

A majority of the previous Chinese L2 CR studies, adopting written discourse completion tasks (DCTs), were not based on learners’ communicative performance. In addition, no empirical evidence was provided to explain why the learners produced certain CRs in different situations. Therefore, the current study, adopting naturalistic role plays and retrospective interviews, has a two-fold purpose: (1) to compare and contrast Chinese L2 speakers’ CRs to those produced by native English speakers in communicative settings; and (2) to provide qualitative data on the reasons of the compliment response types used by learners in different situations.

2. Rationale for selecting the research instruments

As widely acknowledged in pragmatics research, the DCT can reveal information on learners’ pragmatic knowledge or perceptions, but it is not a sufficient tool to assess their production, although it is often convenient to implement and easy to control (Brown, 2001; Hudson, 2001; Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Kasper and Rose, 2002; Tran, 2006; Yuan, 2001). On the other hand, other types of instruments focusing on spoken interactions, such as authentic discourse, elicited conversations and role-plays could potentially reveal the pragmatic performance features in communicative contexts. Unfortunately, so far no study has examined the interlanguage pragmatic features of Chinese learners of English by using any of these interactional instruments.

However, two such instruments were introduced in examining the interlanguage compliment responses of other non-Chinese second language learners. Baba (1996) examined the compliment response behaviors of Japanese ESL learners and English speakers who were second language learners of Japanese (JSLs). Data gathered by elicited conversations in natural settings revealed that both learner groups’ compliment responses approximated those of the native speakers of the target languages. Both groups were also shown to demonstrate L1 pragmatic transfer in their elicited conversations. Tran (2006) evaluated Vietnamese ESL learners’ interlanguage compliment responses through the use of a naturalistic role play. Results showed that although these learners had frequently adopted the English routine of showing appreciation in response to compliments, they still demonstrated a considerable amount of L1 pragmatic transfer. The major advantage of adopting elicited conversations or naturalistic role plays is that they are able to reveal the learners’ pragmatic performance in near-authentic settings.

Data collected through elicited conversation, such as the one used in Baba’s (1996) study has an advantage in obtaining the targeted speech acts in a relatively high frequency over limited time, given the fact that the interlocutors were trained to provide compliments in order to trigger responses from the participants. However, quantitative analysis was impossible since the number of supplied compliments was not controlled in this study.

Compared to elicited conversations, role-plays are more widely used due to their relative ease in implementation and maintaining researcher control. Among the different types of role plays, open role-plays are preferred by many researchers because of their inclusion of multiple turns and speaking situations (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Targeted pragmatic features are often embedded in open role-plays, which “also enable us to observe how context factors, such as power, distance and degree of imposition” (Kasper and Rose, 2002, p. 87) might influence the participants’ pragmatic production. Despite the advantages of open role-plays, they, as well as most other types of role-plays, require the participants to construct a new identity in order to carry out the communicative activities outlined for them. Such an identity construction process, as illustrated by Kasper and Rose (2002), inhibits the participants’ “online input processing and utterance planning” (p. 89). Thus, “most types of role-play under-represent learners’ pragmatic ability” (p. 89).

According to Yuan (2001), the selection of a major research instrument should be based on the particular research question and the researcher’s goal. Since this study, adopting a mixed-method design, aims to capture the speakers’ compliment responses in naturalistic settings, it is important that the researcher could both quantify the data and conduct in-depth analysis. Therefore, there is a need to implement an instrument (i.e. naturalistic role-play2) that can keep a good balance between authenticity and control.

Also, because the other purpose of the current study is to discover the reasons of the CR choices made by the participants, retrospective interviews were the appropriate tool to use, since they help to capture the perceptions of the participants on their own speech act performance.

1 Tran (2006) used the term “Naturalized Role Play (NRP)”.

2 Refer to the detailed description of the naturalistic role play task in section 3.2.1.
3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 45 students participated in this study, including 15 native English speakers (NESs), 15 Chinese ESL speakers and 15 Chinese EFL speakers. The NESs were volunteers from two freshmen composition classes taught by the researcher in a mid-size state university in southwestern U.S. The Chinese ESL participants all came from mainland China, were all enrolled in the Program of Intensive English in the same institution as the NESs, had spent a mean length of 9.20 months (SD = 1.21) residing in the U.S., and had an average of 7.41 years (SD = 2.12) of English learning experiences at the time of data collection. Chinese EFL participants were all sophomore non-English majors from a large public university in northern China. None of them had either studied or traveled abroad. They had spent a mean length of 7.53 years (SD = 2.24) of learning English by the time of data collection. Table 1 lists other background characteristics of the participants.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Description of the naturalistic role-play

The main instrument in this study is a naturalistic role-play task. As Tran (2006) mentioned, the naturalistic role-play allows the researcher to incorporate the targeted pragmatic feature into communicative tasks that closely resemble real life situations and to conveniently take control of the data collection process. The naturalistic role-play is different from the open role-play in that it ensures the participants are unaware of the research focus throughout the whole procedure. The naturalistic role-play used in this study was an adapted version of the one created by Tran (2006). This role-play was divided into two situations, in which each participant was asked to adopt a familiar role and to carry on communicative tasks with a native-English-speaking interlocutor. Major tasks include greeting, giving directions, asking for and offering help as well as describing a place, a thing and a procedure. To avoid possible negative influence from unfamiliar content, choices were given in places for content related to compliments on ability/work (e.g., performing Taichi, singing, or writing) and on possessions (a new car or a new bike). Interlocutors and participants were asked to decide together in advance on the content to be used in the role-plays. Two different sets of instructions were given to each role-play participant and interlocutor respectively. While no information was provided to participants indicating that they would receive compliments, interlocutors were made fully aware of the fact that they needed to compliment four times in designated parts of the role-play and that they needed to compliment naturally and to make compliments a part of the normal social talk (see Appendix A for a sample interlocutor manual). The four supplied compliments focused on the following areas and were inserted in such an order in the role-play: (1) ability/work; (2) possession; (3) appearance; and (4) personality trait.

3.2.2. Description of the retrospective interview

The retrospective interview was a common technique to trace the thoughts of the participants, who verbalize them shortly after a task. This instrument has been commonly used in L2 research, including pragmatic research (see e.g. Cohen, 1998; Faerch and Kasper, 1987; Hassall, 2008). In this study, a retrospective interview was carried out with each of the 15 Chinese ESL participants immediately after the naturalistic role play. To eliminate language-related problems, all interviews were conducted in Chinese. The main purpose of using the retrospective interview was to account for the reasons of the CRs used by the participants in different situations. In addition, the participants were asked to identify the focus of the role-play at the very beginning of the interview, and their responses were used as a validation of the authenticity of the CRs embedded in the naturalistic role-play.

3.3. Procedure

First of all, a role-play instruction manual was provided to every participant from the three targeted speaker groups (NES, ESL and EFL). A different set of manuals were given to the interlocutors, all of whom were college-educated and native speakers of American English. During the week the instructional manuals were delivered, the researcher organized a 30-min
training session with the participants and the interlocutors respectively. This training session was done in person with all NES and ESL participants as well as with their interlocutors. Two audio-recorded training sessions (each lasting for 30 min) were provided by the researcher and delivered by a colleague in the participating Chinese institution to the EFL participants and their interlocutors respectively. Within two weeks after the training sessions, the naturalist role-play data was collected from each of the 15 participant–interlocutor pairs from the three targeted speaker groups. All role plays were audio-recorded.5

The researcher conducted the retrospective interview with each ESL participant shortly after the role-plays. During the interview, the researcher replayed the role-play recording and listened to it together with the participant. The researcher paused the recording at every place where a compliment and response sequence had occurred. The whole sequence was replayed again and orally repeated by the researcher to make sure the participant understood it. The participants, then, were asked to reflect on their thinking process while responding to the compliment. In the cases where the participant had little or nothing to say, the researcher prompted them with specific questions (e.g., Have you learned about this from your English classes? Where/when have you learned about it?) All interviews were audio-recorded.

3.4. Analysis

3.4.1. Analysis of the naturalistic role-play results
First of all, different CR patterns among the three speaker groups were identified through the role-play transcripts. Holmes’ (1988, 1993), Yu’s (2004), as well as Tang and Zhang’s (2009) categories of CR strategies were used as initial coding schemes, which were later adapted to reflect the nature of the data for the current study. The adapted CR strategy framework consists of three macro strategies (Accept, Evade and Combination) and 11 micro strategies, as shown in Table 2. A total of 180 CR tokens (60 tokens from each group, and 4 tokens from each participant) were categorized based on this framework. Each token was further divided into utterance units. All utterance units produced by participant under one complimenting situation were categorized as one CR category if they all conveyed the same meaning based on the framework. While the researcher coded all the data, a second rater coded 50% of the role play data. Interrater reliability obtained by Cohen’s kappa was .85 for macro strategies and .78 for micro strategies. This indicated a substantial agreement between the two raters (Landis and Koch, 1977).

3.4.2. Analysis of the retrospective interview results
The researcher listened to the interview recordings and translated all Chinese ESL participants’ verbal reports into an English transcript. Major themes were identified in this transcript to reflect the rationale for the participants to adopt the CR strategies in naturalistic settings.

* Combination refers to a situation in which both Acceptance and Evasion are adopted in a single compliment response sequence.

5 A colleague in the participating Chinese institution (the EFL students’ English instructor) helped the researcher to collect and audio record the role-play data from the EFL group.
4. Results

4.1. Results from the naturalistic role play

Fig. 1 shows the general patterns used by the NESs, Chinese ESL and EFL speakers at macro level of CR strategies. Acceptance was the most preferred response by all three groups and was used more frequently by the EFL group, followed by the ESL speakers and then by the NESs. The same trend was shown for the use of evasions, while a reverse trend was shown for the use of the combination strategy.

Further analysis in the following sections compared the micro-level strategies used by the three speaker groups in each of the four compliment situations: (1) ability/work; (2) appearance/clothing; (3) possession and (4) personality (see Appendix A for detailed descriptions of the four situations).

4.1.1. Responses to compliments on ability/work

As shown in Fig. 2, in responding to compliments on ability/work, a majority of Chinese L2 speakers showed appreciations (e.g. Thank you./Thanks.), while they used other strategies infrequently. On the other hand, in the NES CRs, the qualifying strategy was used almost as equally frequent as appreciations. Commenting was never used in the Chinese L2 speakers’ CRs, yet it was moderately frequent in NES CRs. The following extracts from the role plays illustrated the native speakers’ use of qualifying and commenting strategies:

(1) Interlocutor: That’s pretty good Taichi you were doing at the party.
   Participant: Yeah, I’ve been doing it for four years.

In the above extract, along with the agreeing response “Yeah”, the participant further qualified the compliment by mentioning his history of practicing Taichi. An intended meaning of the underlined qualifying utterance could be interpreted as the following: “I’ve been doing Taichi for four years, and that is why I was good at it at the party.”

(2) Interlocutor: A friend of mine told me (about the participant winning the contest). She showed me a video of you singing—it was really good!
   Participant: Really? Thank you. I thought that “I Will Survive” was probably a really bold move but it worked out better for me. I get to try out for American idol next year for free.
The underlined sentences in the above example provided informative comments on the compliment the participant received for her singing performance. Such comments usually did not show acceptance of the compliment but rather provide more information (e.g., thoughts/causes/history) about the subjects or objects being complimented. In the case of this example, the first underlined sentence explained the participant’s previous thoughts in participating in the singing contest and the self-evaluated consequences of this thought. The second underlined sentence, on the other hand, provided extra information on the participant’s follow-up step after her success in the singing contest.

4.1.2. Responses to compliments on appearance/clothing

The use of CR strategies in responding to compliments on appearance/clothing (Fig. 3) shows a pattern similar to the previous situation. Appreciation was still the most frequently adopted strategy among the three groups. Returning the compliment was used moderately frequently by the NES and EFL speakers, but not by the ESL speakers. The following two examples illustrated the use of returning strategy by the NES and EFL speakers respectively:

(1) Interlocutor: Oh, no worries (referring to the participant’s apology for being late). Apparently you took so long getting ready—you look good!
Participant: Haha, thanks. So do you.
(2) Interlocutor: And you look so nice tonight. I really like the jacket you’re wearing.
Participant: Oh, thank you. You look very nice, too.

4.1.3. Responses to compliments on possessions

In responding to compliments on possessions (Fig. 4), appreciation was still the most common strategy among the three groups, used most frequently by the Chinese ESL speakers, followed by the EFLs and NESs. It is interesting to see that commenting, a strategy that was not preferred by L2 speakers in previous situations, was adopted by EFL speakers with the same frequency as appreciation in responding to compliments on possessions. And the EFL speaker’s use of commenting in this situation is more frequent compared to the other two groups.

4.1.4. Responses to compliments on personality

A very different trend was shown in the participants’ responses to compliments on personality (Fig. 5). Although appreciation still remained as one of the most commonly used strategies by the NES and the ESL groups, the former adopted credit-shifting (e.g., No problem./You’re welcome./Thanks for having me.) quite frequently, while the latter showed their preferences in two other strategies, agreeing (e.g., I enjoyed doing it.) and ignoring/giggling. It is most noteworthy to point out
that 80% of the CRs produced by the EFL group in this situation belonged to the ignoring/giggling category, whereas they hardly used any other strategies.

4.2. Results from the retrospective interview

In response to the first interview question asked right after the role play task: “What do you think this role play is about?”, all ESL participants answered similarly that the role play was about daily communication, or divided it into more specific tasks such as asking for directions, describing a procedure, greeting and party manners. None of the participants mentioned receiving compliments from the interlocutors. Moreover, after the interview, when the researcher revealed the research focus—compliment responses—to the participants, all of them were surprised that they were tested on a subject that they were not aware of throughout the role play task. This indicated that all ESL participants were equally able to provide impromptu responses to the interlocutor’s compliments, which were indeed successfully embedded in the multiple tasks of the role play without the participants’ awareness. The following analysis focuses on the Chinese ESL participants’ explanations of five of their most commonly used CR strategies in the role play.

4.2.1. Saying “Thank you/thanks” to show appreciation

All Chinese ESL participants mentioned in the interviews that they considered a response like “thank you” or “thanks” as the “safest” compliment response in all situations. Most of the participants mentioned the fact that they were educated, as children, by their parents in China that they need to say “thank you/thanks” when receiving other’s compliments. As one of them said, “When I was little, my parents always taught me to say ‘thank you’ when other people praised me, because this reflected one’s good education and manners.” This finding is in contradiction with many previous studies, which commonly showed a preference for denying compliments in Chinese language (Chen, 1993; Yu, 2004). This might be due to the social change that has taken place in China recently, with more and more families receiving exposure to western culture through news and media, as Chen and Yang (2010) found in their recent work. Moreover, nearly all participants mentioned the fact that they have received English instruction at school which taught them the typical contexts (such as receiving a compliment) where they need to show appreciation. In several incidences in the role play, saying “thank you/thanks” was described by the participants as a self-protection from being considered as funny or awkward by the NES interlocutors, whom they had met for the first time. A common line uttered by many participants during the interview was “I didn’t know what else to say, so I just said ‘thank you’ to not offend him/her.” From this, we could certainly see that the ESL participants might not be used to receive compliments from a stranger that they had just met for the first time.

4.2.2. Offering the objects/subjects being complimented on

In responding to the interlocutors’ compliments on ability/work (i.e., being a Taichi master, a good singer or writer), the Chinese ESL participants demonstrated their moderate preference in offering help or lessons regarding the skills on which they were complimented. Some participants attributed this particular type of response to the influence from their native culture, because “in Chinese, if someone says to me that he/she admired my Taichi performance and I’m good at it, I would say ‘Do you want to learn it? I could teach you.’” (quoted from one ESL participant).

4.2.3. Commenting on the possessions being complimented

The second most preferred strategy used by Chinese ESL participants in response to compliments on their possessions was offering further comments. Providing informative comments, as mentioned by several participants, was much easier in this particular situation compared to the others, because they always had something to say about their favorite personal possession, a car or a bike. However, it is interesting to notice that there seemed to be a trend for the ESL participants to provide informative comments on the cost of their possessions (e.g., It costs me 100 dollars), in contrast to the common comments given by NESs in this scenario, which usually indicated where the possession originally came from (e.g., I got it from Target). One ESL participant mentioned in the interview that he thought the interlocutor must expect information on the cost of his bike since he apparently showed interest in buying a similar one by complimenting on the “fantastic
handlebars” of his bike. Also, several ESL participants mentioned that in Chinese they would always tell the people who complimented their possessions about the cost if they wanted to be polite and friendly, and this was especially true among friends. This idea seemed to reflect a different cultural orientation: In Chinese culture, people would be willing to share the cost information of their personal possessions, while in the U.S. this information was often kept private.

4.2.4. Agreeing with the compliments

In responding to compliments on possessions, the ESL participants commonly agreed with the compliments by saying “Yes/Yeah/I think so.” The retrospective interview revealed that the major reason why participants agreed with the compliment was due to their concern about being friendly to an unfamiliar new native-speaking friend. One participant said, “I said ‘I think so’ to her because I just met her for the very first time and I’m not sure what she expected me to say. I just agreed with what she said to make her happy.” The majority of the participants also mentioned that in Chinese, they would seldom agree with other’s compliments on their possessions, because “it’s universally expected that you show modesty by downgrading or rejecting compliments”. However, an exception came from one female ESL participant, who said, “We people in Qingdao [a northern coast city] will never downgrade or reject other’s compliment. We will often say, ‘Yeah, that’s right’ to show our acknowledgement. It is simply not necessary to be modest for us.” This response, despite its distinct difference from the majority, did illustrate a possible regional preference in responding to compliments in the participants’ L1 culture and that this might influence their L2 CR performance.

4.2.5. Ignoring/giggling to evade compliments on personality

A unique phenomenon in responding to the compliment on personality (i.e., thoughtfulness) by Chinese L2 speakers was to provide no response or to giggle. This was in stark contrast with the commonly used evasion strategy by native speakers—credit-shifting. In the retrospective interview, two reasons were given by the ESL participants to account for their use of ignoring/giggling in this particular situation. First of all, some participants explained that they were not sure what to say when their American friend said to them “You brought a dish! Awesome! That was so thoughtful of you!”. Most of them chose to keep silent just to be safe or giggle and then quickly move on to the next topic. One participant said, “In Chinese I would reject this compliment quite firmly by saying something like I was not thoughtful. I knew I shouldn’t say this in English; however, I ran out of my words, not knowing what other things I could say.” From this quote, we could see that some of the ESL participants might acknowledge the existence of cultural differences, yet they needed appropriate linguistic forms in order to respond to the compliment on personality. Secondly, some of the ESL participants were so concentrated on the tasks listed for them that they genuinely ignored this particular compliment given by the interlocutor towards the end of the role play. Since the participants were asked to describe the procedure of cooking the dish they brought to the interlocutors, some of them said that they were thinking hard at the moment about how to accomplish this task while the compliment was given. It was not until listening to the recording that some of them realized that they were actually being complimented. This could potentially be a task effect; however, ignoring the compliment also probably illustrated the participants’ limited L2 processing capacity (see the theory of information processing in McLaughlin, 1990), which prohibited them from using their linguistic knowledge for all demands and from accomplishing automaticity in their L2 communication.

5. Discussion

Findings from the naturalistic role play indicated that Chinese L2 participants demonstrated patterns similar to their NES counterparts in responding to compliments through successful use of “thank you/thanks” in all situations. This result was similar to those found in some Chinese L1 CR studies, especially those conducted within the past ten years (Chen, 2003; Chen and Yang, 2010; Yuan, 2001). Difficulties still seem to exist for the Chinese participants in responding to personality compliments, since most often such compliments were ignored or treated nonverbally (i.e., giggling). If the learners’ goal is to become native-like in oral communications, they could be guided to realize a more appropriate evasion strategy in responding to personality compliments.

Moreover, offering further comments (e.g., I worked hard on it.), a common strategy used by the NESs here to continue conversations in responding to compliments on ability/work, was not adequately used by either L2 groups. Again, if the learners’ goal was to become target-like in English communication, authentic compliment response examples could be shown to them to raise their L2 pragmatic awareness. Learners should also be made aware that NESs quite often used compliments as a conversation starter, as in the ability/work compliment that began the naturalistic role play. In this case, overly brief responses, such as a simple “thank you”, might put the interlocutor in an uncomfortable position and cause potential difficulties for smooth communicative progress.

Between the two L2 groups, the EFL participants seemed to face more difficulties in mastering a variety of strategies in responding to compliments. Although most of them typically knew that they should show appreciation to be polite when receiving a compliment, other strategies, such as qualifying and credit-shifting, commonly used by NESs in different situations, were simply not a part of their pragmatic repertoire.

The retrospective interview results helped to explain the main reasons for the Chinese ESL participants’ choices of CRs in naturalistic settings. Compared to the EFL group, the ESL group was immersed in authentic language contexts on a daily basis and received more opportunities to communicate with NESs. Given this rich exposure to authentic input, it was particularly interesting to understand their choice of specific CR strategies. The interview results showed that these ESL participants
demonstrated strong cultural awareness in responding to compliments in English. This cultural awareness could be used in an efficient way by classroom practitioners. For example, authentic video clips from the NESs' naturalistic role plays could be shown to the learners. In-class activities could also be designed to compare the learners' L1 CRs to the ones shown in the video clips. In the ESL context, where authentic input is rich, learners could even be asked to conduct field research by themselves, such as collecting examples from daily life on how native speakers give and respond to compliments (see examples in Ishihara, 2004).

6. Conclusion

This study has focused only on one particular speech act, compliment responses, produced by a limited number of participants in each speaker group. Also, the participants' pragmatic performance might be influenced by their relationships with the interlocutors. Although none of the Chinese L2 speakers were familiar with their interlocutors, the native speakers in this study were assigned to do the role plays together with one of their classmates. In this regard, their compliment responses might not have been produced in an exactly comparable setting as those produced by the L2 speakers.

Despite the above limitations, this study has demonstrated its success in utilizing the naturalistic role play, a performance-based research instrument to keep the balance between authenticity and research control. The overall results from the naturalistic role play showed that Chinese L2 speakers used different sets of strategies in responding to compliments in English compared to native speakers. These differences were demonstrated to be affected by not only the learners' L1 culture but also their limited L2 proficiency, which was reflected by their common difficulties in coming up with more diverse linguistic choices in compliment responses.

Such detailed rationales to account for the learners' pragmatic choices would not be possible without the implementation of the retrospective interview, which has added richness to the quantitative data. However, given more time, it would have been better if this interview had also been conducted with the Chinese EFL and NES participants as well.

Following the success of the research instruments utilized in this study, future research could expand the scope of this exploration by examining more commonly used speech acts produced by different speaker groups as well as the contextual variables affecting speakers' use of these speech acts, such as gender and social distance. Although these issues have already been examined by traditional discourse completion tasks, examining them in natural or naturalistic settings would make a welcome contribution to the development of pragmatic research and provide more insights into what could potentially be incorporated in L2 pragmatic instruction.

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Appendix A

Instructional Manual for Conversation Partner's Use

Dear __________:

It is your task to lead the conversation in a flexible and natural way. Please read the description of the following two situations and identify yourself with the character “you” in it. If you have any question, please feel free to ask. The whole role play should not exceed 10 min.

Discuss with your partner and decide on ONE of the following roles for you. You two know each other's name and have said hello to each other sometimes. But you have not yet had a chance to talk much. Also, asked your partner whether he/she owns a car or a bike as well as the model/color of the car/bike.

1. You are enthusiastic of learning Taichi. One of your new friends, _______is a Taichi master and has performed in several school events, such as the New Year's Party.
2. You are enthusiastic of learning singing. One of your new friends, _______is a good singer and has just won the first place in the school singing contest.
3. You are enthusiastic of improving your writing. One of your new friends, _____ is a good writer and has just had an essay published in the school newspaper.

It’s now around 4 pm and you are leaving school. You want to stop by a bookstore and have heard that there is one named “Barns & Noble” not far from school, but you do not know where it is. You are passing by the library and see your new classmate. You approach him/her to say some greetings. You two talk while walking together. The talk should include but may not be limited to the following points:

- Start the conversation by greeting your friend and asking him/her about his/her classes. When it is most natural during the talk, compliment on his/her writing skills by referring to his/her essay published in the school newspaper.
OR compliment on his/her
performance of Taichi at the school New Year’s Party.

OR compliment on his/her singing
performance in the school contest.

• Ask for directions to get to the Barnes & Noble by bike/car.
• Ask what time the bookstore is closed today.
• Accept his/her company of riding the car bike together to the bookstore. When it is most natural during the talk, compliment on his/her car/bike. You should pick a specific feature of the car/bike to give your compliment.
• While you are both riding on the road, please talk about each other’s hometown (e.g. compare the weather/food/population, etc.)
• Before leaving the bookstore, invite your new friend to a dinner party held in your apartment next week. Your party will start at 6:00 pm next Friday, and you need to tell him/her your address and show how to get to your place.

One Week Later...

Situation Two:

Today is the day of your dinner party. Now you are at home preparing the food when you receive a call from your friend asking for directions to your apartment. Your talk should include but may not be limited to the following points:

• Mimic phone rings, pick it up. Listen to what your friend says first. (She/he will tell you about getting lost and ask for directions again).

   Ask your friend where he/she is and tell how to get to your place.

   (When your friend show up at your doorstep) Greet him/her and invite him/her to come in. When it is most natural during the talk, compliment your friend on his/her appearance/clothing.

   Respond to your friend’s question expressing concern about your health (which is asked because he/she heard from their English teacher that you were sick).

   Your friend brings you a dish. (When she/he gives you the dish) Ask him/her what kind of dish it is. When it is most natural during the talk, compliment your friend on his/her thoughtfulness in bringing the dish.

   At last, show your interest in that dish and ask your friend about how you can cook it on your own or where you can buy it. End your conversation by inviting your friend to join the dinner.

Note: It is very important that you compliment naturally and make your compliments a part of the normal social talk. DO NOT make it obvious that the compliments are among the points listed for you.

References


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