Formal Instruction on the Speech Act[1] of Giving and Responding to Compliments

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Abstract

This paper introduces instructional techniques on the speech act of giving and responding to compliments for intermediate learners in a second language context in the U.S. The instruction utilized relevant research literature and included awareness-raising activities where learners compared their L1 complimenting behavior. The instruction also facilitated learners' outside-of-class observation and interaction with other speakers of English. Learners collected their own notebook data by giving appropriate compliments considering contextual factors. Thirty-one adult learners enrolled in a university ESL program participated in the instruction which was integrated into the oral skills curriculum. The paper also describes learners' response to the instruction and reports their enhanced awareness and performance over an extended period of time.

Introduction

Use of language is so closely and uniquely tied to the culture and often rules of speaking vary across languages. According to these implicit cultural rules, we constantly alter our language use depending on the situation and the interlocutor. For example, not only are compliments and compliment responses linguistically different, but when and where compliments are used, who gives compliments, who receives them, and what is complimented on vary across cultures. With such complexity, sociocultural or pragmatic use of language is a challenging area for language learners. Without varying language use according to the situation, a second language speaker could totally fail to communicate their intentions, even with a good grasp of grammar and lexical items. Although faulty grammar or mispronunciation

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[1] Speech acts are speech functions that are realized by way of words (Yule, 1996). They are functional units in communication such as apologies, requests, complaints, invitations, and compliments. This study attempts to investigate not merely the single speech act of complimenting but rather include responses to compliments in sequences of interactions. Compliments and responses to compliments are a set of communicative acts that serves a particular function consisting of sets of strategies (i.e., speech act *set*, Cohen, 1996).

is usually tolerated, pragmatic failure is unlikely to be excused. Wrong use of the language results in a negative interpretation of the second language speaker as arrogant, impatient, unfriendly, distant, and so forth, and it often leads to ethnic stereotypes.

At the same time pragmatics, or language use in its context, is one of the most complex and thus challenging areas for instructors to teach in a language classroom. Is pragmatics teachable in the classroom, and is it learnable for the students? A growing number of interventional studies in interlanguage pragmatics has investigated effects of formal instruction on pragmatics. Do learners benefit from such instruction? And if indeed they do, which teaching methods are more effective? Rose and Kasper (2001) discuss overall advantages of instructed group over uninstructed group among past interventional studies, and the effectiveness of formal instruction on pragmatics seems to have been established. Some of the teaching techniques involve: conscious learning and noticing (Schmidt, 1993), awareness-raising and observational tasks (Hinkel, 1994; Kasper, 1997). Some studies compare effectiveness of instructional techniques, such as implicit and explicit approaches. Although learners improved in pragmatic ability with either approach, the explicit instruction generally appeared to be more effective than the implicit approach (Kasper, 1997). Rose and Kwai-fun (2001) examine the effects of inductive and deductive instruction on learners' performance in compliments and compliment responses. The findings indicated an improvement in the utilization of compliment formulas by learners instructed with both approaches, while only the deductive group approximated native norms in the use of response strategies. They conclude that inductive and deductive instruction might both assist in pragmalinguistic[2] improvement, although only the deductive approach may lead to sociopragmatic[2] development.

Although pragmatic rules of language can be taught in the language classroom, they are difficult to articulate or generalize even for teachers, both native and nonnative. As language teachers often notice and some literature suggests (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, Harford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991; Boxer &

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[2] The terms *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic* are based on Thomas' distinction between the two types of pragmatic failure: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. The former is basically a linguistic problem which occurs as a result of misunderstanding the intended illocutionary force of an utterance. The latter results from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior (Thomas, 1983, p. 99)

Pickering, 1995), few ESL/EFL textbooks reflect natural use of the language. However, some pragmatic or cultural aspects of language have been discovered through empirical studies on speech acts. This paper provides linguistic and sociocultural descriptions of the speech act of compliments and compliment responses in American English, and how these can be taught in an English as a Second Language classroom. Based on empirical data on compliments and compliment responses in American English in literature, a set of materials was created and taught. The ways in which adult intermediate ESL learners actually responded to such instruction will be described.

The immediate and delayed effects of classroom instruction on the speech act in that particular classroom will also be briefly reported in this paper. Since there have been few longitudinal studies examining effects of such formal instruction over time (e.g., Billmyer, 1990; Kubota, 1995; Lyster, 1994; Morrow, 1996), this study is intended to contribute to the existing body of research in interlanguage pragmatics.

Literature Review

Since the classroom instruction given in this study is based on empirical speech act research, relevant literature will be reviewed in this section. Compliments and responses to compliments are among the most investigated speech acts, along with apologies, requests, and refusals. Compliments not only express sincere admiration of positive qualities, but they also replace greetings, thanks, or apologies, and minimize face-threatening acts, such as criticism, scolding, or requests (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988, and Wolfson, 1983, 1989). Complimenting is a tool of establishing friendship that creates ties of solidarity in U.S. culture. It also is an important social strategy that functions as an opener for a conversation, allowing meaningful social interactions to follow. Americans pay compliments so frequently that neglecting to do so can even be interpreted as a sign of disapproval (Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1989, Wolfson & Manes, 1980) and a wrong use of compliments may cause embarrassment and offense (Dunham, 1992; Holmes & Brown, 1987).

Manes and Wolfson (1981) collected 686 naturally occurring compliments and found them to be extremely formulaic. The data were gathered from middle-class Americans, male and female of varying ages and occupational/educational backgrounds. Eighty-five percent of the compliments used one of the first three syntactic categories below and 97% fell into the nine categories (pp. 120-121).

1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ. (Your blouse is beautiful.)

2. I (really) like/love NP. (I like your car.)

3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP. (That's a nice wall hanging.)

4. You V (a) (really) ADJ NP. (You did a good job.)

5. You V (NP) (really) ADV. (You really handled that situation well.)

6. You have (a) ADJ NP! (You have such beautiful hair!)

7. What (a) ADJ NP! (What a lovely baby you have!)

8. ADJ NP!   (Nice game!)

9. Isn't NP ADJ? (Isn't your ring beautiful?)

Since compliments typically initiate a conversation or are independent of the previous topic, the use of deixis was prevalent to identify the referent of the compliment unambiguously (Manes & Wolfson, 1981).   The majority of the compliments (70%) utilized second person pronouns (You look great) or demonstratives (That's a nice hat). Otherwise, the complimented object was clear from the context (You bought a new jacket? It's a great color) verbally or non-verbally.   Identification of the referent was crucial and the deixis in compliments seemed to serve an important function in this role.

With regard to the topic of the compliment, three major categories have been identified in American English: appearance or possessions, abilities or accomplishments, and personality traits of the interlocutors (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Nelson, El Bakary, & Al Batal, 1993). Compliment topics reflect what is culturally considered admirable in society. Positive remarks are offered regarding some attributes that are noticeably different such as newness and weight loss in mainstream American culture (i.e., "noticings", Hatch, 1992).   Whereas compliments on appearance or possessions can be given relatively freely regardless of the status of the interlocutors, those on abilities or accomplishments are more restricted in their distribution. It is generally supposed that speakers in higher positions are capable of evaluating the performance of those of lower status, thus utilizing compliments as positive reinforcement (Wolfson, 1989). There has also been a large body of research on gender difference in complimenting (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1989).

Similarly, studies of American responses to compliments have in large part uncovered cultural norms shared by the society.   Although appreciation of compliments (Thanks) is often recommended as the most appropriate and graceful response in etiquette books, the majority of responses was found to employ self-praise avoidance strategies (Pomerantz, 1978). Drawing on Pomerantz (1978),

Billmyer (1990) grouped responses to compliments into three categories for instructional purposes: acceptance, deflection, and rejection. The repertoire of deflection types consisted of the following behaviors: commenting on the history of the referent (I got it at Macy's), shifting credit away from self (A friend of mine gave it to me), downgrading the compliment (It's not all that expensive), questioning the compliment or requesting reassurance (Do you really think so?), and returning a compliment (Your bike looks great, too) (pp. 36, 42).

The empirical distribution of American response types has also been reported. Simple acceptance of the compliment, or an appreciation token (Thank you) occurred in 29% of all compliment responses in Herbert (1989, 1990), Herbert and Straight (1989), and Nelson et al. (1996), and 30% in Chen (1993). In Nelson et al. (1996), nearly half of the compliments were deflected and few were rejected. Rejection of compliments tended to occur much less frequently due to its potential face-threatening nature (Knapp et al., 1984; Nelson et al., 1996).

Compliments and responses to compliments in other languages and other varieties of English have been researched as well and revealed a number of discrepancies in complimenting behavior across cultures (see Barnlund & Araki, 1985; Han, 1992; Creese, 1991; Daikuhara, 1986; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Nelson, et al, 1996; Ye, 1995). Learners' transferring their first language pragmatic rules could induce instances of embarrassment or offense in interactions with native English speakers. In an attempt to minimize potential misunderstanding and communication breakdown caused by negative transfer or a pragmatic gap on the part of the learners, classroom instruction has been implemented. The following are the goals of the classroom instruction, the participants, and the procedure.

Classroom Instruction

Goals of Instruction

(1) To increase ESL learners' exposure to giving and responding to compliments in natural/naturalistic settings and provide pragmalinguistic practice in and outside the classroom.

At one point, the instruction required learners to collect American compliment responses outside the classroom. This provided learners with an opportunity to observe and analyze both linguistic and social aspects of the model as if they were ethnographers (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991). Learners engaged in real conversations performing the target speech act and were simultaneously exposed to the authentic input of their interlocutors. Such input was the most relevant to

individual learners' realistic use of language, and thus the most appropriate model for the learners.

(2) To raise learners' pragmatic awareness

Since realistically speaking, it is impossible to teach everything that learners need to know, classroom instruction should equip learners with the tools and the motivation necessary to facilitate their further learning outside the classroom. The importance of cognitive awareness of social use of language is also discussed in a number of studies (Holmes and Brown, 1987; Judd, 1999; Kasper, 1997; Kasper and Schmidt, 1996).

(3) To assist learners in expressing themselves through the speech act

Pragmatic use of language involves both linguistic and sociocultural representation of learners' intentions. It is required of a teacher to provide accurate information on the way the speech act set is performed by native speakers and to provide sufficient linguistic practice, but then it should be left to the learners to decide whether or not to adopt such target culture norms. Classroom instruction should assist learners in conveying what they wish to communicate in the form of comfortable self-expression, and not impose native norms on the learners. As Thomas (1983) stated:

> It is the teacher's job to equip the student to express her/him in exactly the way s/he chooses to do so --- rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborate polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being unintentionally rude or subservient (p. 96).

Learners

The instruction was administered to two groups, representing 31 intermediate international students from 20 countries enrolled in an intensive ESL program at the University of Minnesota. The first group consisted of 13 learners, four males and nine females from 10 countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Cameroon, France, Mexico, Brazil, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Myanmar). The second group contained 18 learners, 13 males and five females, representing 13 countries (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Senegal, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Russia, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan). Their time in the United States prior to the instruction varied from several weeks to three years. The class discussions, activities, and assignments were integrated into the curriculum of a regular oral skills course, taking approximately 200 minutes of total class time.

Classroom Instruction Procedure

In planning classroom activities, empirical research findings and analysis from Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Wolfson (1989) were utilized. Classroom instructional methods of teaching compliments and responses to compliments were adapted from Billmyer (1990) and Dunham (1992). Classroom observation of the learners and their feedback will also be reported in the following section.

Stage I. Introduction: Day 1

The purpose of this introduction was to assess learners' initial pragmatic competence in and awareness of giving and responding to compliments and to motivate them to learn pragmatic use of language. Initially, learners were asked to think about some of the most challenging aspects of learning English. While some grammar points were enumerated, no one pointed out pragmatic aspects. They were astounded to hear that acquiring native-like functional skills would normally take approximately ten years in an ESL setting. This initial discussion contained a shock factor, motivating the learners to speed up the learning process so that it would not take them as long.

Second, in order to introduce the concepts of compliment and flattery, a sample dialogue of complimenting behavior was modeled and such vocabulary and related concepts as compliment, flatter, brown nose, apple polish, and butter up were taught. Then, learners individually worked on the pre-instructional inventory as the pre-test.

Stage II. Student Research

This portion of the instruction was designed to inform learners of ethnographic research and to familiarize them with a set of findings from Manes and Wolfson (1981). In addition, the aim was to motivate them to observe native English speakers' complimenting behavior. First, the forms of American compliments (Manes and Wolfson, 1981) were introduced. The nine most frequently occurring syntactic categories of compliments were laid out and the learners were informed that 85% of the compliments consisted of the first three categories and 97% employed the nine categories. Learners practiced giving compliments in pairs using these syntactic categories.

Then, the class discussed findings on the influence of gender and status of the interlocutors in speech act realizations. This discussion motivated the learners to collect notebook data for themselves to verify these findings as of today in a

college environment in Minnesota. The learners were to compliment at least three speakers of American English outside of class to record their own compliments and their interlocutors' responses. Note pads were distributed to the learners for this purpose and they later copied their notes onto handouts to be submitted. In offering a compliment, learners were advised to be mindful of appropriate topics in relation to the gender of the addressee in each interaction. Although a few learners reported awkwardness in doing this assignment, they generally enjoyed experimenting and learned the importance of being sincere in giving compliments. This initial learner involvement was designed to raise learners' pragmatic awareness, provide authentic linguistic input, and create a learner-centered class. Since complimenting could also be easily and naturally initiated by learners, they practiced it with other speakers within the natural course of conversation. Some of the learners mentioned that they continued to give compliments beyond this assignment. The class reviewed these written interactions repeatedly during subsequent class sessions in discussing different aspects of compliments.

Stage III. Awareness of Contextual Variables and Practice: Day 2

The purpose of this stage was to make learners aware of contexual variables in giving and responding to compliments and to have them analyze their own data. The class reviewed nine most frequently occurring syntactic categories and learners identified the categories used in their own complimenting assignment from Stage II. Manes and Wolfson's findings on gender and relative status of the interlocutors were discussed again and learners analyzed their own data in terms of such variables. Although the learner data did not include diversity in terms of interlocutors' age and status, learners discussed these variables and took them into consideration in determining appropriateness of their own complimenting interactions.

Finally, sincerity and spontaneity in giving compliments were considered and learners determined the appropriateness of their own recalled interactions, taking into account the contextual variables, compliment topic, and sincerity in the interactions.

Stage IV. Pragmatic Insights: Optional Homework

This optional assignment was given to sharpen learners' insights on complimenting behavior. The handout included excerpts about positive values of mainstream Americans (Wolfson, 1983). This assignment was collected and feedback was given in writing, as well as discussed briefly in class for the benefit of the whole

class.

Stage V. Responses to Compliments: Day 3

This section was designed to teach learners a variety of strategies for responding to compliments.   Learners practiced not only accepting but also deflecting compliments.   First, the data collection assignment was returned to the learners with good examples marked, which were role-played between the learners.

Second, short sample complimenting interactions were demonstrated to stimulate the learners' powers of observation, and four self-praise avoidance strategies were taught inductively.   Such strategies included: downgrading the compliment, questioning the compliment, shifting the credit away from themselves, and returning a compliment (Billmyer, 1990).   Learners shared some more written interactions from their data collection assignments and the class identified the responding strategies used in the interactions.

Finally, learners practiced giving and responding to compliments in a mingling activity.   They formed two concentric circles, each one facing a partner.   One complimented the other and the other responded.   Then, the outer circle rotated and each student had a new partner, repeated the process, and switched roles after practicing sufficiently (see Figure 1 below).   In this activity, the learners were advised not always to accept compliments, but to express themselves in the most comfortable manner using the newly learned deflection strategies.   This activity functioned as an effective springboard for even more learner-initiated practice. After this activity, some learners were occasionally heard complimenting each other partly in jest and partly seriously before and after class time.

Figure 1. Mingling activity for giving and responding to compliments
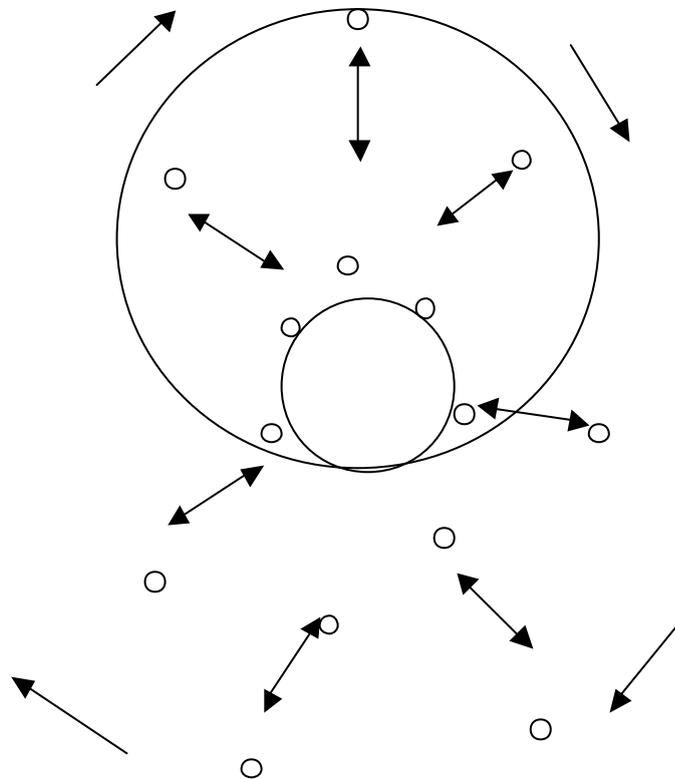
Stage VI. Compliments as a Conversation Opener: Day 4

This section was intended to discuss another function of complimenting as a conversation opener.   A sample of a prolonged conversation among family members was role-played, during which the learners looked at the written dialogue on the handout and highlighted the rapidly shifting topics of the interaction. Through this activity, the learners identified another function of complimenting as a conversation opener.   They also practiced in pairs opening a conversation with a compliment and sustaining the interaction.

Stage VII. Closing

This closing was to assess learners' post-instructional production of compliments and compliment responses, to receive their feedback about the instruction, and to probe their level of pragmatic awareness, confidence, and motivation toward learning speech acts.   Learners completed the post-instructional inventory individually. The final item on the inventory included a list of nine other speech acts, which were explained to the learners who indicated their interest in learning them.

The Immediate and Delayed Effects of Formal Instruction

The learners' performance in and awareness of giving and responding to compliments were measured before, during, and immediately after the instruction. In addition, the subset of 10 learners took the delayed post-test for the assessment of the long-term effects of the instruction[3]. The learners' pragmatic performance was evaluated through their written dialogues for: (1) the length (the number of turns), (2) syntactic categories of the compliment, and (3) response strategies. Learners' awareness was analyzed in terms of: the extent to which learners noticed the existence of culturally-bound rules in the target language, their attention to pragmatic use of the target language, and the understanding they gained of their own pragmatic ability.

Pragmatic Performance of the Speech Act

As the instruction progressed, learners produced longer and longer written complimenting dialogues. Although learners' imagined interactions were fairly short and simple prior to the instruction (1.9 turns), the average length of the written dialogues increased during instruction (2.8 turns) and after instruction (5.4 turns), and even more so in the delayed post-test (7.8 turns). In real life, such a skill would probably prove helpful in developing interactions smoothly and establishing solidarity with an interlocutor.

Moreover, learners also utilized newly learned syntactic structures of compliments, and distribution of learners' first three most-frequently-occurring syntactic categories approximated the native norm (31%, 51%, and 67% respectively in pre-, post-, and delayed post-tests). This is a developmental pattern similar to that reported in Rose and Kwai-fun (2001). Additionally, before instruction nearly half of the compliments employed the shortest and simplest category (Category #8, Nice game), while 15% did not fall into Manes and Wolfson's (1981) nine syntactic categories, some of which included some deviant features. Once the syntactic categories were taught, however, deviations rarely occurred. Also, after instruction far fewer learners preferred Category #8, whereas most demonstrated their abilities to use various other categories.

Analysis of distributions of compliment responses revealed that the repertoire

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[3] This paper gives only a brief overview of the effects of instruction. For a more complete report of the findings and limitations of this case study, see Ishihara (forthcoming).

of the learners' response strategies was expanded. Prior to the instruction, 40% of the responses simply accepted compliments, while 33% already employed deflection strategies, and 10% extended the conversation up to six turns, commenting on the history of the object. Some creative responses to compliments on appearance that were sociopragmatically deviant from American norms were found in the data (e.g., "Keep liking" and "Thanks, I'll try be better").

Although initially as many as 40% of the learners simply accepted the compliment just by saying thank you, once they learned other ways to handle compliments, the vast majority hardly opted for that strategy any more. Instead, they preferred the newly learned deflection strategies, especially downgrading (26%) and shifting credit (29%) in the post-test, and downgrading (47%), and commenting on history (37%) in the delayed post-test. One year after the instruction, learners only marginally used other deflection strategies. Although learners may have largely forgotten the other response strategies over time, they appeared to have maintained central linguistic skills and response strategies.

Pragmatic Awareness

To assess learners' pragmatic awareness, learners' written assignments and feedback were examined to determine the extent to which learners noticed the culturally-bound rules in the L2, their attention to pragmatic use, and understanding they gained of their pragmatic ability. At the start of the instruction, some learners were concerned not only about what to say to give compliments in English, but also about how to appropriately interpret and respond to compliments. Some learners expressed awkwardness in responding to compliments that were rare in their countries. Still others were already aware of the culturally-specific nature of compliments but did not articulate in what way giving and responding to compliments differ in their first and second languages.

The instruction also seemed to have enhanced learners' awareness of appropriate complimenting topics. Although most of the learners had a good grasp of which compliment topics were appropriate and which were not, during the instruction a few learners' compliments on a lipstick color and eye color facilitated a discussion on appropriate and inappropriate compliment topics in American culture. Such compliments from a male to a female would probably be acceptable in Spanish interactions termed as "piropos," or flirtatious remarks (Campo & Zuluaga, 2000). However, if delivered from a male to a female, compliments on beautiful eyes or a color of lipstick could carry unintended romantic connotations in American culture.

Therefore, learners were warned against such potentially inappropriate topics. In post- and delayed-post tests, such risky topics were no longer found in the learners' written dialogues.

Through several activities and discussions, learners were also made aware of contextual variables such as interlocutor's gender and relative status that might influence use of compliments and responses to compliments. Before instruction, most learners already correctly guessed that women, rather than men, tended to be recipients of compliments from both men and women. However, some of them guessed from their native language norms that compliments tended to be given by those of lower rank to those of higher rank, such as employees to bosses, students to teachers, and players to coaches, which is often not the case in American English.

Learners also indicated a higher level of confidence in giving and responding to compliments in English after instruction. While 62% of the learners reported that they were not at all or not always comfortable with giving and responding to compliments in the pre-test, in the post-test 86% reported their increased sense of comfort with the speech act. Along with this enhanced sense of comfort, learners commented that through class discussions and practice, they had learned about the culturally-specific nature of compliments and American norms in giving and responding to compliments. To quote one of the comments verbatim:

I feel more comfortable to give compliments because now I know how I can give compliments and to which people I can give it. Americans with lower status don't give compliments to people with higher status that is normal in my country and for me. This is one of the many things that I learned.

On a final note, the vast majority of the learners exhibited an extremely high level of interest in learning other speech acts such as apologies, requests, refusals, condolences, complaints, and thanks. All of them indicated their interest in learning multiple speech acts, and no one indicated lack of interest. This fact shows that instruction in speech acts is probably much needed from the learners' perspective. Pragmatic use of the target language may be taught rarely in the present-day second language classroom despite learners' interest and desire.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed instructional techniques on the speech act of giving and responding to compliments for intermediate learners in a second language context.

The instruction utilized relevant research literature, featuring awareness-raising activities and learners' outside-of-class observation and interaction with other speakers of English. The preliminary findings have indicated that the instruction probably facilitated learners' improvement not only in terms of performance, but also awareness of giving and responding to compliments. One year after instruction, some of the skills and strategies (i.e., utilizing less common syntactic categories for compliments and other deflection strategies) were marginally used and might have been largely forgotten. However, the learners appeared to have maintained central skills and strategies such as: giving compliments on appropriate topics, utilizing syntactically nativelike compliments, using downgrading and commenting on history response strategies, and developing conversation utilizing compliments. These preliminary analyses lend support to past studies which have documented positive effects of classroom instruction in pragmatics and provide further evidence that such positive impact can last over an extended period of time.

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