

Compliment Responses across Gender: Moroccan University EFL Learners as a Case Study

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Abstract

Compliment response is among the most common speech acts used in everyday conversations. Recipients' responses to compliments differ depending on distinct social variables, including power, the degree of intimacy, social distance, culture and gender. The current study investigates Compliment Responses (henceforth, CRs) among Moroccan male and female university EFL learners based on four topics of compliments (ability, character, possession and appearance). Thence, the present paper aims to explore the most frequent CR strategies used by Moroccan male and female university EFL learners. Besides, it endeavors to find out the differences between the two groups in CRs. 50 female and 50 male university EFL learners from Sultan Moulay Slimane University took part in the present study, epitomizing higher education population. In order to attain the required data for the study, discourse completion test (DCT) was used and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages) and inferential statistics (Independent T-test) based on Herbert's (1989) classification of CRs. Results of the study revealed that the most frequent CR strategies used by Moroccan male and female university EFL learners at the macro level are agreement strategies; however, the most frequent CR strategies used by the two groups at the micro level are appreciation token, praise upgrade and return strategies, wherein females showed a great tendency towards the use of praise upgrade and return strategies, while males were more inclined to the use of appreciation token strategy. Furthermore, the study results showed that there is a great consonance between Moroccan male and female university EFL learners in CRs at the macro level, whereas there is a significant difference between the two groups at the micro level in all situations except for character.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence has become the primary focus of second language acquisition, the main objective of second and foreign language teaching and learning, and the chief concern of EFL learners. Given that communicative competence plays a major role in EFL learning and teaching, the unawareness of one of its components may hamper the language learning process.

According to Bachman (1990), communicative competence is composed of two broad components, each of which comprises two distinct sub-components, namely organizational competence, which encompasses grammatical and textual competence and pragmatic competence, which entails illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence.

There seems to be a broad agreement that pragmatic competence consists of two different interrelated subcomponents: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. According to Leech (1983, pp.10-11), “pragmalinguistics constitutes the more linguistic end of pragmatics, whereas sociopragmatics refers to the sociological interface of pragmatics”. Accordingly, considering that pragmalinguistics constitutes the linguistic aspect of pragmatics and sociopragmatics entails its sociological aspect, EFL learners’ effective pragmatic performance requires both the awareness of the linguistic rules and familiarity with the socio-cultural norms governing a specific culture.

A number of scholars have classified compliment speech act under different categories. While Austin (1962) lists the speech act of 'compliment' within the class of behabatives, Searle (1979) classifies it within the category of expressive. In the classification of illocutionary acts functions, Leech (1983) places compliments in the convivial category through which politeness takes a more positive form of seeking opportunities for comity. The compliment is viewed as a positive politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory because it shows that the complimenter knows the complimentee's wants and interests.

The subject of CRs has been studied in different contexts, including Iran (Sarkhosh, 2022), Indonesia (Dirgayasa, 2022), Turkey (Bas, 2021), Poland (Hiliker et al., 2021), Yemen (Al-Ghamdi et al., 2019) Thailand (Suteerapongsit, 2020) and Singapore (Leng, 2015). Nevertheless, it has been disregarded in the Moroccan context. Even though CRs have been studied in other Arabic-speaking contexts such as Jordan (AL-shboul et al., 2022), Iraq (Al-Rickaby, 2022), Egypt and Saudi Arabia (El-dakhs, 2021), Saudi Arabia (ALqarni, 2020) and Jordan (Al-Roussan et al., 2016), findings of such studies cannot be applied to other Arabic-speaking contexts. The current study seeks to raise awareness about the differences between Moroccan female and male university EFL learners in CRs. Besides, it explores a new culture and speech community by investigating how Moroccan male and female university EFL learners respond to compliments. Therefore, this research fills a gap by adding a study of Moroccan-based CRs to the cross-cultural literature on compliments.

The significance of this study, therefore, springs from many reasons. First, CRs are among the most common speech acts used in everyday conversations. Second, they play a crucial communicative role. Third, the study intends to demonstrate that gender differences in language exist not only at the lexical and syntactic levels, but also at the pragmatic level. Furthermore, this study will further inform research in the field of sociopragmatics. Last but not least, the study findings are hoped to provide students with strategies that can help them respond properly to people's compliments, facilitating the teaching process and refining students' communicative competence.

Accordingly, the current study investigates CRs among Moroccan male and female university EFL learners. It specifically endeavours to meet two major objectives. First, it intends to determine the most frequent CR strategies used by Moroccan male and female university EFL learners. Second, it aims to explore the differences between the two groups in CRs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Speech Act Theory

The theoretical framework within which the present study is conducted is speech act theory. It was inaugurated by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969). Austin (1962) argues that any utterance may perform three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The first one refers to the actual utterance. The second one refers to the speaker's intention in

performing that utterance, while the last one represents the effect of the utterance on the interlocutor.

According to Austin (1962), the illocutionary act falls into five categories: commissives, expositives, exercitives, behabatives and vindictive. Commissives bind the speaker to take a certain course of action, like promising and vowing. Expositives refer to how one fits an utterance into an argument or exposition and includes the following examples: 'I reply', 'I argue', 'I assume'. Exercitives include using authority, influence, or other resources, including urging and warning. Behabatives relate to social behaviour, including apologizing, congratulating and commanding. Verdictives entail acts where a judgment or assessment is made, typically by a person in a position of power, like in appointing, urging or warning.

Searle (1977) approaches Austin's (1962) classification of illocutionary forces and comes up with a new taxonomy based on speakers' intentions called the direction of fit. This alternative criterion is whether the words are supposed to fit the world or the world is assumed to suit the words. This criterion involves four directions of fit: (a) words-to-world, which represents how things are, including assertives such as stating or claiming (b) world-to-worlds which gets the world to be changed by a future course of action either by the speaker or the hearer (c) the double direction of fit which gets the world to correspond with the propositional content by saying that the latter is consistent with the world like in declarative such as appointing and naming and (d) the null direction which conveys the speaker's feelings about the situations portrayed by the propositional content as in expressive such as thanking and welcoming.

These functions correspond to the five categories identified by Searle (1975): (a) representatives through which the speaker is committed to the truth of the proposition expressed, (b) directives which commit the speaker to come up with some effect through an action produced by the addressee, (c) commissives which commit the speaker to some future course of action, (d) expressives which express the speaker's attitude towards a psychological or emotional state of affairs, (e) declaratives which bring about a change in the state of the world.

2.2. The Speech Act of Compliment Response

CR is generally defined as an expression used by the recipient of the compliment to accept or reject the compliment. According to Herbert (1986), a CR is the acknowledgement of the other's efforts to compliment one's action or behaviour. This demonstrates that a CR is typically viewed as a response given by the recipient to people who compliment their ability, performance, appearance or character.

According to Farenkia (2014, p. 7), "a CR is the second part of adjacency pair". Similarly, Al- Jammal (2017) defines a CR as a statement made in response to another statement that references something that the participants positively regard and ascribe to the addressee.

Compliments and CRs are the most common speech acts used in daily conversations (Yu, 2003). Talbot (2010) asserts that a number of social factors, such as power, the degree of intimacy, social distance, culture, and gender, have an impact on how people respond to compliments.

CRs have been investigated by many researchers, including Pomerantz (1978), Holmes (1986) and Herbert (1989). Pomerantz (1978) was the first researcher who studied CRs. She investigated CRs among American English speakers, stating that when responding to compliments, Americans encounter two conflicting conditions that pose a dilemma when responding to it. On the one hand, they have to agree with the speaker. On the other hand, they have to avoid self-praise. Holmes (1986) conducted a study on CRs among New Zealand

speakers, wherein she showed that the most frequent CR strategy used by New Zealand speakers is the acceptance strategy. She also examined gender differences in CRs and found that males evade compliments more than their counterparts. Herbert (1989) conducted a study on American and British speakers of English and analyzed more than one thousand CRs from State University in New York, then discovered that about sixty percent of CRs implied acceptance.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Method

The present study has two major objectives. First, it intends to find out the most frequent CRs used by Moroccan male and female university EFL learners at the macro and micro levels. Second, it aims at exploring the differences between the two groups at the levels mentioned above. In order to meet these aims, a quantitative method was adopted. Besides, data were collected using discourse completion test (DCT). The latter comprises four situations corresponding to four topics: appearance, ability, character and possession.

3.2. Participants

This study is addressed to Moroccan university EFL learners from Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. 100 participants were recruited for the investigation, comprising 50 males and 50 females. All the respondents who took part in the investigation involve second and third year University students from the English department with an average age of 19-23 (table 1).

Table 1 *Sample Profile*

	Frequency	Percent%
Gender		
Male	50	50%
Female	50	50%
Total	100	100%
Age		
18-20	41	41%
20- 25	59	59%
Education Level		
Second Year University Student	41	41%
Third Year University Student	59	59%

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

Data collection was carried out between June 2022 and August 2022 using DCT. Moreover, survey data was collected using Google Forms, wherein the participants were invited to fill in a survey by sharing its link on "[The Department of English Studies of Sultane Moulay Slimane University](#)" Facebook page. In DCT, participants were provided with four situations in which they received compliments about their appearance, performance, character and possession, and they were asked to write down what they would respond in each situation as stated in table 2 below:

Table 2 *Situational Settings in DCT*

Situation 1 (Ability)	You've perfectly performed a presentation. As you finished, one of your classmates made a comment and said: «You did a great job! It was an insightful presentation. I hope I can do it the way you did it." Your answer:
Situation 2 (Possession)	You have purchased a new smartphone. While you were checking the newsfeed, your friend noticed that you had got a new smartphone.

	She/He checked it and tried some functions, then said: "wow! How smart!" Your answer:
Situation 3 (Character)	Your friend has been organizing her/his bookshelf and asked you for help. After helping her/him and being done with the organization, she/he says: you're such a compassionate person!" Your answer:
Situation 4 (Appearance)	You have dressed up for a party you are invited in. As you get into the event, a friend of yours approaches you and says: "You look so charming today" Your answer:

3.4. Semantic Coding of CRs

In order to investigate CR strategies among Moroccan male and female university EFL learners, Herbert's (1989) taxonomy was adopted. It consists of two major categories at the macro level, namely agreement strategies and non-agreement strategies. Besides, it comprises several categories at the micro level, including *appreciation token*, *comment acceptance*, *praise upgrade*, *comment history*, *reassignment and return* strategies, representing agreement strategies and *scale down*, *question*, *disagreement*, *qualification* and *no-acknowledgment* strategies, exemplifying non-agreement strategies. Table 3 illustrates the macro and micro categories employed in the study.

Table 3 Herbert's (1989) Taxonomy of CRs

Response type	Examples
I. Agreement	
A. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; (smile)
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Oh! Thanks a lot! You just made my day!
B. Comment History	I bought it for a journey to Nepal.
C. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	It was a present from my father.
2. Return	So you are.
II. Non-agreement	
A. Scale Down	It's nothing.
B. Question	Seriously?
C. Non-acceptances	
1. Disagreement	I don't like it.
2. Qualification	I see your smartphone is smarter.
D. No Acknowledgment	(Silence)

3.5. Data Analysis

With a view to analyze the frequencies of CRs among Moroccan male and female university EFL learners, descriptive statistics were used (percentages). Additionally, the differences between the two groups in CR strategies were analyzed using inferential statistics (Independent T-test).

3.6. Data Collection Procedure

To ascertain the reliability and validity of the study instrument, a total of 20 respondents participated in the pilot study, comprising 10 Moroccan female and 10 male university EFL learners and 10 Moroccan male university EFL learners from Mohammed V University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, using Google Forms and sharing the survey link on "[English Studies \(Rabat University\)](#)" Facebook page.

3.7. Research Questions

This study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequent CR strategies used by Moroccan female and male university EFL learners?
2. Is there a significant difference between Moroccan male and female university EFL learners in CR strategies?

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in two parts: (1) Participants' responses to compliments at the macro level; (2) Participant's responses to compliments at the micro level. Each part is divided into two sections: (a) The frequency and percentage of CRs; (b) The differences between males and females in CRs.

4.1. Participants' Responses to Compliments at the Macro level

4.1.1. The Frequency and Percentage of CRs

Table 4 illustrates the frequency and percentage of CR strategies used by males and females at the macro level corresponding to the four specific topics: ability, character, possession and appearance.

Table 4 *The Frequency and Percentage of CRs by Gender*

Gender	Situations								
	Character		Appearance		Possession		Ability		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Agreement	F	14	19	45	41	45	45	45	40
	P	28%	38%	90%	82%	90%	90%	90%	80%
Non-Agreement	F	36	31	5	9	5	5	5	10
	P	72%	62%	10%	18%	10%	10%	10%	20%

As can be seen, 72% of males and 62% of females showed a great tendency towards the use of *non-agreement* strategies with regard to CRs on character. Conversely, most of the two gender groups employed *agreement* strategies when responding to compliments with respect to appearance (90% of males; 82% of females), possession (90% of males; 90% of females) and ability (90% of males; 80% of females).

4.1.2. The Differences between Moroccan Male and Female University EFL learners in CRs (At the Macro Level)

Table 5 illustrates the differences between males and females in CRs with respect to the four situations at the macro level.

Table 5 *Independent Sample T-test of CRs at the Macro Level*

CR Situations	Gender	N	Mean	SD	d	t	Effect Size
Situation 1 (Ability)	Male	50	1,10	0,30	90,87	-1,40	0,01
	Female	50	1,20	0,40			
Situation 2 (Possession)	Male	50	1,72	0,45	97,41	1,06	0,01
	Female	50	1,62	0,49			

Situation3 (Character)	Male	50	1,10	0,30			
	Female	50	1,10	0,30	98	0,00	0
Situation 4 (Appearance)	Male	50	1,10	0,30			
	Female	50	1,80	0,39	92,56	-1,15	0,01

The table reveals that there is no significant difference between the two gender groups in their CRs concerning the four situations. Specifically, in the first situation, the p-value is greater than 0.05 ($0.16 > 0.05$), and reveals no significant difference between the two groups on ability. In the second situation, the p-value is greater than 0.05 ($0.29 > 0.05$), which indicates no significant difference between the two group genders on character. In the third situation, the p-value is also greater than 0.05 ($1.00 > 0.05$); this shows that both males and females are not significantly different in the realization of CRs when they get compliments on possession. In the last situation, the p-value is greater than 0.05 ($0.25 > 0.05$), which also shows no significant difference between participants regarding CRs on appearance.

Seemingly, participants' responses to compliments show no significant difference between the two gender groups at the Macro level. The said finding corroborates the finding of Suteerapongsit (2020), finding that at the macro level, there is a consonance between males and females in CR strategies.

4.2. Participants' Responses to Compliment at the Micro Level

4.2.1. The Frequency and Percentage of CRs

Table 6 illustrates the frequency and percentage of CRs used by males and females regarding the four topics at the micro level.

Table 6 The Frequency and Percentage of CRs by Gender (At the Micro Level)

Gender	Situations							
	Character		Appearance		Possession		Ability	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Appreciation Token	F 2	3	25	10	25	10	25	5
	P 4%	6%	50%	20%	50%	20%	50%	10%
Comment Acceptance	F 0	0	0	0	15	5	0	0
	P 0	0	0	0	30%	10%	0	0
Praise Upgrade	F 1	2	10	15	0	15	15	25
	P 2%	4%	20%	30%	0	30%	30%	50%
	F 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comment History	P 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Return	F 11	14	10	16	5	15	5	10
	P 22%	28%	20%	32%	10%	30%	10%	20%
Scale Down	F 34	29	3	4	5	5	5	10
	P 68%	58%	6%	8%	10%	10%	10%	20%

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Question	F	2	2	2	5	0	0	0
	P	4%	4%	4%	10%	0	0	0
Disagreement	F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	P	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Qualification	F	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
	P	0	0	0	0	0	0	10%
No-Acknowledgement	F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	P	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

In the first situation, 68% of males and 58% of females showed a great tendency towards using *scale down* strategy. In the second situation, 50% of males employed the *appreciation token* strategy, while 62% of females used *return* and *praise upgrade* strategies. As for the third situation, 50% of males employed the *appreciation token* strategy, while 60% of females employed *praise upgrade* and *return* strategies. In the last situation, 50% of males used *appreciation token*, and 50% of females used the *praise upgrade* strategy.

The frequent use of the *scale down* strategy by both gender groups when responding to compliments on character, like in (*It is nothing; It is not a big deal*), can account for the humility and politeness of Moroccan society. On the other hand, the recurrent use of *appreciation tokens* by males like (*Thanks, buddy; I appreciate it; thank you for your compliment*), and *praise upgrade* as in (*You really made my day! Oh! Thanks a lot, dear! it's really kind of you!*) along with *return* strategy by females as in (*As smart as you; you look charming as well; so you are*) can be attributed to the fact that Moroccan female speakers are more polite and delicate in their responses to compliments in comparison with their counterparts. This conclusion supports the finding by Holmes (1988) that women tend to use more polite speech styles than men in compliments and CRs.

4.2.2. The Differences between Moroccan Male and Female University EFL learners in CRs at the Micro Level

Table 7 illustrates the differences between males and females in CRs with respect to the four situations (Ability, possession, character and appearance) at the micro level.

Table 7 *Independent Sample T-test of CRs at the Micro Level*

CR Situations	Gender	N	Mean	SD	d	t	Effect Size
Situation 1 (Ability)	Male	50	2.70	2.12			
	Female	50	4.50	2.56	94.66	-3,82	0,13
Situation 2 (Possession)	Male	50	2.40	2.13			
	Female	50	3.80	2.16	98	-3.27	0.09

Situation3 (Character)	Male	50	6.50	1.34	98	0.88	0.00
	Female	50	6.24	1.61			
Situation 4 (Appearance)	Male	50	3.04	2.42	98	-2.79	0,07
	Female	50	4.38	2.38			

In the first situation, the p-value is less than 0.05 ($0.00 < 0.05$), indicating a significant difference between the two groups of participants in their responses on ability. In the second situation, the p-value is less than 0.05 ($0.02 < 0.05$), which shows a significant difference between the two groups in the realization of CRs on possession. In the third situation, the p-value is greater than 0.05 ($0.38 > 0.05$), which reveals no significant difference between the two groups on character. In the last situation, the p-value is less than 0.05 ($0.00 < 0.05$), which shows a significant difference between males and females regarding CRs on appearance.

Apparently, findings at the micro level disclose a significant difference between males and females in all situations except for character. This can account for the fact that males and females use different communication styles; females are discursive and expressive, while males use fewer words. Furthermore, we can also conclude from the finding as mentioned above that Moroccan males speak bluntly without considering that it might be taken personally, while females speak with caution.

5. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study has two major objectives. On the one hand, it intends to find out the most frequent CR strategies used by Moroccan female and male university EFL learners; on the other hand, it endeavours to explore the differences between Moroccan male and female university EFL learners in CRs. Data in this study were collected using DCT, composed of four situations corresponding to four topics (ability, character, appearance and possession). Besides, data analysis comprises the use of descriptive statistics (percentages) and inferential statistics (Independent T-test)

Three main implications can be drawn from the study findings. First, the participants employed three explicit CR strategies: *appreciation token*, *return* and *praise upgrade*. This finding reveals that both gender groups prefer to use direct speech acts. Second, one of the most frequent CR strategies employed by females is the *return* strategy, which they may consider self-effacement. Third, the different CR strategies used by females and males can account for their distinct communication styles, which refer to the different mindsets the two groups hold. Furthermore, culture can also be considered an impactful variable in responding to compliments.

However, this research is subject to one major limitation: the sample size is insufficient to generalize results to a larger population. Therefore, future researchers may conduct this study with a larger sample size and approach the current topic by including other contextual variables such as social distance and relative power. For instance, future researchers can investigate the impact of social distance on participants' responses to compliments.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Test

Dear respondent, this questionnaire is part of a research paper being carried out to investigate compliment responses across gender. Your contribution is highly appreciated and will be duly acknowledged. All information in this questionnaire will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Situation 1: You've perfectly performed a presentation. As you finished, one of your classmates makes a comment and says: "You did a great job! It was an insightful presentation. I hope I can do it the way you did it." Your answer:

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Situation 2: You have purchased a new smartphone. While you were checking the newsfeed, your friend noticed that you have got a new smartphone. She/He checked it and tried some functions, then said: "wow! How smart!" Your answer:

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Situation 3: Your friend has been organizing her/his bookshelf and asked you for help. After helping her/him and being done with the organization, she/he says: you're such a compassionate person!" Your answer:

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Situation 4: You have dressed up for a party you are invited in. As you get into the event, a friend of yours approaches you and says: "You look so charming today" Your answer:

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