



TRANSFER EFFECTS IN COMPLIMENT RESPONSES OF EFL LEARNERS

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The present study investigated whether Turkish learners of English from two proficiency levels, namely pre-intermediate and advanced, use target-like compliment response strategies in English and whether there is pragmatic transfer from the learners' first language in responding to compliments through a Discourse Completion Test. In order to compare the transfer effects, the baseline data was collected from native speakers of both Turkish and English as well as Turkish EFL students. According to the findings, all the groups reflected a similar pattern by showing a high preference for accepting and deflecting strategies. However, the positive transfer effect was observed in the micro strategies under acceptance and deflecting as well as strategy combinations. Turkish native speakers also tended to respond to compliments more with returns and bald acceptance whereas native English speakers with neutral elaboration. In line with these findings, EFL learners also tended to use accepting and deflecting more. Important pedagogical implications were drawn in the light of these findings to guide second language teaching curricula.

Keywords: Compliment response strategies, Native speakers, Non-native speakers, Pragmatic transfer.

Introduction

It has long been an investigated issue in the field of pragmatics if learners realize the speech acts in the target language through the transfer of their native pragmatic resources (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The reason of this pragmatic transfer issue's being so significant is it's being heavily influential on the comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information (Kasper, 1992). To give an example if an L2 learner's turns governed by L1 norms which are sequentially and situationally inappropriate, it can result in communication breakdowns purely because they are not anticipated by his/her co-participant(s). Hence, it seems valuable to study pragmatic transfer to gain deeper insights into the differential governing patterns of speech behaviors ruled by the norms and values of various communities as well as to understand or even predict the potential cross-cultural problems that may emerge due to those differences.

Although there is a great deal of research on the pragmatic transfer in the speech acts of second language learners from different backgrounds, compliment response (henceforth CR) has received relatively little attention signaling the need for further research on this subject obligatory.

Attempting to extend interlanguage pragmatics research by analyzing the compliment responses of a relatively understudied learner group through a strategy categorization into the interlanguage (IL) patterns of Turkish EFL learners, this study aims to find out whether upper-intermediate level Turkish EFL

learners use target-like CR strategies in English and whether pragmatic transfer takes place from the learners' first language in their responses to compliments or not.

Literature Review

A compliment is described as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1988:485). A compliment functions generally to increase or consolidate solidarity between the interlocutors through the expression and acknowledgement of admiration (Wolfson, 1989). The response to a compliment thus has the potential to reinforce and maintain such solidarity (Holmes, 1988).

The first researcher who investigated the CRs was Pomerantz (1978). The researcher postulates that two conversational principles conflict with each other while responding a compliment which are defined as “agreeing with the speaker” and “avoiding self-praise”. In the researcher’s experiment, American native speakers responded both with agreement and disagreement to the situations. The results indicated that the participants made use of a variety of structures in responding although the prescriptive norm of CR in American community was accepted as “Thank you”. Herbert (1986) also complies with this view by stating that American native speakers utilize agreements, disagreements and request interpretations as CRs. Holmes (1988) compares New Zealand English with Malay language and groups the CR types into three forms as acceptance, rejection and deflecting /evasion. She concluded that while New Zealand English opted for acceptances more than Malay, Malay native speakers were more inclined to deflect or reject compliments.

Following these developments a number of contrastive studies have been carried out in an attempt to compare CRs in diverse languages. Urano (1998) reviewed those studies and maintained that there is a clear contrast among different languages as depicted through the contrastive studies on compliment responses. To explicate, whereas in Arabic and South African English, the native speakers were more likely to prefer acceptance of compliments and less likely to reject them, the Far-Eastern speakers seemed to avoid accepting compliments by rejecting or deflecting them.

In an attempt to compare the CR strategies of Korean advanced learners in Korean and in English, Han (1992) found out that Korean learners are inclined to reject or deflect compliments in their native language, yet most of them approached target-like norms in their L2 use by accepting them in English.

Furthermore, through a contrastive study Chiang and Pochtrager (1993) investigated the CRs of Chinese-born English speakers and those of American-born English speakers. The results displayed that the majority of all CRs were either accepted or positively elaborated by American speakers whereas the Chinese learners of English have a tendency to either reject or negatively elaborate on the compliments addressed to them as a result interference from L1.

In another study, Cedar (2006) investigated the IL of Thai learners of English in terms of CRs and observed that Thai learners tended to avoid positive elaboration, smiled and showed no response in contrast to the native speakers of English, which was again seen as a signal of negative pragmatic transfer.

In an Arabian context, Falasi (2007) looked for the CR patterns of native speakers and Arabic learners of English and exhibited that a majority of Arabic learners of English accepted the CRs, but deviated from the target norms by returning them significantly more than the native speakers by using the literal translation of Arabic formulaic expressions. Similarly, Tran (2008) examined the CRs of Vietnamese learners’ of English and provided evidence for negative pragmatic transfer based on the participants’ tendency to disagree with or downgrade compliments much more than Australian native speakers of English.

The only study conducted about the CRs of Turkish EFL learners has been that of İstifçi (1998) which is also congruent with the results of the present study. The researcher compared the CRs of upper-intermediate learners of English with those of native speakers of British English and native speakers of Turkish through a Discourse Completion Test. The study employed the CR strategies defined and

categorized by Chen (1993) and adapted by Ernawati (1996). It was found out that Turkish speakers mostly employed ‘Deflecting’, ‘Returning’ and ‘Rejecting’ strategies whereas native English speakers mainly used ‘Accepting’ strategies. This led to the conclusion that the learners approached the native speaker norms by using the ‘Accepting’ strategy though their use of the other strategies was taken as evidence for negative transfer. Furthermore, Turkish learners of English tended to translate the formulaic expressions in their native language to L2 which can signal a potential for intercultural misunderstandings.

Methodology

The data was collected through the Written Discourse Completion Test developed by Ernawati (1996) and adapted to Turkish by İstifçi (1998). In the task, there were 10 compliment response situations in which the respondents were given compliments about appearance / attire, performance / ability and possession (See Appendix A).

Three types of data from three groups of participants were collected for this study. Grouping procedure is given below:

- (1) Turkish L1 Baseline Data was formed by the responses of 20 native Turkish speakers (NTS) aged between 19-25. 9 of the respondents were male and 11 were female. The respondents were the students taking an intermediate-level compulsory English course at Yıldız Technical University Modern Languages Department.
- (2) English L1 Baseline Data was formed by the responses of 20 native English speakers (NES), aged between 19-28. 8 of the respondents were male and 12 were female. The respondents were international students attending Turkish classes at Boğaziçi University, of whom 15 were American, and 5 were Canadian.
- (3) EFL Experimental Data was formed by the responses of 20 Turkish EFL learners who were taking an upper-intermediate level course at Yıldız Technical University Modern Languages Department. 5 of the respondents were male and 15 were female whose age range was 19-25.

The CR responses of the participants were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed in terms of the CR strategies used. Gajasenı’s (1994) framework modified upon the frameworks of Herbert (1986) and Holmes (1988), and it was taken as the basis in identifying and categorizing. Emerging response patterns were grouped into three macro-strategy categories as Acceptance, Rejection, and Deflecting and into the relevant micro-strategy categories on the basis of the following scheme:

1. Acceptance: The respondent accepts the compliment by thanking, agreement or by expressing gladness, by direct or indirect self-praise and/or by showing a concern for the other through returns.

- A. Thanking: e.g. ‘Thanks’ and ‘Thank you.’
- B. Agreement: e.g. I like it, too.
- C. Expressing Gladness: e.g. I am glad you liked it.
e.g. *Your appreciation was very important for me.*
- D. Bald Acceptance: e.g. I worked hard for it.
e.g. *Bon appetite.*
e.g. *Enjoy your meal.*
- E. Praise Upgrade: e.g. I am an excellent cook.
- F. Returning: e.g. So is yours.
e.g. *It is very nice of you.*
e.g. *If you like, I can give it to you.*

2. Rejection: The respondent does not accept the compliment by expressing it directly or scaling down or minimizing the compliment.

- A. Disagreement: e.g. I don't think so.
 B. Scaling Down: e.g. It was pure luck. It is old.

3. Deflecting Category: The respondent deflects the compliment by giving some sort of neutral explanation (usually about its history) or transferring the complimentary force to the third party or asking questions.

- A. Neutral Elaboration : e.g. I bought _____ at _____.
 e.g. *I can give the recipe.*
 B. Shifting Credit: e.g. I got the recipe from my mom.
 e.g. *Thanks to you.*
 e.g. *I hope you can achieve as well.*
 C. Questioning: e.g. Do you really think so? You like it?
 e.g. *I hope everyone thinks like you.*

Indeed, there were some occurrences where non-native English speakers (NNES) created L1 like utterances which are added by the researcher in italics. Every response statement in each given situation was considered as a unit of analysis while analyzing the compliments and a score of 1 was given for every unit to the corresponding strategy. The scores were added and the total frequency scores were turned into percentages. The responses to the given situations were also analyzed with respect to the strategy pairs (i.e. combination of a strategy with another strategy).

Following Kasper's (1995) definition, the close percentages in all groups were taken as evidence of positive pragmatic transfer in interpreting transfer effects, whereas the cases where there were 'seemingly significant' differences between the IL use and the L2 use, but not between IL use and L1 use were accepted as evidence for negative transfer.

Results

The analysis of the CR strategies of the NTS and NES revealed that both groups employed all the macro and micro strategies defined in the study and they used very similar number of strategies in total (n (NTS strategies) = 340; n (NES strategies) = 338). Table 1 shows the frequencies of the strategy types employed by both groups with their corresponding percentages.

Table 1. CR Strategies Employed by NTS and NES

Macro Strategy Category		NTS n = 26		NES N = 21	
Sub-strategies		N	%	N	%
ACCEPTANCE	Thanking	144	42.6	156	46.1
	Returning	25	7.3	17	5
	Bald Acceptance	55	16.2	62	18.3
	Agreement	20	5.9	6	1.7
	Expressing Gladness	15	4.4	26	7.6
	Praise Upgrade	21	5.7	4	1
Acceptance Total		280	82	271	79.7
DEFLECTING	Neutral Elaboration	4	1.1	16	4.7
	Questioning	26	7.6	15	4.4
	Shifting Credit	10	2.9	12	3.5
Deflecting Total		40	11.6	43	12.6
REJECTION	Scaling Down	5	1.4	19	5.6
	Expressing Disagreement	15	4.4	5	1.4
Rejection Total		20	5.8	24	7.00

As revealed by the findings, both groups followed the same order of preference for macro strategies. It was found that acceptance strategies were employed most, followed by deflecting and rejection strategies. Also the overall percentages of the acceptance, rejection and deflecting strategies in both the NTS and the NES group displayed minor differences (82 %, 70.7 %; 5.8 %, 7%; 11.6%, 12.6%) indicating a similar pattern in the use of macro strategies. In terms of micro-strategy preferences the order was similar in the way that “thanking” was found to be the most frequently employed micro strategy in both groups (42.6%, 46.1%), followed by “bald acceptance” (16.2 %, 18.3 %).

The analysis of the micro strategies also showed that both the NTS and NES had very close percentages in the categories except for agreement, expressing gladness, praise upgrade, scaling down, expressing disagreement, neutral elaboration, and questioning. Agreement strategy was used more frequently by NTS than NES (cf. NTS= 5.9 > NES= 1.7%). Likewise the use of the praise upgrade strategies displayed a remarkable difference in the way that the total percentage of returning strategies used by the NTS were twice as much as that of the NES (cf. NTS = 5.7 % > NES = 1 %). In building their return responses, several NTS directly complimented the other party’s same object / performance by expressions like “So is yours” or offered the object of compliment to the others, which are the patterns not exhibited by NES. Unlike the NES, most NTS preferred to use culture-specific return expressions like “O senin kendi güzelliğin / It is because of your own beauty” or “Daha iyileri senin olsun / May the better ones be yours”.

Also in accepting the compliments “Bald Acceptance” was used slightly more by NES (18.3 %) than NTS (16.2%). NES who used this strategy exhibited self-praise in an indirect form by elaborating on their hard efforts for the result being complimented through statements like “I studied/ worked hard for it.” or “I did / tried my best.”

In terms of rejection strategies, NES and NTS tend to differ significantly as it is obvious from the percentages. While NES preferred scaling down strategy more (5.6 %), NTS did not prefer this strategy as much (1.4 %). Similarly, they differed in the preferences for expressing disagreement strategy as NTS used this strategy fairly more than NES (cf. NTS= 4.4 % > NES= 1.4%)

Elaboration was, on the other hand, a strategy preferred frequently by NES, but they tended to make their elaborations on the complimented object more through neutral comments compared to NTS. In using this strategy NES preferred to elaborate on the object of compliment by giving details about the background of it such as by neutrally describing where/when they bought the object or the cause of the performance such as “dancing” or “aerobics classes.”

Table 2. Common Strategy Combinations used by the NTS and NES

Macro Combination Category	NTS N= 26	NES N=21			
Micro Combinations					
	n	%	n	%	
Accept + Accept	Thanking + Returning	32	42.6	16	16.6
	Thanking + Bald Acceptance	21	28	33	34.3
	Thanking + Expressing Gladness	7	9.3	14	14.5
Accept + Deflect	Thanking + Neutral Elaboration	15	20	33	34.3

The CRs of the NTS and NES displayed similarities and differences in the combination of strategies as well. NES used more combinations (n=96) than the NTS (n=75). Table 2 shows the common strategy combinations employed by NTS and NES. The findings indicated that when both groups combined the

strategies, they mostly employed the thanking strategy. The groups also reflected a similar pattern in combining the strategies, acceptance + acceptance being the most prevalent one, followed by the acceptance + deflecting and acceptance + rejection strategies. In the NTS group the most commonly employed combinations were thanking + returning (42.6%), thanking + bald acceptance (28 %) and thanking + neutral elaboration (20 %). In the NES group thanking + neutral elaboration (34.3) was used fairly more than NTS. Likewise, thanking + bald acceptance had the same percentage in this group (34.3%) followed by thanking + returning (16.6 %).

The findings about the CR strategies of the Turkish EFL learners showed that both the pre-intermediate and advanced learners used all the macro and micro strategies defined in the study like NTS and NES, but the total number of strategies used by the advanced students (n=303) was remarkably more than the pre-intermediate (n=267). Table 3 shows the frequencies of the macro and micro strategies of all the participant groups with their relevant percentages.

Table 3. Macro and Micro CR Strategies used by the participant groups

Macro strategy Category		NTS n= 26		NES n= 21		Tur.EFL Learners n = 25	
Micro strategies		N	%	N	%	N	%
ACCEPTANCE	Thanking	144	42.6	156	46.1	166	47.1
	Returning	25	7.3	17	5	24	6.8
	Bald Acceptance	55	16.2	62	18.3	38	10.7
	Agreement	20	5.9	6	1.7	18	5.1
	Praise Upgrade	21	5.7	4	1	8	2.2
	Expressing Gladness	15	4.4	26	7.6	17	4.8
Acceptance Str. Total		280	82	271	79.7	271	77.2
REJECTION	Scaling Down	5	1.4	19	5.6	6	1.7
	Expressing Disagreement	15	4.4	5	1.4	16	4.5
	Rejection Str. Total	20	5.8	24	7.00	22	6.2
DEFLECTING	Neutral Elaboration	4	1.1	16	4.7	3	0.8
	Questioning	26	7.6	15	4.4	29	8.2
	Shifting Credit	10	2.9	12	3.5	9	2.5
Deflecting Str. Total		40	11.6	43	12.6	41	11.5

According to the findings, the order of preference for the macro strategies of the Turkish EFL learner's (NNES) group was found to be the same as that of NTS and NES, acceptance being the first (77.20%) followed by deflecting (11.5 %) and rejection (6.2 %), which can be taken as a sign of positive transfer in the order of preference for macro strategies.

The order of preference for the micro-strategies by NNES, on the other hand, was the same as the order preferred by NTS, being thanking the first (47.1%), followed by bald acceptance (10.7 %) and questioning (8.2 %). As the percentage of questioning was also fairly high for the NES, this similarity in all groups may also be regarded as an evidence for positive transfer in the governing choices of microstrategies.

Also, as illustrated in Table 3, in almost all the sub-strategy categories, except agreement, scaling down and questioning, the percentages display slight differences, which signals a trend of positive transfer by the Turkish EFL users in the use of a great majority of micro strategies. Agreement strategy, however, implies a notable difference. Herein, the learners' percentages appear to be much higher than the L1 percentage (cf. NNES = 5.1 % > NSE = 1.7 %), but slightly less than L2 percentage (5.9%). This can be interpreted as a form of negative transfer in the use of returning strategies. Also, the inclination for overusing a pragmatic feature governed by L1 norms is a remarkable interlanguage-specific feature of the understudied groups.

Still, in some microstrategies where the NTS and the NES displayed some marked differences such as praise upgrade, the learner group approached the NES group in terms of target-like use of praise-upgrade.

The data about the combination strategies of the EFL learners reflected results similar to the above with the order of preference for macro strategy combinations being the same as NES' and NTS' (Accept + Accept > Accept + Deflect > Accept + Reject) as shown in Table 4. Thanking was again the most frequent strategy used in combinations and it was combined mostly with returning as is the case in the NTS group, though it was not observed so frequently by NES (16.6 %) implying interference effects in the formation of strategies. Also, the learners were found to have overused thanking + returning fairly more like NTS, which is a characteristic peculiar to the interlanguage being observed. Another characteristic is that NNES preferred making elaboration in the form of bald acceptance and neutral elaboration extensively, thus they seemed to show a tendency to give explanatory statements like NTS and NES despite the low frequency.

Table 4. Common strategy combinations of the participant groups

Main strategy Category		NTS N= 26		NES N=21		NNES N = 25	
Strategy Combinations							
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Accept + Accept	Thanking + Returning	32	42.6	16	16.6	47	40.8
	Thanking + Bald Acceptance	21	28	33	34.3	24	20.8
	Thanking + Expressing Gladness	7	9.3	14	14.5	15	13
Accept + Deflect	Thanking + Neutral Elaboration	15	20	33	34.3	29	25.2

As for pragmatic appropriacy, the most salient effects of L1 tended to cluster around the expressions of gladness. Some sample L1-like expressions were "I became happy", "I am happy that you like/d it", "I am happy to you like it" and "Your thought makes me happy". Also, in return expressions especially the EFL students overused "You are very polite", an expression not encountered in the L2 baseline data. Finally, in few return cases the effects of formulaic L1 expressions were observed (e.g. "I hope the better one will be yours", "May a better watch will be yours"; "I wish you will become successful as well").

Conclusion

The overall results indicated that there are both indications of positive and negative transfer in the English CRs of the Turkish EFL learners. The positive transfer effects were seen in (1) the preference for acceptance and deflecting strategies more than rejection strategies, (2) the frequency of use in most micro

strategies except for elaboration, (3) the comprehensive use of thanking and returning, and the (4) common strategy combinations governed by accepting strategies, thanking in particular. On the other hand, the negative transfer effect was specifically seen in the employment of the returning strategy, characterized with overuse and the literal transfer of L1-like expressions. These results are in line with the findings of İstifçi (1998) in terms of the EFL learners' preference for accepting, deflecting and returning strategies and those of Falasi (2007) with regard to the extensive use of returns accompanied with literal translations in responding to compliments. However in our case the translations were relatively few. Also, this study differs from İstifçi's in the way that all groups used rejecting at a low level and tended to avoid compliments more with deflecting.

Accordingly, since acceptance and deflecting are the two commonly-preferred categories in all groups, it can be deduced that the EFL learners tended to accept and/or deflect the compliments rather than reject them as an outcome of the similarities between the analyzed norms of NTS and NES. In accepting the compliments, however, they tended to show high concern over the complimenter. This can be explained on the basis of the assertion of Lorenzo-Dus (2001) who alleged that Brown and Lewinson's (1987) politeness model may account for the reasons why some CR strategies are more preferable than others in some cultures. As Zeyrek (2001) states the core cultural values of Turkish culture center on "relatedness". In such a culture, the positive face needs of the interlocutors, i.e. 'the desires to be admired by the others' (Brown and Lewinson, 1987) are prioritized. In line with this predisposition, the Turkish EFL learners have been more sensitive about the positive face needs of the complimenters. However, they can still be argued to approach pragmatic appropriacy as their returning preferences do not heavily deviate from the native norms.

As a result, the present study has shown that the CR strategy use in the interlanguage system of Turkish EFL learners reflect many aspects of positive transfer as well as violations of the L2 pragmatic norms in the use of return strategy and expressions of gladness. It has also highlighted the fact that interlanguage is a system of its own with its peculiar characteristics. However, these are not generalizable results since this study had to be conducted with a limited number of participants. Further research involving more participants is necessary to show whether the findings of the study reflect a common trend among EFL Turkish learners in CR strategy use.

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