

# Evidence for L1 Sociopragmatic Transfer Among Iranian L2 Learners: The Case of Compliment Response Behaviour

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## To cite this article

Sayyede Effat Hosseini, Hamid Reza Dowlatbadi, Mousa Ahmadian. Evidence for L1 Sociopragmatic Transfer Among Iranian L2 Learners: The Case of Compliment Response Behaviour. *International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*. Vol. 2, No. 3, 2015, pp. 28-38.

## Abstract

This study examined whether Iranian L2 learners transfer compliment response behavior from their L1 to L2 speech act production. To this end, 40 upper-intermediate Iranian L2 learners, 40 Persian native speakers (non-English majors), and 40 American native speakers participated in the study. The English version of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was given to L2 learners and American native speakers while the translated version of the same test was given to Persian native speakers. The results revealed that when responding to compliments in English, Iranian L2 learners transferred their L1 norms and values to their target language. This indicated that responding to compliments in an L2 requires the acquisition of sociocultural norms of the target culture.

## Keywords

Compliment Response Behavior, L1 Transfer, Sociocultural Norms

## 1. Introduction

Communication is a social affair, which takes place within a fairly well defined social situation. In such a situation, learners rely on one another's shared understanding of their expressions in order to facilitate communication (Akmajian et al., 2001). Lack of such shared understandings of one another's expressions leads to not acting appropriately in that situation (Ruhil, 1998). Thomas (1983) calls this phenomenon *pragmatic failure*. This kind of failure mostly occurs in native-nonnative speakers' encounters, who are members of different L1s with different cultural values and norms. When L2 learners from different cultures communicate with native speakers of the target language but do not perceive their different pragmatic knowledge, miscommunication may happen. This kind of failure is called *sociopragmatic failure*, which is "the mismatch which arises from cross-culturally different assessments within the social parameters affecting linguistic choice, size of imposition, social distance between speaker and hearer, relative rights and obligations, etc" (Thomas *ibid*: 226). The main problem is that an EFL/L2 learner who commits a linguistic error

while speaking in the TL is just perceived as having less proficiency in the TL, but when he makes a sociopragmatic mistake, due to his inappropriate use of linguistic forms and deviating from TL norms and values, might appear as rude, disrespectful, or impolite (Thomas *ibid*). One speech act in which miscommunication may happen is the speech act of complimenting and compliment responses.

In the Persian context, production and understanding of this speech act brings about many problems for L2 learners (Afghari & Karimniya, 2007). What works in the Persian culture does not necessarily work in another, though it is true that some pragmatic knowledge is universal and some aspects may be successfully transferred from the learners' native language. That is why an American nearly possessed an Iranian friend's coat when the Iranian responded to the American's compliment with a translated *ta'arof*, i.e., *You can have it*. This example shows lack of awareness of pragmatic norms of the target language on the part of that Iranian (Sahragard, 2000). According to Kasper (1990), when native speakers of a language violate speech acts realization patterns typically used by native speakers of a target language, they are often exposed to the inadvertently violating conversational and politeness norms of that target

culture. Moreover, Thomas (1983) confirms that cultural differences and negative transfer from learners' L1 to L2 could also be the cause of such failure.

Here, another factor comes to the fore: *L1 transfer*. Leech (1983) and Blum-Kulka (1982) pointed out that pragmatic failure may arise from the mistaken transfer of the norms of one's sociolinguistic community to another. The result is that the person is judged as being impolite. Research (e.g., Takahashi, 1995) has shown that nonnative speakers of English, in their interactions with English native speakers, mostly transfer their L1 pragmatic norms and patterns to their TL production. The roots of L1 transfer lie in the different pragmatic norms and norms of the two cultures (Wolfson, 1981). By detecting the areas of difference which cause difficulty for Iranian L2 learners by L2 researchers, then the probability of falling into miscommunication may be decreased. Moreover, L2 teachers can better decide what areas should receive the least emphasis and what areas should be paid more attention because of interfering with the target language and causing communication breakdowns. The purpose of this study is detecting the types of compliment responses used by Iranian L2 learners in order to find whether Iranian L2 learners transfer their L1 response norms and values to the compliments while interacting in L2.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

Compliments are positive expressions or evaluations, particular feature of which is giving explicit or implicit approval and praise to the hearer for something valuable done by himself/herself and even the whole speech community, or something valuable inherent in his/her character (Ye, 1995). Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that polishing social relationship, paying attention to positive face wants, thus increasing or integrating solidarity between people are the most obvious functions of compliments. Therefore, compliments and responding to them are positive politeness devices.

However, compliments may be also regarded as a threat to negative face. Here, they are regarded as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) or negative politeness devices. Brown and Levinson (1987) have identified two reasons why responding to compliments can be regarded as negative politeness devices. First, when the addressee accept a given compliment, S/he may feel it as a constraint to denigrate the object complimented. Second, the compliment makes him/her feel obliged to offer the object complimented to the speaker, thus damaging his/her own positive face desire to be liked or admired by others.

Therefore, the speech act of complimenting and compliment responses can both help to consolidating social relations as well as make problems in people relations. In the context of FL/L2 learning, if learners do not know how to give compliments and respond to them appropriately in L2, they can be considered as impolite. According to Kasper (1990), when native speakers of a language violate speech acts realization patterns typically used by native speakers of a

target language, they are often exposed to the danger of unintentionally violating conversational and politeness norms of that target culture. Kasper (1997) considers inadequate pragmatic knowledge as one cause of such failure in communication. Thomas (1983) confirms that cultural differences and negative transfer from learners' L1 to L2 could also be the cause of such failure. Putting it simply, nonnative speakers, trying to interact or speak in an FL/L2, may transfer norms and values of speaking from one's speech act community to the target language speech (Beebe et al., 1990).

In recent decades, much attention has been paid to cross-cultural aspects of compliment behavior in various cultures. One major focus of research on complimenting events has been on compliment responses (Davis, 2008). One early study focusing specifically on compliment responses in the context of America is Pomerantz's (1978). The results of her study showed that in American English, the recipient of a compliment either agrees with the speaker or avoids self-praise. Her observations led to the conclusion that a large number of American speakers did not orient toward accepting compliments. Instead, they preferred to disagree and reject them to a large extent (Ahn, 2007).

Herbert (1986) collected a corpus of 1062 compliment responses among American native speakers and South African learners over a three-year period. The corpus of American native speakers showed that men's compliments were twice as likely to be accepted as women's, that women were twice as likely to accept compliments as men. In addition, he found that "compliments given by men were far more likely to be met with agreement – particularly by a female responder – and, among all interactional pairs (men-to-men, men-to-women, women-to-women, and women-to-men), men-to-men compliments were the most likely to be met with no acknowledgement" (p. 213). The other finding of the study was that despite being socially conditioned to respond to a compliment by using ones' manners and saying 'thank you', American speakers are almost twice as likely "to respond with some response other than agreement" (p.80).

In the context of Iran, Sharifian's (2005, 2008) studies showed that the cultural norm in Iran is that Iranian speakers more often accept and return the compliment to either the giver of the compliment, to God, to a family member, or to a friend. In fact, the norm of *shekaste nafsi* ("broken-self", literally equals to "self-breaking" or "doing self-broken" and approximately means "modesty" or "humility") encourages the speakers to deny, or downplay a talent, skill, or a possession and somehow reassign the compliment to the person who initiated it. In Sharifian's (2008) study, data was collected from 42 male and female Persian-speaking learners of English in Iran via a Persian and an English version of a DCT. The participants completed the English DCT first and then received and completed the Persian version after an interval of two weeks. The results revealed that speakers of Persian in their responses to compliments in their both L1 and L2 represented the cultural schema of *shekaste-nafsi* (modesty).

The study conducted by Yousefvand (2010) aimed at extracting and categorizing the range of strategies used in responding to compliments in Persian. A DCT was used to extract the strategies employed when responding to compliments by Persian speakers. Findings suggested that, in responding to a compliment, the general tendency of Persian speakers was to respond to a compliment with an agreement. In addition, they tended to express their modesty, which is deeply rooted in their culture. However, this study did not consider the role of sociopragmatic parameters like social status and social distance of the two interlocutors in such results.

Behnam and Amizadeh (2011) conducted a cross-cultural study of compliments and compliment responses on American and Persian interviews. The data contained eight video-taped and transcribed interviews of *Oprah Winfrey's* programs with celebrities from MBC4 channel and eight Persian interviews with eight Iranian celebrities. The results revealed that in both interviews, compliments served the common function of introducing the guests. However, compliments tended to serve multiple functions such as thanking, and performing affective functions like establishing rapport and common ground. The case of difference in the data was the use of *taarof* among Persian interlocutors. Generally speaking, paying compliments and responding to them was more often in the Persian interviews than in the English ones. The researchers attributed this excessive use of compliments in the Persian data to the pervasive place and role of cultural norm of *taarof* in Iranian culture. These results highlighted the role of culture in paying compliments and responding to them.

Karimnia and Afghari (2011) attempted to see whether compliment response behavior of Persian and American native speakers illustrate the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson's universal model. To do so, they collected a corpus of 50 hours of recording the live interviews from 5 Persian TV channels and 4 English TV channels. The results showed that Persian speakers generally tended to produce non-acceptance responses whereas English speakers more often tended to produce acceptance strategies. The reason underlying such tendency among Persian native speakers was that in Persian culture, the norm of *shekasteh nafsi* more often makes Persian speakers withhold expressions of delight or gratitude, even when they do feel pleased at receiving a compliment. This shows the nature of face in Persian, achieving public acknowledgment of reputation or prestige, and maintaining the face.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The sample in this study consisted of 120 participants in three groups: 1) A group of 40 Iranian male and female L2 learners (the InterLanguage group), 2) A group of 40 Persian native speakers who were non-English majors, and 3) A group of 40 American native speakers, who were university

students from various academic fields in B.A/B.S. levels.

The Iranian L2 learners were selected from among junior and senior students of English Literature and English Translation at universities of Arak, Shahrekord, and Isfahan. They had studied English for at least three years and had passed several courses in grammar, reading, conversation, and writing up to advanced level. So it was assumed that they had enough proficiency in oral and written production. In addition, the OPT was administered and the results showed that they were upper-intermediate. They consisted of 26 females and 14 males who were between 21 and 26 years of age, with the mean of 22. Persian Language was their L1. Their families' educational level, exposure to English, and socioeconomic status was also controlled. They were from families with mid-educational levels, and mid-socioeconomic status.

The Persian native speakers were 40 undergraduate students (non-English majors) at the State-run universities of Arak, Shahrekord, and Isfahan. Their ages ranged from 20 to 26, with a mean of 22. They consisted of 18 males and 22 females. Persian language was the first language (mother tongue) of all the participants. Their families' educational level and socioeconomic status was controlled. They were from families with mid-educational levels and mid-socioeconomic status.

The third group consisted of 40 American native speakers who were between 18 and 28 years of age, with a mean of 23. They were all undergraduate students at a college in Texas. They consisted of 23 males and 17 females. Their families' educational level and socioeconomic status were controlled. They were from families with mid-educational levels and mid-socioeconomic status.

#### 3.2. Instrumentations

##### 3.2.1. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

A standardized Oxford Placement Test (Allen, 1992) was used to have a homogeneous group of L2 learners.

##### 3.2.2. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

The main research data was collected through a written open-ended DCT. The DCT was a modified version of Yu's (2004) and Sharifian's (2008) questionnaires along with some items added by the researcher. The test was provided in two versions: English and Persian. The English DCT was translated into Persian by the researcher. Then, a proficient Persian-English bilingual did a back translation of the instrument into English. Finally, a native speaker of English did a reliability check on the translation by comparing the original English version with the back-translated English version.

The DCT had two parts. In the first part, the participants answered a background information questionnaire conducted in order to elicit the data on students' gender, age, length of studying English, their families' educational level (high, mid, or low), their L1 and L2, and the extent of exposure to English (whether they usually use English to speak to English native speakers, whether they use English to do their

class homework and projects, whether they use English to speak to their friends and classmates, and whether they mostly use audiovisual aids and satellite), and their families' socioeconomic status. The aim of conducting this questionnaire was to homogenize participants in terms of the above-mentioned factors. It should be noted that the questions of whether English is their L2, their length of studying English, and the extent of exposure to English were exclusively designed for Iranian L2 learners.

The second part contained 25 items (situations) to which the participants were expected to respond. They were supposed to place themselves in every situation—as they were in a real-life context—when responding to compliments. The degree of social status (power) and social distance (familiarity) of the two interlocutors was also included in the situations of the DCT.

All the items (situations) of the DCT were constructed in relation to two characterizations: (1) compliment topics, (2) relationship between participants. The compliment topics in the test involved achievement, possession, character (personality), and appearance, according to the Manes and Wolfson's (1981) classification of the most common compliment topics. The relationship between the two interlocutors within the situations was formulated in terms of their social status (power) and social distance (degree of familiarity).

The distance variable in this study was treated as a binary value, that is, the speaker either knows the hearer (–) distance, or does not know the hearer (+distance). The situations 2,4,5,10,11,12,14,16,17,19,20,21, and 22 pertained to the compliment exchanges between interlocutors who do not know each other (+), while the situations 1,3,6,7,8,9,13,15,18,23,24, and 25 pertained to the compliment exchanges between two interlocutors who know each other (–).

The status (power) variable in this study was treated as a binary value, that is, the speaker was either of higher status (+power), or of equal status (=power). Therefore, the situations (1,3,6,8,9,10,15,18,20,23,24) pertained to the compliment exchanges between interlocutors who were of equal status, for example, between sisters, friends, or classmates and situations (2,4,5,7,11,12,13,14,16,17,19,21,22,25) pertained to the compliment exchanges between interlocutors who were of unequal status, for example, between teachers and students.

### 3.2.3. Validity of the DCT

The validity of the test was examined through content validity. To this end, at least four experts, two English native speakers and two Persian native speakers who were professors of Applied Linguistics judged the degree to which the items actually represent the test objectives qualitatively. A checklist, provided by the researcher, was given to them. English Native speaker experts evaluated the English version of the test while the Persian experts evaluated both the English and Persian versions.

Before administering the test, a pilot testing took place to

see whether there would be any problems or confusion regarding the clarity of the items and format of the test or whether the items met cultural specifics of the two contexts, namely, English and Persian. The results proved that some revisions were necessary. Feedback was also gathered through an interview with the participants. They confirmed that some situations were not only very likely to occur in their respective cultures but also indicated that they could indeed picture themselves in these situations.

## 4. Procedures

Having taken place the pilot testing, the required revisions of the DCT were made and validity of the test was confirmed. Then, the main stage of the research was begun. First, the OPT was administered to homogenize the Iranian L2 learners in terms of their level of language proficiency. Then, the DCT was administered to L2 learners and Persian native speakers (with an interval of one weeks after the OPT for the L2 learners) during the spring semester of 2012 by three professors of Applied Linguistics in the universities of Arak, Shahrekord, and Isfahan, without the presence of the researcher herself. Only the native speakers of English completed the test at their leisure at home. It was sent to them via email.

## 5. Data Analysis

The data collected through the DCT was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, the types of compliment responses by the three groups were detected. Then, the data were coded according to the Herbert's (1986) taxonomy of compliment responses, and frequency and percentages of each compliment response type was computed. In Herbert's classification, compliment response types consist of three main categories: Agreement, Non-agreement, and Other interpretations. Each category contains several subcategories.

In order to achieve inter-rater reliability of coding, following Cohen's (1960) suggestion, 20% of the data from each group was randomly selected to be independently coded by a second rater. Two American English speakers coded the set of American native speakers' and the L2 learners' data, whereas a professor of Applied Linguistics (who was a Persian native speaker) and the researcher herself coded the Persian data. The raters were trained on how to rate every item of the DCT. To make the process of coding easier, the researcher designed a rating matrix.

To ascertain the raters' consistency in rating the scores (inter-rater reliability), Kappa Measure of Agreement was run. According to Peat (2001 cited in Pallant, 2007), a value of .5 for kappa shows moderate agreement, above .7 represents good agreement, and above .8 represents very good agreement. The inter-rater agreement coefficients in the present study were 73% and 77% for the two sets of English data, which represents a good agreement, and 81% for the Persian data, which represents a very good agreement

between the raters.

To find out whether there was difference between Iranian L2 learners, Persian native speakers, and Americans, the researcher run a nonparametric test, namely, Chi-square test for independence, using the  $\chi^2$  statistic, through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Software, version 16, to compare the two groups on a nominal variable with 14 categories of compliment responses. The specific hypothesis was that there is difference in the frequency and type of compliment responses for the two groups. A .001 alpha level of significance was chosen as the cutoff point for testing the hypothesis.

Finally, to find out whether Iranian L2 learners transferred compliment response types from their L1, the researcher

examined the types of compliment responses of the three groups. Similarities in Iranian L2 learners' use of compliment response types to Persian native speakers and dissimilarities to American native speakers were considered as evidence for transfer. The explanation of this part was done qualitatively.

## 6. Results and Discussions

### 6.1. Iranian L2 Learners' Performance on the DCT

The total frequency distribution occurrences and percentages of each compliment response type used by Iranian L2 learners were shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Frequency Distribution Occurrences and Percentages of Iranian L2 Learners' Compliment Response Types.

Category	Sub-Category Type	Frequency (N)	Percentage %
I. Agreement	Appreciation Token	206	15.25
	Comment Acceptance	47	3.48
	Praise Upgrade	75	5.55
	Comment History	45	3.33
	Reassignment	121	8.96
	Return	164	12.14
	Subtotal	658	48.74
II. Non-Agreement	Scale Down	209	15.48
	Question	65	4.81
	Disagreement	83	6.14
	Qualification	60	4.44
	No Acknowledgment	17	1.25
	Subtotal	434	32.14
III. Other Interpretations	Request	21	1.55
	Joking	55	4.07
	Formulaic Expressions	182	13.48
	Subtotal	258	19.11
	Total	1350	57.30

**Table 2.** Frequency Distribution Occurrences and Percentages of American Native Speakers' Compliment Response Types.

Category	Sub-Category Type	Frequency (N)	Percentage %
I. Agreement	Appreciation Token	323	32.10
	Comment Acceptance	76	6.56
	Praise Upgrade	25	2.48
	Comment History	148	14.71
	Reassignment	32	3.18
	Return	95	12.05
	Subtotal	675	67.09
	Scale Down	46	4.57
II. Non-Agreement	Question	53	7.25
	Disagreement	25	2.48
	Qualification	49	6.44
	No Acknowledgment	14	1.39
	Subtotal	253	25.14
	Request	18	1.78
III. Other Interpretations	Joking	27	2.68
	Formulaic Expressions	33	3.28
	Subtotal	78	7.75
	Total	1006	42.69

As Table 1 shows, a total of 1350 compliment responses was collected from Iranian L2 learners. In general, Iranian L2 learners utilized *Agreement* as the most frequent type (48.74%). The frequency of occurrence for *Non-Agreement* had the second rank (32.14%), while the frequency for *Other Interpretations* had the last rank and was the least frequently

used response type (19.11%). Table 1 also reveals the frequency of occurrence and percentages of each sub-type in details. The *Scale Down* gained the highest frequency of occurrence (15.48) and the *No Acknowledgment* gained the least frequency of occurrence (1.25%).

A close analysis of Table 1 reveals that the *Comment*

*Acceptance, Comment History, Question, and Qualification* had the second rank in terms of the least frequent response types and received almost the same frequency of occurrence by the participants (3.48%, 3.33%, 4.81%, and 4.44%, respectively). Moreover, in terms of the most frequent compliment response types, the *Appreciation Token, Formulaic Expressions, Return, and Reassignment* received the second, third, forth, and fifth rank after the *Scale Down* by 15.25%, 13.48%, 12.14%, and 8.96% percents, respectively.

## 6.2. American Native Speakers' Performance on the DCT

The American native speakers' frequency and percentages of compliment response types were presented in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, a total of 1006 compliment response types was collected from American native speakers. The *Agreement* had the highest frequency and received 67.09% of the total occurrences whereas the *Other Interpretations* had the least frequency by 7.75 percentage. Within the sub-types, the *Appreciation Token* had the highest frequency (32.10%) while the *No Acknowledgment*, which accounted for 1.39% of the total frequency occurrences, was the least frequently used type. The *Comment History* was the second most frequent type utilized by American native speakers by 14.71 percentages.

Moreover, the *Return* and *Comment Acceptance* had the second and third rank in terms of the most frequently utilized types (12.05% and 6.56%, respectively). The results of the Tables 1 and 2 show that there are noticeable differences between the two groups in terms of the frequency and percentages of compliment response types.

This difference is better shown by running the Chi-Square test for independence. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of "minimum expected cell frequency". The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

The results of Tables 3 and 4 indicated that there was statistically significant difference between Iranian L2 learners and American native speakers in terms of using compliment response types,  $\chi^2 (13, n=2356)=4.044E2^a$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Therefore, the first hypothesis of the study has been retained. Moreover, according to Table 4, the Cramer's V is .41, which is considered a medium effect size using Cohen's (1988 cited in Pallant 2007) criteria of .10 for small effect, .30 for medium effect, and .50 for large effect.

**Table 3.** Chi-Square Test on the Use of Compliment Response Types between Iranian L2 Learners and American Native Speakers.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.044E2a	13	.000b
Likelihood Ratio	424.911	13	0
Linear-by-Linear Association	120.149	1	0
N of Valid Cases	2356		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13.24.

b. Differences significant indicated at the level of .001

**Table 4.** Symmetric Measures.

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	0.414	0
	Cramer's V	0.414	0
N of Valid Cases		2356	

## 6.3. Persian Native Speakers' Performance on the DCT

The frequency of occurrences and percentages of compliment response types utilized by Persian native speakers are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Frequency Distribution Occurrences and Percentages of Persian Native Speakers' Compliment Response Types.

Category	Sub-Category Type	Frequency (N)	Percentage %
I. Agreement	Appreciation Token	218	16.29
	Comment	39	2.91
	Acceptance	51	3.81
	Praise Upgrade	27	2.01
	Comment History	137	10.23
	Reassignment	155	11.58
	Return	627	46.86
	Subtotal		
II. Non-Agreement	Scale Down	215	16.06
	Question	54	4.03
	Disagreement	87	5.54
	Qualification	48	3.58
	No	31	2.31
	Acknowledgment	449	33.55
	Subtotal		
III. Other Interpretations	Request	30	2.24
	Joking	44	3.28
	Formulaic	188	14.05
	Expressions	262	19.58
	Subtotal		
	Total	1338	100

As Table 5 shows, Persian native speakers made up a total of 1338 compliment response types. The *Appreciation Token* (16.29%), *Reassignment* (10.23%), *Return* (11.58%), *Scale Down* (16.06%) and *Formulaic Expressions* (14.05%) received the highest frequency of occurrences while the *Comment History* (2.01%), *No Acknowledgment* (2.31%), and *Request Interpretations* (2.24%) received the least frequency of occurrences.

**Table 6.** Chi-Square Test on the Comparison of Iranian L2 Learners' and Persian Native Speakers' Use of Compliment Response Types.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.383a	13	0.743
Likelihood Ratio	9.455	13	0.738
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.416	1	0.519
N of Valid Cases	2706		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 23.95.

To see whether there was significant difference between Iranian L2 learners and Persian native speakers' use of compliment response types, the chi-square test for independence was run. The results are presented in Tables 6

and 7.

**Table 7.** Symmetric Measures.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.383a	13	0.743
Likelihood Ratio	9.455	13	0.738
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.416	1	0.519
N of Valid Cases	2706		

Table 6 indicates that there was not statistically significant difference between Iranian L2 learners and Persian native speakers in terms of using compliment response types,  $\chi^2 (13, n=2706)=9.383, p=.743$ . Moreover, as shown in Table 7, the Cramer's V is .059, which is considered a small effect size.

The last comparison was made between Persian native speakers and American native speakers in order to see whether they produced similar or different sets of data. To this end, chi-square test for independence was run. The results are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

**Table 8.** Chi-Square Test on the Use of Compliment Response Types between Persian Native Speakers and American Native Speakers.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.406E2a	13	0
Likelihood Ratio	464.459	13	0
Linear-by-Linear Association	132.322	1	0
N of Valid Cases	2362		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.17.

**Table 9.** Symmetric Measures.

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	0.432	0
	Cramer's V	0.432	0
N of Valid Cases		2362	

Table 8 indicates that there was statistically significant difference between Persian native speakers and American native speakers in terms of using compliment response types,  $\chi^2 (13, n=2362)=4.406E2, p < 0.001$ . Moreover, as shown in Table 9, the Cramer's V is .432, which is considered a medium effect size.

#### 6.4. The Evidence for Pragmatic Transfer of L1 Compliment Response Types to L2 Speech Act Production

As discussed earlier, there are two kinds of pragmatic transfer, namely, positive and negative transfer. Both of them can occur at pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic levels (which are known as pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer). According to Takahashi (1995), positive transfer occurs when comparing three sets of data L1, IL, and TL, similarities in terms of response frequencies were found in L1, IL, and TL. Negative transfer occurs when similarities in terms of response frequencies were found in L1 and IL while

differences in terms of response frequencies were found in L1 and TL as well as between IL and TL. The comparison of frequency counts and percentages of compliment responses were said to provide evidence of pragmatic transfer.

A close analysis of the results showed that while L2 learners mostly preferred to accept the compliments and immediately use the *Reassignment*, *Return*, *Scale Down*, and *Formulaic Expressions* in responding to the compliments, American native speakers were mostly inclined to accept the compliments while immediately use the *Comment History*, *Return*, *Comment Acceptance*, and *Formulaic Expressions* while Persian native speakers mostly used *Appreciation Token*, *Reassignment*, *Return*, *Scale Down*, and *Formulaic Expressions* in responding to the compliments. Similarly, 16.29% of Persian native speakers accepted the compliments, 16.06% degraded the special thing they had been complimented on, 3.81% accepted the compliment and asserted that the compliment force was insufficient, 10.23% reassigned it, that is, attributed the content of the compliment to a third party who helped them, 11.58% accepted but returned it to the person who complimented them, and 14.05% used *Formulaic Expressions* in responding to compliments. Thus, the almost similar frequencies of occurrence of these strategies between Iranian L2 learners and Persian native speakers showed that negative pragmatic transfer has taken place.

Moreover, the different frequencies of occurrence of these strategies between Iranian L2 learners and American native speakers showed that negative pragmatic transfer probably occurred in the use of response types (except *Return* and *Formulaic Expressions*). In the same vein, the different frequencies of occurrence of these types between Persian native speakers and American native speakers showed that negative pragmatic transfer has probably occurred in the use of response types (except *Return* and *Formulaic Expressions*).

These results were in line with Pomerantz's (1978 cited in Ahn, 2007), Herbert's (1986), Chen's (1993), Jeon's (1996), Yu's (2004), and Cheung's (2009) in which American English speakers either agreed with the speaker or avoided self-praise, and Herbert's (1986) in which despite being socially conditioned to respond to a compliment by using ones' manners and saying 'thank you', American native speakers were almost twice as likely "to respond with some response other than agreement" (p.80). It appears that the American native speakers used the *Appreciation Token* more often than the other groups not only to acknowledge the compliment given, but also to signal their acceptance of/or agreement with it (Yu 2003). The results were also in line with Dowlatabadi (1996) as well as Allami and Naemi (2007) in which Iranian L2 learners transferred the sociocultural norms of their L1 to their TL production.

The results of this study also confirmed that American native speakers mostly used another strategy along with agreeing with the compliments. This strategy could be *Return*, that is, shifting the praise to the complimenter from equal status and (-) distance, *Comment History*, that is, impersonalizing the complimentary force by giving (maybe

irrelevant) impersonal details when the complimenter is from unequal status and distance, or *Comment Acceptance*, that is, accepting the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment when the complimenter is from both equal and unequal status and (-) and (+) distance. In American culture, if the speaker and hearer are of equal power, a casual speech style is appropriate which focuses on affiliation and solidarity. When the interlocutors are of unequal power, a more formal speech style is appropriate which shows the dominance of the speaker over hearer. This helps the face of the two interlocutors not to be damaged (Richards & Sukwiat, 1983).

Moreover, in most Asian countries including Iran, disagreement is viewed as a personal matter. It is not something to be displayed in public (*ibid*). That is why most of Iranian L2 learners Persian native speakers in this study did not ostensibly disagree with the compliments and preferred to accept it, though in an insincere manner! In other words, Iranian L2 learners showed more sensitivity to status (power) in responding to compliments when it was paid by higher status and (+) distance interactants. This tendency is called *ta'arof*, which is a cultural norm in Persian society and characterizes Persian politeness (Sahragard, 2000). According to Amouzade (2001), "*ta'arof* constitutes the abstract basis of polite interactions" in Persian (p. 9). This finding is in accordance with Sharifiyan's (2005; 2008), Behnam and Amizadeh (2010), and Karimniya and Afghari (2011). The roots of such behavior lie in their politeness paradigms. Moreover, they tended to transfer their native *ta'arof* norms of being polite in their English responses, which was also evident in this study. Therefore, Iranian L2 learners transferred their L1 norms of *ta'arof* to their TL speech act production. This kind of transfer was negative and is claimed to have occurred at sociopragmatic level, that is, Iranians used *ta'arof* mostly in compliment exchanges in which one interlocutor was from high status and power.

The important point here is that to Beeman (1986), "the most effective and widely used strategic formula in the use of *ta'arof* is to aim for a lower relative status position and defer to another person." (p. 59). Sahragard (2000) called this kind of behavior *Tavazo* (modesty, humility) or what Persian native speakers as well as Iranian L2 learners in their responses to compliments manifested in this study as *Shekaste nafsi*! Thus, the overuse of the strategies of *Return Reassignment*, and *Scale Down* by them shows the existence of the cultural norm of *Shekaste nafsi* in Persian culture. This finding was previously supported by Sharifian (2005, 2008), Yousefvand (2010) and Karimniya and Afghari (2011). Therefore, the formulaic expressions of *ta'arof* and *shekaste nafsi* are in close relationships with each other, which in turn lead to Persian native speakers' politeness.

As none of these norms, *Shekasete nafsi* (modesty) and *ta'arof* were found in the Americans data, thus, a kind of negative transfer may have occurred at the sociopragmatic level and in compliment exchanges with an interlocutor from higher status and (+) distance. As Persians are more conscious of themselves as existing in dependence upon a

whole network of relationships with other people, they think that their success or achievement is not solely attributed to their ability; rather they feel indebted to someone else (Sharifiyan, 2008). That is why they preferred the compliment response types of *Reassignmnet*, *Return*, and *Scale Down*, especially in situations where the topic of the compliment was achievement and possession. Therefore, it is not irrational if we claim that due to these differences between the two cultures, Persian native speakers as well as Iranian L2 learners may be exposed to communication breakdown when encountering American native speakers.

Sociopragmatic transfer, in Thomas's (1983) view, leads to sociopragmatic failure. As Holmes and Brown (1987) asserted, sociopragmatic failure, can be accounted for by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values and occurs when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context.

Furthermore, the distinctive strategies observed in Iranian L2 learners and American native speakers' responses, which led to negative pragmatic transfer at sociopragmatic level, could be attributed to the different conceptualizations of linguistic politeness between them: Persians considers it polite to emphasize the status deference when there is actually differences, whereas from the Americans perspectives, being polite is conveyed by denying the status differences do exist (Takahashi, 1995).

The same also holds true for different social distances between them. Appropriate style of speaking according to the power paradigm of the interaction indicates the degree of perceived affiliation or distance between speaker and hearer. "Successful use of [the compliment response] strategies create an atmosphere of politeness which enables social transactions to proceed without threat to the face of speaker and hearer" (Richards & Sukwiat, 1983: 120). In fact, sociopragmatic transfer is identified through "learners' perceptions of contextual factors, of whether carrying out a particular linguistic action is appropriate, and of the overall politeness style adopted in an encounter" (Kasper, 1992: 213).

One more point is worth mentioning regarding the occurrence of positive pragmatic transfer in this study. As the results showed, Iranian L2 learners, Persian native speakers, and Americans employed the same strategy in responding to compliments on one's appearance from equal status and (-) social distance, that is, the strategy of *Returning*. However, Kasper (1992) claimed that it is hard to distinguish positive transfer from the learners' activating their general/universal pragmatic knowledge, or from their generalizing their prior IL pragmatic knowledge. He pointed out: "the surface-level investigation does not tell us whether or not the learners actually rely on their IL or how they perceive the role of their L1 in realizing given speech acts" (p. 7).

This study along with the previous literature on sociopragmatic transfer led us to conclude that pragmatic transfer is extremely context-dependent. There are context-internal factors (e.g., interlocutors' familiarity, relative status) and context-external factors (e.g., degree of imposition) interacting with L1 transfer (Takahashi, 1995). In light of the



above discussion, it is reasonable to ask such a question: what conditions/factors do or do not make L2 learners resort to their L1 pragmatic strategies, resulting in the occurrence of transfer?

Ellis (2008) has answered this question by numerating several proposals or factors affecting learners' L1 transfer of pragmatic knowledge: learners' proficiency, the EFL or ESL context, length of residence in the L2 environment, and training effect. Takahashi (1995) added one more factor: sociopsychological factors including motivation, attitude, among many.

Regarding the effect of learning-context factors, whether EFL or ESL, it should be mentioned that although transfer exists in both EFL and ESL contexts, in EFL contexts, the occurrence of transfer is more tangible and EFL learners are more likely to rely on their L1 pragmatic competence when trying to communicate in the L2 (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Takahashi, 1995). In such situations, actual contact with native speakers of the TL is limited and focuses in classrooms are mostly on the grammatical and lexical aspects of language use. The latter is more evident in Iran where pragmatic development lags behind linguistic development among L2 learners and learning pragmatic aspects of language is left to the learners themselves by resorting to the situations outside the classrooms. This necessitates the development of pragmatic awareness in the classrooms (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

As transfer works in conjunction with many other factors, Ellis (2008) identified two other factors influencing when and to what extent transfer takes place. These are sociolinguistic factors of the social context and the relationship between the interlocutors. Following Ellis, Odlin (1989) pointed out that negative transfer is more likely in unfocused contexts such as classroom settings than in focused contexts where there is concern to maintain the standardness of languages because in the former, "learners constitute a 'focused' community and as a consequence treat L1 forms as intrusive and even stigmatized" (p. 380). When the same learners are outside the classroom, they may show much less regard for TL forms and transfer quite freely!

As a whole, detecting pragmatic transfer as compared with linguistic transfer is more difficult "due to the implicit nature of rules of speaking and as a result, it causes much more damage than linguistic transfer in communication because of its socioculturally value-laden nature" (Dogancy-Aktuna & Kamisli, 1997: 15). Therefore, the points raised above indeed encourage us to seriously consider the importance of teaching pragmatics and including this more-or-less forgotten side of language in language curricula by teachers! Thomas (1983) had a suggestion in this regard. He noted "teachers should develop a student's metapragmatic ability—the ability to analyze language in a conscious manner" (p. 98). By paying conscious attention to the relevant social factors in a particular context on the part of L2 teachers, L2 learners will be saved from unintended or automatic lapsing into the norms of their native language and survive unintended offense!

## 7. Conclusions

In a nutshell, it is now quite obvious from the results of this study that languages differ greatly in patterns and norms of interaction. How the recipient perceives a communication can make a tremendous difference in cross-cultural encounters (Wolfson, 1981).

The results of the data analysis proved that the areas of difference existed in the frequency of occurrences of the strategies with respect to the relationships between the two interlocutors in terms of their social status (power) and social distance. In situations with unequal status and (+) distance, most Americans, although agreeing with the complimentary force, did not accept the praise personally; rather, they impersonalized the complimentary force by giving (maybe irrelevant) impersonal details (the strategy of *Comment History*). By contrast, in situations with unequal status and (+) distance, most Iranian L2 learners employed the strategies of Scale Down, Return, and Reassignment.

The results of the data analysis also confirmed that Iranian L2 learners transfer their L1 pragmatic norms of responding to compliments when producing utterances in English. To put another way, Iranian L2 learners employed similar strategies as those found in Persian native speakers' responses and different strategies as compared with those employed by American native speakers. It means to some extent, they may have transferred their L1 patterns to L2 production. This kind of transfer was negative and mostly took the form of translating some equivalent formulaic expressions in L1 that were different in L2. On the other hand, Iranian L2 learners, Persian native speakers, and Americans employed the same strategy in responding to compliments on one's appearance from equal status and (-) social distance, that is, the strategy of *Returning*.

Moreover, the transfer of L1 sociocultural norms (parameters) into Iranian L2 production was evident in the data. This kind of transfer occurred at the sociopragmatic level. In other words, Iranian L2 learners showed more sensitivity to status (power) in responding to compliments when it was paid by higher status and (+) distance interactants. Closer analysis revealed two of the cultural norms (values) in Persian society were not parallel to those found in the American society. These two norms were *Shekasete nafsi* (modesty) and *ta'arof* (e.g., it is yours). None of these norms was found in the Americans data. It shows that transfer may have occurred at sociopragmatic level.

The findings of this study had several theoretical and pedagogical implications for the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Theoretically, this study aimed to provide a better understanding of how pragmatic competence interplays with pragmatic transfer and to inform the scope of research that should be pursued by interlanguage pragmatics.

Moreover, the field of interlanguage pragmatics now calls for a good number of research projects in different languages in order to see whether pragmatic patterns and norms of different languages have conformity with general elements of interlanguage pragmatics shared in different L1s. According

to Spolsky (1990), linguists, sociolinguists, and psychologists are in need of moving towards the field of universality. Otherwise, they may fail to come up with a general linguistic theory. As such, theoretically, the present study like some other studies (e.g., Dowlatabadi, 1996; Goodarzi, 1996) strived to move in such a way to add to the field of pragmatic universals. From another perspective, the idea of pragmatic universals is in close association with the idea of *interlanguage conformity* (which was presented by Ahmadian, 2001). In other words, the universal pragmatic rules that are true for L1 are also true for IL.

As Applied Linguistics mediates between theory and practice in language learning (Alcon 2004), thus, this study can be seen from several perspectives in instructed SLA. As learning about a foreign language also involves understanding something of the culture within which the language is embedded, FL/L2 learners cannot learn the pragmatic dimension of language unless they learn the culture of the foreign language. "The peculiarities of one culture, the target one in this case, cannot be highlighted unless we refer to that of the learners" (Neddar, 2011: 81).

The goals and objectives of a language course should be designed to meet the needs of language learners. Language teachers and textbook writers should pay attention to design communicative activities, which would help learners to develop communicative competence.

With respect to pragmatics, what L2 learners need to know in order to utter appropriate expressions is not only the knowledge of linguistic patterns but also knowledge of pragmatic patterns and norms of the target situation. Learners themselves outside the classroom can attain some part of the knowledge (e.g., via being exposed technical aids including the Internet, video films, or satellite). Nevertheless, it is not sufficient. Much of the attainment of the knowledge is on the shoulders of the teachers, course designers, and material developers. Then, with greater awareness, students can interpret and respond appropriately in the target language (Neddar, 2011). This also helps them know which L1 pragmatic norms and strategies match with those of L2 and can hence be transferred positively and which L1 norms do not match with those of the L2, thus leading to pragmatic failure.

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