HOW TO RESPOND TO A COMPLIMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC TRANSFER OF CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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LANLAN XIAO

DR. MEGUMI HAMADA

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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1. Introduction

The focus of early second language instruction has been on the accuracy of language use (Chang, 2009). It was not until the 1970s, when Hymes introduced the notion of communicative competence (1971) covering both the speaker's knowledge of linguistic rules and sociocultural rules of speaking. After that, the trends of second language teaching and learning began to shift from the focus of grammatical competence to communicative competence.

Communicative or pragmatic competence is the ability to use language forms in a wide range of environments, covering the relationships between the speakers and the social and cultural contexts of the situation (Gass & Selinker, 2001). To use language accurately, the mastery of grammatical, phonological and lexical systems is required. However, the accurate use of language forms does not guarantee the appropriateness of the language use (Gass & Selinker, 2001). That is, speakers who may be considered fluent in a second language may still be unable to produce socially and culturally appropriate language. Learners need to acquire competence as to when to speak, what to speak with whom, and in what manners, thus, pragmatic knowledge is required to use language appropriately.

The relationship between pragmatics and second language acquisition has given rise to a new field known as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which is considered one of the most important areas in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka,

1993). Kasper (1992:203) defined interlanguage pragmatics as "the branch of second language research which studies how non-native speakers…understand and carry out linguistic actions in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge". One of the general assumptions in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is that intercultural miscommunications often caused by learners' falling back on their L1 sociocultural norms and conventions in realizing speech acts in a target language (Thomas, 1983).

The intercultural miscommunications and pragmatic failure have received attention in interlanguage pragmatics studies. However, few data based studies have even focused on L1 negative pragmatic transfer of specific speech act, that of compliment responses. There has been little research obtaining a discussion of negative pragmatic transfer and the learners' proficiency levels. To bridge this gap, there is a necessity to conduct more in-depth studies examining the differences in the use of CRs strategies between native English speakers and Chinese ESL learners and analyzing the effects of proficiency levels on their L1 negative pragmatic transfer. It is expected that the finding obtained for the relationship between pragmatic transferability and L2 learners' proficiency levels will contribute to a better understanding of developmental aspects of L2 pragmatic competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on pragmatic transfer concerning with learners' proficiency levels

ILP studies have focused on examining what is negatively transferred from L1 to L2 contexts. Kasper (1992) has identified two types of negative transfer which may hinder the communication: pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. Negative pragmalinguistic transfer occurs when L2 learners assume the form-function mappings between the L1 and L2 are identical, which actually differ, and literally translate L1 routines to L2. Negative sociopragmatic transfer takes place when L2 learners perceive L2 pragmatic contexts in the same way as L1 pragmatic contexts, which in fact vary, and transfer their perceptions about how to perform in a given situation from L1 to L2 situation. In that sense, learner's lack of pragmatic knowledge and their heavy dependence on L1 sociolinguistic norms in realizing L2 speech acts can cause serious consequences. Thomas (1983) has pointed out that pragmatic failure is more serious than linguistic errors. While linguistic errors show that the speaker is less proficient in the language, pragmatic failure may result in the misjudgment of a person being rude, unfriendly or even dishonest.

Current studies of pragmatic transfer not only determine what is negatively transferred, but also examine the conditions under which negative pragmatic transfer takes place, i.e., the transferability constraints that have an effect on the promotion of pragmatic transfer (Franch, 1998). By examining L2 learners' production of requests, apologies, and refusals in accordance with the sociolinguistic norms of their native

language, Ellis (1994) identified several sociolinguistic factors that condition the occurrence of pragmatic transfer: linguistic proficiency, cultural information as well as length of stay in the L2 community.

The attention to the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and linguistic proficiency was marked by Bardovi-Harlig's (1998) study of ESL and EFL learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness, operationalized with learners' scores on an error recognition and severity rating task. She found that error recognition and ratings significantly dependent on proficiency levels. Compared to the low-proficiency ESL group, the high-proficiency ESL learners assessed pragmatic elements which were inappropriate as more serious. This study lends support to assume that second language learners demonstrating higher grammatical knowledge might have better understanding of L2 pragmatic conventions.

To date, a small number of studies have been conducted which principally investigated the correlation between pragmatic transfer and second language proficiency. However, their findings are controversial. As to linguistic proficiency, some researchers believe that only when learners have achieved a certain L2 level; they will be capable of transferring their native strategies into L2 linguistic forms. For example, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) examined whether or not the transfer of Japanese request strategies was influenced by proficiency level and the perceived degree of imposition involved in a request. They did find that the strategies *Would you please* and *Would you* were more

transferable by high level learners due to their conventionality in Japanese. It was also found that Japanese proficient learners had a higher degree of transferability in high imposition situations than low level learners. This implied that more proficient learners would have enough control over the L2 to express L1 native speakers' sentiments at the pragmatic level; thus, they would be more likely to transfer L1 sociocultural norms than less proficient learners. Their hypothesis obviously supported that low-proficiency learner are less likely to transfer L1 pragmatic knowledge, even when they may want to do so, due to their limited L2 proficiency.

However, some studies with contradicting results run counter to Takahashi and Beebe's claim, positing that low proficiency L2 learners are more likely to undertake negative pragmatic transfer, which is supported by further research. Robinson (1992) studied female Japanese ESL learners' rejections in English. She found that both intermediate and advanced learners identified the differences between American and Japanese cultures in terms of appropriate refusal behaviors. However, learners with higher language proficiency adopted more English refusal strategies whereas low-level learners failed to produce native-like refusals because they were more likely to be influenced by their L1 refusal behaviors.

Maeshiba et al. (1996) is the only study that directly addressed the issue of pragmatic transfer and proficiency. Their primary objective was to test Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) hypothesis that advanced learners were more likely to transfer complex pragmatic

strategies from their L1 due to a high degree of linguist proficiency. Maeshiba et al. examined the apology strategies used by Japanese learners of ESL at two proficiency levels, intermediate and advanced. Their main finding was that the lower proficiency learners were more likely to transfer their L1 apology strategies than the high-proficiency learners. Whereas there were only two contexts in which the advanced learners relied on L1 apology strategies, the intermediate learners transferred L1 strategies in six contexts. Their findings didn't support Takahashi and Beebe's hypothesis, but suggested a negative correlation between pragmatic transfer and proficiency.

Another attempt by Flor (2003), she investigated non-native speaker's production of advice acts from two different proficiency levels, determined by the educational setting they belong to. Results from her study showed effects of the proficiency level. University students, the higher level group, produced not only a greater amount of native-like appropriate advice acts, but also more modification devices than Secondary School students, the group belonging to the lower level.

Shardakova (2005) discussed American L2 learners' acquisition of pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge in its relation to both their advancement in linguistic proficiency and study abroad experience. It demonstrated that an increase both in linguistic proficiency and direct exposure to Russian culture enabled students to align their apologies more closely with native speakers. The group that most approximated the Russian norm was the group of learners with high linguistic proficiency and adequate

study abroad experience.

Taking consideration of previous findings, it is reasonable to assume that higher L2 linguistic proficiency allows second language learners to supply L2 linguistic equivalents to L2 pragmatic conventions. The less proficient learners don't have enough control over the L2 to produce target-like linguistic norms at the pragmatic level, thus, they are more likely to negatively transfer L1 sociocultural norms than more proficient learners.

2.2. Studies of pragmatic transfer on compliment response

In recent decades, the cross-cultural aspects of speech act behaviors have become one of the major foci in studies of language use. Holmes (1988:485) defined compliments 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". She also pointed out that even when a compliment appears to a third person, it may be indirectly complimenting the addressee. She provided this example:

R's old school friend is visiting and comments on one of the children's manners.

C(complimenter): What a polite child!

R(recipient): Thank you. We do our best.

Since the utterance indirectly attributes credit to the addressee for good manners, it can be interpreted as paying a compliment to the addressee (Holmes, 1988; p.485). The

speech act of compliment response is a conversational device used in interpersonal relationships in daily life. The use of a compliment response as a ritual expression may play an important role in maintaining the solidarity of interpersonal relationships and the harmony of social interaction. For example, Manes (1983) has maintained that offering and responding to a compliment in American English functions to both establish and reinforce solidity between speaker and listener. Wolfson (1983) has contended that by offering a compliment, the speaker expresses approval or admiration toward the listener; by accepting the compliment, solidarity between interlocutors thus emerges or is established.

A clash of responses to a compliment may occur if people do not know each other's cultural conventions, and conflicts of the speech act of compliment response may result in a misunderstanding of each other's socio-linguistic communications. For example, while "You look lovely today" may sound natural to an English-speaking woman, but it might make a Chinese woman uncomfortable and even resentful. There have been a few studies that have investigated the speech act of compliment response by socio-culturally diverse group of speakers. Pomerantz (1978) was the first researcher who discussed compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective. She claimed that in American English, two general speech behaviors conflict with each other when responding to a compliment. These conflicting behaviors are "agree with the speaker" and "avoid self-praise" (Pomerantz, 1978; p.81-82). Recipients of compliments use various solutions to

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solve this conflict, such as praise downgrade and return. Thus, although prescriptive norms of American speech behavior state that the appropriate response to a compliment is to say "Thank you", speakers will often downgrade the compliment or return it to the compliment addresser (Pomerantz, 1978; p.82).

Herbert (1986, 1990) conducted a large scale analysis of compliment responses by speakers of American English. He revised the Pomerantz's taxonomy and ended up with a three-category, twelve-type taxonomy: Agreement (appreciation token; comment acceptance; praise upgrade; comment history; reassignment; return); Non-agreement (scale down; question; disagreement; qualification; no acknowledgement); Other interpretation (e.g. request interpretation). His findings presented that only 386 out of 1062 compliment responses were accounted for by Acceptance, which is the appropriate response encouraged using (Herbert, 1986; p.80).

To date, there are several previous studies that have examined L2 learners' production of compliment responses in target language. In a study comparing the compliment responses of American and Chinese speakers, Chen found that Chinese non-native speakers tended to reject compliments, while Americans tended to accept and appreciate them. With respect to specific compliments on appearance, ability and possession, Americans were more inclined to accept compliments on appearance than on ability and possessions, as they regarded the former as self-image and preferred to keep it up. On the other hand, Chinese speakers tended to decline compliments on appearance, regarding

appearance as intimate and private; modesty enhanced their face and self-image. In

addition, she (1993) suggested that Chinese speakers used different compliment response

strategies in that, they minimized self-praise and maximized dispraise of self, which

helped explain the reasons Chinese speakers might experience pragmatic failure when

responding to a compliment given by an American. Cheng (2003) also compared the

ways how Hong Kong Chinese and native English speakers made and responded to

compliments in intercultural English conversations, and her findings showed that both

social norms and context-specific factors accounted for differences observed in the

speech acts of compliments between the two groups. Baba's study (1999) examined the

compliment responses by Japanese speakers of English. Her findings suggested that

Japanese speakers of English transferred their L1 pragmatic norms, especially in the

family category. Qu and Wang (2005) investigated compliment response patterns by

Chinese L2 learners of English. The results revealed that as the learners improving their

English level, they still made negative pragmatic transfer, but the pragmalinguistic

transfer were significantly reduced compared with sociopragmatic transfers.

2.3. Significance of present study

It is clear that previous empirical research on the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer in

the speech act of compliment response has been limited. Qu and Wang's (2005) study

was the only one that investigated pragmatic transfer on compliment responses by

Chinese L2 learners of English. There seem to be a few studies examining proficiency

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levels and pragmatic transfer; however, they simply cover several ethnic groups other than Chinese as first language background. For instance, most studies on the non-native speakers' production of several speech acts (e.g., refusal, request, and compliment response) in English only examine the Japanese learners of English. In particular, there have been few studies that directly and explicitly addressed the issue of pragmatic transfer and proficiency levels. Thus, there is a necessity to conduct more in-depth data-based studies that have been placed to bridge this gap.

The present study is intended to attain this goal by examining the amount of pragmatic transfer in compliment responses by Chinese learners of English, and to what extent negative transfer is influenced by the learners' level of English proficiency. The Chinese learners of English are distributed into three levels of proficiency determined by IEI placement test scores across from high-advanced learners, intermediate level to low proficiency level. Inclusion of the proficiency variable is motivated by a controversy of the effect on L1 transfer among researchers. The research questions underlying the present study include:

1. To what extent do Chinese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English? (L1-L2 comparison)

2. Is there positive or negative relationship between negative pragmatic transfer and English proficiency levels?

It is expected that the finding obtained for the relationship between pragmatic transferability and L2 learners' proficiency levels will contribute to a better understanding of developmental aspects of L2 pragmatic competence. Also, it is hoped that the discovery of general patterns of pragmatic failure produced by a group of subjects from Chinese language background could be helpful to ESL/EFL educators who can use to illuminate situations in which students may fail pragmatically, and in turn to develop curricular to address these problematic areas.

3. Method and Procedure

3.1. Participants

The Chinese participants for this study were 15 females and 5 males undergraduate and graduate students at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana), aged from 22 to 32 years old. They are students of various disciplines such as computer science, business administration, engineering and educational psychology. Chinese participants across from low, intermediate, and high-advance levels of English proficiency were chosen for this study based on their TOEFL scores. The TOEFL score was chosen to evaluate Chinese ESL learners' proficiency levels because the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as an admission requirement for non-native English speakers at most of English-speaking colleges and universities can scientifically evaluate the ability of an

individual to use and understand English in an academic setting. In addition, the TOEFL

Committee of Examiners is composed of 12 specialists in linguists, language testing, and

teaching with the main responsibility to advise on TOEFL content

(http://en.wikipedia.org). The TOEFL is ensured as a valid measure of English language

proficiency since it includes four sections, each measuring one of the basic language

skills, i.e., reading, listening, speaking and writing. Twenty Chinese participants all took

the iBT version of the TOEFL which is scored on a scale of 0 to 120 points. Table 1

below shows TOEFL scores for each group of Chinese learners with different proficiency

levels:

Table 1. Comparison of TOEFL scores among Chinese groups of ESL learners with

different proficiency levels.

TOEFL Score	Low level	Intermediate level	High level
Highest	82	98	112
Lowest	64	78	94
Mean Score	70	83	101

At the time of study, the Chinese participants reported time spent in the United States

as ranging from 10 months, to almost 4 years. One participant had spent time in another

English-speaking country for almost one year.

A stratified sampling technique was used in this study. Chinese participants were

restricted to adults engaged in a graduate study in an American (English-speaking) university with the expectation that subjects would be highly proficient in English. Each Chinese participant had studied English in a formal ESL setting for at least 10 months and in a formal EFL classroom setting for at least 12 years. Most of Chinese participants believe that their English study focused on grammar points, pattern drills and translation practices rather than oral conversational practice. The Chinese participants all used English in the university classes; 60% of them reported using English "often", "almost every day", or "all the time" with classmates for doing a group project, or with professor for asking or discussing academic problems while 40% reported using English "not often", or only at school or work. Less than half Chinese participants (23%) considered themselves fluent in English, while 45% participants reported they were "not quite" fluent even they got high scores in TOFEL test. Six participants (32%) reported that they were not fluent in English.

Another group was made of 10 full American college students (6 females and 4 males) at the same university. Their ages range from 22 to 52 years old. Most of them are local residents of Indiana State.

3.2 Materials

The participants were provided with a survey packet comprised of a Demographic Survey (Appendix A), and a Discourse Completion Task (Appendix B). In the written Demographic Survey, participants were asked to provide basic information, i.e., age,

gender, course of study/ current job, and their first language, as well as more specific

information if the participant was a non-native speaker. Specific information elicited

included: English learning environments, length of formal English study, frequency and

context of English use, TOEFL scores, self-determination of English fluency, total time

spent in United States, and total time spent in other English-speaking countries.

The written discourse completion task (DCT), as Golato (2003) pointed out, explicitly

required participants not to conversationally interact, but to particulate what they believe

would be situationally appropriate responses within possible yet imaginary interactional

settings. However, observational or interview data of naturally occurring interaction can

be problematic in that it is difficult to rule out factors that may influence compliment

responses, e.g., social distance between the addresser and addressed, target of

compliment, contextual settings in which complimenting takes place, etc. In the present

study, the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of 12 contextual situations was

administered to 10 American native speakers and 20 Chinese L2 learners during a period

of two weeks. The test was designed to elicit compliment responses by setting up a

situation in a few sentences after which a compliment response was given (See Appendix

B). In the discourse completion task, 12 situational settings relating to four different

topics were employed: appearance, possession, ability and character. For each social

situation, age, gender and social status difference between two speakers were considered.

For example, a male speaker gave a compliment to female, or a senior person to a young

teenager, or a person with high social status to a low status.

3.3. Procedure

Participants were asked to participate in the study in groups by the researcher. The participants were provided with a survey packet comprised of a written Demographic Survey and a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Participants were asked to complete a Demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) with survey questions that was carried out with a view to possible reasons for Chinese learners' pragmatic transfer, e.g., the length of stay in a target community, whether or not Chinese learners had direct exposure to English language or whether or not they received any classroom instruction of pragmatic knowledge, etc. It was conducted to encourage Chinese learners to talk about their experiences as foreigners in real-life situations with English native speakers.

Subsequently, twenty Chinese students completed the DCT. Subjects responded by writing what their oral response would be to each situation posed. They were encouraged to respond quickly, and it was requested that they didn't carefully analyze what they thought their response should be. Chinese participants were asked to write their responses to match as closely as possible what they might actually say. Responses were returned to the researcher personally. Most participants responded immediately, taking about 15-25 minutes to complete the DCT in the researcher's presence. Thirty percent of the subjects completed the DCT outside of the researcher's presence and returned the survey one or two days after receiving it. This time delay could have affected the data by giving the

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subject extra time to reflect his/her responses, a luxury not available in spontaneous oral communication.

Similarly, responses of ten American native speakers were collected as baseline data to evaluate the quality of speech produced by Chinese speakers. The responses of Chinese students were both qualitatively and quantitatively compared to those of American English speakers. That is, this paper not only analyzed Chinese L2 learners' amount of production of compliment responses, but examined what kind of linguistic realization strategies participants employ when responding a compliment. The classifications of compliment responses were mainly based on the literature by Herbert's (1986 & 1990) three categories, twelve-type taxonomy (Table 2):

Table 2. Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses.

Response Type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptance	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?

II. Comment History   I bought it for the trip to Arizona.

III. Transfers

   1. Reassignment   My brother gave it to me.

   2. Return   So is yours. You look great too.

B. Nonagreement

  I.   Scale Down   It's really quite old.

  II. Request assurance   Do you really think so?

  III. Nonacceptance

    1. Disagreement   I hate it; it's all right, but Len's is nicer.

    2. Qualification   It's all right, but I hope I can do it better next time.

                                 That's what I should do. It's part of my job.

  IV. No Acknowledgement   [silence]

C. Other Interpretations

  I.   Request   You wanna borrow this one?

4. Data Analysis

The compliment strategies were categorized after the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaires had been collected. Using responses from American native English speakers, a compliment strategy was formulated for each item. For example, an "Agreement compliment strategy" could be comprised of three individual speech act components: (1) Appreciation Token ("Thank you"), (2) Comment Acceptance ("Thanks, I like it so much"), and (3) Praise Upgrade ("Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?"). For the reliability of coding, the DCT data were coded independently by the researcher and an American native English speaker. For example, if a respondent replied a compliment from his/her professor giving back the midterm report that was highly evaluated, saying "Thank you. I spent a lot of time on it. I am really worried about it", this was coded as: [comment acceptance] under the category of "Agreement" strategy. If a participant responded a compliment "You speak excellent French" from a French tourist asking for directions, saying "You are just being nice. I know my French is horrible", thus this was coded as [disagreement] under the category of "Non-agreement" strategy. The coding from both Chinese and American research groups agreed with the research requirement, that is, with 100% interractor reliability, all data from both research groups would be useful in the process of data analysis and interpretation.

To answer the first question "To what extent do Chinese learners of English reflect

their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English" the presence of each component was calculated for frequency of use for both Chinese and English participants. The frequency of each component is presented in the Tables 4 & 5, and Figures 1 & 2. Quantitatively, individual native speakers' responses were analyzed to determine if language forms were present in the largest number of responses. The Chinese ESL learners' responses were then reviewed to determine which language forms were present or absent as compared to the native speakers' responses. To answer the second research question concerning the relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer, the frequency was calculated to find differences in the amount of the negative transfer between learners of different proficiency levels. To better understand the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer, the quality/content of semantic formulas was examined as well. With regard to the identification of pragmatic transfer, the method proposed by Kasper (1992) was adopted:

A simpler and more adequate method is to determine whether the differences between the interlanguage and the learner's native language on a particular pragmatic feature are statistically significant, and how these differences relate to the target pragmatic feature in L1, L2 and IL can be operationally defined as positive transfer. Statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature between IL-L2 and L1-L2 and lack of statistically significant differences between IL and L1 can be operationally defined as negative transfer (pp. 223-224).

To test the statistical significance of differences found, the taxonomy developed by Herbert (1986 & 1990) was modified based on the corpus of this study. For instance, "Request" was dropped off from the classification scheme because this was not reflected in the data from American English nor Chinese ESL learners. In addition, "Expressing embarrassment/Joking" was added into the taxonomy "Other Interpretations" due to the fact that this was a frequently used strategy, and when it appeared, it was interpreted in the way that the addresser showed agreement with the prior compliment, but in order to avoid self-praise. What also deserves mention is "Suggestion" was added into the classification scheme. Analysis of the data from Chinese ESL learners showed that while they used "Suggestion" response type, they neither directly refused nor accepted a compliment, instead, they accepted compliments indirectly to show their modesty, saying "You can have/buy one like that if you want". The resulting classification categories are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses.

Response Type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptance	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]

2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So is yours. You look great too.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Request assurance	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptance	
1. Disagreement	I hate it; it's all right, but Len's is nicer.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but I hope I can do it better next time. That's what I should do. It's part of my job.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Suggestion	You can have one like that one day.

You can have one if you want.

II. Expressing Embarrassment/Joking

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Frequency of the semantic formulas

The differences among research groups in the frequency of the semantic formulas were examined in two perspectives. First, the semantic formulas were grouped as general compliment strategies, i.e., "Agreement", "Non-agreement", and "Other interpretations" based on the Herbert's (1986 & 1990) classification system. The second part of this section examined the research groups' differences in the frequency of each compliment component in the semantic formulas, i.e., "Appreciation Token", "Comment Acceptance", and "Disagreement" and so on. The frequency of use (# of responses exhibiting component/total # of responses) was employed to detect whether the difference was statistically significant.

5.1.1. The general patterns of CRs strategies

Figure 1. Comparison of American English and Chinese native speakers' productions of CRs strategies.
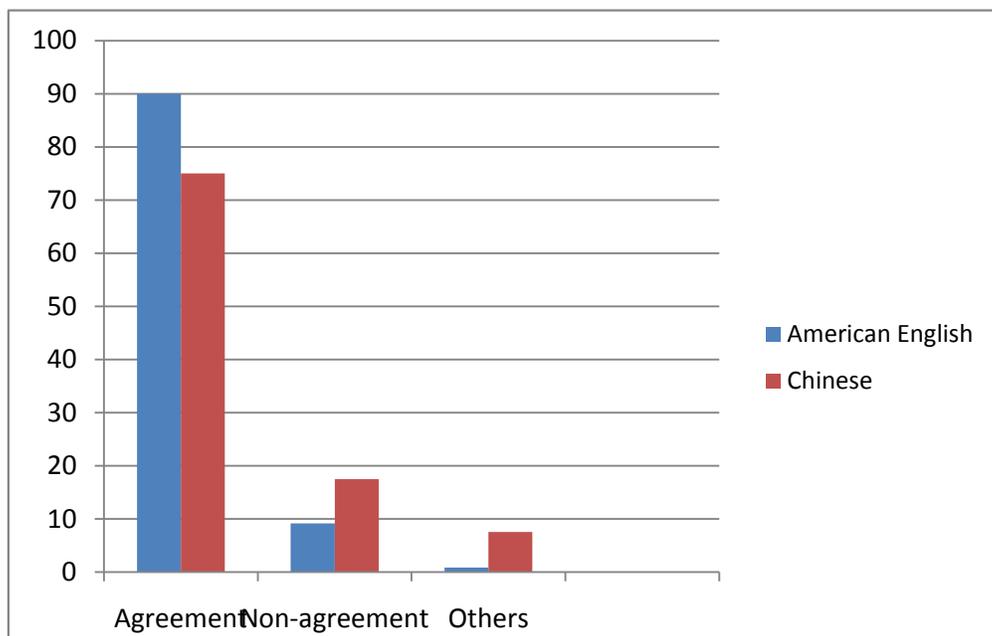
As seen in Figure 1, an apparent trend was demonstrated that the preference for both research groups was in the order of "Agreement", "Non-agreement" and "Other interpretations". As shown in Figure 1, almost 75% of the Chinese responses fell into the category "Agreement". In contrast, American native English speakers' production of "Agreement strategies" amounted to 90.01% for the total which carried the most weight in the pattern distribution. However, focusing on the first research question "To what extent do Chinese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English", we can clearly see that the difference between two research groups lied in that Chinese native speakers used more "Non-agreement" strategy and "Other interpretations" than American speakers. Unlike native English speakers, Chinese ESL learners produced "Disagreement" strategy that made up 17.5% of the total, which

was significantly higher than American English speakers' productions. In addition, for American English speakers, only 0.83% of the total fell into the category of "Other interpretations", on the contrary, the percentage of Chinese ESL learners' responses amounted to 7.5%. Thus, both groups were similar in terms of the preferred order of CRs strategies; however, the subtle difference was found that Chinese ESL learners produced more "Disagreement" and "Other interpretations" than American native English speakers.

This finding was in line up with the previous work by Chen's (1993) comparative study of compliment responses between Chinese L2 learners of English and American native English speakers that Chinese learners of English tended to reject compliments while American English speakers tended to accept and appreciate them. In this sense, "Agreement" would be considered as a natural and appropriate strategy to respond to a compliment in the target English culture, while "to decline or disagree" would be perceived as socioculturally inappropriate strategy by native English speakers.

Moreover, apart from examining different uses of general CRs strategies by Chinese ESL learners and American native English speakers, we now shall pay attention to differences in the use of CRs strategies among Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels (low, intermediate and high level).

Table 4. The use of CRs strategies from Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels.

| CRs Strategy	Low	Intermediate	High	Native English
Agreement	63.66%	73.61%	84.53%	90.01%

| Non-agreement | 24.63% | 16.67% | 13.09% | 9.16% |
| Other Interpretations | 11.71% | 9.72% | 2.38% | 0.83% |

As shown in Table 4, the typical compliment strategy used by American native English speakers was "Agreement", and then followed by "Disagreement" and "Other interpretations". Comparing Chinese research groups, it was found that the preferred order in the use of "Agreement" strategy was going from high, intermediated level to low level learners. The "Agreement" response type was produced with almost the same frequency between Chinese high level learners (84.53%) and American native English speakers (90.01%), which was significantly higher than the other groups. As seen in Table 4, one noteworthy difference that occurred among Chinese research groups was in the component of "Non-agreement" response type. The percentage of "Non-agreement" formula in the group of Chinese low level learners amounted to 24.63%, which was higher than that in the group of intermediate levels (16.67%) and that in the group of high levels (13.09%). Another distinction of note was that Chinese low level learners utilized 11.71% of "Other interpretations" formula, which was more than intermediate level learners (9.72%) and high level learners (2.38%).

Since native English speakers' responses were set up as baselines to evaluate Chinese ESL learners' productions of CRs strategies, native responses showed that the preferred use of agreement or acceptance of compliments was considered as a natural and

appropriate strategy in the target English culture. However, "Non-agreement" and "Other interpretations" are socioculturally inappropriate for American English speakers since both strategies imply that the addressee try to keep a distance from the speaker's gesture of kindness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As shown in Figure 2 below, it was expected to note that Chinese high level learners employed "Agreement" strategy more than the other groups. In addition, the "Disagreement" and "Other interpretations" formulas in the group of low level learners were produced with a significantly higher percentage than the other two groups. This probably indicated that Chinese low level ESL learners were more likely to be negatively influenced by their Chinese conventions than the other two groups. The finding shown in Figure 2 was that comparing three groups of Chinese ESL learners, the group that approximated native norms and responses were learners with high linguistic proficiency levels. In short, language proficiency level seemed to be an important factor, that is, the higher Chinese L2 learner's proficiency was, the more native-like responses they produced.

Figure 2. The use of CRs strategies from Chinese ESL learners across different proficiency levels.
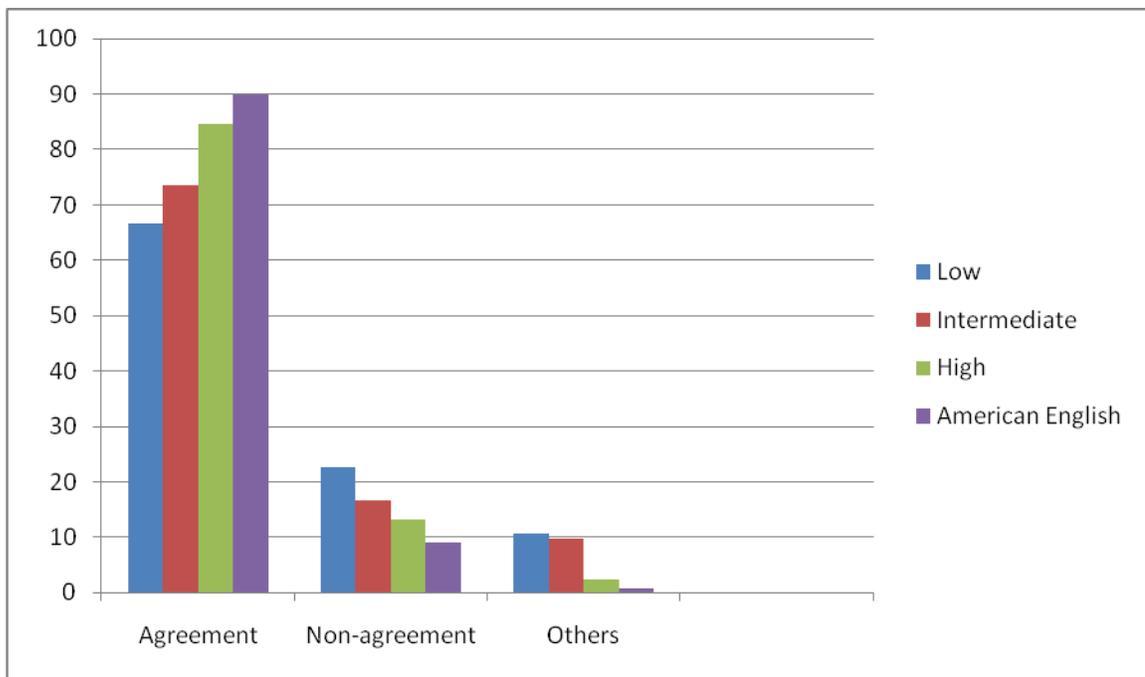
5.1.2. The CRs strategy patterns in sub-categories

In this section, the differences in the use of CRs strategies between Chinese ESL

learners and American native English speakers were examined in the frequency of each

compliment component in the semantic formulas, i.e. "Appreciation Token", "Comment

Acceptance", and "Scale Down" and so on.

Table 5. American native English speakers' productions of CR realization strategies.

CRs Strategy	Response Type	American English	
	Appreciation Token	30	
	Comment Acceptance	37.5	

Agreement	Comment History	2.5	90.01%
	Praise Upgrade	4.17	
	Reassignment	5.84	
	Return	10	
Non-agreement	Scale Down	4.17	9.16%
	Request Assurance	0.83	
	Disagreement	2.5	
	Qualification	0.83	
	No Acknowledgement	0.83	
Other Interpretations	Suggestion	0	0.83%
	Expressing Embarrassment/Joking	0.83	
Total		100%	

In order to interpret data, politeness strategy and face value have to be considered. In

Chinese culture, both politeness and face are salient, while in the American English

culture only politeness is salient in society at large (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As shown

in Table 5, under the category of "Agreement" strategy, the "Appreciation Token" and

"Comment Acceptance" types were produced with almost the same frequency by native

English speakers. In addition, only 10% of the "Return" response type indicated that

native English speakers also preferred using "Return" strategy when responding to a

compliment. It was found that the typical compliment response strategies for American

English speakers agreeing or accepting a compliment were "Appreciation Token",

"Comment Acceptance" and "Return". For example,

Situation #8 Addresser: "Congratulations! That was a great play"

        CR 4: Thank you.   (Appreciation Token)

Situation #6 Addresser: "Wow, awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's great!"

        CR 3: "Thanks. I am really excited about it.   (Comment Acceptance)

Situation #3 Addresser: "Hi, I haven't seen you in ages. You look great!"

        CR 1: "Thanks a lot. You are looking good too.   (Return)

As seen in Table 5, it was found that the "Scale Down" formula in the native speakers'

responses was higher than the "Disagreement" formula, which probably indicated that

native English speakers preferred to disagreeing or declining a compliment indirectly. For

example,

Situation #4 Addresser: "Wow! What a nice watch (Rolex)! I wish I had one like that."

        CR9: "It's fake."   (Scale Down)

Situation #10 Addresser: "You speak excellent French!"

         CR 10: "You are just trying to be nice. I know my French is terrible.

                                              (Disagreement)

Moreover, Table 5 showed that the "Request Assurance", "Qualification" and "No

acknowledgement" formulas were produced with the same frequency of 0.83% by native

English speakers, which probably indicated that these three response types were not frequently and naturally used in the target English culture. For example,

Situation #9 Professor: "You did a brilliant job on your report. It was very well written!"

CR 2: "Oh, really? So you liked what I had to say about [subject]?

(Request Assurance)

Situation #2 Male Addresser: (At a crowded party) "The blouse looks pretty on you."

CR 4 (Female): "cold hard stare. Then I turn away. He shouldn't talk about my blouse—that sounds like he's staring at my breasts."

(No Acknowledgement)

Situation #3 Addresser: "Hi, I haven't seen you for ages. You look great!"

CR 5: "Are you kidding me? I'm completely frazzled. You're looking way better than I am."

(Qualification)

As shown in Table 5, under the category of "Other interpretations" it was interesting to note that the absence of "Suggestion" response type by native English speakers was expected. That is because in the target English culture, it's not naturally appropriate to employ "Suggestion" strategy, saying "You can have one like this if you want" when responding to a compliment like "Wow, your cell phone is awesome". In addition, only 0.83% of the "Joking" formula indicated that native English speakers seldom expressed their embarrassment by making a joke with the addresser when responding to a compliment. For example,

Situation #12 Landlord: "Hey, you're very organized."

CR 4: "Well, one of us has to be. (joking, me and my landlord are cool like

that.)   (Joking)

After examining native English speakers' productions of compliment realization

strategies, we now shall shift attention to compare the use of CRs realization strategies

among three groups of Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels.

Table 6. Comparison of the use of CRs realization strategies by Chinese ESL learners across different

proficiency levels.

CRs Strategy	Response Type	Low		Intermediate		High	
Agreement	Appreciation Token	23		27.78		40.49	
	Comment Acceptance	14.28		23.61		26.19	
	Comment History	0		0		1.19	
	Praise Upgrade	0	63.66	2.78	73.61	2.38	84.53
	Reassignment	4.76		9.72		8.33	
	Return	21.62		9.72		5.95	
	Scale Down	3.57		1.39		3.57	

Non-agreement	Request Assurance	3.57	24.63	4.17	16.67	3.57	13.09
	Disagreement	4.38		2.78		2.38	
	Qualification	13.11		9.94		2.38	
	No Acknowledgement	0		1.39		1.19	
Other Interpretations	Suggestion	9.52	11.71	8.33	9.72	2.39	2.38
	Expressing Embarrassment/Joking	1.19		1.39		0	
Total		100%		100%		100%	

Table 6 showed that there were significant differences among Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels in the occurrences of different types of compliment responses. As seen in Table 6, it was interesting to find that all three research groups employed the same first three strategies including "Agreement" strategy, going from "Appreciation Token" to "Comment Acceptance", which resemble with native responses. In particular, for Chinese high level learners, the largest part of Chinese responses in the category "Agreement" was the "Appreciation Token" formula. And 26.19% of the total fell into the category of "Comment Acceptance", e.g. "I will try to do it better/I will keep working hard". Only two Chinese native speakers employed "Praise Upgrade" strategy. However, in consideration of overall CRs realization strategy, it was expected to find that Chinese high level learner employed all of "Agreement" components in the semantic

formulas while the "Comment History" formula was absent in the Chinese intermediate level's productions. Moreover, Chinese low level learners neither utilized the "Comment History" nor the "Praise Upgrade" formulas. This probably indicated that Chinese high level learners had more free choice and flexibility in the use of compliment realization strategies when agreeing or accepting a compliment than the other two groups. It supported the hypothesis that ESL learner with low proficiency levels failed to express their L2 norms at the pragmatic level since they didn't have enough control over their L2.

Another noteworthy difference found in the component of "Appreciation Token" response type was that even Chinese ESL learners tried to employ native-like acceptable CRs strategy, they failed to use in the appropriate situations. *For example,*

Situation #2 At a crowded Thanksgiving dinner party, an American male in his late 20s whom you haven't met before comes over and says to you: "The blouse looks pretty on you." You reply:

This situation was created with the purpose to examine whether or not Chinese ESL learners would realize the real illocutionary force under the compliment. In this situation the male/female's compliment functioned as a start of flirting or flattering. Most of the Chinese ESL learners employed the "Appreciation Token" strategy since it was the most safely used strategy for responding a compliment. Unlike Chinese ESL learners, the flexibility was found in the native English speakers' productions of CRs realization strategies. The first three strategies employed by native English speakers included

"Appreciation Token", "Return" and "No acknowledgement". For example,

Situation #2 Male Addresser: "The blouse looks pretty on you."

CR 1 (Female): " Thank you. My boyfriend picked it out for me."

(Appreciation Token)

CR 2 (Female): (cold hard stare). Then I turned away. He shouldn't talk about my

blouse – that sounds like he's staring at my breasts.

(No Acknowledgement)

CR 4 (Female): (with some surprise but no doubt) "Thanks. You look great too."

(I'd probably do my best to continue the conversation.)   (Return)

Compared with native responses, only one Chinese ESL learners clearly demonstrated

that she realized the real purpose of this compliment by saying "Thank you" and then

added comments like "I don't like to talk to the guy who looks old, but to some young

guys at my age, I would introduce myself first". With her added comments, we can

completely tell that she not only appropriately used the "Appreciation Token" semantic

formula, but demonstrated her understanding of the conversational situation in which this

CRs strategy was required. However, for other Chinese ESL learners, it was hard to tell

whether or not they realized the potential illocutionary force even if they employed

seemingly acceptable CRs strategies.

In the "Non-agreement" sub-categories, one noteworthy difference that occurred

among Chinese research groups was that only Chinese high level learners usually used

"Scale Down" strategy followed by the "Disagreement" formula, which was similar with native responses. However, in the responses of Chinese low and intermediate level learners, the "Qualification" carried the most weight of the total which was significantly higher than the other response types. For example,

Situation #11 Addresser: "I really appreciate your help. You are so patient and caring."

CR 2: "I just did what I can do. Please don't say that."   (Qualification)

Situation #10 Addresser: "You speak excellent French!"

CR 4: "You can do the same thing. If you were force to practice almost

everyday.   (Qualification)

In the "Other interpretations" sub-categories, all three Chinese research groups employed the "Suggestion" as their first frequently used strategy. However, the distinction of note was that compared with Chinese high level learners, the "Suggestion" formula produced by both groups of Chinese ESL learners with intermediate and low levels was significantly higher. For example,

Situation #4 Addresser: "Wow! What a nice watch. I wish I had one like that."

CR 4 (Low): "You can have one if you want."   (Suggestion)

Situation #6 Addresser: "Wow, how awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's really

great."

CR 2 (Intermediate): "Thanks. You can buy one if you like it."   (Suggestion)

The absence of the sub-category "Expressing Embarrassment" in responses of Chinese

high level learners was expected while both groups of ESL learners with low and

intermediate levels produced the "Expressing Embarrassment" with almost the same

frequency. For example,

Situation #7 Mom: "Well done. The food tasted lovely."

> CR 2 (Intermediate): "Do you want to do give some rewards to me?"   (Joking)

> CR 2 (Low): "Then how about making me some favorite pudding for thanks?"

> > (Joking/Expressing Embarrassment)

After examining the differences in the frequency of each compliment component in

the semantic formulas among Chinese ESL learners with different levels, results from

this part was in line up with the previous section that the group that approximated native

norms and responses were learners with high linguistic proficiency levels. That is, the

higher Chinese L2 learner's proficiency was, the more native-like responses they

produced.

5.2. Quality of components of CRs strategies

The quantitative data above clearly demonstrated that compared with American native

English speakers, Chinese ESL learners did negatively transferred L1 sociocultural

conventions on their L2. In addition, compared three groups of Chinese ESL learners, it

was expected to find that Chinese high level learners resembled with native English

speakers more than the other two groups both in terms of general compliment response

strategies and in specific compliment response types. In this section, the qualitative data

was also included to examine the second research question focusing on "the relationship

between negative transfer and the learners' proficiency levels". The inclusion of

qualitative data was considered simply because of the findings that while Chinese ESL

learners and American native English speakers sometimes produced CRs strategies with

almost the same frequency, and even the compliment strategies used by Chinese ESL

learners across different proficiency levels were almost identical. However, the quality of

the components produced by different research groups was different. In general,

responses from Chinese ESL learners at different proficiency groups were linguistically

correct, but often lacked the pragmatic elements that allow these face-threatening acts to

be well received by the interlocutor.

5.2.1. Evidence of pragmatic transfer

A. The use of "Return/Reassignment" response type

When receiving a compliment, Chinese ESL learners employed the "Return" response

type simply because in the Chinese cultural expectation, in employing these response

types, the complimentee seemed to imply that she/he agreed with the addresser and

accepted credit for the positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In addition, by returning

or transferring the compliment back to the addresser, the addressee appeared to mean that

she/he was not that special, and the addresser was also worthy of equivalent compliment.

In this way, the addressee humbled him/herself by diminishing the complimentary force

of the original praise (Brown & Levinson, 1987), especially when complimented by the addresser with high social status. For example, in situation #9, when receiving a compliment from the professor who gave back a midterm paper, saying "You did a brilliant job on your report. It was very well written", many Chinese low level learners employed the "Return" strategy saying "Thank you for your help and direction (guidance)". The "Return" strategy was negatively transferred from their L1 and was inappropriately used in this situation. Since native English speakers usually used the "Return" strategy in the situation in which they were complimented on their appearance by classmates or friends, saying "Hi, I haven't seen you for ages. You look so great!", and then they replied "Thanks, you look great too". In terms of the frequency as shown in Figure 3, we clearly see that the "Return" strategy produced by Chinese low level learners amounted to 21.62%, then followed by the group of intermediate level learners with the frequency of 9.72% and high level learners with the percentage of 5.95%. This probably indicated that the order of negative transfer of the "Return" strategy was going from low, intermediate to high level learners.

Figure 3. Comparison of the negative pragmatic transfer by Chinese groups of ESL learners.
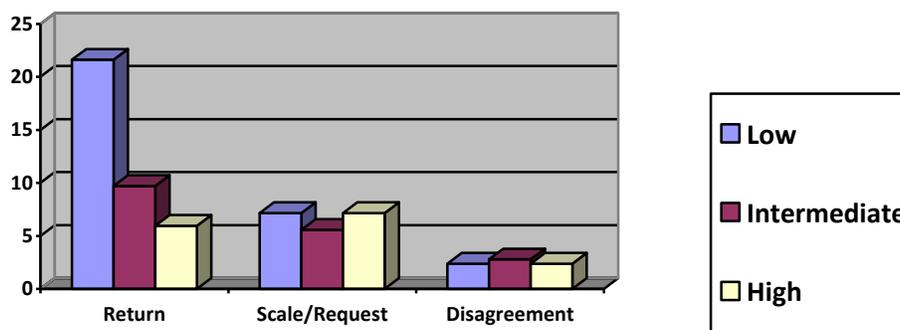
Moreover, when complimented by native English speakers, the "Reassignment" strategy was inappropriately used compared with native responses. For example, in the situation #8, when receiving a compliment from a college schoolmate whom the addressee didn't know at all, saying "You did a good job. That was a good play", two out of seven Chinese low level learners replied "That is the effort of everyone. /That is the team's work". The "Reassignment" formula was considered as a natural polite strategy because in Chinese culture, it was expected to appreciate good efforts from other members when working in a team or group. It was unacceptable to take credit only on the addressee. However, all of ten native English speakers used "Appreciation Token" strategy in this situation, as their first compliment response type, saying "Thank you. /Thanks". Thus, Chinese low level learners negatively transferred L1 sociocultural norms on the speech act of CRs strategy in English. In contrast, the absence of the "Reassignment" formula in the other two groups was expected, which probably indicated that Chinese low level learners negatively transferred Chinese conventional forms on L2

more than the group of intermediate and high level learners.

B. The use of "Scale Down/Request Assurance" strategies

When complimented by others, Chinese ESL learners showed their disagreement directly or indirectly. They either scaled down the compliments by saying "It's not that/really good" or made a request assurance. For example,

Situation #5 Sales person: "You really have a cool hat on."

   CR 5 (Low): "It's just all right.   (Scale Down)

Situation #3 Addresser: "Hi, I haven't seen you in ages. You look great."

   CR 3 (Intermediate): "Really? Are you kidding me?   (Request Assurance)

Situation #6 Addresser: "Woe, how awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's really

     great!"

   CR 1 (High): "Yeah but I guess I probably won't use much of the fancy

     functions."   (Scale Down)

In employing the "Scale Down/Requesting" Strategy, the addressee tried to play down the value of the object praised, thus suggesting only a partial agreement with the complimenter and signaling the addressee's need to avoid self-praise (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In other words, to be modest or polite in Chinese culture involved rejection or disagreement of a compliment. If a compliment was explicitly accepted, this was considered immodest or impolite. However, in the target English culture, it was expected to accept and appreciate compliments. Thus, the more the "Scale

Down/Requesting" strategy used, the more Chinese ESL learners negatively transferred their L1 on L2.

In terms of frequency, as seen in Figure 3, it was interesting to find that the "Scale Down/Requesting" formulas were produced with exactly the same frequency of 7.14% between Chinese low level and high level learners. On the contrary, the group of Chinese ESL learners with intermediate level produced the "Scale Down/Requesting" formula with considerably lower percentage of 5.64%.

C. The use of "Disagreement" strategy

Negative pragmatic transfer was also observed in the content of "Disagreement" given by Chinese ESL learners, especially those with lower English proficiency level. In Chinese culture, by rejecting the compliment, the recipient of the compliment appeared to show disagreement in a direct and clear way and thus damaged the positive face needs of the complimenter. In particular, in rejecting a given compliment, the addressee didn't care much about maintaining the addresser's face or causing a bad impression, since she/he may want to avoid self-praise rather than satisfying the addresser's face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, in English culture, only politeness is salient in the society at large. It's inappropriate to employ the "Direct Disagreement" strategy when responding to a compliment. For example,

Situation #5 Sales person: "You really have a cool hat on."

CR 6 (Low): "It's not beautiful. I don't want this hat."   (Disagreement)

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Situation #3 Addresser: "Hi, I haven't seen you in ages. You look great."

        CR 6 (Intermediate): "You're so sweet, but I know you must be kidding. After

               all these years, I know I look terrible."   (Disagreement)

Situation #10 Addresser: "You speak excellent French!"

        CR 4 (High): "Well, I don't think my French is good."   (Disagreement)

Figure 3 clearly demonstrated that for Chinese low level learners, 4.38% fell into the category of "Disagreement" response type, which was higher in comparison of the other groups. As seen in Figure 3, the "Disagreement" strategy was produced with almost the same frequency between Chinese intermediate and high level learners. The finding probably indicated that Chinese low level learners negatively transferred Chinese sociocultural implications on their L2 more than the other two groups.

D. The use of "Qualification" response type

Another example of negative pragmatic transfer in the choice of semantic formula existed in the use of "Qualification". The production of the "Qualification" strategy deeply reflected a Chinese traditional cultural value. When receiving a compliment, Chinese ESL learners tended to accept it reluctantly by adding more comments to show their modesty in that they were not satisfied with themselves and they had to work hard and then could make an improvement through the future work. For example,

Situation #7 Mom: "Well done. The food tasted lovely."

        CR 1 (Intermediate): "We are family, isn't it? I just did what I should do.

(Qualification)

Situation #12 You're helping your landlord prepare for a Christmas party at her home.

Landlord: "Hey, well done. You're very organized."

CR 6 (Intermediate): "That's part of my nature/personality." (Qualification)

Situation #9 Professor: "You did a brilliant job on your report. It was very well written."

CR 4 (High): "I hope I can do it better next time." (Qualification)

As examining the frequency of "Qualification" strategy by Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels, a distinction of note in Figure 4 was that Chinese low level learners employed the "Qualification" strategy with the percentage of 13.11%. The "Qualification" response type was produced by Chinese intermediate level learners with the frequency of 9.94%. The "Qualification" formula in both groups of low and intermediate level learners was significantly higher than that in the group of high level learners. For example, one Chinese ESL learner with lower proficiency level used the "Qualification" strategy three times when responding to a compliment:

Situation #7 Mom: "Well done. The food tastes lovely."

CR 1: "That is what I should do."

*Situation #8* Addresser: "Congratulations! That was a great play!"

CR 1: "Thanks, but that is what I should do."

Situation#10 Addresser: "You speak excellent French!"

CR 1: "I think I need to learn a lot of it in the future."

When receiving a compliment on her ability, she tried to play down the compliment and showed her modesty by employing the "Qualification" strategy. Both quantitative and qualitative data implied that the order of negative transfer of the "Qualification" strategy was going from low, intermediate to high level learners. That is to say, the lower the Chinese ESL proficiency level is, the more they negatively transferred L1 norms on the L2.

Figure 4. Comparison of the negative pragmatic transfer by Chinese groups of ESL learners.
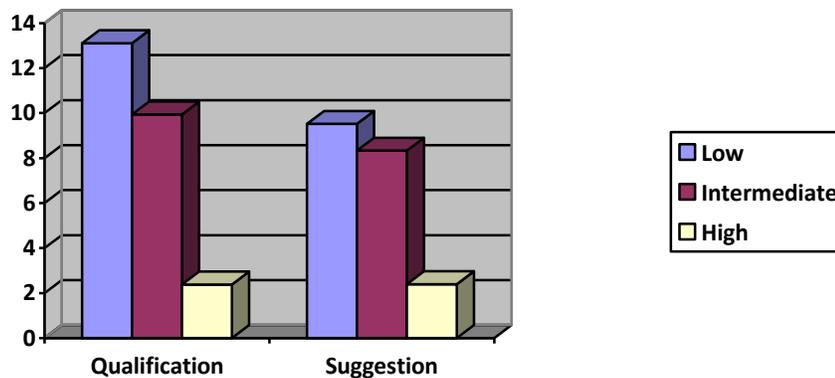
E. The use of "Suggestion" strategy

One noteworthy negative pragmatic transfer that existed in the semantic formulas was the use of "Suggestion". As complimented on their possessions, Chinese ESL learners utilized the "Suggestion" strategy to invite the addresser to draw additional conversational implications (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In Chinese culture, this response type could be interpreted in the way that the addresser showed agreement with the prior compliment, but in order to avoid self-praise, the addressee tried to play down this

agreement by using a "Suggestion" strategy. It may imply that the addressee wanted to accept the praise, but pretended to disagree in order to show modesty. For example,

Situation #6 Addresser: "Woe, how awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's really

great!"

CR 3 (High): "I ordered this one online for free, so you can get one if you

want. The only thing you need to do is to renew your contract."   (Suggestion)

CR 2 (Intermediate): "It's my new phone, you can buy one. It's not

expensive."   (Suggestion)

In examining the frequency of "Suggestion" strategy by Chinese ESL learners with different proficiency levels, Figure 4 demonstrated that the percentage of "Suggestion" response type by Chinese low level learners amounted to 9.52% while Chinese intermediate level learners produced the "Suggestion" strategy with the frequency of 8.33%, both of which were significantly higher than that in the group of high level learners. Another distinction of note was that when compliments on possessions were given in three different situational settings, two of seven Chinese ESL learners with lower proficiency level employed the "Suggestion" strategy twice while this occurrence was absent in neither groups of Chinese ESL learners with intermediate and high levels. For example,

Situation #4 Addresser: "Wow! What a nice watch! I wish I had one like that."

CR 2 (Intermediate): "I bought it when it's on sale. Maybe you can go there

and see if they have some."   (Suggestion)

Situation #6 Addresser: "Woe, how awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's really

great!"

CR 2 (Intermediate): "Yeah, it's a new one. I bought it online. You can have a

one. It's not expensive."   (Suggestion)

When receiving a compliment on her possessions, she tried to play down the compliment

and avoid a self-praise by using the "Suggestion" strategy. As shown in Figure 4, the

findings probably indicated that Chinese low level learners negatively transferred the

"Suggestion" strategy more than the other groups. In short, language proficiency level

seemed to be an important factor.

These findings above confirmed that the group that most approximated the English

norm were learners with high linguistic proficiency and it was easier for lower

proficiency learners to be influenced by their L1 behavior than higher proficiency

learners. The less proficient learners didn't have enough control over the L2 to produce

target-like linguistic norms at the pragmatic level, thus, they were more likely to

negatively transfer L1 sociocultural norms than proficient learners.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at examining the differences between Chinese ESL learners

and American native English speakers' productions in the speech act of compliment response and also analyzing the effects of linguistic proficiency of Chinese ESL learners on their negative pragmatic transfer from L1 sociocultural behaviors to L2, that has not received a great deal of attention in the interlanguage pragmatic studies carried out so far. In this sense, I dealt with three groups of ESL learners whose language proficiency varied according to their TOEFL scores. Results from my study showed that while the range of semantic formulas seems to be universal, differences in the use of general CRs strategies among groups and evidence of negative pragmatic transfer have been found in both the frequency and the content of the semantic formulas.

Concerning the frequency of the semantic formulas, the overall group comparisons showed substantial differences in the use of general compliment strategies, i.e. "Agreement", "Non-agreement" and "Other interpretations". The native speakers of English were found to utilize more "Agreement" strategy but less "Non-agreement" strategy than did Chinese ESL learners. This finding lent support to empirical observations provided by several researcher concerning differences between Chinese and American's productions of compliment responses. Chinese, a high context and collectivistic culture, is concerned with face-maintenance and thus prefers to humble themselves by disagreeing or playing down the compliment (Chen, 1993 & Cheng, 2003). American, on the other hand, a low context and individualistic culture, values overt communication codes and thus prefers to agree or accept the compliment in a direct

manner.

As aforementioned, the compliment responses were elicited from 12 different situations that were classified into 13 sub-categories, i.e., "Appreciation Token", "Comment Acceptance", "Scale Down" and "Qualification", etc. The analysis of data revealed that language proficiency seemed to be an important factor. Among 13 semantic formulas in which American native English speakers significantly differed from Chinese ESL learners in the frequency of the use, the group who approximated with native English productions was learners with high linguistic proficiency levels. That is, the higher the Chinese learners' proficiency level was, the more target-like response they produced.

Concerning the relation between negative pragmatic transfer and proficiency level, it was examined in both the frequency and the content of the semantic formulas. The negative pragmatic transfer was found in the use of "Return/Reassignment", "Request/Scale Down", "Disagreement", "Qualification" and "Suggestion" strategies. The findings from this section confirmed that it was easier for lower proficiency learners to be negatively influenced by their L1 behavior than higher proficiency learners. The less proficient learners didn't have enough control over the L2 to produce target-like linguistic norms at the pragmatic level, thus, they were more likely to negatively transfer L1 sociocultural norms than proficient learners.

The hypothesis of Takahashi and Beebe (1987), Maeshiba et al. (1996), and Flor M.

(2003) which held that negative transfer increased as the learner's proficiency level increased (i.e., that transfer was greater among higher proficiency learners than among lower proficiency learners) was not supported in this study. In my study, it was expected to note that the difference in the amount of the negative transfer among learners of different proficiency levels was very apparent. This study was in line up with the previous work by Robinson (1992), Maeshiba et al. (1996), and Flor (2003) in that learners with higher language proficiency adopted more English sociocultural norms whereas low-level learners failed to produce native-like responses because they were more likely to be negatively influenced by their L1 refusal behaviors.

Pedagogically, this study illuminates several areas in which Chinese ESL learners might appear inappropriate when responding to a compliment. The possible pragmatic failure was found more among Chinese ESL learners with lower proficiency levels who negatively transferred their L1 sociocultural rules to L2. Unlike advanced learners who produced more native-like compliment responses, lower level learners tended to play down or disagreed the compliment. To help out low level learners achieve optimal pragmatic success, teachers need to make students aware of specific speech act sets and the accompanying linguistic features that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received speech acts. Teachers could use discourse completion task in the classroom to give an instruction of pragmatic rules, and then use role play activities to mimic an authentic situations, beginning with the more semantically formulaic compliment

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responses. Lessons should be designed to include compliment and compliment response in different cultural contexts. To increase input, teachers should use audiovisual media together with regular practice of prefabricated expressions. Instructors can record or videotape short authentic dialogues featuring compliment and compliment response performed by native speakers. These dialogues should be representative of potential situation in which gender, and social distance or power are included. It is also important that these dialogues include different types compliment responses with different topics. After presenting these dialogues the instructor can move forward to interpretation and production activities. During the interpretation phase, the instructor should draw learners' attention to both social situational settings and its linguist execution, emphasizing potentially problematic areas. Once learners have been introduced to various authentic compliment and compliment responses and have discussed them, they can be assigned to practice and role-play their own compliment response in pairs. By doing this, it might be easier for students to acquire specific speech acts, which demand more social interaction as well as many face-saving moves. Further studies might investigate semantic formulas, or speech act sets as potential teaching material for curriculum development, as well as classroom applications of the DCT.

This study was compromised by several limitations that should be addressed if the study were to be duplicated. Limitations included the areas of the subject pool, the study instrument, and the Discourse Completion Task.

The study should be replicated with a larger and more diverse group of subjects. With only 20 Chinese ESL learners and 10 American native English speakers, one subject's response could change the final results by approximately 8%. This subject pool was largely female, with only 20% of the subjects being male. Future studies may employ ethnographic methodology so as to broaden our understanding of compliment response behaviors in natural settings.

The Discourse Completion Test as a time-efficient instrument may not be the best way to obtain authentic data. Subjects are writing, not speaking, and have the opportunity to contemplate and change their responses, something that is less possible in a naturalistic spoken setting. For this study, most subjects responded immediately, taking about 15-25 minutes to complete the DCT in the researcher's presence. However, twenty percent of subjects completed the survey outside of the researcher's presence, and many took a number of days before returning the completed task. When naturalistic data collection is not an option, future studies should adopt procedures to better control the amount of time that the subject spends completing the DCT. Another enhancement may be to produce an oral version of the DCT, in which all participants respond orally to the prompts and audio recordings are made and transcribed (Hendriks, 2002). Future studies should use DCTs with a greater number of prompts directed to each of the four topics. Kasper and Dahl (1991) suggest that when using the DCT for interlanguage speech act studies, "questionnaires with 20 items and 30 subjects per undivided sample will serve as a rough

guide" (p.16).

    Despite some limitations that might be attributed to my study, such as the employment of elicitation method or populations size, I believe that my study has further examined a particular pragmatic aspect that of compliment response production, that of, the effect of proficiency levels on compliment response strategies. Also, I believe that an accumulation of future research like this will capture a full picture of compliment response as a reflection of ESL learners' pragmatic transfer.

Appendix A

1. Age and Gender:

2. Major of study in the university/Current job

3. Is English your first language?

(If Yes, please go to Discourse Completion Task on the next page.)

4. Did you take any TOFEL or IELTS test? What is your score?

5. How many years have you studied English in the class?

6. Have you studied English outside of school? If *Yes*, please describe the specific situation:

7. What has your English study focused on? (e.g. grammar points and exercises, translation practices, listening comprehension skills, reading skills, and oral conversation practice)

8. How often do you speak English?

9. With whom do you speak English, and for what purpose?

10.   Do you consider yourself fluent in English?

11.   Length of stay in United States:

12.   Total time spent in English-speaking countries (Please specify country and

amount of time):

Appendix B

Discourse Completion Test

Directions: Please write your response in the blank area. DO NOT spend much time thinking about what right answers you should provide; instead, please try to write your response as you feel you might say it in the real situation.

    a. Appearance

1. Your friends have organized a party to celebrate the end of semester. You've dressed up for the party. Your neighbor, an American woman in her 70s, meets you in the hall way and says to you: "You look very handsome/pretty today." You reply:

2. (For female respondents) At a crowded Thanksgiving dinner party, an American male in his late 20s whom you haven't met before comes over and says to you: "The blouse looks pretty on you." You reply:

    (For male respondents) At a crowded Thanksgiving dinner party, an American female in her late 20s whom you haven't met before comes over and says to you: "You look very handsome/nice." You reply:

3. You meet a former schoolmate you have not seen for some time. After an exchange of greetings, she/he says: "Hi, haven't seen you in ages. You look great". You reply:

b. Possession

4. You are wearing a Rolex watch. A friend of yours sees it and says to you: "Wow! What a nice watch! I wish I had one like that." You reply:

5. In a Nike store, you would like to buy a pair of shoes. When you are checking out at the cashier, one sale person says to you: "You really have a cool hat on." You reply:

6. You have bought a new mobile phone. When you receive a call, you friend noticed that your phone is a different one. Having looked at it and tried some functions, s/he says: "Woe, how nifty/awesome! My cell phone doesn't do that. It's really great!" You reply:

c. Ability

7. You have helped your mother cook an elaborate dinner for some family friends, and they're pleased with how the dishes taste. After they have gone, your mother says: "Well done. The food tastes lovely. Thanks for your help." You reply:

8. You have just played in a university basketball game and scored a winning goal. Afterwards, a fellow student whom you don't know very well says to you: "Congratulations! That was a great play!" You reply:

9. Your professor just gave back your midterm report. The paper was evaluated highly. After the class, your professor meets you in the hall and says to you: "You did a brilliant job on your report. It was very well written"! You reply:

10. You are studying for a degree in French. One day, as you are walking through the town, a French tourist asks you for directions. You answer him fluently, and afterwards, the tourist says to you: "You speak excellent French!" You reply:

d. Character (Personal traits)

11. You've helped your friends (a couple) to look after their child for a whole day at your place. When they come back to pick up the child, they say: "Thank you! I really appreciate your help." You reply:

12. You are helping your landlord prepare for a Christmas party at her house. You have listed everything that needs to be done to get ready. Your landlord says to you: "Hey, you are very organized." You reply:

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