

## Examining internal structure of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) on Arabic Learners of English

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### Abstract

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This study aims at finding out whether Arabic learners of English (Emirati Females in particular) produce target-like compliment responses in English and whether pragmatic transfer can occur. Discourse completion tests (DCTs) and interviews were used to study the strategies employed when responding to compliments by native speakers (NSs) and Arabic non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Findings suggest that Arabic (L1) expressions and strategies were sometimes transferred to English (L2). This study also indicates that Emirati female learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they perceive these norms to be universal among languages rather than being language specific. It also indicates that Arabic NNSs of English have some misconceptions about NSs that affect the way they respond to their compliments. Some important cultural and pedagogical implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

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**Keywords:** pragmatic transfer, compliment responses, raising cultural awareness in the EFL/ESL classroom

### Introduction

A study examined internal structure of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), a technique used to elicit data in sociolinguistic research, and effects of systematic modification to its situational prompt on subject response. The DCT is a questionnaire containing situations, briefly described, and designed to elicit a particular speech act. Subjects read each situation and respond in writing to a prompt. Three versions of a DCT designed to elicit requests were used:

- an original that included needed information on requisite goal
- social distance
- social dominance

It is an elaborated version with additional information on interlocutor's gender, role relationship, length of acquaintance, interaction frequency, whether the relationship was optional, and a description of setting; and an elaborated version in which students were asked to reflect 30 seconds before responding. A significant dilemma in sociolinguistic research concerns the methods used to collect data, the validity of different types of data and, '...their adequacy to approximate the authentic performance of linguistic action' (Kasper and Dahl 1991:215). Manes and Wolfson (1981) claimed that the most authentic data in sociolinguistic research is spontaneous speech gathered by ethnographic observation. Difficulties in relying on this method are well-documented (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989, Aston 1995) and have led to the wide use of an elicitation procedure known as the **discourse completion** test (DCT).

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Justified criticisms have been leveled at the DCT, some labeling it an instrument that limits the capturing of authentic communication, and others making it look almost obsolete.

However, there are to date no other sociolinguistic data collection instruments that have as many administrative **advantages** as the DCT, making it, practically speaking, a resource pragmatics testing and teaching will continue to rely on. Furthermore, a better understanding of communication in such a constructed context may help us gain a better understanding of authentic communication.

**(K Balmier and M Varghese: 2000)**

### **Methodology**

For validity and reliability, I used triangulation by not concentrating on just one source of information. I approached the topic from different points of view by combining quantitative data from discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and qualitative data from interviews. I also used theories and background knowledge from books and journals articles that guided me to approach my topic in the right way.

#### *Participants*

The subjects of the study were all female participants divided into three main groups:

1. **Group1:** American NSs of English = 10 ( HCT teaching staff)
2. **Group2:** Emarati NNS + English majors = 10. All of them are English Teachers at the Fujairah Elementary School for Girls.
3. **Group3:** Emarati NNS non-English majors = 6. 2 Housewives + 4 Math teachers at the Fujairah Elementary School for Girls.

The reason why females were chosen for this study is because they tend to use politeness strategies more than men do. According to Guodong & Jing (2005), many research studies support this claim. They explain that studies on the relation of gender and language have found out that women are more sensitive than men to being polite. Studies conducted by Liao & Breneham and Brown in 1996 and 1998 also found that women are more status sensitive than men. Therefore, it is predictable that women will use more politeness strategies than men do. What is also important to note, as Liu (1997) explains, is that women are traditionally assumed in both cultures to be more concerned than men with personal topics such as physical appearance, clothing, food and diet.

#### **Tools:**

##### *1. Discourse Completion Test:*

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consists of six scenarios, in which participants are expected to respond to compliments. These scenarios were designed to meet the purpose of this study and to elicit data on compliment responses from both NSs and NNSs of English. The final version in English was translated by the researcher to Arabic. Groups 1 and 2 took the English version, and group 3 took the Arabic version.

**DCT Questions:**

The data collected from the three groups through the discourse completion test will be presently analyzed for the six scenarios. The analysis will be based on Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses to examine the similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers of English.

**Scenario 1:**

You have just finished presenting your research paper. At the end of the class (when you were just leaving the classroom), one of your classmates say: "You did an excellent job! I really enjoyed your presentation". You answer:

\_\_\_\_\_

Almost all of the NSs responses to this scenario were agreement. Their responses varied between appreciation token "oh, thank you!", to comment acceptance "thanks! I'm glad you enjoyed it", and praise upgrade "you have no idea how hard I worked for that!". Only one NS responded by disagreeing and questioning "Really? I thought it was just ok." On the other hand, almost all of the native speakers of Arabic (NSAs), have responded by either transfer (returning the compliment) "oh, your presentation was much better", or interpreting it as a request "do you want me to help you with your presentation?" Only one of the NSAs responded with a simple "thank you." The responses of NNSs who took the English version of the DCT showed more use of the agreement responses like "thanks!" and "It's nice of you to say so."

However, they also showed literal translation of Arabic formulaic expressions used as compliment responses. These translations included "I'm your pupil", which is a scale down expression that means the speaker is much better than the addressee, and "I'm ashamed" which might strike a NS as extremely out of place, but is literally translated from the widely used Arabic formulaic expression (أخجلتكم تواضعنا) *akhjaltomtawaado'na*.

**Scenario 2:**

You have some friends and relatives over for coffee and cake that you baked. Someone says: "Tastes Yummy!" You answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Eight of the ten NSs responded with "thanks" and then offering to give the speaker the recipe "would you like the recipe?". The other two responded by giving information or history, "it's a family recipe". NNSs who answered in Arabic used questions "really? Did you really like it?" disagreement "no it's not, you're just complimenting me!", and reassignment "my mom gave me the recipe". NSAs who answered in English did not use those two strategies in their responses. Instead, they resolved again to literally translating Arabic formulaic expressions like "Your taste is yummy," and "I added my magic to it / that's because I dipped my sweet finger in it." Only one person responded with "thank you."

**Scenario 3:**

You were shopping for a skirt and stranger (male) approaches you and says: "This would look amazing on you!" You answer: \_\_\_\_\_

NSs all responded with either no acknowledgment or by not accepting the compliment "what's it got to do with you?" NNSs who answered in Arabic and English also responded with no acknowledgment, or by offending the man.

**Scenario 4:**

You were shopping for a skirt and stranger (female) approaches you and says: "This would look amazing on you!" You answer: \_\_\_\_

NNSs responded with either a question "really?/ oh, so do you think I should buy it?" or an appreciation token "thanks / thank you". NNSs who responded in Arabic used formulaic expressions like "May Allah bliss you" *jazaakiallahkhair*, "May Allah make all your days beautiful" *Allah yhalliyyamek*. NNSs who answered in English used tokens of appreciation "thanks/ how sweet of you to say so", or returned the compliment by translating Arabic formulaic expressions "Your eyes are beautiful" *oyoonech el helwa*.

**Scenario 5:**

Some friends are over at your house. One of them looks at a clock hanging on the wall and says: "I love your clock. It looks great in your living room!" You answer: \_\_\_\_\_

NNSs responded with comment history "It was a present from my daughter/ I bought it in Harrods", or acceptance "yes, I loved it when I bought it". NNSs who answered in Arabic interpreted this compliment as a request and responded with offering the clock to the speaker and insisting that they take it. NNSs answering in English also insisted that the speaker take the watch "you must take it! I swear, you must!" Only one NNS answered with an appreciation token "you like it! Thank you!"

**Scenario 6:**

You're wearing a new shirt and a colleague looks at you and says: "This shirt looks great on you! Blue is a great color for you." You answer: \_\_\_\_\_

NNSs responded with appreciation tokens "thanks/ you made my day!" questions "is it really?/ do you think so?", disagreement "I dunno, I prefer pink", and comment acceptance "oh, it's my favorite color. Thanks". NNSs who answered in Arabic responded with returning the compliment "you're more beautiful/ this is because you have a good taste," disagreement "thanks, but I know this is only a compliment," and questions "really? Swear!!"

NNSs who answered in English returned the compliment by translating Arabic formulaic expressions "your eyes are beautiful and they see everything beautiful", disagreement "please don't say that, you're embarrassing me!" scale down "oh, it's so cheap! I bought it in the sales", and comment acceptance "thanks, I like it too".

Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behavior that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Compliment responses are one type of speech acts that differs considerably from Arabic to English. This study aims at finding out whether Arabic learners of English produce target-like compliment responses and whether pragmatic transfer can occur. The present study contributes to the limited collection of research done on compliment responses in Arabic.

Intercultural miscommunication is often caused when learners fall back on their L1 socio-cultural norms in realizing speech acts in a target language. This is referred to as pragmatic transfer. Rizk (2003) defines pragmatic transfer as “the influence of learners’ pragmatic knowledge of language and culture other than the target language on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information” Pragmatic transfer can be either positive, which is considered an evidence of socio cultural and pragmatic universality among languages, or negative, which indicates inappropriate transfer of L1 sociolinguistic norms into L2. Learners would not transfer an L1 pragmatic feature to L2 if they know that it is language specific.

Pragmatic studies dealing with different speech acts have been conducted since the early 1980s. The L2 pragmatic transfer studies have shown that despite being linguistically competent in a second language, learners are likely to transfer L1 pragmatic rules in their L2 production (El Samaty, 2005). Takahashi and Beebe (1987) hypothesized that there is a positive correlation between L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer. Eslami-Rasekh (2004) supports this claim by stating that linguistically competent learners do not necessarily possess comparable pragmatic competence.

*Even grammatically advanced learners may use language inappropriately and show differences from target-language pragmatic norms.*

It was clear from the above analysis that in most cases, female Emarati learners of English did not produce target-like compliment responses. For instance, they literally translated Arabic formulaic expressions used in compliment responses and these expressions were not always suitable for the compliment given in English. It was obvious also that language proficiency did not play a role in producing target-like compliment responses. Both English majors and non-majors produced the same compliment responses.

### **Conclusion:**

The present study explored pragmatic transfer of compliment responses in Arabic learners of English in comparison with the data from native speakers of American English. The findings of the study show that Arabic learners did not produce target-like responses to compliments. This suggests that it’s not enough to build learners’ linguistic competence and that it might be necessary to also develop their socio cultural, which will in turn develop their understanding of the frames of interaction and rules of politeness within the target culture. It is also important to provide learners with knowledge of the linguistic forms or stylistic strategies appropriate to convey the intended meaning in different contexts or situations.

The study offers two pedagogical implications, one for syllabus designers, and the other for instruction. First, when designing textbooks, syllabus designers should examine learners’ needs considering the understanding and production of speech acts in the target language and which of these speech acts they are likely to come across. Learners should be made aware of NSs usage of the variety of expressions to realize a certain function, depending on the situation where they are used. This could be accomplished by eliciting compliment responses from their own culture, and presenting the target culture’s way of responding to compliments to raise their awareness. Second, Emarati EFL learners have no contact with NSs of English, and that calls for more communication in the classroom, as it contributes to inter-language development. This could be achieved through: (a) using authentic materials from the target language that will help learners understand as many native and non-native varieties and communicative styles as they can be expected to come across, (b) focusing on learner-centered activities like role plays and real discussions to develop efficient strategies of the target language, (c) team-teaching with NSs to give the students a chance to interact and learn English under the supervision of a NS.

In the end we can say that DCT's are very good, authentic, measurable and reliable research tools and is widely used by linguists and people related to other fields.

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