Lip Service or Real Offer? Investigating Responses to Compliments by Egyptian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to investigate Compliment Responses (CRs) produced by Egyptian EFL learners through the use of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) as a data collection method. The aim is to gain an insight into the politeness strategies employed by Egyptian Arabic native speakers by shedding light on how young Egyptian EFL learners react when receiving compliments in English and in Egyptian Arabic. Comprehension is a skill that requires higher EFL proficiency levels so that the students can understand the questions properly, demonstrate a certain level of pragmatic familiarity in the target language, and thus eliminate language barriers that can strongly influence the research results. Hence, to guarantee a certain level of familiarity with English, the sample selected for this small-scale study comprises 30 responses by 15 English-majored university students (11 females and 4 males). The DCT consisted of 6 different compliment situations related to appearance, possession and performance/ability, and participants were asked to respond to the compliments as they would in real life. Responses were categorised according to the following strategies: thanking, wishing, rejecting, doubting, topic shifting, explaining, encouraging, offering the complimented object or help, returning the compliment, joking, expressing gladness, agreeing, combining two or more strategies as well as combining strategies with non-verbal responses. The data reflected some social-cultural norms of the Egyptian society. Gender-based differences in CRs have also been highlighted, and classroom implications that could apply to EFL teaching in the Egyptian context are proposed.

Keywords: compliment responses, Egyptian EFL learners, pragmatic transfer, politeness strategies, pragmatic awareness in the EFL/ESL classroom.

1. Theoretical framework

Three main concepts serve as a base for this study, namely Pragmatics, Compliments (Cs) and Compliment Responses (CRs) and Politeness Theory. What follows is a brief review of these concepts with a few examples from Egyptian Arabic native speakers (EANSs).

1.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is defined as the study of “the ways in which the context contributes to meaning” (Kuiper and Allan, 2010: 20) as well as “of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of these forms” (Yule, 1996: 4). It is related to the way an individual expresses his/her thoughts in different situations to be understood or to convey a specific meaning. One of the key concepts in pragmatics is speech acts, known as the utterances that serve a function in real-life interactions and require both linguistic knowledge as well as appropriate use of this knowledge within a particular culture.
The same utterance or sentence can be used in different situations, and consequently, has different meanings, depending on the context. As an instance from Egyptian Arabic, the utterance "تسلم" (to a male addressee) or "تسلمي" (to a female addressee), transliterated “teslam” and “teslami” respectively, mean “may you stay safe”. Another example is “ربنا يكرمك” transliterated “Rabena yekremek” (to a male addressee) or “Rabena yekremek” (to a female addressee), meaning “may God bless you.” However, in the context of compliments and compliment responses, the two expressions are used to express gratitude or appreciation, and can be used interchangeably with “thank you”. Therefore, interpretation of the message depends on the context as well as on the intonation of the speaker.

1.2. Compliments and Compliment Responses

Holmes (1986: 446) defines complimenting 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, skill, etc)”. Similarly, for Huth (2006: 2028), a compliment is “a positive assessment of affair, of an object, or of an action”. In Al Falasi (2007), compliments are defined as expressions of positive evaluation by the speaker to the addressee. In Chen and Yang (2010: 87), a compliment is “a supportive action, akin to offers, gifts, and congratulations, which sequentially implies an acceptance or rejection as second pair part”.

Compliments are widely used in daily interactions to fulfill different purposes. Hatch (1994) states that compliments reinforce solidarity when performed appropriately. Furthermore, they can be employed as a means to express appreciation, express rapport, encourage the performance and soften criticism. Boyle (2005: 356) stated that people can compliment, sincerely or insincerely, to make other people have positive feelings about themselves, encourage and give hope, protect themselves from people of authority or get complimented back by their addressees.

Compliment Responses are among those salient speech act behaviors that are naturally utilised in everyday conversations and are closely associated with the sociocultural norms of a speech community (Shahsavari et al., 2014). As Yu (2003: 1687) emphasised, “compliment responses are worthy of study because they are very common, yet frequently problematic speech acts” since the person who is complimented is in a position to accept the compliment, but try to avoid praising himself/herself. Compliments may mentally/emotionally impose a face-threatening effect on the receiver, a fact that may hinder appropriate interaction when responding to compliments. For instance, a compliment receiver may exhibit doubt, uneasiness or self-defence (Shahsavari et al., 2014). As evident in literature on CRs, performing compliments is culture-specific, and many EFL learners either tend to transfer strategies pertinent to their first language or create other interlanguage formulae of their own (Al Falasi, 2007). In addition, factors such as: the complimenter, the complimenter, the compliment occasion, the context, and the nature of the compliment paid are of great significance in relation to the interpretation of the compliment in terms of politeness and appropriateness (Shahsavari et al., 2014: 1746).

1.3. Politeness Theory

As Hill et al. (1986: 349) asserted, “politeness is one of the constraints on human interaction, whose purpose is to consider others’ feeling, establish a level of mutual comfort and promote rapport”. Brown and Levinson (1987: 73-76) state that the primary purpose of maintaining politeness strategies is face saving, which they defined as “the respect that each individual has for him or herself”, and maintaining that self-esteem in public or in private situations. For Brown and Levinson (1987), there are two types of politeness, positive and negative, pertaining to distinct values. According to Olstain and Cohen (1989: 45), “positive politeness cultures may show a tendency toward placing high value on directness, matter-of-factness, friendly back-slapping, and the like, negative politeness cultures, on the other hand, may value the maintenance of social distance and face-saving”.

Leech (1983: 82) defines politeness as the behaviour patterns that create and sustain social harmony. Unlike Brown and Levinson, Leech (1983) is concerned with normative aspects of politeness. Leech based his Politeness Principle on six maxim: Tact Maxim (minimising cost to other and maximising benefit to other), Agreement Maxim (minimising disagreement between self and other and maximising agreement between self and other), Approval Maxim (minimising dispraise of other and maximising praise of other), Modesty Maxim (minimising praise of self and maximising dispraise of self), Generosity Maxim (minimising benefit to self and maximising cost to self) and Sympathy Maxim (minimising antipathy between self and other and maximising sympathy between self and other). Comparing Brown and Levinson’s and Leech’s theories of
politeness, Chen (1993) states that providing “an adequate theoretical framework” for encompassing and highlighting differences in compliment responses across cultures, Leech’s Politeness Principle Maxims has been a very considerably valid reference for researchers. For this reason, Leech’s Politeness Maxims will be referred to in the analysis of the current study data.

Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behaviour that requires linguistic competence as well as pragmatic competence (defined as the ability to understand and use language effectively in context”; El Samaty, 2005: 341). The way people communicate is influenced by the sociocultural behaviours and constraints of L1 and L2. Rizk (2003) stresses that what is considered appropriate in one language might not be the same in another. Leech (1983) states that cultural differences affect and define the degree of politeness and appropriateness of a compliment. Accepting compliments was found to be the dominant strategy employed by native English speakers (Chen, 1993; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Herbert, 1986) while speakers of many other languages (e.g. Asian cultures such as China, Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam) show preference for strategies such as devaluation and compliment rejection (Chen, 1993). Some cultures, when complimented, tend to give more weight to “Agreement Maxim”, some others to “Modesty Maxim” and some cultures tend to balance between both of them. Shahsavari et al. (2014) highlight that some cultures consider compliments as ingratiating, performed for gaining approval or seeking favour. It could even be interpreted as a sign of envy of the complimented object, which impacts the way the complimentee would respond to the compliment.

In the context of EFL and ESL, it can be said that such inconsistency in the realisation and production of CRs as well as the lack of exposure to the authentic language input are two major challenges L2 learners encounter in producing proper native-like patterns in real-life contexts (Yu, 2003).

It has long been argued that Arabic and English norms of responding to compliments vary markedly and the interpretation of a compliment in any target language requires familiarity with the sociocultural rules that govern the speech acts of performing compliments and responding to them. For instance, in her study conducted on CRs by Emirati female learners of English, Al Falasi (2007) stated that the conventional formulae and strategies native speakers of Arabic employ to respond to compliments might be regarded as odd or offensive by native speakers of English in case of lacking such pragmatic knowledge. This study aimed to find out whether Egyptian learners of English produce target-like compliment responses and whether pragmatic transfer from L1 Egyptian Arabic can occur in L2 English.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection

It is worth noting that using DCTs as a data collection method has been a matter of debate among researchers. As far as the authenticity of the situations is concerned, Kasper and Dahl (1991) state that DCTs are limited. Moreover, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), human interaction is complex; thus how people would perform on such a platform of imaginary nature is not representative of how they would actually perform in real-life communication. In addition, DCTs do not cater for the “extended negotiation” that is very likely to occur in real-life communication (Nurani, 2009: 672). Despite these drawbacks, DCTs have been administered in a wide range of studies on speech acts for its productivity and suitability to participants from different cultural backgrounds (Nurani, 2009). DCTs also permit the collection of great amounts of data in shorter time compared to other data collection methods and trigger the registering of socially appropriate responses in the relevant situations (Nurani, 2009).

Some procedures were taken to improve the quality of the DCTs used to collect the data for the current study. The DCTs were designed on surveymonkey.com, with no title except for the word questionnaire in both versions for the purpose of not explicitly stating the focus of the study. Two versions of an online DCT were administered (Appendices A and B), one in Egyptian Arabic and the other in English to shed light on transfer effects. Both versions were given to the same group to examine transfer within the group. DCT versions were separately launched, starting with the Arabic version, with 10 days interval in between. The DCT consisted of 6 different compliment scenarios related to appearance, possession and performance. Four scenarios (Situations 1, 3, 5 and 6) were adapted from Chen (1993) for their suitability to the purpose and participants of this study. Each compliment aspect is addressed through 2 different scenarios, where the compliments were offered by different genders. The gender of the complimenter was included in the description of the situation to examine whether there would be differences in responding to male versus female complimenter. An additional comment field was given after each scenario, and respondents were instructed to enter any further comments
they had concerning the situations and/or their responses. The links were individually sent out to the participants via chatting applications such as Facebook Messenger and Whatsapp.

2.2. Participants

15 English-majored university students (11 females and 4 males) were recruited through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was employed since there was no need to obtain a randomised sample for the purpose and limits of the study and what it was to measure. Further, no generalisations could be sought based on DCT responses provided by such a small sample. Participants, in the current study, are the researcher’s friends and former English-major students. They have been to different schools (state-governed and foreign language medium schools), with a range of 12 to 15 years of English formal instruction, and they share the same mother-tongue (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic/ECA). The responses given were completely anonymous; no indicators of identity (such as names, phone numbers, places, etc.) by which individuals could be identified were present in the data.

The reason why more females were chosen for this study is that according to several studies investigating compliments and compliment responses (e.g. Al Falasi, 2007; Guodong & Jing, 2005; Liu, 1997) females were found to be more sensitive than males to sociopragmatic issues, such as politeness, and to personal issues such as physical appearance. In addition, the present study contributes to the limited collection of research done on compliment responses by EANSs. Despite the number of empirical studies conducted on speech acts in general, few data-based studies have focused on L1 transfer of compliment responses. Thus, more research was needed in this area to better understand the relationship between L1 transfer and compliment responses in L2 use by EANSs.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Data Analysis

First, responses are categorised in tables in terms of the CRs strategies employed in each compliment situation and their frequencies of occurrence. Then, a discussion of the results follows with examples from the data.

1- Possessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 1 (Female Complimenter)</th>
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<tr>
<td>لابس(ة) ساعة(ة) رولكس. صديقة لي(ن) شافتها وبتقول لك: &quot;واو! ساعة فخيمة حقيقي! طول عمري بحلم يكون عدي رولكس&quot;</td>
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You are wearing a Rolex watch. A female friend of yours sees it and says to you: "Wow! What a luxury! I have always dreamt of owning a Rolex."
A male friend of yours sees you driving your newly purchased Porsche, and says to you: "Wow! What a car! I wish I had one like that."
2- Performance/Ability

**Situation 3 (Male Complimenter)**

لسه مخلص(ة) بريزنتيشن في المحاضرة/في شغلك/في مؤتمر، زميل لي(ي) بيقول لك: "أداءك كان رائع! البريزنتيشن عجبني جدا".

You have given a presentation in your class/at work/in a conference. After your presentation, a male colleague of yours comes to you and says "That was a great presentation. I really enjoyed it."
Situation 4 (Female Complimenter)

You offer a female colleague a sandwich you made yourself at home. She tastes it and says: "Yummy! This is the best sandwich I've ever had."

Arabic

- Combination strategies: (a formulaic expression + making an offer)
- Using a formulaic expression
- Combination strategies: (thanking + making an offer)
- Thanking
- Expressing gladness
- Combination strategies: (a formulaic expression + thanking)
- Joking
- Combination strategies: (thanking + downgrading)
- Combination strategies: (expressing surprise + making an offer)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + doubting + further details about cooking skills)

English

- Thanking
- Combination strategies: (thanking + expressing gratitude)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + expressing gladness)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + wishing)
- Combination strategies: (expressing gladness + thanking)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + offering help)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + giving further comments + expressing gladness)
- Combination strategies: (thanking + wishing)
- Agreement
3- Appearance

**Situation 5 (Male Complimentor)**

You meet a male acquaintance you haven’t seen for some time. After an exchange of greetings, he says: “You look stunning! Even nicer than when I saw you last time!”
Situation 6 (Female Complimenter)

لاس (ة) جاكيت حلو، قابلتك صديقة الصبح وتبول للك: "الجاكيت ده جميل عليك(ي)"

You are wearing a jacket. One of your female friends meets you in the morning and says: "This jacket looks great on you".
4.2. Discussion

As previously mentioned, it has been emphasised in the previous literature on CRs that the strategies or patterns many speakers of different languages employ highlight the cultural differences in responding to compliments, even in cases where the compliments are realised and interpreted in the same or similar ways. For instance, in Golato (2002), both native speakers of German and American English tended to accept compliments although Germans did not show any preference for the use of tokens of appreciation in their responses. Based on the analysis of the current data, it is evident that “thanking” was the overriding strategy employed by the Egyptian EFL learners. This reflects native English speaker norms, and according to Wolfson (1986), this positively correlates with the speakers’ proficiency level. Generally, EANSs tended to accept the compliment by combining thanking with strategies such as: wishing (e.g. Hope you get a better one), encouraging (e.g. If you work hard enough, I am sure one day you will have it; Don’t worry. You will get yours soon enough), explaining (e.g. I worked hard; It also feels good and keeps me very warm; It’s from x store; it’s my diet), offering help/the complimented object (e.g. Contact me if you have any questions; Take it; Take the other one, too), returning the compliment (e.g. You do, too; You look stunning, too; You look nicer), expressing gladness (e.g. You really cheered me up; I’m glad you did; You made my day; Happy to hear that from you), shifting credit and showing appreciation (e.g. I am so grateful; I really appreciate it; It means a lot). In addition, no instances of rejection have been found.

However, some participants accepted the compliments by translating some thanking formulaic routines from Arabic such as “Allah bless you” or “God bless you, dear”. In the context of Cs and CRs, such phrases are used to express gratitude or appreciation, and can be used interchangeably with “thank you”. The word شكرًا = thanks is often preceded or followed by formulaic wishes like “فؤاد مبروك” or “فؤاد بخير” (May Allah/God bless you or “صلیلی” May you stay safe, which are used in ECA to function as expressions of thanks when used on their own. Many responses came in the form of a short prayer that the speaker be blessed. This reflects the Egyptians’ strong ties with their religion, which are embedded within their speech acts. The literal translations of such Arabic formulaic expressions used in compliment responses are not suitable for the compliments given in English, and may result in communicative failure or confusion in cross-cultural communication.

Another example of pragmatic transfer from Egyptian Arabic to English lies in the excessive use of terms of endearment (functioning as “supportive moves” as in the terminology of Worathamrong and Lukasneeyawin, 2016 and Blum-Kulka and Olshain, 1984). Supportive moves were defined in Blum-Kulka and Olshain (1984) as modifications preceding or following the main utterance to create an effect on the context in which the main utterance was embedded. Such terms in responses like: “Thank you, sweetheart. Hope you get a better one insha’allah”, “Thank you, sweetie. I am sure you will one day”, “Thank you very much, honey” and “God bless you, my dear” seem to be used to express appreciation and establish rapport, reflecting the warm-hearted nature of Egyptians. Moreover, their supportive disposition is seen where the encouraging and reassuring strategies was employed in responses like:

“Don’t worry. You will get yours soon enough.” Situation 2
“You have to work hard to get one!” Situation 1
“If you work hard enough, I am sure one day you will have it.” Situation 2
“I’m sure you’ll get yours soon.” Situation 2
“You don’t look bad yourself.” Situation 5

Another deviation from the native norms of English CRs is depicted in Egyptians using longer compliment responses by combining two, three or even four strategies (two-fold, three-fold and four-fold formulas in the terminology of Al-Mansoob et al., 2019). There seems to be a certain general feeling that the longer the response to compliments, the more sincere it is.

Examples from Situation 4:
Two-fold: (thanking + explaining)
“Thanks, it’s homemade.”
Three-fold: (doubting + wishing + promising)
“Really! Bon appetit! I’ll make you one every day if you want.”
Four-fold: (doubting + thanking + wishing + promising)
“Really! Thanks! Enjoy it! I will make you one next time.”

As far as the reference to God is concerned, it is present in the following examples when making wishes in the responses of both DCTs:

“ربنا يرزقك ببيها عن قريب” = May God give you one soon

“ربنا يرزقك” = I have always dreamt of buying one and I finally did. And, ma shaa Allah, I love it. I thank you very much.

ma shaa Allah is an Arabic phrase that literally means “God/Allah has willed it” and is used to express praise or gratitude for an intended incident, someone or something. In the Muslim world, it is a widely used expression intended to wish for God’s protection from the “evil eye”. Unlike the findings of a study by Tannen and Öztæk (1981) where the concept of “evil eye” is highlighted through employing different strategies in responding to the compliments in a Turkish context (cited in Iṣtifći, 2017: 22), Egyptians in the current study tended to show acceptance while observing the concept of “evil eye”. In Tannen and Öztæk (1981), the overriding strategy employed, in response to a compliment on a flat, was denigrating (belittling the complimented aspect). 19 subjects chose to criticise the flat by referring to how over-priced or intolerable it was in some kind of way. According to Ruhi (2006), such strategies whereby the compliment concept is explicitly challenged suggest rejection, thus, they may be considered as “rude” or “impolite” by speakers of other languages and those who are not familiar with the compliment norms of their interlocutors.

Another frequent expression was “إن شاء الله” in shaa Allah, used in some Arabic as well as English responses such as: “إن شاء الله ربنا يرزقك و تجيب أحسن منها” = God willing, you will have a better one, “Thank you sweetheart, hope you get a better one insha’allah”, “Hope you get one insha’allah”, “You’ll have one one day inshaallah” and “Inshallah you’ll have your own soon” to indicate acceptance of God’s will when expressing a wish or referring to the future. An Arab, in general, regardless of their cultural/religious background, would feel very awkward in his/her speech if told not to use the word “Allah” in his/her conversation. Such a type of code-switching may also occur for establishing a religious identity, even among non-Arabic-speaking Muslims. This goes in line with what was highlighted by Mattar (1978) that “Allah” is one of the most common words in both written and spoken language of Egyptians where frequency of usage is concerned, which is evident in many aspects of life including everyday greetings.

According to Farghal and Haggan (2006: 102), Arabic speakers tend to habitually “pay lip-service” to the complimenter. There is a general belief that they employ a set of language routines to offer the complimented object without genuinely meaning it. Such an argument is also developed by Al Falasi (2007) where she stresses that the UAE is among those cultures where compliments and compliment responses are mere routines that are usually offered insincerely. Likewise, this finding is supported by some examples in the current study. When offering the complimented object, a participant commented on her offer: “وعزة مراكبية” [zuumet meeqabbejia], meaning an ‘out of politeness (courtesy) invitation’ or offer of kindness which is not intended literally. The expression literally means: “a boatman’s/sailor’s invitation”. It is named after the popular scenario that boatmen would invite over passengers far on land or people on other boats with the solid knowledge that the invited will not be able to accept the invitation. Therefore, it refers to proposing something to someone just for the sake of appearing generous without the intention to pursue the offer.
Another supporting example in the data came as “Consider this yours, man! We are friends” responding to a compliment on the car (Situation 2).

On the other hand, other responses revealed genuine offers of the complimented object. Promises of buying a similar object, offers of the same complimented object, and help related to the complimented performance/skill were also dominant. For example, one of the participants wrote: لو معايا قلوب ماتبغي ليني أشتري غيرها "I can definitely give it to her". Other participants commented: “I LITERALLY mean it” (when made a promise of buying the complimenter the same watch) and “If I’m rich enough to buy a new one, I’ll give it to her and tell her to keep it”. Moreover, in response to the performance-related situation (the presentation), a participant, after offering help, commented: “I really want the best for him, and I will try to help him as much as I can.”

Recent literature tackling L2 cross-cultural variations of speech acts have shown that advanced levels of proficiency in a second or a foreign language do not guarantee the production of target-like patterns. El Samaty (2005) and Takahashi and Beebe (1987) concluded that in a target language, pragmatic transfer from L1 is more likely to occur by more competent L2 users due to the sufficient linguistic capability of expressing thoughts and feelings and the lack of pragmatic exposure to the authentic sociocultural norms of L2 (cited in Alfalasi, 2007). Similarly, Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2004) stated that “even grammatically advanced learners may use language inappropriately and show differences from target-language pragmatic norms”, which seems to be the case with the Egyptian users of English in the current study. CRs in the data reveal some social-cultural characteristics of the Egyptian society. Commenting on the Egyptian sense of humour, Hammoud (2014: 24) stated:

“Known for their proverbial sense of humour, Egyptians resort to comedy as a safety valve in everyday life and as a creative tool in many cultural productions… that pertain only to Egyptian cultural elements that can hardly be understood outside their cultural-bound context… Without a shared encyclopaedic knowledge of the school system, religion, songs, and geography, the jokes may fall flat.”

In the present study, joking seems to be a strategy some participants employed (more in male to male compliments) in the three compliment aspects studied to escape the embarrassment imposed by the compliment situations as in the following examples:

(Male to male compliments on appearance)
“Thanks, bro! I’m straight!”
“Oh, I see your vision has improved!”
“I look nice every time, bro!”

(Male to male compliments on possessions):
“Let’s face the fact dude. You’re never gonna have one like this.”
“I hope I won’t get into an accident.”

(Female to female compliments on ability)
“The least I can do.” (A literal translation of the Arabic formulaic expression "أقل حاجة عندي" used to add a humourous effect).

Modesty was also evident in the responses where participants chose to shift the topic: “أيه رأيك في كونها “What do you think about the colour then? or shift the credit: "It is a gift from a friend". Expressing doubt in responses such as: "أيه! يعني مااعكملش؟" "أيه!" = Really! = Really! So, I didn’t mess it up?!", "I didn’t think it would look that great.", "I thought it wasn’t that good." and non-verbally (e.g. through laughing) also seems to be a sign of modesty rather than lack of self-confidence. In a possession-related situation (Situation 2), one of the participants mentioned in the comment field that he shifted the topic for the purpose of drawing the complimenter’s attention away from the situation as a way of not showing off or making the complimenter feel any less. Regarding the same compliment situation, another respondent commented that she would shift credit to someone else even if it is a lie. She wrote that “some people do not want to feel inferior about money and such things. As I always want to be equal to my friends (males or females), I’ll never make them feel that I am better or something”. Thanking was also combined with downgrading/denigrating to observe the Maxim of Modesty (e.g."ربنا يخلصك والله ويجزي بخاطرك زي ما ينجيري بخاطري و ترفعي معنوياتي." May God bless you and uplift your soul as you lift mine up with your kind words "Thank you. There are many better cars."); “It is not much, but I am glad you like it”). It is also worth noting that this goes in accordance with the presence of returning the compliment strategy, mostly combined with appreciation tokens in the data. Motivated by the Maxim of Approbation, some responses came as:

“Thank you. Your outfit looks great, too.”
“Thank you, sweetie. You are the beautiful one.”
“Thanks for your words. You look amazing, too.”
“Allah bless you. And you always look great.”
“You are beautiful, too, and I love you. Thank you.”
(а formulaic Egyptian Arabic response to compliments that functions as: This is nice/kind of you!)
(а routine Arabic response to compliments meaning: Some of what you already have!)

As emphasised by earlier researchers (e.g. Jucker, 2009; Leech, 1983), CRs are very likely to create an issue of politeness for the complimentee as he or she has to choose to observe the Maxim of Agreement or the Maxim of Modesty (avoiding self-praise). While some cultures indicate preference for observing the Agreement Maxim (e.g. American), some give more weight to the Modesty Maxim (e.g. Chinese) and some cultures tend to observe both maxims equally (Istifci, 2017: 17). In the current study, it seems that the EANSs belong to the third category that tends to maintain a balance between both maxims through shifting topics, shifting credit or downgrading. However, clear agreement responses are only found in the English version of the DCT (e.g. “I love it. Thank you so much.”; “Me too!”; “Thank you. I like it too. It is a gift from a friend.”), which reflects an adequate pragmatic knowledge of EFL.

Non-verbal acts are known to be nonlinguistic means to convey information/messages. Although people nowadays rely more on written communication, it is emphasised that nonverbal communication constitutes 60 to 70 percent of overall human communication (Fontenot, 2018, and people seem to trust forms of nonverbal communication over verbal communication since it is rich in meaning compared to the verbal means (McCormack, 2019). In the context of CRs, Cheng (2011), for instance, states that Cs related to personality were often ignored or treated non-verbally (i.e., giggling) by Chinese people. Although DCTs are not the best methodological instrument for registering non-verbal acts (Ghazzoul, 2019), the responses and comments, in the current study, indicate some preference for non-verbal data expressed by an emoji or a word/phrase after the response explaining how a response would be communicated in real life or how they would feel after receiving the compliment:

Examples:
“with a cold blood face”
“looking at him in suspicion”
“*laughing*”
“*smiling*”
“*:•”

In responses to compliments offered by male interlocutors in both languages, the female participants mentioned they would thank, but “with a cold blood face” or “looking at him in suspicion”. This could be interpreted as a way to offend the male complimenter and/or escape the embarrassment imposed by the compliment situation. Three comments (from female participants who used thanking as a response strategy) came as the following:

“هكون محرجة و أنا برد و هكون عايزة أفلسع من الموقف باي شكل “ = Out of embarrassment, I’d feel like escaping the situation in any kind of way
“I would feel shy, and, maybe, I would be ending this awkward conversation.”
“I think I’d be a little shy after this compliment.”

“OK, as I’d feel embarrassed from such reactions, I’d try hard to cover it by some silly stories.”

In a study on CRs by Emariati female learners, Al Falasi (2007) concludes that the reaction to a compliment by an American male would differ from that of a local male, considering the background concept of compliment and where it comes from in each culture. In other words, a female would feel positive about a compliment by an American male, but might feel offended receiving a compliment from a local male. Al Falasi (2007) mentioned that one of her interviewees commented: “If the man who complimented me was a foreigner, I would accept the compliment and thank him, if it was a local guy, I would certainly ignore him”. This can explain the reactions of the female complementees to compliments on appearance by male acquaintances in the present study. On the other hand, this does not seem to be the case for the other compliment aspects. Male to female compliments on performance and possession were more accepted by female respondents. For instance, A female participant commented “I don't think that the gender of my colleague would make my answer any different” in relation to her response to a compliment by a male colleague on her presentation skills.
Conclusion

The lack of pragmatic knowledge and the insufficient exposure to the native-like norms could be considered as a major reason behind the way the Egyptian learners of English responded to compliments. It is clear from the analysis above that there were many instances of transfer from L1 Egyptian Arabic, which may lead to pragmatic failure especially when employed in cross-cultural communication (Shahsavari et al., 2014; Al Falasi, 2007; Eslami-Rashek et al., 2004) and wrong interpretations of patterns as “rude” or “bizarre”. As confirmed by many recent studies on CRs, language competence is not the only guarantor of appropriate target-like productions. EFL learners need to be made aware of the fact that pragmatic norms in general are not universal, hence, cannot apply to all the languages available to the learners without some sort of familiarity with the pragmatic intercultural commonalities and/or differences. As far as the inclusion of speech act input is concerned, other speech acts such as those related to greetings, requests, invitations are given more weight than compliments and compliment responses in EFL contexts. Therefore, EFL teachers and textbook writers need to pay particular attention to providing all the necessary and appropriate elements of pragmatics to reduce communicative breakdown that may occur between speakers of different languages and to help the EFL learners perceive and produce compliments effectively.

4. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Statistically speaking, the first suggestion for further research would be including a larger sample to obtain more representative and generalisable findings that can be applied to the entire population (Egyptian EFL learners). In addition, using other or mixed data collection methods, allowing the inclusion of more naturally occurring conversations, would aid in capturing the complexity of real human interaction and arriving at conclusions based on more authentic data.

The speech acts of compliments and compliment responses are related to the notion of closeness between interlocutors. Earlier researchers (e.g. Maiz-Arévalo, 2012) have argued that social distance is among the factors influencing the use of compliments. For example, to avoid issues like face threats, some prefer implicit compliments on appearance, performance or ability when the interlocutors are not socially close. This view is supported by the participants of the current study who mentioned their responses would differ according to the degree of intimacy between themselves and their complimenter. Therefore, it would be beneficial to investigate social distance as well as the other factors influencing the use of compliments responses such as age and social status.

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6. References


تعليمات

اقرأ/ا قرأ المواقف أسفل وجواب (ي) عليها زي ما بتجارب (ي) في الحياة العادية

لو عندك أي تعليقات تحب (ي) تضيفها/تضيفيها، فيه بوكس مخصص تحت كل رد اسمه تعليقات أخرى

الإجابات بتوصلني من غير أسماء، مش بيظهر عندي مين كتب إيه، فاكتب (ي) اللي تحبه/تحبيه

شكرا مقدما

نوعك؟

عمرك؟

لابس (ة)

ساعتك كان رأسي كرونو. صديقة ليك (ي) شافتها ويقول لك: واوا! ساعة فخمة حقيقي! طول عمري بحلم يكون عندي رولكس!

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

الباس (ة)

ساعتك كان مخلص في المحاضرة/في شيكل (ي) في مؤتمر، زميل (ي) يقول لك: أداءك كان رائع! البريزنتيشن ظني جدا

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

الباس (ة)

فابلات (ي) واحد معرفة بفاقك كثير مشوفوش/مشوفي هوش، بعد السلام يقول لك: شكلك حلو قري، كل مرة أحلى من اللي قبلها

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

الباس (ة)

يتبعد على زميلة (ي) بساندوتش عاملة/عامل ليك، بتدو فيدي وينقول لك: طعمه خطير. أحلى ساندوتش كله في حياتي

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

الباس (ة)

لاسا (ي) جاكيت حلو، فابلتك صديقة الصبح ويقول لك: الجاكيت ده جميل عليك (ي)

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

الباس (ة)

أعجبني البورش الليك، يا ريت كان عندي زيها

ترد (ي) تقول (ي)

تعليقات أخرى

Appendix A


Appendix B

Instructions:
Read the situations below (questions 3 to 8), and respond to them as you would in real life.
If you have any further comments concerning the situations and/or your responses, please enter them in the
comment field under each situation.
The responses will be entirely anonymous. I will NOT know who wrote what.
Thank you so much in advance :) 
Top of Form
1. Your gender:
   
2. Your age:
   
3. You are wearing a Rolex watch. A female friend of yours sees it and says to you: "Wow! What a luxury! I have
   always dreamt of owning a Rolex."
   You reply:
   Comments:

4. You have given a presentation in your class/at work/in a conference. After your presentation, a male
   colleague of yours comes to you and says: "That was a great presentation. I really enjoyed it."
   You reply:
   Comments:

5. You meet a male acquaintance you haven't seen for some time. After an exchange of greetings, he says:
   "You look stunning! Even nicer than when I saw you last time!"
   You reply:
   Comments:

6. You offer a female colleague a sandwich you made yourself at home. She tastes it and says: "Yummy! This is
   the best sandwich I've ever had."
   You reply:
   Comments:

7. You are wearing a jacket. One of your female friends meets you in the morning and says: "This jacket looks
   great on you."
   You reply:
   Comments:

8. A male friend of yours sees you driving your newly purchased Porsche, and says to you: "Wow! What a car! I
   wish I had one like that."
   You reply:
   Comments: