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Pragmatic Competence of Complimenting Among Female Omani EFL College Students: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract

The importance of pragmatic competence in language teaching and learning has been highlighted in many studies; however, scarcity of such studies in the Omani context can be easily identified. The study investigates how female Omani higher education students express compliments in English and whether these are pragmatically, linguistically and communicatively appropriate. The research data were collected from 51 female college students through a response-based questionnaire containing 18 social scenarios to test their responses on the linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness of compliments. Native speaker's ratings on these revealed that 61.02% of students' responses were linguistically deficient and 23.96% pragmatically incompetent. It was found that many students used linguistic and pragmatic considerations of complimenting from their mother tongue while communicating in English which resulted in infelicitous or defective performance of the speech act under examination. This entails an urgent need to integrate pragmatic and cultural knowledge into EFL skills courses in Oman, especially those that focus on speaking, in order to raise students' awareness of what is considered appropriate and acceptable in English and avoid serious cross-cultural errors in inter-language communication.

Keywords: compliments, speech acts, female EFL students, linguistic accuracy, pragmatic competence.

الكفاءة البراجماتية لأسلوب المجاملات الخطابية لدى طالبات الكليات العمانية المتخصصات في اللغة الإنجليزية: دراسة لغوية اجتماعية

رحمة المحروقية، وخالصة الأغبرية، وفيجاي سينغ ثاكور

المخلص

تطُرقت عدة دراسات لموضوع أهمية الكفاءة البراجماتية في تدريس اللغات واكتسابها، غير أن الموضوع لم يحظى بالاهتمام المطلوب في السياق العماني. وتهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقصي التعابير اللغوية المتعلقة بالمجاملات والمستخدم من قبل الطالبات الإناث المقييدات في مؤسسات التعليم العالي، وتحليلها لمعرفة مدى صحتها من النواحي البراجماتية واللغوية ونجاحها في خلق تواصل خطابي ناجح. وقد تم جمع بيانات الدراسة باستخدام استبانة تحوي ١٨ سيناريو اجتماعي، تم توزيعها على ٥١ طالبة جامعية للحصول على ردودهن حول هذه السيناريوهات، وتهدف الدراسة لقياس مدى صحة التعبيرات المستخدمة لغويا ومناسبتها من الناحية البراجماتية. وقد أظهرت نتائج تقييمات متحدثون باللغة الإنجليزية على ردود الطالبات أن ٦١,٠٢٪ من الردود غير صحيحة من الناحية اللغوية، و ٢٣,٩٦٪ منها غير موفقة من الناحية البراجماتية، كما توصلت الدراسة إلى أن عددا لا يستهان به من الطالبات يستخدمن أثناء التخاطب باللغة الإنجليزية نفس الردود المتاحة في اللغة الأم في المجاملات مما يتسبب في أخطاء غير مقبولة في المجاملات، وهذه الملاحظة تستدعي بالضرورة حاجة ملحة لتضمين مقررات تتعلق بالمعارف الحضارية والبراجماتية في تدريس مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية في سلطنة عمان، وخاصة المهارات المرتبطة بمهارة التحدث من أجل زيادة وعي الطلبة حول ما يمكن اعتباره صحيحا وملائما في اللغة الإنجليزية وبهدف تجنب الوقوع في الأخطاء المتعلقة باختلاف الثقافات في التخاطب بين اللغات المختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المجاملات، الأعمال الخطابية، طالبات يدرسن في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية، الدقة اللغوية، الكفاءة البراجماتية.

Introduction

Communication models proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Purpura (2004) consider pragmatic proficiency as an important aspect of language ability. Pragmatic competence is often absent or missing from the EFL programs of Oman's colleges and universities that use English as a medium of instruction in their majors. Incidentally, these institutions teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and courses in Academic English (AE), but most of these are devoid of an emphasis on effective communication and pragmatic competence. Thus, while language is a prime focus, the teaching programs fall short of equipping students with either linguistic or communicative competence (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a) due to a lack of focus on the pragmatic knowledge that determines what is appropriate or not in the target language. Hence, it is important to investigate the challenges students face within the broad area of pragmatics. Pinpointing these challenges will help materials writers and EFL teachers to decide what to focus on and how to go about it. This study is rooted in a premise that pragmatic competence is more important than linguistic competence in social communicative contexts.

Compliments in the Literature

Compliments have been researched by such scholars as Holmes (1986, 1988), Manes (1983), Wolfson (1981, 1983), Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Herbert (1990, 1991). Holmes has investigated gender and status differences and the influence of such factors in compliments as age, topic and function. Her work also includes systematic categorization of responses to compliments. Although Holmes illustrates her findings statistically, the studies by Manes and Wolfson have been simply descriptive and ethnographic.

Functions of Compliments

Holmes (1986) sees a compliment 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" (p. 485). Sometimes, a compliment could be directed to a third party, which may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee, who is not the speaker or the hearer. An example would be a mother being complimented on the behavior of her child as in "What a polite child she has!"

Compliments can be seen as a social lubricant, aimed at establishing solidarity. Holmes (1986) mentions that compliments are positively affective speech acts that facilitate solidarity. Brown and Levinson (1987) agree that compliments may function as positive politeness strategies. However, that is not true of all compliments as some may be perceived as face-threatening (Yu, 2005).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a compliment may be used to reduce the harshness of a criticism in order to avoid any hostility or violent reaction on the part of the hearer. Sometimes compliments are used to introduce a request sought by the complimenter. Brown and Levinson note that people in general prefer polite strategies (such as the use of compliments).

Compliments can also serve as an oblique directive to someone other than the immediately complimented. Wolfson (1984; cited in Holmes, 2013) mentions that a teacher may compliment a child's behavior as an indirect way of getting another child to imitate it. For example: Teacher (T): Look at Johnny; he is sitting up straight in his chair. As a result, other students (not doing this) now sit up straight.

Responding to Compliments

Recently, researchers have become interested in studying responses to compliments because there are preconceived notions about patterns of response in different cultures. While Japanese responses to compliments are often thought of as constituting denial, American responses are thought of as containing an acceptance, marked with a "thank you".

Cognitive Consistency or Balance Theory (Heider, 1958) seeks to account for people's responses to compliments, which supposes that people are likely to accept what is consistent with their evaluation

of themselves. Put differently, if compliments fit our self-evaluation, we tend to accept them; but if contrary to our self-evaluations, then they are somehow refuted. In fact, compliments that run counter to our perception of reality might be regarded as insulting. This echoes with Lakoff's (2010, p. 207) remark that we alter reality by our utterances and it makes little sense to see language, or linguistics as autonomous.

Leech (1983) proposes two different maxims that, in the opinions of some researchers, could govern the act of responding to compliments: the agreement maxim, which aims at establishing or maintaining solidarity, and the modesty maxim, which discourages people from showing self-praise. Pomerantz's (1978) analysis of compliment responses has found that compliments represent the recipients' resolution to conflicting conversational constraints.

Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) present an elaborate way of categorizing compliment responses. Comparing Arabic (Syrian) and American responses, they recursively analyzed data from their interviews and categorized responses as: acceptance, mitigation and rejection. Fifty percent of American responses were labelled as acceptance, 45% as mitigation, and 3% as rejection. In contrast, the figures for Syrian responses were 67% acceptance, 33% mitigation and 0% rejection. Thus, acceptance and mitigation are the strategies mostly employed by both Americans and Syrians. Both use similar response types such as agreeing utterances, compliment returns, and deflecting or qualifying comments. Holmes (2013) found that, in her New Zealand data, acceptance of compliment was the most used response. The next most used response was deflection of the compliment's credit.

Compliments among EFL Learners

The above discussions illustrate how the use of speech acts depends on the culture which is influenced by societies' beliefs, values, traditions and norms. If EFL learners are unfamiliar with Anglophone culture, then they may be unable to communicate well in English with native speakers or even with speakers of English from other cultures. Hence, it is vital to familiarize them with the socio-cultural aspects

of the foreign language to raise their pragmatic competence, which cannot be acquired simply through learning grammatical rules. According to Tubtintong (1993), what tertiary EFL students need are courses that promote participation, encourage active use of language, and empower them with confidence and a feel for the communicative value of English.

Canagarajah (2006) also cautions against the practice of overly focusing on grammatical rules or abstract features at the expense of proficiency in pragmatics, which requires teaching what to say, how to say it, to whom to say it and when to say it. Pragmatics pays attention to the appropriateness and acceptability of a particular utterance in a given context. Hence, researchers like Widdowson (1978) stress on the importance of teaching both the linguistic code (vocabulary, syntax and morphology) and the pragmatic rules (rules of use) simultaneously.

Recent research conducted by Yu (2005), and Huth (2006) show that foreign language students compliment and respond to compliments in ways different from those used by native speakers. Studying the difference in compliment responses between Thai non-native speakers of English and American native speakers of English, Cedar (2006) found significant differences. While Americans preferred to accept compliments, Thai speakers avoided them and used fixed expressions in response.

Methodology

The researchers constructed 18 social scenarios that involve the act of complimenting to investigate how 51 female Omani college students respond to situations that demand complimenting and whether their compliments are grammatically accurate and pragmatically appropriate. The research design for this study is developed in a qualitative framework based on participants' individual responses for analysis and interpretations. The choice of research framework is strongly motivated by Bleich's (cited in Cooper, 1985, p. 261) view that more is known about participant's responses from small numbers of detailed reactions than from large numbers of one-word judgments as in the case of multiple-choice scales used in quantitative analysis. Therefore, the

data strands presented and analyzed in this study should be, to use Willett's (1995, p. 480) view, considered as 'illustrative stretches' of discourse the participants produced in their responses to the social scenarios used in this study.

Sampling

From the total sample of the study ($n=51$), the majority of the female participants ($n = 37$) study at Sultan Qaboos University, and others come from different higher educational institutions in Oman. In selecting the participants for this study, care has been taken to choose female undergraduate students from different majors with, broadly speaking, more or less similar learning and proficiency background so that more valid responses could be elicited, analyzed and interpreted in terms of their psychometric properties, i.e., mental abilities and processes. Fourteen of these students major in English Education, 21 are Arts students majoring in English literature and translation, and the rest are from Agriculture and Marine Sciences, General Sciences, Commerce, and Political Science. Forty-two participants are in their third year or beyond, while three are first-year students. Six students did not mention their year of study. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit the students from Sultan Qaboos University to form a small subgroup of the sample population. As this sampling technique works like chain referral and brings in motivated participants, the authors asked the initially identified and selected participants for assistance to help identify other students with similar trait(s) and enthusiasm of interest in the present study. And this is how we got some participants from other institutions also and our sampling chain, instead of becoming linear snowball sampling, turned out to be an exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. To put another way, a friend of one friend encouraged her friend(s) to participate in the study. All the participants were made aware that since

their participation was voluntary, they had the right to choose or not to choose to continue in the study. However, no student from the group expressed her inability to participate in the study.

Instrumentation and Procedure

The English-language questionnaire contained 18 social scenarios reflecting situations where female students had to make compliments to males and females of higher, equal or lower status. The participants were given the questionnaire and were asked to write their responses in English. They were given as much time as needed to respond to the scenarios within the classroom time allocated for the activity. The questionnaires were then collected and results tabulated.

After tabulating 51 responses to each scenario, the researchers asked a native English speaker to evaluate all students' responses on the basis of linguistic accuracy (whether the students' responses were grammatically accurate) and pragmatic appropriateness (whether the responses would actually be used by native English speakers in such situations or not). The evaluator placed a check mark for correct accuracy and appropriateness and a cross mark for incorrect accuracy and appropriateness beside the provided response cells.

In terms of accuracy (grammatical accuracy, accuracy of word choice, general correctness of the phrase or construction, accuracy of mechanics, such as spelling), the researchers then identified the types of errors made. They also analyzed the pragmatically inappropriate responses and determined if they were mere translations from the native language of these students. The researchers assumed there would be a negative transfer from Arabic into English since each language issues compliments differently. Moreover, the fact that the students were not taught explicitly how native speakers compliment increased the likelihood of making mistakes.

Discussion of Results

Table 1: Native Speaker's ratings on linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness of student responses in 18 social complimenting scenarios (n=51)

Scenarios	Linguistic Accuracy				Pragmatic Appropriateness			
	No. of In-accurate responses	% age	No. of Accurate responses	% age	No. of Inappropriate responses	% age	No. of Appropriate responses	% age
Scenario 1	41	80.39%	10	19.60%	7	13.72%	44	86.27%
Scenario 2	39	76.47%	12	23.52%	26	50.98%	25	49.01%
Scenario 3	30	58.82%	21	41.17%	0	0%	51	100%
Scenario 4	22	43.13%	29	56.86%	9	17.64%	42	82.35%
Scenario 5	36	70.58%	15	29.41%	1	1.96%	50	98.03%
Scenario 6	33	64.70%	18	35.29%	1	1.96%	50	98.03%
Scenario 7	47	92.15%	4	7.84%	9	17.64%	42	82.35%
Scenario 8	37	72.54%	14	27.45%	23	45.09%	28	54.90%
Scenario 9	34	66.66%	17	33.33%	3	5.88%	48	94.11%
Scenario 10	24	47.05%	27	52.94%	7	13.72%	44	86.27%
Scenario 11	40	78.43%	11	21.56%	49	96.07%	2	3.92%
Scenario 12	23	45.09%	28	54.90%	31	60.78%	20	39.21%
Scenario 13	23	45.09%	28	54.90%	7	13.72%	44	86.27%
Scenario 14	33	64.70%	18	35.29%	8	15.68%	43	84.31%
Scenario 15	29	56.86%	22	43.13%	17	33.33%	34	66.66%
Scenario 16	17	33.33%	34	66.66%	10	19.60%	41	80.39%
Scenario 17	25	49.01%	26	50.98%	9	17.64%	42	82.35%
Scenario 18	27	52.94%	24	47.05%	3	5.88%	48	94.11%
Total/Mean	560	61.02%	358	38.99%	220	23.96%	698	76.03%

As the cumulative result of the data above suggests, 560 out of 918 responses of 51 participants, i.e. 61.02% were linguistically inaccurate while 220 out of 918 responses, i.e. 23.96% were pragmatically inappropriate. Broadly speaking, the findings suggest that the female Omani college students have more problems in terms of grammatical correctness and accuracy, i.e. almost 2.5 times more, than pragmatic appropriateness. However, in terms of tolerance towards errors, pragmatic errors tend to be more serious in social interactions than language errors.

Linguistic Accuracy as rated by the Native Speaker

In terms of accuracy, the average number of grammatically-correct responses in each of the 18 scenarios was 19.88 (38.99%). Responses rated as grammatically accurate by the native speaker are listed preceded by the relevant scenario and followed by our analysis and discussion on each response.

Scenario #1: Your female professor has invited you to have lunch at her house with her family. She serves lunch for everybody present. You want to compliment her on the food, so you say:

Accurate responses include you are really an excellent cook⁽¹⁾, you are creative, very delicious food, thank you, and thanks for the lunch. This is the most delicious meal I have ever had.

Only 10 (19.60%) female students gave accurate responses to this scenario despite the fact that a basic response like thank you would have been predominately expected to surface. Such a response is learned at an early stage and, thus, assumed to surface error-free. On the other hand, we listed 41 (80.39%) inaccurate responses including:

Inaccurate responses include Oooh, what a delicious food!!, you are a good cooks, and it has a nice taste, the food is so much delicious and tasty, and this lunch is so delicious that is the best food I have tast, can I take some food to my mother to test it, I have never been eaten lunch like this and your food taste delicious, where do you buy it?, you are a good teacher and a chief as well, it is very delisious, thank you for your geneoristy and it was so wonderful invention.

The mistakes made mostly relate to definite articles, a basic area of grammar assumed to have been already mastered by late learners of English like those participating in the study. We also found problems with intensifiers like so, very, so much, and a lot (frequently written as a single word). Mistakes in tenses, verb forms and choice of verbs were atrociously common. The respondents make simple spelling mistakes, omitting the final e in taste, mixing taste for test and supplying flawed words like 'delisious' and 'invention' for delicious and invitation.

Other responses that confirm to our findings in relation to inaccuracy are elaborated for scenario# 6 and #7

Scenario #6: You see a female classmate carrying a new handbag, and you want to compliment her on it, so you say:

Scenario #7: You go to a shopping mall and you see your friend there trying on a pair of shoes, and you want to compliment him on his/ her choice, so you say:

Inaccurate responses comprise it is amazing, beauty and magic, you have to use it very carefully and locked it always, you have a powerful choice, dear, I recommend you to pay this shoes, and you successful in choosing this shoes, it's colore very attractive.

The mistakes here range from poor grammar to wrong lexical choice. The researchers record mistakes related to parallel construction, wrong word choices,

prepositions, countable vs. uncountable and word order. The problem gets more serious when knowing that these have explicitly been taught about these grammar points in their language courses. The rules of parallelism are stressed in the curriculum and taught both in grammar and writing courses.

Pragmatic Appropriateness: Native Speaker's Ratings

The native speaker of English was also asked to rate the female students' responses in terms of appropriateness. Below, we list each scenario with detailed discussion about the appropriateness and inappropriateness of responses given.

Scenario #1: Your female professor has invited you to have lunch at her house with her family. She serves lunch for everybody present. You want to compliment her on the food, so you say:

Pragmatically inappropriate responses to this particular scenario include I feel jealous from your family because they eat from that delicious food, your cook is very delicious. So, I will always eat from your hands, How did you cook it? Can I take some food to my mother to test (taste) it? Doing careful analysis of these responses, the researchers observe that they represent negative transfer from Arabic. Although the responses were written in English, the students were most probably thinking in Arabic. Below, we show how these responses relate to Arabic compliment by stating the response, followed by the translation and our commentary on it.

- Your cook(ing) is very delicious, So, I will always eat from your hands.
- Tabxak laDiD waayid w daayman bakul min iydeenak

The respondent here did not know that "cook" corresponds to "chef". She intended to say "your cooking". This response is a perfectly natural way of complimenting delicious food in Omani culture. On many occasions, Omanis compliment offered tasty meals by saying "I will always eat from your hands". However, this response is totally inappropriate in the Western English-speaking cultures.

- I feel jealous from your family because they eat from that delicious food.
- AybaT ?aailatak li?nhum yuklu ?akil laDiD

In the Arabic culture, this response gives credit to the chef who cooked delicious food. Therefore, it sounds perfectly natural to be heard as a form of

complimenting in Oman. However, the word “jealous” used by the respondent carries negative, even harsh, feelings towards the host/ hostess who took pain cooking for the guests.

We were also baffled at the response can I take some food to my mother to test (taste) it? which Omanis would normally never say when offered food by someone who is higher in status and with whom one has a formal relationship (a professor in this case). Omanis are polite and thus it is unlikely that they would ask their host to give them some of the food to take home with them.

Scenario # 2: Your male professor has invited you to have dinner at his house with his family. When you arrive, you notice a painting on the wall and you want to compliment your professor on it, so you say:

For this scenario, 26 (50.98%) replies were rated inappropriate. Responses like nice picture, it make the house smug, nice painting in the right place for the right person who deserves it, and where is it from? do not reflect transfer from Arabic but reveal a lack of sensitivity to what is appropriate in the Western English-speaking cultures. Students uttered rather blunt questions about where the professor got the picture from and made wrong assumptions that he himself painted it, which could embarrass the professor, who might not be gifted for art or painting at all, and thus hinder smooth communication with him.

Scenario #3: Your male classmate has just finished giving a presentation in one of the classes you are taking. You want to compliment him on his presentation, so you say:

Since students do presentations on a regular basis, this scenario received a very high number of pragmatically appropriate responses. Students felt comfortable complimenting a male classmate who had just given a good presentation. However, one student wrote: “I will not compliment him because I am a female; a male should compliment him because there are boundaries between men and women who are not relatives in our society.” Since women in Oman have little contact with strangers of the opposite gender, this student felt it was culturally inappropriate to compliment a male on a good presentation he made.

Scenario #4: You see a male classmate wearing a new turban, and you want to compliment him on it, so you say:

Scenario #5: You see a female classmate wearing a new abaya, and you want to compliment her on the design of its embroidery, so you say:

Scenario#4 and #5 are intriguing since they uncover gender-specific responses. In Scenario# 4, respondents had to compliment a male wearing a new turban, while in Scenario# 5 they were asked to compliment a female on her new abaya (black cloak worn by women when going out). Nine students refused to compliment the male on his turban, pointing out that it is culturally unacceptable to do so. They wrote, I would not say anything. Maybe because it sounds weird or unacceptable. I do not think I will compliment him, I won't say this for a male classmate in reality. Maybe I will say it to my brother or else nothing at all. These responses reveal a social distance between the genders and the need for minimal interaction. One respondent stated plainly that this social distance between the genders which forbids complimenting is unfair. She wrote, to tell the truth, I sometimes have to say but of course not in this world nor in this circumstance. She confessed her desire to compliment males at times but thought the society would treat her openness harshly.

Other responses recorded for scenario#4 include it's beautiful and fits your face, it looks suitable for your face, your turban is suitable for your body, and this new turban makes your face brighter. These responses may sound acceptable for an Omani speaker, except for the response suggesting that the turban suits the body. However, they reveal negative transfer from the Arabic culture and sheer lack of sensitivity towards the English culture.

Responses to scenario#5 were all rated as pragmatically appropriate. They include your taste is great, nice abaya, very soft and beautiful design, wow perfect design and what an elegant abaya. It looks nice on you. However, two responses did not sound appropriate to the researchers. One was Oh, nice abaya, I think it is for Eid (a special Muslim festivity). If you change another color it will be better. The bold-print sentence is not a true compliment since the complimenter feels there was a problem with the color. The second response was I will not complement it because I do not like these kinds of abayas. Women in my society do not wear this kind of abaya. This response revealed jealousy on the part of the responder who either felt women were not entitled to this kind of fancy abaya or was too religious to accept the idea of attracting males' attention with a particular dress design.

Scenario #6: You see a female classmate carrying a new handbag, and you want to compliment her on it, so you say:

The responses to scenario# 6 were also rated appropriate except for ha ha ha, what is this funny handbag!! I mean, it is so nice with its colorful designs. This expresses two contradictory feelings towards the handbag– sarcasm and a compliment. Another response that was rated appropriate by the native speaker but which felt awkward to the researchers was Do you feel it's comfortable at SQU because we always looking for something practical. The participant conveyed the idea that the handbag looked neither comfortable nor practical.

Scenario #7: You go to a shopping mall and you see your friend there trying on a pair of shoes, and you want to compliment him on his/ her choice, so you say:

There were nine pragmatically inappropriate responses. Close examination at them reveals how potentially annoying they could be. For example, hey, are you going to buy me same as your shoes? Can I have them for me? and it looks really nice on you, just buy me like them show a total lack of communicational tact. Omanis are known to be polite; therefore, it was extremely unexpected of participants to order friends "just buy it" and "buy me these shoes" As per Omani culture, this is inappropriate and unacceptable. So, these responses are not mere translations from Arabic. In this scenario, we also found such irrelevant responses as I would tell the truth actually and Wow, it's an interesting shoe, and it's make famous. To a native English speaker, there would be no obvious link between buying a new pair of shoes and consequently becoming famous.

Scenario #8: You notice that your boss has come to work in a new car, and you want to compliment him on it, so you say:

This scenario requires paying attention to the types of compliments one may give to a person higher in status than herself (a boss in this case). However, we identified responses characterized as negative transfer from Arabic like God gives you the goodness of it and prevents you of its hard, translated from the Arabic prayer "Allāh ya?Teek xerha wykuf ?anak sharha" (May you drive it safely and may you be protected against car accidents). We also observe totally inappropriate responses such as Would you mind racing me after work hours. I brought my brother's SS sport car for this week, actually it fits you, and I think you are the best boos (boss) who has the best test (taste) in cars. Such responses may certainly hinder communication and serve as threats not compliments.

Upon analysis of these utterances, we also noticed that respondents overlooked the fact that the compliment was directly made to a boss, a person of high rank than the complimenter. For instance, respondents wrote This is my favorite cars and I hope you enjoy driving it, a response that could only be made to a close friend. We found one culturally-linked response in Your car is useful in raining weather because it is big and it can cross wadies (wadis = flash floods).This reveals Omanis' general fear of rain and their preference for big cars which they assume will cross a flash flood without being carried away by it. Some responses like Wow you are sooecial (social?) with your things. Everyone will be gelous (jealous) of you are not clear and the intended message seems to be blocked due to lack of language competence.

Scenario #9: You are supervising your younger sister while she is doing her homework. You notice that she is able to solve her math problem on her own, and you want to compliment her, so you say:

Two pragmatically inappropriate responses were How great you are that is because you are my sister and, you are clever and you can do what children of your age can not do. In the first response, the speaker is so proud of himself that he decided to compliment himself instead, which is considered uncommon and inappropriate.

Scenario #10: You are the boss in a certain firm. A task needs to be done urgently and accurately. You assign it to an employee, who does what is required without any mistakes, and you want to compliment him/her, so you say:

The majority of respondents here gave the employee who completed a task for his boss swiftly more credit than native speakers would think appropriate. To illustrate, responses like I will give you promotion for your great job, I think I should pay for your effort and I should give you some extra money with your salary sound perfectly natural in Oman given the cultural assumption that whoever works hard deserves a bonus or gratuity. However, all were rated inappropriate.

A response found to be surprising by the native speaker was accurately done and to the point, I shall resign. In Oman, it could be said jokingly xlaaS ana bastaqeel (I will resign) because I have found a perfect substitute. But this is a response that can be vague and irrelevant to a non-Omani, who is unfamiliar with Omani youth talk and expressions.

Equally exaggerated responses were also given to Scenario# 14: Your boss happens to help out as the

football coach at your brother's school. There is a match between your brother's school and another one. Your brother's school team wins. You want to compliment the boss on his coaching skills, so you say: The coach who made his team a winner received responses like You are a clever coach you should be the coach of our national team and this achievement because of your great abilities in leading. These are extraordinary responses, and might be considered embarrassing.

Scenario #11: You notice that one of your new female acquaintances has unusually colored eyes, and you want to compliment her on this, so you say:

Scenario #12: You notice that one of your new male acquaintances has unusually colored eyes, and you want to compliment him on this, so you say:

Scenario#11 and #12 received the most drastically inappropriate responses. 49 (96.07%) and 31 (60.78%) respondents respectively gave wrong responses, like Oh nice colored eye! You look handsome with it, who did you inherit it from? and Those are natural or contact lenses. These did not constitute compliments and could put the person with nice eyes in a predicament. Similar responses were also given to the female acquaintance with nice eyes in scenario#11. Far-fetched responses included You got beautiful eyes, give them to me and I will (give) you mine... haha just kidding!, and God if I could borrow your eyes for one day only! These are certainly not mere translations from Arabic, but represent a lack of understanding of the social act of complimenting. On the other hand, many respondents refused to compliment males on their unusually nice eyes as they deemed it inappropriate because, as mentioned above, of gender segregation.

Scenario #13: You meet your professor in a city park. You want to compliment him on the little son he has with him, so you say:

In scenario#13, seven (13.72%) responses out of 51 were rated as inappropriate. These include your son is more beautiful than you, I hope your son become a copy of your personality and smart as you, Kite boy (cute boy), you are lucky to have like him and your son is quit (quiet) and does not do any noise. We observe there was total ignorance on the part of the complimenter when she was complimenting a professor's son.

Scenario #15: You notice that your female co-worker is wearing a new ring, and you want to compliment her on it, so you say:

Scenario #16: You notice that your male co-worker is wearing a new ring, and you want to compliment him on it, so you say:

These are also gender-specific as they seek compliments from the opposite sex. The female receiving the compliments in scenario 15 and 16, with 17 (33.33%) and 10 (19.60%) wrong replies, got some very funny ones, like Wow, where did you get that? I want one just like that, nice look(s) with shining ring, I would like you to buy me one if you don't mind, who presented to you?, and Your ring is very fashionable. It give you classy look. These responses are both inappropriate and funny. Slight negative transfer is apparent in some responses, as in Where did you buy it? However, it is natural to ask a friend where she bought her ring from as a means of compliment. In Scenario#16, the male with the ring received many more pragmatically inappropriate responses, like Your ring is beautiful and make your hand look nice!, Oh, I think all boys in our class will try to buy like your ring, I hope for you happy married, your ring is very nice, don't lose it and You look like a woman, it is shameless for you! These responses show insensitivity to the interlocutor and indeed represent a pragmatic failure.

Scenario #17: You notice that your male professor has a sense of humor, and you want to compliment him on this, so you say:

Scenario #18: You notice that your female professor has a sense of humor, and you want to compliment her on this, so you say:

Pragmatically inappropriate responses in scenario 17 with 9 (17.64%) and in 18 with 3 (5.88%) incompetent replies include Your blood heavy ('heavy' actually meaning 'light' here), When I am with you, I see the world more pretty and wonderful, It is suitable for you. Also, it is very fast, hahaha nice one, and I like the sense of humor you have. By the way, it suits you a lot. These responses are far too inappropriate to be used to address a professor. Some represent negative transfer from Arabic like damak xafeef (your blood is light) and zeen halak (good for you). The latter response stems from Omanis' belief that having a sense of humor is always good for health.

The numbers in the table are worrying both in terms of accuracy and appropriateness. The native speaker identified 560 grammatically inaccurate responses in the 18 scenarios, a considerable number of errors committed by students whose major is English or who study their courses in English as the medium of instruction. Though the numbers of inappropriate

responses are not as high as those infringing grammar and structure rules, they reveal insensitivity to language aspects of communication and show how pragmatically incompetent our students are. This is because pragmatics is not taught explicitly in our English curriculum, making students resort to mere translation and thus negative transfer from their native language, Arabic. Issues concerning level of formality, closeness to the interlocutor and social status were pretty much ignored in responses. The highest number of responses rated inappropriate by the native speaker related to those concerning the opposite gender, as surfaced in Scenario#11, #12, #15, #16, #17 and #18.

Conclusion

This study examined 918 compliment responses in 18 social scenarios of 51 female Omani EFL university students from the perspective of speech act pragmatics in terms of their linguistic accuracy and pragmatic felicity. The study reveals the extent to which pragmatically incompetent female Omani EFL learners are. Inappropriate compliments, i.e., 220 in number (23.96%) represent lack of awareness of the generally expected norms of complimenting by English speakers⁽²⁾. They also represent a considerable degree of pragmatic failure and a hindrance to effective inter-personal communication. Incidentally, pragmatic competence constitutes a crucial aspect of communicative proficiency as it determines the appropriateness of an utterance within a particular social context and with a specific interlocutor. For EFL learners, this is especially more so since it is not sufficient to be grammatically correct: they must be pragmatically competent too. Hence, increasing efforts are being made to devise language programs that holistically address the linguistic aspects and social functions of the target language. If insufficient teaching of pragmatics is offered, EFL learners will continue to resort to negative transfer of pragmatic knowledge from their mother tongue and thereby committing cross-cultural errors in communication. The point to be consistently reiterated in EFL instruction, therefore, is that pragmatic considerations of communication, for example politeness markers, as indicated by House and Kasper (1981) are an integral part of the foreign cultural system and should neither be used nor interpreted by reference to one's own native system. Thus, more effective teaching of cultural and pragmatic components of the target language

may minimize native culture interference and prevent impolite, ineffective, or inappropriate interpretation of utterances produced by native speakers.

Considering the importance of pragmatic competence in communication, this study suggests the following pedagogical directions and recommendations.

Implications, Recommendations and Direction for Future Research

The findings of this study imply direct pragmatic intervention in English language classrooms for pragmatically transparent L1 background (e.g., Omani EFL learners) which can enhance the understanding of the situations of cross-cultural asymmetry between Arabic pragmatics and English pragmatics. Another implication of this study is curriculum innovation. Pragmatic competence can benefit from explicit instruction; therefore, L2 curriculum should be enhanced, particularly with pragmatic input in the syllabus designing and material production. Also, the positive washback of these changes and interventions should also be linked with and extended to testing.

Intervention studies that investigate the effectiveness of these responses can be conducted to provide stronger empirical evidence as to whether a systematic training, to use L1 and Renandya's (2012, p. 100) view, focusing more on helping lower proficiency learners develop bottom-up understanding of the need for compliments and the determinations of their appropriate form might in fact facilitate the development of their communicative competence. Their awareness should be raised towards the fact that complimenting always enhances the positive face of the addressee and it should not be used indiscriminately; rather, it should be computed by giving consideration to the intimacy and power relations of the interlocutors and also the type of situation or event that occasioned it. As Lakoff (2010, p. 212) remarks, speech acts and their cultural felicity, raise the important question of who, how much, and in what way one divulges one's real self. These questions need to be the focus of training programs.

Furthermore, as compliments are theoretically rich as well as practically important, we would like to suggest further studies using some more scenarios of complimenting and also some comparative data-driven research on native speakers' and Omani university students' compliment behaviors. Further studies should include other instruments and male participants in the study to triangulate the results and produce

more findings to know if the participants' responses represent the same situations of cross-cultural errors and misunderstandings. Whereas this study was limited to only one speech act of complimenting, other studies may add to the picture of pragmatic competence of Omani learners by investigating other speech acts such as requests, complaints and apologies.

Limitations of the Study

In this final section, we would like to highlight the limitations of this study. Firstly, the scenarios given to the participants were open-ended; without choices. Multiple choices prove to be better in collecting data when participants' proficiency in the target language is weak⁽³⁾. To elicit better responses, further research should attempt to use choice responses to help participants make better judgments about their pragmatic awareness in complimenting. Secondly, appropriate responses proposed by the participants of the current study may be considered, to some extent, to reflect their personal beliefs and creativity in choosing a hyperbolic decorative language to serve as effective compliments to impress the addressees. Furthermore, the present study has explored the complimenting responses of female Omani students in 18 social scenarios in a qualitative framework. However, it has not involved other data collection instruments and also it has not examined male students' responses. Furthermore, it has focused only on one speech act, namely 'complimenting'.

- (1) The actual responses given by the participants are italicized throughout the discussion and results parts of the paper.
- (2) A reviewer rightly pointed out that norms may change in accordance with the variety of English under study (British, American, Australian, Indian, etc.). The authors would like to express agreement with the reviewer; however, they would like to express that they are not discussing accuracies in grammar and inappropriateness in pragmatics in light of dialectal variations. Rather, they have made their conclusions on the generally accepted communicative norms shared by English speakers regardless of the dialect they belong to.
- (3) A reviewer argues that this could serve as strength to qualitative research. We believe that this method provides abundant language variations and enormous data that may tap untapped areas in the sociolinguistic research. However, in the case of incompetent learners, it can amount to multiple interpretations.

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