
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing EFL students' Socio-Pragmatic Competence: A Conceptual Comparative Study of Compliment Response Strategies between Jordanian and Iraqi Speakers

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ABSTRACT

In everyday conversations, people frequently use compliments as a means of interaction. Because of societal and cultural considerations, compliment behaviors vary across countries. This study examined the socio-pragmatic competence of EFL students by comparing compliment strategies between Jordanian and Iraqi speakers in an academic setting. The sample of the study includes undergraduate students at Jerash University and Knowledge University in Erbil who study in the English departments. It is a qualitative study that adopts a mixed-methods approach using two research tools, namely observation and interviews. The analytical framework used to analyze the data is proposed by Herbert's (1986,1990). The expected results aim to identify the various types of compliment responses employed by both groups. The compliment strategies mentioned in the analytical framework are acceptance, mitigation/deflection, rejection, no response, and request interpretation. This study recommends future research comparing the expected findings with students in other cultural contexts in other countries.

KEYWORDS

Compliment response strategies (CRs), Jordanians, Iraq, socio-pragmatics, academic setting

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1. Introduction

Compliments and compliment responses are investigated by many researchers of politeness and speech acts. The reason is possibly related to their major role in interactions (Pomerantz 1978; Wolfson and Manes 1980; Wolfson 1983; Holmes 1988). A speech act that expresses gratitude or thanks after receiving a compliment is known as a compliment response. The appropriate strategies to respond to compliments are specified by cultural perspectives. Compliment responses eventually play a significant role in reflecting cultural values, which are seen as a kind of respect for actions performed by others. The way that people utilize and respond to compliments varies. A compliment's delivery and response are greatly influenced by the circumstances in which it is offered.

This study examined the socio-pragmatic competence of EFL students by comparing compliment strategies between Jordanian and Iraqi speakers in an academic setting. Understanding the significance of compliment responses helps elucidate why Jordanians and Iraqis employ them in certain ways. For those giving favors, praise, or compassion, it is essential to examine both the explicit and implicit meanings articulated by students. This research addresses a problem in the cross-cultural literature on compliments by examining Jordanians' and Iraqis' compliment responses. Investigating compliment response strategies used by Jordanian and Iraqis EFL students will help students from other countries to formulate appropriate compliments when interacting with Jordanians and Iraqis, predominantly with their colleagues.

Jordanians and Iraqis are motivated to apply compliments for a multiplicity of reasons. One of them is to preserve unity among those involved. By using a compliment, the receiver wants to strengthen their social relationship with the speaker. According to Holmes (1986), compliments are given in order to foster unity and prevent any gaps that can arise from offenses between the

speaker and the recipients. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), the way a compliment is delivered might have a negative impression on the listener's emotions. One way to strengthen an interpersonal relationship is through compliments. It might be considered a positive approach to politeness. According to Pomerantz (1978), recipients could be hesitant about whether they should restrict or refrain from self-praise.

Compliments might be given for sentimental reasons. In this instance, the compliments serve to protect the speaker's face. According to Johnson and Roen (1992), the purpose of using compliments is to maintain a positive interaction with the person giving them. Furthermore, people should be kind to those who receive compliments or good work by appreciating them in general. Therefore, one of the goals of utilizing compliments with the speakers is to be courteous. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers must respect the desires of their audience and act in a way that is appropriate to them.

2. Past Studies

2.1 Past Studies on the Jordanian and Iraqi Compliment Strategies

2.1.1 Past Studies on Iraqi Compliment Strategies

Several studies have examined compliment strategies in various cultures, but few studies have compared them between Jordanian and other societies. Some of them focused on the formulation of the compliments, and others on the contextual impact on their responses. This section will highlight the most recent studies that investigated compliments in various cultures and countries, particularly between Jordanian and Iraqi societies. Concerning the effects of contextual factors, such as social distance and status, gender, and cultural values, on the pragmatic performance of Iraqi Arabic (NSIA) and Irish English (NSIrE), Al-Hilu, M. J. (2017) sought to categorize and compare the linguistic patterns used by native speakers of Iraqi Arabic (NSIA) and Irish English (NSIrE) in constructing compliments. It was revealed that pragmatic transfer, which accounts for almost half of the CRs uttered by the IEFLs, clearly manifests the strong effect of the deep-rooted native speakers' social norms in the realization of the IEFLs' strategies of CRs.

Rushin (2026) examined pragmatic failure through the compliment response strategies utilized by English-speaking Iraqi Kurdish learners (EFL). The results displayed that even while EFL students were often exposed to the target language, their compliment responses frequently did not follow English socio-pragmatic norms. Rather, they used response strategies that were originally formed in their mother tongue. Mohammed, M. J. (2014) studied how teaching English socio-pragmatic awareness has affected Iraqi EFL students' ability to respond with compliments. It is common knowledge that diverse languages and cultures have varied socio-pragmatic features of language use. The study demonstrated that the quality of compliment responses given by Iraqi EFL learners varies greatly from that of native English speakers. The findings support the hypothesis and underline the significance of teaching Iraqi EFL students about the sociocultural norms and practices of the L2 they are learning.

Sattar, H. a., & lah, s. (2008) inspected compliment responses in English among Iraqi postgraduates at USM. It was revealed that the students used different strategies in response to compliments in different situational settings. Moreover, the study proposed that second language instructors need to assist students in improving their proficiency in the proper usage of speech acts in the target language. Al-Hilu, M. J. (2022) conducted a study on the speech act of implicit complimenting from a pragmatic perspective among Iraqi Arabic native speakers. The study found that Iraqi students still need much more pragmatic teaching about the speech act of implicit complimenting to enable them to use it properly and efficiently in their interactions. Moreover, it was found that implicit compliments rarely take place in their communication. Salman & Ebadi (2015) inspected pragmatic transfer in Iraqi Arabic learners of English responding to compliments. The study showed that Iraqi learners of English transferred some expressions that are correlated to Iraqi Islamic culture into their CRs expressed in English.

2.1.2 Past Studies on Jordanian Compliment Strategies

Many previous Jordanian studies investigated compliments, but no study compared Jordanian compliments with those of Iraqis. One of the studies that examined Jordanian compliment response strategies was conducted by Al-Shboul et al. (2022). They examined the compliment response strategies used by adolescent students in Jordan to explore how gender and social power impact their compliment response strategies. The findings showed that the acceptance-compliment strategy was preferred over the non-acceptance strategy by both male and female participants. Combination and acceptance strategies were the most often employed strategies by both groups, whereas face relationship-response strategies and nonacceptance strategies were the least frequently employed. Al-Natour et al. (2025) studied compliment response strategies utilized by Jordanian students in an academic setting. The findings showed that Jordanian students used several types of compliment responses: acceptance, mitigation/deflection, rejection, non-response, and request interpretations. They employed different strategies for each type, such as thanking, downgrading, disagreement, and silence.

AlBataineh, H. (2017) investigated the pragmatics of the speech act of implicit complimenting among Jordanian people. The results of the study demonstrated how implicit compliments differ from explicit ones and that they fall under a separate category. Furthermore, the study revealed that implicit compliments prompted a variety of interactional functions that help both the addressee and the speaker. Al-Rousan & Awal (2016) examined how Jordanian university students respond to compliments. It aimed to show how Jordanians respond to compliments and look into any gender-related disparities. It was revealed that the agreement strategies were employed by receivers more frequently than the other strategies. Furthermore, the results also demonstrated that while agreement strategies were preferred over non-agreement and other interpretation strategies by both genders, female students employed them more frequently than male students.

Abu Alsallal et al. (2020) sought to ascertain how social distance and gender affected Jordanian Arabic speakers' (JAS) social compliment responses. It was revealed that males employed agreement compliment responses more than females, as (86%) of compliment responses were given by males, while (70 %) were given by females. Additionally, participants gave more agreement to compliment strategy responses in non-social situations (86%) than in social situations (68%). Al-Natour et al. (2025) examined the pragmatics of compliment responses between Omani and Jordanian students, emphasizing the similarities and differences in the ways in which they employ compliment strategies. Although the forms of their compliments may differ significantly, it was anticipated that there would be approximately distinctions and commonalities.

2.1.3 Past Studies on Sociolinguistics and Socio-Pragmatics

This section includes numerous previous studies on compliment strategies and other sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic studies that were related to Arabic and non-Arabic societies. The implicit meanings embedded within compliments were examined by Endarti, E. (2024). The complex relationship between politeness, face-saving, and emotional expression in compliment strategies is highlighted by the shift from overt to covert communication. Yang, S. (2024) inspected pragmatic transfer in compliment responses among Chinese college EFL learners. The study found that Chinese college EFL learners and native American English speakers use different strategies when responding to compliments. This finding advocated that pragmatic transfer is challenging to avoid, as Chinese and American cultures are guided by distinct pragmatic norms and politeness principles. Ed-deraouy Sana (2024) examined pragmatic competencies in the interlanguage of Moroccan EFL learners, concentrating on the speech acts of requests, apologies, and compliment responses. The study recommended more explicit and targeted instruction in interlanguage pragmatics in the Moroccan EFL educational setting to better prepare students for authentic interactions. Building on the theme of online communication, Derakhshan & Shakki (2024) inspected compliment norms and patterns in both face-to-face and online contexts. This comparative approach delivers a valuable framework for understanding how diverse communication modes impact compliment behavior. They stated that in both settings, explicit and formulaic compliments are utilized more frequently than implicit and non-formulaic ones.

While Derakhshan & Shakki focused on explicit compliments, Hasan Almansoob & Munassar Awadh (2024) examined the appropriateness of the translations by Badawi and Ramiz of the speech act of compliments in the Shakespearean play 'King Lear'. The findings showed many similarities between the original version of the play and the TTs. 75% of Ramzi's translations and 65% of Badawi's translations appeared to match the original contexts in preserving the function of the speech act of compliment in the selected 20 texts. This advocated that both translators successfully captured the distinctions of Shakespeare's language, allowing the essence of the compliments to resonate with modern audiences. However, further analysis may be needed to explore the stylistic choices that led to the observed alterations in their translations.

Al-Natour, M., & Banat, S. (2023) examined the politeness strategies employed by undergraduate students when interacting with their professors through WhatsApp messages. They discovered that the students employed various types of politeness strategies in their communication with their professors on WhatsApp. The results highlighted the importance of preserving a respectful tone in digital communication, signifying that students are aware of the hierarchical dynamics in their relationships with professors. This perception may impact their choice of language and formality in their messages, sparking broader cultural norms surrounding respect and the level of imposition that they need to take into account while they interact with others. Moalla, A. (2013) endeavored to compare features of discourse and sociolinguistic competence among speakers of American English (AE) and Tunisian learners of English concerning the communicative act of compliment response (CR). The study showed that the most commonly used strategy among the American participants was accepting. The study discovered that CRs can be placed between accepting the compliment (59%) and mitigating it (36%). Al-Natour et al.'s (2024) study examined the positive politeness strategies used by English professors towards their students. They revealed that the professors preferred to employ eight positive politeness strategies with their students. The positive politeness strategy was the most favored strategy because, generally, it is used to inspire students to feel comfortable and participate in class. It reduces the distance between the professors and their students, making them feel closer to one another.

Compliments judges gave to competitors on the TV talent program Arab Idol investigated by Migdadi et al. (2024). The results showed that four categories of positive semantic carriers, adjectives, verbs, nouns, and adverbs, as well as three syntactic patterns, underpinned the majority of the judges' explicit compliments.

Abdikarimova et al. (2024) inspected the use of compliments in English by Kyrgyz learners. This study provided a practical perspective on how learners employ compliments in real-world interaction, shifting from spoken compliments to the digital realm. According to the results of Duwila et al.'s (2024) study, evaluation or appreciation compliment strategies were used commonly by men with women. The patriarchal system in Indonesia does not serve as a barrier for Indonesian women to actively participate in politics. Men appreciate and respect women who establish competence and good traits. Al-Natour et al. (2025) scrutinized the congratulatory strategies written in the graduation notebooks for undergraduate students at Jerash University. The study revealed that the students clearly used several congratulatory strategies, including congratulatory statements, happiness clauses, compliments, good wishes, and the ability to attach presents. Zhuang, J. C., & He, Y. (2020) revealed that macro strategies (i.e., acceptance, refusal, and in betweenness) and, by implication, micro strategies (e.g., upgrade) vestige on identities depending on context. Saadati, S., & Vefali, G. M. (2021) examined developing EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness of complimenting. They discovered that the language learners' understanding of compliments and responses to compliments appeared to indicate that their pragmatic development was inadequate; it also suggested the impact of the native socio-pragmatic schema on their pragmatic performance.

Kurita, H. (2024) examined how Japanese and American women who belong to Generation Z can react differently to compliments, taking into account the effect of the compliment's topic as well as the person's gender. It was revealed that both American and Japanese participants accepted nearly all of the compliments with gratitude, with little variation in micro strategies and no difference in macro strategies. Alsuhaibani, Z. (2022) inspected the consequences of consciousness-raising instruction and corpus-based instruction on EFL (English as a foreign language) students' development of compliment responses. The study proved the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction of compliment responses through both consciousness-raising instruction and corpus-based instruction. Moving from instructional interventions to the practical application of compliments, Ruytenbee & Vanderhasselt (2024) exposed the role of evaluative language in online compliments and complaints. This study emphasized the increasing importance of comprehending how compliments function in online communication and their influence on readers. Al-Natour et al. (2024) examined the usage of terms of address by Jordanian students from a sociolinguistic view. This study revealed that employing terms of address in the Jordanian students' interaction was preferred. They liked to use them to soften their speech with others. Moreover, they considered that utilizing them saved the face of the hearers. Solodka, A., & Perea, L. (2018) in their research elucidated how native speakers tend to compliment people: syntactical structure of expressions, cultural lexicon, attributes praised, and language context. Alharbi et al. (2024) studied how Saudi females from two generations respond to compliments in an educational setting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). They concluded that both groups of participants sought to accept compliments, while there was a tendency to question the sincerity of compliments. Gender and social power dynamics in compliment responses among university students in Indonesia and Pakistan were investigated by Bibi, F., & Sartini, N. W. (2023). They discovered that Indonesian students were involved in the cultural values of modesty and social harmony. The results showed a preference for acceptance and amendment strategies. In contrast with Pakistani students, they displayed a higher tendency for no acceptance and no acknowledgment strategies, alongside acceptance and amendment strategies.

2.2 Analytical Framework

This study adopted Herbert's (1986,1990) analytical framework. He divided the compliment response strategies into five types in terms of acceptance, mitigation/deflection, rejection, no response, and request Interpretation. Under part one of these types, there are various strategies. All of these types and strategies are explained in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Herbert's (1986,1990) Analytical framework for the compliment response strategies

NO.	Types of Compliments	Strategies
1	Acceptance	Appreciation Token
		Agreement by means of a comment
		Upgrading the praise
2	Mitigation/Deflection	Account about history
		Shifting the credit
		Question
		Returning
		Downgrading

3	Rejection	Disagreeing
4	No Response	silence
5	Request Interpretation	Pardon, I do not understand

There are five compliment response types CRs which are acceptance, mitigation/deflection, rejection, no response, and request interpretation, and some of these types have more than one strategy, as Herbert's (1986,1990) stated in the above table. More explanation for these types is as follows:

- 1- **Acceptance.** Under this type, there are three sub-strategies, which are appreciation token, agreement by means of a comment, and upgrading the praise. The following examples illustrate each one of them:
 - a. Appreciation token: *'thank you/ thanks'*.
 - b. Agreement: by means of a comment can be implemented by saying *'Yeah, I like it, too'*.
 - c. Upgrading the praise: an example for this strategy is by saying *'Yeah, I can play football well too'* for
- 2- **Mitigation/deflection.** Under this type, there are four sub-strategies, which are:
 - a. Account about history: *'bring it from USA'*.
 - b. Shifting the credit: it can be illustrated by saying *'My father gave it to me'*.
 - c. Question strategy: which can be indicated by saying *'You look nice, too'*.
 - d. Returning: when someone says "Your jacket looks great," the returning response strategy is employed by saying: "Thanks, yours looks fantastic too."
 - e. Downgrading, which can be implemented by saying *'It's really quite old'*.
- 3- **Rejection.** It consists of one strategy, which is:
 - a. Disagreeing: An example for this strategy is *'A: You look good and healthy. B: I feel fat.'*
- 4- **No response:** It can occur by keeping silent without saying anything.
- 5- **Request interpretation.** An example of this strategy is saying *'Pardon, I do not understand'*.

These compliment response strategies CRs that could appear in the data will be categorized based on the main types and their strategies as mentioned in the above analytical framework. They will be itemized and sorted to be analyzed sufficiently.

3 Methodology

Recognizing these strategies required a detailed analysis of the terms and expressions that the students employ when they communicate with each other. The researcher preferred to use qualitative tools in the form of observation and semi-structured interviews. More details about these instruments will be provided. As this research is a qualitative study that sought to identify compliment response strategies, it seeks to conduct an in-depth analysis of participants' responses to delve into their exact meaning. The next section provides more information about the participant in this research.

3.1 Participants

The study involved approximately 100 undergraduate students from the English departments of Jerash University in Jordan and Knowledge University in Erbil, evenly split between the two institutions. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, meaning no new information emerged from additional participants, as defined by Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020).

3.2 Instruments

This study applied a mixed-methods approach, employing observation and semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments. Observations focused on student interactions during lectures and in office settings to identify compliment response strategies. Following Musante and DeWalt's (2010) guidelines, researchers distinguished regular from irregular activities, explored the rationale behind behaviors, noted exceptions, and organized systematic observations to capture events from various perspectives.

A semi-structured interview was utilized as another instrument in this research. Following Creswell & Creswell's (2017) definition of qualitative data, information was gathered from purposefully selected informants. The researcher adopted scenarios from Rabab'ah (2024), but three of the ten originally selected situations were discarded after review by three experts. Consequently, seven situations were chosen for the interviews, in which students were asked to imagine themselves in these scenarios and explain compliment response strategies in those contexts. The students were asked verbally to imagine themselves in those situations to deliver compliment response strategies they use in their real communication.

3.3 Data collection

In this study, the researcher employed two methods to achieve the research objectives. The first method involved semi-structured interviews with students, where they were asked to envision specific situations and explain their responses to gather their compliment response strategies. The researcher documented participants' reactions and observed their behaviors during lectures and in office encounters, noting their communication strategies. Following data collection, the researcher categorized the students' compliment strategies according to Herbert's (1986,1990) analytical framework, analyzing each strategy utilized by the students.

Several procedures are followed to collect the data. The researcher commenced by contacting participants to explain the purpose and ensure voluntary participation, with a guarantee of data confidentiality. After obtaining their consent, participants explained compliment response strategies based on interview scenarios, which were then classified and coded. The text's authenticity regarding wording and structure was carefully examined. Data preparation involved a thorough reading of each compliment to identify patterns in phrases, politeness, and language use. Contextual factors, such as communication dynamics and formality, were also considered to enrich the understanding of the pragmatic meanings of the compliments and linguistic choices.

4 Conclusion

This study examines the compliment response strategies of Jordanian and Iraqi students, applying a mixed-method approach involving observation and semi-structured interviews with 100 participants from Jerash and Knowledge universities. It aims to identify the preferred compliment strategies of both groups and to analyze the similarities and differences in their use within academic interactions. The influence of gender and social factors on these strategies is also expected to be significant. Future research is recommended to further explore the cultural and traditional influences on the students' compliment strategies.

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