

Teaching pragmatic competence: Compliments and compliment responses in the ESL classroom

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that teaching and learning languages involves far more than targeting surface grammatical or lexical systems. The other aspects of language have been referred to as invisible, as they are often the most difficult to teach and acquire, given their subtlety and complexity. This paper discusses how teaching compliments and compliment responses could be approached in the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. A review of the literature suggests that explicit instruction has some positive effects on the acquisition of these speech acts. Naturally occurring oral examples of compliments and compliment responses by speakers of different ages and types of relationships were collected in different settings, including the workplace and the home. These examples formed the basis of a teaching resource, which was used in an intermediate/advanced immigrant English class in Australia. It is suggested that using naturally occurring data as examples to explain the workings of these speech acts could be used to teach at all levels in the adult ESL setting.

Introduction

Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and involves knowledge beyond the level of grammar (Thomas 1983). Crozet (2003) states that some of the rules that govern interactions but that are not immediately obvious have been referred to as *invisible* rules. Teaching pragmatic competence is widely regarded as an integral part of learning and teaching a language, and has been widely investigated (Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Rose and Kasper 2001; Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin 2005). Kasper (1989) includes the ability by learners to use speech acts in socially appropriate ways as part of what she calls a speaker's *declarative* knowledge of the target language. Studies of cross-cultural pragmatics report that the way speech acts are realised varies across languages. This variation can sometimes cause misunderstandings, or what Thomas (1983) called pragmatic failure, which occurs when learners transfer first language (L1) pragmatic rules into second language (L2) domains. This transfer of rules can lead to stereotyping about particular speech communities, as speakers may be perceived as being rude or inconsiderate. Teaching communication according to the sociocultural rules that govern speech acts in a given speech community is a valuable way to make students aware of what is valued within a culture and how this is communicated.

Raising pragmatic awareness can foster what Kramsch (1993: 236) calls 'intercultural competence', where speakers of other languages can become aware of what she terms 'the third place'. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) argues that the classroom is a place where pragmatic instruction can occur. Rose and Kasper (2002) review a series of studies that tested the effectiveness of explicit teaching (which Schmidt, in Rose and Kasper 2002: 255) called 'the noticing hypothesis' versus no instruction. They conclude that pragmatics has shown that explicit instruction of the target language pragmatic rules is effective in acquiring pragmatic competence. For example, Koike and Pearson (2005) found the rate of acquisition of pragmatic competence was faster when English-speaking learners of Spanish received explicit instruction and feedback. Alcón Soler (2005) compared two groups of Spanish high-school students and found that the group that received explicit instruction showed a greater speed of acquisition in how to give suggestions in English. Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) conducted a study in which one of the tasks consisted of noticing and repairing the speech act of apologising. The authors reported that explicit classroom instruction can benefit ESL learners from different backgrounds even if more advanced learners may develop awareness without instruction. Instructional methods in the above studies included focus-

on-form, feedback (Koike and Pearson 2005), discourse completion tasks and recasts (Alcón Soler 2005), and viewing and identifying pragmatic infelicities, followed by role play (Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin 2005). Rose and Kasper (2001) provide further insights into the benefits of both implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatic skills, as well as instructional methods for teaching and testing them.

Review of the literature on compliments

Holmes (1986: 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, patronising, sarcastic, ironic or even as put downs (Holmes 1995: 119). Giving a compliment (C) may be considered a face-threatening act because it leads to ‘the complimenter’s debt’ (Holmes 1986: 487), where receivers may feel obliged to return the C. Ochs (1993) gives the example that a compliment to her as a professional academic could be interpreted as the speaker trying to foreground her gender identity (female) and an attempt to establish a more intimate relationship, which may make her feel indebted to the speaker. Cs and compliment responses (CRs) have been widely studied using a variety of methodologies in different learning contexts. An overview of some of these studies and their findings now follows. Early studies focused on describing English Cs and CRs used in the United States, while later studies focused on how this speech act differs across cultures.

Early studies on Cs and CRs were carried out by Wolfson and Manes (1980) in their research on United States English. Their pioneering study identified several lexical and syntactical features of Cs and CRs, as well as the functions they serve. They found the structure of Cs to be formulaic, that speakers use a small number of adjectives, and that Cs and CRs could be classified into types of structures: adjective, verb, adverb/noun. Wolfson and Manes also found that the subject of Cs encompassed two main topics: appearance and ability. Furthermore, they noted that the functions served by this speech act included thanking, starting a conversation, giving approval and reinforcing certain behaviours. Overwhelmingly, Cs served to establish solidarity among same status speakers, while they could also be used as genuine expressions of admiration. In addition, Cs could be used to soften a potentially face-threatening act such as criticism. Pomerantz (1978), on the other hand, studied the sequential organisation of CRs in United States English and observed that they pose a problem for the receiver because, at the same time that the receiver wishes to avoid disagreement, s/he must also avoid self-praise. Strategies to avoid self-praise are downgrading the compliment or shifting reference by reassigning the praise or returning a compliment. The receiver of a C can opt to accept, agree, reject or disagree.

Holmes and Brown (1987) further elaborated the CR types identified by Pomerantz, which took into account the role of the listener in the interaction. They developed three broad categories of addressee’s responses to compliments; accept, reject, and deflect or evade.

Holmes (1986) also studied the structure and function of Cs and CRs using data from New Zealand. In terms of structure, she found, as in previous studies, that Cs are a highly formulaic speech act, which, at the lexical level, are typically expressed by a small number of adjectives. At the syntactic level, a pattern in New Zealand English, which differed from other studies, was the ‘NP BE + -ing +Adj’ form (eg *You’re looking really great!*) (Holmes 1986: 489). Also, Cs were found to be most likely to occur as part of openings or closings, which would suggest they are used as part of greetings and leave takings. As in previous studies, Holmes found Cs established or increased solidarity, rapport or intimacy.

In another study conducted by Holmes (1995), gender differences emerged in relation to the functions of Cs. The data suggested it was more socially acceptable for women to give Cs, while for men it was seen as a face-threatening act. In addition, she found frequency, structure and topics of C differed among men and women. Overall, women were found to give and receive more Cs than men. While it was less common for subordinates to compliment those of higher status, women of higher status received more compliments than men in higher positions. Patterns of compliments differed also, with men preferring to reduce the force of the C (*nice shirt!*), while women preferred a structure that increased its force (*What a lovely shirt!*) (Holmes 1995). While men compliment more on possessions, women compliment more on appearances.

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.

Two ethnographic studies that compared English-speaking speech communities serve to highlight that culturally appropriate behaviour can vary even when speakers share similar linguistic resources. Herbert (1989) compared data from South African and New York university students and found the frequency of Cs to be higher among United States participants. The topics were similar and mostly about appearance. An interesting finding was that there were far more acceptances of Cs in the South African data than the United States data. Creese (1991) compared British and United States English data among teachers and found, like Wolfson and Manes (1980), that Cs are used to show solidarity as well as to encourage and show gratitude. Creese (1991) found differences in two areas: the first was syntactic, where British participants favoured the syntactic category ('I (really) like/love + N'). Another difference was the C topic, which for United States participants was appearance, whereas in the British data it was ability.

Daikuhara's (1986) ethnographic study analysed C and CR behaviour within a group of same status Japanese and United States English acquaintances. Many of the functions were found to be similar to those found by Wolfson and Manes (1980), namely that Cs serve to establish solidarity between same status speakers, but many Cs were also made in order to find out further information about a subject. The author explored the widely held view that Japanese people do not give many Cs, and this was revealed not to be the case. The author notes that the high number of Japanese uses of 'no, no' and 'that's not true' was a transfer from Japanese and used to defer or show politeness towards the speaker. It was found that rather than disagree with a C, the Japanese speakers downplayed it or accepted it in much the same way as United States English speakers may use 'thank you' following a C. The study also found that syntactically the pattern 'I like/love + N' did not appear in the Japanese examples.

Studies by Golato (2003) and Huth (2006) investigated the use of compliments by United States English students of German using a conversation analysis (CA). Differences that were found included United States speakers giving appreciation tokens (such as 'thank you'), while German speakers preferred to agree with the compliment. Also, in the latter case, a similar strength adjective is used and giving a compliment generates another, which was seen to be a problematic area for the United States English speakers.

In a two-year ethnographic study, Yu (2005) contrasted how Cs and CRs differed in data collected in Boston and Taipei. The study found significant differences in cultural norms. The United States data showed a higher frequency of compliments. The structure of Cs was found to be indirect in the Chinese data, with speakers having a variety of moves before the C. So, for example, small talk was found to be a lead-up to an indirect C, which in English would be considered optional. Complimenting on appearances and possessions, which is found to be typical in United States contexts, was not the case in the Taiwanese data. The function of compliments to establish solidarity was present in the United States data but not in the Taipei data. In addition, there were fewer lower-status Cs to higher-status speakers than in the United States data. Yu suggests that these differences are due to underlying Chinese cultural values of hierarchy. Finally, how well people know each other was seen as an important factor in the use of Cs. United States speakers were more likely to give Cs to strangers, whereas Chinese speakers used them more often with people they knew well.

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 *shekastehnaqsi*, 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 conceptualised 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. Further, Sharifian explains that when the compliment cannot be attributed to the interlocutor, there is a tendency to praise or enhance the 'face' of another party who may be responsible for the success, for example, family members or employers. Also, Persian speakers feel they have to return a C

to make the other feel successful, and Sharifian proposes that this highlights the Persian value of self in relation to others.

A study by Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) investigated the C and CR behaviour of United States English teachers and Arabic speakers in Syria. Similarities include the tendency by both groups to accept or downplay but rarely reject Cs. Differences were found in CR behaviour. Whereas United States English speakers used more appreciation tokens (thanks), in the Arabic equivalent 'Shukran' on its own was not considered sufficient and needed to be extended. Furthermore, Syrians were found to use more formulaic forms of CR, the length of which was tied to the sincerity of the C.

Teaching pragmatic competence

The view that pragmatic competence is not learned merely by exposure or osmosis is shared by many scholars. What is at issue for educators is how to go about the task of teaching culture, 'not as if it were a fifth skill to be added on to L2 study but by taking *cultural context* as central' (original italics) (Kramsch 1993: 13). Thomas (1983: 96) stated that it is the role of teachers to:

equip the student to express her/himself in exactly the way s/he chooses to do so – rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborately polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being *unintentionally* rude or subservient.

In other words, she proposes that students be equipped with the necessary knowledge to make their own decisions about how to use the target language.

Bardovi-Harlig (1996) cautions against the over-use of textbooks in the classroom, as they represent speech acts either unrealistically or not at all. She suggests a variety of ways to promote pragmatic awareness. Teachers can encourage learners to think about how a particular speech act differs in their own language. This could lead to classroom-led discussions and, for more advanced learners, collecting data outside the classroom. Studies that focus on teaching C and CR as part of learners' pragmatic competence include Holmes and Brown (1987), who developed a set of exercises to facilitate the acquisition of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. The exercises were aimed at identifying, as well as producing, Cs and CRs. One exercise included learners collecting examples of naturally occurring data in order to develop awareness of the importance of the context and topics in which they occurred. Students were encouraged to collect both written and spoken examples, as well as naturally occurring data or from film and television data. Barraja-Rohan (2003) discusses examples of Australian English Cs and CRs, which typically involve self-deprecation. A classroom activity is described where students discuss the appropriateness of the Cs given and then follow up the discussions by role play.

The study

The study focused on collecting spontaneously occurring examples of Cs and CRs and using them to expose learners to ways that the speech act of complimenting is used in Australian English. The learners were adult immigrants at an intermediate/advanced level from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, and were attending ESL classes at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institution where I was teaching at the time.

Background and data collection

The motivation to address the use of Cs and CRs stemmed from classroom observations of ESL learners. Some students seemed unsure or uneasy when faced with accepting or giving compliments, both in communication with the teacher and within peer interaction. Indications in the less proficient learners included what could be described as uncomfortable body language or giving no reply to compliments. Some students, however, asked how to manage this area of communication and openly asked questions about what is considered acceptable in Australian English, based on their experiences outside the classroom. For example, one learner asked if it is acceptable in English to comment on a colleague's hairstyle and gave the example of when such a C on a work colleague's recent haircut had been met with offence. Another instance involved a student claiming that a certain group of students in the class could not 'take a compliment', which was attributed to their cultural background. A more proficient speaker,

when complimented on her colourful and unusual bag, replied jokingly, 'be careful, if you say that I will be forced to give it to you; that's what we do in my culture'. The above examples show a range of different levels of pragmatic knowledge by the learners about this speech act.

The approach taken was to collect a variety of Cs and CRs in a variety of settings. The same approach was taken by Holmes and Brown (1987) on a larger scale. Over a period of two months, two colleagues and I wrote down Cs and CRs as soon as possible after hearing them in a variety of contexts including the workplace, the home, shops and our children's sporting events. Every effort was made to make a note of other contextual information such as the noise conditions or whether the C and CR occurred early or late in the encounter or in passing. Information about the speaker (age, gender and relationship to the other speaker) was noted. In addition, where possible prosodic and non-verbal clues about how the speakers reacted to the compliments were noted, such as whether the speakers were surprised or taken back by the compliment. Any information about whether or not they felt at ease or uncomfortable was also noted. When writing down the examples, emphasis was given to the meaning or intention of the C rather than word accuracy. In this regard, the research accorded with Yuan (2001), who noted that while this method lacks accuracy, it is the most realistic and feasible way to collect natural spoken data. All names of participants were changed in order to ensure anonymity of participants.

Like any other natural data collection exercise, this approach is problematic. However, as Golato (2003) argues, using naturalistic data recognisable to learners and teachers is preferable to using methods such as discourse completion tasks, questionnaires or textbooks. Examples from the data were selected to illustrate some of the ways that Cs and CRs are realised in Australian English.

Examples from the data

A variety of Cs and CRs found in the examples collected are presented in this section. Topics on both appearance and ability were common. In several examples the formulaic 'thank you' was given in response to a compliment, but in many more cases the responses involved downplaying the C. In some cases praise was exaggerated in order to soften or make up for a misdemeanour. In other instances a C was a way to soften a criticism or make a suggestion. Lastly, some Cs had examples of idioms or sayings that might not be immediately clear to non-English speakers. Some examples of C rejections are by children who perhaps do not feel the need to agree with their parents' views. There were also instances of what might be called true expressions of admiration on both ability and appearance.

Greeting

On the question of Cs of appearance, in a mostly female and friendly workplace it was found that clothes, accessories and anything new was commented on. In this exchange the C is part of a greeting that took place in a corridor. It was the first time these two female work colleagues had seen each other that day. They routinely commented on each other's clothes.

S1: Hi, I love your boots.

S2: Oh, they're a bit old.

S1: A bit of boot polish and away you go!

Softening a misdemeanour

Another type of C occurred when the speaker, an 11-year-old boy, was seeking to apologise or 'make up' for a misdemeanour (not getting off the computer when told to do so) and therefore using the compliment during dinner to 'make it up' to the listener (his mother). The following somewhat exaggerated compliment was certainly interpreted as such by the receiver.

Mother: How's the crumble, darling?

Son: Mum, with your crumble there's only one possible answer to that question!

Mother: Oh, aren't you a darling!

Softening a criticism

This type of C is exemplified in an exchange between a supervisor and a colleague who had just given a presentation. The overall feedback was positive and the feedback was not taken to be a criticism.

S1: That was great. Just one thing: I would've got everyone to introduce themselves first.

S2: Ok, well, maybe next time.

Idiomatic expression within a compliment

The use of idiomatic expression can also be part of a compliment. The first example was interpreted by the receiver as quite 'strong'.

S1: Thanks for getting back to me about it and I hope I haven't caused any problems.

S2: Not at all, you've taken the bull by the horns!

S1: Well, I'm glad you see it that way!

S1: Aren't you the hostess with the mostest! What a great dress!

S2: Oh, I just felt like dressing up today.

Compliments incorporating sarcasm

The following two utterances were heard in an exercise class and were remarks made by the instructors to a woman who had an unusually large bruise on her leg. Both utterances were meant as sarcastic and jocular in tone and led to extended jokes and speculations about how this person had acquired such a large bruise. Interestingly, however, the real story was not told, so the extended responses to the comments seemed to be a way of avoiding an explanation.

Instructor 1 (female): Nice bruise! How did you get it!

Instructor 2 (male): Your bruise is coming along nicely!

Rejected compliments

In this example between a mother and her seven-year-old son, the C was rejected. Such a C is more likely to be used in very familiar or intimate contexts.

Mother: My god, look at that! You got 13/15 today!

Son: So what? Lucy got 15!

Mother: Well, I think 13 is really good, so there!

Compliments about ability

An example of genuine admiration was made to a child who was performing exceptionally well at her weekly basketball game. The child was pleased, as was her mother.

Woman: There seems to be two of you on the court!

Child: *(Beams with pride)*

The following exchange between two female friends was also a C about ability, in this case that so much food had been prepared in one morning after working all week. The C is downplayed by S2.

S1: You didn't do all this *today*, did you?

S2: Oh, no, I did some yesterday.

The following interaction took place between two women at work. S1 was showing S2 how to use a recording tool. S2 had experienced a few false starts recording her own voice and remarked that the results sounded terrible.

S1: I think you've got a *good* voice!

S2: I don't know about that. I think we need Mary to be here! (laughs)

Repeated compliments

In this type of C, it was expected that responses would vary not only according to the addressees but also how often a C has been paid over a period of time. An interesting example arose when the following C and CR were exchanged. S1 did not realise that S2 had been complimented on her hair all day and by late afternoon was just accepting Cs without adding extra information.

S1: Have you had your hair cut? It looks really good.

S2: Oh, yeah.

S1: Don't you like it?

S2: Oh, yeah, I do.

S1: Oh, you don't seem to.

Unacknowledged compliments

Another type of C was an exchange where the speakers were a couple. The male partner had cooked the evening meal and clearly expected praise. His comment was therefore a hint that he should be acknowledged. This request for praise was repeated for some time, as was the desired reply.

Partner (male): Nice dinner!

Partner (female): Yeah, great! (*ignores the real intention of the question*)

The classroom

Drawing on these data, various classroom activities were prepared. These activities spanned two classes of students, each session lasting approximately 40 minutes. In the first session, students were asked to recall examples of Cs and CRs they had heard or given/received in English. Other examples were added to ensure that there were different types of Cs for lexical and syntactic variety. A list of adjectives felt to be typical when giving Cs was generated. This included the (over)use of 'awesome', 'sick' and 'crap' as adjectives used by some of the younger people known to the teachers. Next followed a discussion of topics that the teachers believed would be likely to receive Cs in Australian English, and the learners were presented with a list of examples of these Cs. They were asked to identify whether each one was accepted, rejected or downplayed. In the second session some excerpts, each with an example of a C from an Australian film, were played.¹

A scene from *The Joy Luck Club* was also shown; a United States speaker uses a C to flatter the cooking of his girlfriend's mother but then flouts a rule by misunderstanding her criticism of a dish she is serving. This example served as the basis for discussion about how C and CR were given in the students' respective languages. Much discussion centred around the topic of the sincerity factor of Cs and in which contexts the truth was preferable over merely polite remarks. Lastly, the students were asked to write down any examples they heard in their daily interactions outside the classroom for future discussions. Learners reported that they recognised the variety of Cs and CRs presented in their different structures but reported they would not use some of the structures themselves. Students reported that the use of real examples was helpful in identifying lexical and syntactic ways of agreeing and disagreeing that were unfamiliar to them.

The presentation of Cs and CRs formed part of an ongoing discussion about aspects of language the students themselves had noticed in their out-of-classroom experiences and which they wanted to clarify

and discuss. Sometimes these were based on interactions in which they were participants, some were Cs they had overhead and some were the result of something they had read. Other discussions about language and culture that were initiated by the learners also took place, focusing, for example, on speech acts relating to manners in restaurants and offering to help women to carry bags.

Conclusion

As Creese (1991: 47) stated, complimenting is indeed 'a complex multi-linguistic skill'. Holmes and Brown (1987) warn that leaving learners to work out norms and patterns of interaction by osmosis deprives them of the opportunity to make choices about the use of L2. The role of teaching in facilitating awareness of L2 structures is therefore central. This paper has described one teaching approach that aimed to increase pragmatic awareness using naturally occurring examples of possible Cs and CRs and film data in order to address this aspect of language learning in an adult immigrant classroom. When learners ask, 'what do you say in Australia when ...', it is worth recalling Hymes (1972 in Kramsch 1993: 34), who said, 'The key to understanding language in context is to start not with language, but with context'. The data are presented to illustrate complimenting behaviour within the workplace and the social networks of a particular group of people. They occur in the realm of a shared office among familiar supervisors and colleagues, the intimacy of their homes, and the familiar contexts of their weekend activities. Although limited in number, the types of contexts and variety of examples collected formed the basis for useful classroom discussions, as well as cross-cultural comparisons. It is hoped that this approach will be useful in different contexts to address the needs of other learner groups. Further studies of how Cs are realised in other Australian contexts and speech communities, taking into account gender and status in workplace and educational institutions, would be of interest to learners and educators alike.

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Note

- 1 A scene from the movie *Candy* (Australian Screen 2009a) was used to show how self-praise can be used as encouragement. A scene in the film *Caddie* (Australian Screen 2009b) shows how flattery offered by way of apology is rejected. For further discussion on using film to teach Cs and CRs, see Rose (2001). For further reading on the validity of using film in the classroom, ideas to teach Cs and CRs and some examples from films see Rose (2001). A study by Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi (2005) uses film to teach non-verbal and paralinguistic behaviour in French and Italian.

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