Compliment Response Styles Most Favored by Japanese EFL Students

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Introduction

The investigation of speech act realization patterns has been gaining attention in the field of applied linguistics and ESL/EFL since the early 1980s. There are abundant studies that investigate interlanguage phenomena in nonnative English as learners perform such speech acts as requests (Tanaka, 1988; Takahashi, 1996; Matsuura, 1998), apologies (Bergman & Kasper, 1993), complaints (Boxter, 1993), and refusals (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). Other studies have compared and contrasted L1 speakers' knowledge of performing identical speech acts in two different languages such as English and Japanese (Fukushima & Iwata, 1987; Fukushima, 2000). Speech acts examined in these studies consist mainly of those that could intrinsically threaten the face of hearers if used inappropriately by language learners.

Compliment responses appear less face-threatening than refusals and complaints. However, some researchers believe that responding to compliments could also threaten face if second language learners make inappropriate responses to compliment givers, or if they do not respond at all (Wolfson, 1989; Ellis, 1997). According to Herbert (1989), “there is relatively strong agreement within the speech community as to what constitutes a correct response” (p. 5). Compliment responses, therefore, can be an indispensable area of study for both language teachers and researchers.

Compliment response styles in English have been well categorized. Pomerantz (1978) found three major response types in her American English data: Acceptances, Rejections, and Self-Praise Avoidance Mechanisms. The author further grouped acceptances into two patterns: Appreciation Token (e.g., Thank you.) and Agreement (e.g., I thought it was quite nice). Self-Praise Avoidance Mechanisms were also subcategorized into Praise Downgrades (e.g., Well, not that much.) and Referent Shifts (e.g., Yeah, you soon’ real good too.). Other researchers utilized Pomerantz’s (1978) compliment response categories for their analyses. Herbert and Straight (1989), for example, proposed and used the response categories of Appreciation Token, Comment Acceptance, Reassignment, Return, Qualification, Praise Downgrade, Disagreement, Question, Praise Upgrade, Comment History, and Request Interpretation.

Only a few researchers to date have investigated Japanese and English compliment responses cross-culturally, while numerous others compared and contrasted American English responses with those in another regional variety of English (Holmes, 1986; Herbert, 1989), or with responses in a non-Japanese language (Herbert & Straight, 1989; Han, 1992; Chen, 1993; Nelson, El Bakary, & Al Batal, 1996; Nelson, Al Batal, & Echols, 1996; Golato, 2002; Yu, 2003). Among those who have conducted cross-cultural research on Japanese and American responses to compliments in their native language environments, Barnlund and Araki (1985)
employed both interviews and questionnaires to collect data, and found that Americans more readily accepted compliments than Japanese. Japanese, on the other hand, either questioned the accuracy of compliments, denied them, or explained why they were not deserved. Yokota (1986), by using discourse completion tests, collected both Japanese and American responses from interlocutors within families. Her findings resembled those of Barnlund and Araki’s (1985). It was found that American subjects tended to accept compliments whereas their Japanese counterparts tended to deny them or avoid accepting them. Saito and Beecken (1997) also found similar tendencies: their American subjects, in role-playing situations, accepted compliments significantly more often than their Japanese counterparts. Japanese, on the other hand, rejected compliments and used avoidance responses significantly more often than Americans.

Matsuura (2002) also examined American and Japanese responses to compliments in native language environments. The author analyzed a total of 555 response expressions, 260 in English and 295 in Japanese, collected from 47 American and 60 Japanese university-level students via discourse completion tests. The compliments used in the tests were exclusively appearance- and ability-related, i.e., two most frequently observed types of compliment in the U.S.A. (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984). The results proved rather interesting in that compliment response styles from these nationals did not indicate a mere contradiction of acceptance vs. rejection, but showed more complex patterns. When receiving compliments on appearance, American students, irrespective of compliment givers, tended to prefer semantically formulaic expressions: Appreciation Tokens occasionally followed by Comment History. American compliment receivers expressed gratitude toward compliment givers with Appreciation Token (e.g., Thank you.) ; and compliment receivers added historical information on the attribute praised with appended Comment History (e.g., My grandmother bought it for me.). These two types of responses (83 Appreciation Tokens and 27 Comment Histories) accounted for 85.3% of the 129 English expressions collected in appearance-related scenarios. In the same vein as Clark’s (1996) “ostensible compliments,” expressions of gratitude were here named “ostensible acceptance.”

Japanese response styles to appearance compliments, on the other hand, were quite different from those of Americans. Matsuura (2002) maintained that relative social positions of interlocutors and a Japanese conceptual distinction between uchi (inside) and soto (outside) were the important factors that had rendered American and Japanese response styles different. Among 31 responses obtained in scenarios in which the complimenters were subjects’ mothers (in general, family members are ultimate insiders and perceived as close), 13 (41.9%) were Agreement (e.g., Boku mo kinittte irunda. [I like it too.]), whereas only two (6.5%) were Appreciation Token (e.g., Arigato. [Thank you.]). And among 45 responses to close friends, 14 (31.1%) were Agreement and eight (17.8%) were Appreciation Token. To compliments from middle-aged professors, on the other hand, students tended to respond frequently with Appreciation Token and relatively less often with Agreement. It appeared that the relative social positions of interlocutors strongly influenced the choice of response styles.

American and Japanese response styles regarding ability-related compliments, however, appeared less diverse. When responding to compliments on distinguished skills or performance, both Americans and Japanese participants altered their patterns of responses to some
degree according to the perceived weight of compliment force from differing interlocutors. The Appreciation Token (63 responses of a total of 131 expressions, i.e., 48.1%) was most frequently observed overall in the English-speaking context, to which Comment Histories (19 of 144 expressions, 14.5%) were sometimes appended. In Japanese-speaking situations, Appreciation Token was again the most common (50 out of the total 144, 34.7%), but was followed by Downgrade (e.g., Tashita koto nai desu yo. [It isn’t that good.]), Agreement, and Disagreement (e.g., Sonna koto nai yo. [I don’t think so.]).

The present study goes beyond examining possible Japanese compliment response styles that might be used upon receiving compliments in their native language: it explores responses Japanese L1 users might utter when speaking English. An underlying assumption is that Japanese students residing in Japan lack extensive contact with native English-speaking cultures, and that they would therefore tend to respond in the same manner across the two languages. Based on the results of Matsuura’s (2002) cross-cultural study on compliment responses, this study assumes that the following four response styles are likely to appear in Japanese compliment responses: Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, and Disagreement. In this study, utterances of these four response styles are offered to Japanese EFL students, who in turn consider which of the responses they believe would be used most often when speaking English and when speaking Japanese.

This study further examines native English speaker reactions to a range of compliment responses that Japanese think they would utter upon receiving English compliments. Specifically, the study explores the extent to which each of the four response styles, i.e., Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, and Disagreement, would be appropriate when given in native English-speaking contexts.

In sum, the research questions of this study are as follows:

(1) Which of Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, or Disagreement would Japanese students select as likely responses to compliment givers of different social distances in an English-speaking environment?

(2) Which of Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, or Disagreement would Japanese students select as likely responses to compliment givers of different social distances in a Japanese-speaking environment?

(3) How would native English speakers evaluate these four compliment response styles if they were used as responses to compliments in native English-speaking cultures?

Method

Participants

(1) Japanese students

The participants were 200 native Japanese-speaking students, 100 males and 100 females, enrolled in an EFL course offered at a medium-sized university in northeastern Japan. The majority of the participants, 153 students, majored in social sciences (i.e., Economics, Business, Public Administration, and Sociology), and 47 were Education majors. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23, with an average of 19.54. While all had had at least six years of formal English instruction prior to tertiary education, their English proficiency levels varied. None had any
experience of having been abroad for more than one month. In order to avoid any learning effect, participants were randomly given either an English or Japanese version of the questionnaire. Through this procedure, 50 males and 50 females answered an English version of the questionnaire, while another 50 of each answered a Japanese version. The survey was conducted during the last ten minutes of 90-minute English classes.

(2) Native English-speaking instructors

Two different native English-speaking groups, i.e., those of American English and British English, were asked to participate in this study. Following Brown and Levinson's (1987) dichotomous categorization of positive politeness and negative politeness, the investigator of this study determined that Americans and Britons might react to students' responses somewhat differently. According to these two authors, Americans tend to emphasize positive politeness, and thus are good examples of those who belong to a positive politeness culture, while the British (and Japanese as well) put emphasis on negative politeness and are considered to inhabit a negative politeness culture. Since compliment-giving is regarded as an important positive politeness strategy, the investigator of this study wondered whether Americans and Britons would evaluate possible responses differently.

Each English variety group consisted of two male and two female EFL instructors. Each teacher had lived or was living in Japan and had experience teaching tertiary level Japanese students. Their ages ranged from 29 to 54, with an average of 43.3. Their average length of stay in Japan was 10.4 years, with a range of 2 to 23 years.

Questionnaires

(1) The student version

The investigator created a short questionnaire to explore utterances that might be used by students when responding to compliments. The questionnaire consisted of four scenarios in which compliment expressions were put in terms of two different types of attributes: “nice shirt” and “nice boots” were considered related to one's appearance, and “good language ability” and “good guitar skills” were regarded as related to one's ability. These four attributes were adopted from questionnaires devised by Matsuura (2002). Compliment givers were “a close friend of the same sex” and “a middle-aged male professor,” both of which were also adopted from Matsuura (2002), and were assumed to be the types of people students might encounter in English-speaking situations. It was considered that “a close friend” would be someone who is socially close to compliment receivers and shares an almost equal status with them. “A middle-aged professor,” on the other hand, was considered a higher status addressee who was socially distant. These two compliment givers, “a close friend” and “a professor,” were considered an insider and an outsider respectively. Everywhere in Japanese society, people tend to draw a line between uchi (inside) and soto (outside) according to social and psychological distances between themselves and others; those who are felt to be close are “insiders” and those who are perceived as distant are regarded as “outsiders.” This distinction is situational and relative (Bachnik, 1994), and is of utmost importance since the acknowledgment and maintenance of the relative position of others governs virtually all social interaction, including the usage of honorific language (Matsumoto, 1988).
Multiple-choice type questionnaires were employed here since, as Kasper and Rose (2002) argue, compared to discourse completion tests, multiple-choice questionnaires are most consistent in reports of preferences for pragmatic strategies. Another reason for using multiple-choice questions is that they allow the participants to choose one option within a limited time frame, even if no English expressions occurred to them right away. It is hoped that subjects, given these options, were able to indicate rather quickly and intuitively which they would most likely say from the options listed.

Students were offered four compliment responses to choose from. The four options provided here were expressions based on the response categories of Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, and Disagreement. A fifth option, “other,” was also allowed, and those who selected this were asked to write exactly what they might say in the given space. As previous studies (Saito & Beecken, 1997; Matsuura, 2002) indicated, response expressions are not mutually exclusive, and can co-occur in almost any combination. Unlike Saito & Beecken (1997), who analyzed subjects’ first uttered responses in an interview situation, the investigator of this study decided to focus on the sentence subjects felt would most likely be uttered. This is because the first sentence within an utterance may or may not be the response that the speaker thinks they would be most likely to say. The investigator thus decided it would be worth asking speakers to choose which response style they think they are most likely to use. Participants who insisted on selecting more than one response were asked to choose the fifth option.

The investigator devised a Japanese version of the questionnaire by translating the English version. To assure that the Japanese translation was accurate, a bilingual EFL instructor (native Japanese speaker) translated it back into English, and all discrepancies were clarified.

(2) The teacher version

Another version of the questionnaire was devised to examine native English-speaking teachers’ perceptions of appropriateness for each of the four types of compliment responses in each question. The four possible responses were identical to those that had appeared in the student version of the questionnaire. In each scenario, a rating scale of −2, −1, 0, 1 and 2 (indicating “inappropriate,” “somewhat inappropriate,” “neutral,” “somewhat appropriate,” and “appropriate,” respectively) was provided for teachers in order to evaluate each of the four responses (see Appendix).

Analyses

Frequencies of student responses were tallied. Compliment responses in the “shirt” and the “boot” scenarios were regarded as those to “appearance compliments,” and responses to compliments on “language ability” and “the guitar” were considered responses to “ability compliments.” Chi-square tests and residual analyses were employed to see the extent of statistical differences among frequencies of response styles. Averages of teachers’ ratings were computed to see which response styles would be considered most appropriate in English in the given contexts.
Limitations

This study has several limitations. Due to the nature of multiple-choice data collection, the utterance a student selects in each scenario may or may not be the type of expression he/she actually would use in compliment-receiving situations. This is not an ethnographical study, but exploratory research. However, it is still worth conducting this type of study in that it allows researchers to know which response style Japanese students would prefer within a highly structured framework of social positions, compliment givers, and attributes praised.

Second, this study is not intended to assess the extent to which students would transfer pragmatic aspects from L1 to L2. With two different student groups asked to answer either an English or a Japanese questionnaire, this study is limited to comparing the results of these two groups in terms of compliment response styles that might be employed in speaking the two languages.

Third, the relationship between students’ L2 proficiency and their preferences in response styles will not be explored here. There is a body of research that describes how students with a higher level of L2 proficiency demonstrate better pragmatic abilities in L2 (e.g., Koike, 1996; Takahashi, 1996), while other studies document that higher proficiency does not ensure better pragmatic knowledge (e.g., Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996). As the results of these previous studies suggest, the development of pragmatic knowledge in an L2 involves much more than those language abilities assessed by grammar and vocabulary tests.

Results

Student responses in English

Table 1 gives descriptive statistics of student compliment responses in English. Appreciation Token was the most frequently selected response style toward all four compliment types, i.e., appearance compliments from a close friend, ability compliments from a close friend, appearance compliments from a professor, and ability compliments from a professor. The strongest tendency observed was in the scenarios in which a middle-aged professor offered appearance-related compliments. Here, as many as 145 of 200 students, i.e., 72.5%, selected Appreciation Token. The next strongest tendency was in the scenarios in which the professor had given ability compliments: 104 students (52.0%) selected this response style. Appreciation Tokens were observed comparatively less frequently when close friends were the compli-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Disagreement</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>84 (42.0)</td>
<td>55 (27.5)</td>
<td>56 (28.0)</td>
<td>3 (1.5)</td>
<td>2 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>87 (43.5)</td>
<td>66 (33.0)</td>
<td>25 (12.5)</td>
<td>21 (10.5)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>145 (72.5)</td>
<td>23 (11.5)</td>
<td>21 (10.5)</td>
<td>11 (5.5)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>104 (52.0)</td>
<td>39 (19.5)</td>
<td>10 (5.0)</td>
<td>46 (23.0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall</td>
<td>420 (52.5)</td>
<td>183 (22.9)</td>
<td>112 (14.0)</td>
<td>81 (10.1)</td>
<td>4 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The numbers in parentheses show percentages.
ment givers, and tallied 84 (42.0%) for appearance compliments and 87 (43.5%) for those concerning abilities. The scenarios in which students’ close friends were compliment givers registered higher percentages of Questions [27.5% (n=55) on appearance; 33.0% (n=66) on ability] than those in which professors had offered compliments [11.5% (n=23) on appearance; 19.5% (n=39) on ability]. Agreement responses were rather salient when close friends gave appearance compliments (n=56, 28.0%), while Disagreement counts were relatively frequent when professors praised students’ abilities (n=46, 23.0%). As for “Other,” only a few counts were observed (n=4 in total) in the given contexts, and those who had selected this option indicated that they would utter a combination of responses, such as “I don’t think so, but thank you.”

In order to examine the extent of statistical differences among frequencies of response styles, four (compliment types: friend-appearance, friend-ability, professor-appearance, and professor-ability) by four (response styles except for Other: Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, and Disagreement) chi-square tests were conducted. The results revealed that students responded differently in the given scenarios at a significance level of \[x^2(9)=138.08, p< .01\].

Table 2 presents the results of residual analyses. It reveals that significantly fewer students selected Appreciation Tokens in scenarios where a friend had offered compliments on appearance and on ability. On the other hand, Appreciation Token was chosen with a significantly higher level of frequency in the case of appearance compliments from a professor. As for Question style responses, a significantly greater number of students felt them appropriate for ability compliments from a friend, though a significantly fewer students selected Question as a response to a professor’s compliments on appearance. A statistically significant trend to respond with Agreement was observed in appearance-related compliments from a friend, whereas Agreement was less likely to be selected as a response to ability compliments from a professor. Disagreement appeared more often with ability-related compliments from a professor, while it was generally avoided as a response to appearance compliments from both friends and professors alike.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Disagreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>-3.362**</td>
<td>1.847</td>
<td>6.635**</td>
<td>-4.650**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>-2.951**</td>
<td>3.939**</td>
<td>-0.706</td>
<td>0.203</td>
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<tr>
<td>professor</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>6.461**</td>
<td>-4.462**</td>
<td>-1.678</td>
<td>-2.527*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>-0.163</td>
<td>-1.313</td>
<td>-4.237**</td>
<td>6.971**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01, *p < .05**

**Student responses in Japanese**

Student response patterns in the L1 version of the questionnaire closely resembled those they had chosen in English. Table 3 shows frequencies of student responses in Japanese. Appreciation Token was selected with highest frequency (n=122, 61.0%) when middle-aged professors offered appearance compliments. This response style also occurred frequently
Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Responses in Japanese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Disagreement</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>63 (31.5%)</td>
<td>70 (35.0)</td>
<td>48 (24.0%)</td>
<td>15 (7.5%)</td>
<td>4 (2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>54 (27.0%)</td>
<td>72 (36.0)</td>
<td>26 (13.0%)</td>
<td>44 (22.0%)</td>
<td>4 (2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>122 (61.0%)</td>
<td>40 (20.0)</td>
<td>11 (5.5)</td>
<td>24 (12.0%)</td>
<td>3 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>108 (54.0%)</td>
<td>42 (21.0)</td>
<td>6 (3.0)</td>
<td>37 (18.5%)</td>
<td>7 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall</td>
<td>347 (43.4%)</td>
<td>224 (28.0)</td>
<td>91 (11.4)</td>
<td>120 (15.0)</td>
<td>18 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The numbers in parentheses show percentages.

when professors complimented students on abilities \( (n=108, 54.0\%)\). Compared to these, compliments from close friends did not elicit higher frequencies of Appreciation Token: there were only 63 (31.5\%) Appreciation Tokens indicated on appearance compliments and 54 (27.0\%) on ability compliments. A relatively large number of students, however, indicated preference for Question type responses when close friends issued ability compliments \( (n=72, 36.0\%)\), and when friends complimented students’ appearance \( (n=70, 35.0\%)\). Agreement was most salient when close friends offered appearance-related compliments \( (n=48, 24.0\%)\), and Disagreement was chosen relatively often when close friends gave compliments on ability \( (n=44, 22.0\%)\). On the other hand, only a few students, i.e., those who had selected “other” (a total of 18 subjects across the given contexts), indicated that they would utter a combination of two or more response styles.

Four (compliment type) by four (response style) chi-square tests were then conducted. The results indicate that students responded differently at a significance level of \( x^2(9) = 118.16, p < .01 \). Table 4 displays the results of subsequent residual analyses. It was found that Appreciation Token was preferred, at a significant level of frequency, as a response to compliments from professors over compliments from friends. This tendency was exhibited among appearance- and ability-related compliments. Question was chosen statistically more frequently as a response to both appearance- and ability-related compliments from friends, whereas it was less frequently chosen for both types of compliments from professors. Agreement counts were also less frequent for both appearance- and ability-related compliments offered by professors, and were significantly greater for friends’ compliments on appearance. Disagreement tended to be favored as a response to ability-related but not appearance-related compliments from friends.

Table 4. The Results of Residual Analyses (Japanese data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>-3.981**</td>
<td>2.529*</td>
<td>6.482**</td>
<td>-3.451**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>-5.476**</td>
<td>2.894**</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td>3.187**</td>
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<tr>
<td>professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>5.734**</td>
<td>-2.993**</td>
<td>-3.063**</td>
<td>-1.423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>3.732**</td>
<td>-2.437*</td>
<td>-4.257**</td>
<td>1.699</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**\( p < .01 \), *\( p < .05 \)
Native speaker evaluation of compliment responses

American and British teachers evaluated the English responses quite similarly (Table 5). Most indicated that Appreciation Token type responses were appropriate throughout the given scenarios, regardless not only of distance between compliment givers and receivers but also of attribute praised. Their averages for Appreciation Token ranged from 1.88 to 2.00. In terms of Question, teachers’ averages were situated between positive and neutral zones, and ranged from 0.25 to 1.50. On the other hand, the averages for Agreement and Disagreement styles were between negative and neutral. The averages for Agreement ranged from −2.00 to 0.63, and those for Disagreement were −2.00 to 0.00. These averages differed depending on the status of compliment givers and according to actual attributes appraised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Disagreement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ability</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>−1.25</td>
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<td>professor</td>
<td>appearance</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>−0.75</td>
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<td>ability</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>−1.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britons</td>
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<tr>
<td>close friend</td>
<td>appearance</td>
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<td>0.63</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ability</td>
<td>1.88</td>
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<td>ability</td>
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<td>1.25</td>
<td>−2.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The results reveal that the response styles students indicated preference for were quite static across English and Japanese. Analyses of the data suggest that the Japanese concept of *uchis* and *sotos*, or perceived social positions of interlocutors, apparently influenced Japanese selection of compliment response styles in both Japanese-speaking and English situations. This phenomenon is particularly salient in their selection of Appreciation Token and Agreement.

Fewer than a half of the student participants in the English questionnaire, and only one-third of those in the Japanese version, answered that they would use Appreciation Token when close friends complimented them. With one’s own professor, on the other hand, the percentages of students who favored Appreciation Tokens were much higher in both the English and Japanese questionnaires. These results suggest that students discerned the social position of compliment givers and decided to choose response styles they regarded as appropriate both in English and Japanese. In other words, students tended to consider the use of Appreciation Token, apparently a polite expression for them, as more appropriate for outsiders than for insiders.

Agreement generally appears to have been considered more appropriate for insiders than outsiders. Quite a number of students answered that they would employ Agreement with
regard to compliments from friends on appearance: 56 (28.0%) in the English version and 48 (24.0%) in the Japanese. A Japanese preference for Agreement echoes that of Matsuura's (2002) study, in which students, when speaking their native languages, demonstrated high frequencies of Agreement when given appearance compliments from one of their family members (mother) and close friends. The author contended that Japanese tend to favor rather casual ways of speaking toward people perceived as close, a discourse choice that can emphasize closeness in interpersonal relationships. This interpersonal strategy from Japanese apparently influenced the choice of Agreements in English as well.

From a pedagogical perspective, it may seem a problem that Japanese students registered fewer Appreciation Tokens for close compliment givers when given compliments in English. Native English instructors in this study, both American and British, rated Appreciation Token as most appropriate regardless of the relative status of the compliment givers or types of attributes praised. The results with regard to teacher ratings appears to support the claim on English compliments by Spencer-Oatey, Ng, and Dong (2000), who state that accepting compliments is quite common in varieties of native English. EFL teachers and students should note that the use of Appreciation Token, as a way of accepting compliments, is highly expected in a variety of English-speaking cultures.

The results on Agreements may also be indicative of problems in English-speaking situations. Native English-speaking instructors in this study tended to rate Agreement responses from “marginal” to “inappropriate,” while a relatively high percentage of student subjects, i.e., 28%, indicated preference for this response style. Although accepting a compliment may be a common compliment-receiving behavior in English-speaking cultures (Spencer-Oatey, Ng, and Dong, 2000), students should know that native English speakers might consider utterances of Agreement alone as blunt or rude. EFL instructors, therefore, should teach that it would be better to add an expression of gratitude to Agreement.

Japanese use of Disagreement should be also treated carefully in the EFL class, since the rejection of compliments in English is often regarded as a symptom of a problem, occasionally indicating low self-esteem (Pomerantz, 1978). In fact, American and British teachers in this study regarded Disagreement as rather inappropriate for almost all given compliments. For many student participants, on the other hand, disagreeing with someone else’s compliments was perceived as rather appropriate. This may be particularly true in cases where a person of higher status praises one’s ability. As the data indicate, almost a quarter of the student participants answered, in both English and Japanese scenarios, that they might use Disagreement in the case of ability compliments from a professor. Leech’s (1983) Modesty Maxim, i.e., one of the six maxims to be adhered to in order to maintain politeness, seems to bear on these results. Politeness is achieved by minimization of self-praise and by maximization of self-deprecation in the Modesty Maxim, and this maxim is more powerful in Japanese society than it is in English-speaking societies. A rather frequent indication of Disagreement for ability compliments in this study may exemplify a case in which L1 beliefs and the values of EFL learners conflict with sociopragmatic aspects of L2, as Kasper (1997) anticipated.

How then should EFL instructors deal with pragmatic conflicts between L1 and L2 cultures? Several researchers have offered valuable advice regarding the treatment of cross-cultural pragmatic aspects. McKay (2002) argues that the first step is to raise the awareness of both teachers and students that pragmatic rules can differ cross-culturally to a significant
The author further contends that teachers should stress the variety of ways in which individuals from various countries can work to establish amicable relations in cross-cultural encounters. In a similar vein, EFL teachers should inform students that while showing modesty might be a common behavior in a Japanese-speaking society, accepting compliments by thanking others is highly expected in English-speaking cultures.

Bardovi-Harlig (2001), on the other hand, maintains that the extent to which EFL students should adopt the target language culture could be left to an individual teacher's decision. For instance, in a class with the immediate goal of attaining fluency in order to enter a university in the U.S.A., the EFL instructor should require his/her students to acquire a native speaker norm of compliment response strategies. On the other hand, in an EFL class consisting, for example, of adult learners wishing to travel to countries in Asia and enjoy cross-cultural encounters with people of a variety of language backgrounds, there might be a less immediate need for students to demonstrate native-like performance in compliment responses. EFL instructors should bear in mind the extent to which learners should adopt L2 pragmatic conventions, and should allow flexibility depending on the students and the goals and objectives of the particular class.

Conclusion

This study explored compliment response styles that Japanese students favor both in English- and Japanese-speaking contexts. Multiple-choice type questionnaires including the response styles of Appreciation Token, Question, Agreement, and Disagreement, in both English- and Japanese-speaking environments, were created, and administered to university level students studying English in Japan. In order to assess native speaker reactions to likely compliment responses offered by Japanese students, several EFL instructors were asked to evaluate the four response styles that might be uttered when speaking English.

Analyses of the data revealed that response styles students indicated preference for were quite static across languages, which suggests that students' use of compliment responses in English is quite likely affected by their native language. The results also suggested that the relative status of a compliment giver as well as the concept of uchi/soto exerted great influence on the choice of responses in Japan. Appreciate Token was a more frequently selected response style both in English and Japanese when a compliment was issued by a middle-aged professor as opposed to a close friend. Attribute types appeared to influence responses as well. Agreement was favored more extensively in appearance-related compliments from close friends, and many participants chose Disagreement on ability-related compliments from professors. In their choice of responding with Agreement, a considerable number of students apparently intended to express closeness toward friends, and in Disagreement they may have attempted to show modesty toward professors. From a pedagogical point of view, however, employing these two response styles might be problematic in that they could threaten the face of a compliment giver when speaking English. It is thus essential for EFL teachers to illustrate on sociopragmatic differences between, for example, English Agreement and Japanese Agreement, and inform their students that Agreement is most appropriate if an accompanying Appreciation Token is also performed. EFL teachers, on the other hand, should remember that there are cases in which pragmatic aspects of the target language culture might conflict.
with students' values and beliefs.

Finally, one can make some suggestions for future research of this kind. Future studies might try other methods of data collection, and results could be compared with those obtained from this study. Role-playing, for example, could prove fruitful. It could enable researchers to elicit spontaneous performance data from students, i.e., data that may be much closer to actual compliment responses than that on paper. Different methods of eliciting compliment responses may draw different results. Moreover, future studies must not neglect to explore developmental issues, asking questions as to whether older EFL learners more readily deny or avoid accepting compliments as compared to young learners. The ratio of Disagreements to Questions, or any other deflecting response styles could also prove interesting. If adults in general may correctly be assumed to have already acquired L1 beliefs and values, and if Leech's (1983) claim that Japanese stress modesty is true, Disagreements and Questions might appear more frequently in adults' responses to compliments in both L1 and the L2. Speculations and hypotheses such as these should be tested in the near future.

References


MATSUURA : Compliment Response Styles


Appendix

Survey on Compliment Responses (teacher version)

1. Imagine that one of your students receives compliments on a shirt he/she recently bought at a local department store. Suppose his/her (1) close friend and (2) English teacher (middle-aged man), both native speakers of English, gave the following compliments, and he/she responds to them as below. Please evaluate each possible response in terms of appropriateness, i.e., the extent to which it is socially appropriate in your own culture (either American or British culture).

| -2 -- inappropriate | -1 -- somewhat inappropriate | 0 -- neutral (or cannot decide) | 1 -- somewhat appropriate | 2 -- appropriate |

(1) Close friend: Nice shirt! I like it.
Japanese student: ( )

1. Thank you. -2 -1 0 1 2
2. Really? -2 -1 0 1 2
3. I like it too. -2 -1 0 1 2
4. I don't think it's nice. -2 -1 0 1 2

(2) English teacher: I like your shirt. It's nice!
Japanese student: ( )

1. Thank you. -2 -1 0 1 2
2. Really? -2 -1 0 1 2
3. I like it too. -2 -1 0 1 2
4. I don't think it's nice. -2 -1 0 1 2
Imagine that one of your students speaks French fairly well, and receives compliments on his/her language ability. Suppose his/her (1) close friend and (2) English teacher (middle-aged man), both native speakers of English, gave the following compliments, and he/she responds to them as below. Please evaluate each possible response in terms of appropriateness.

   Japanese student: ( )
   1. Thank you.  
   2. Do you really think so?  
   3. I'm good at French.  
   4. My French isn't good at all.

2. English teacher: You speak French well. Great!
   Japanese student: ( )
   1. Thank you.  
   2. Do you really think so?  
   3. I'm good at French.  
   4. My French isn't good at all.

Imagine that one of your students receives compliments on the boots that were given by his/her grandmother. Suppose his/her (1) close friend and (2) English teacher (middle-aged man), both native speakers of English, gave the following compliments, and he/she responds to them as below. Please evaluate each possible response in terms of appropriateness.

1. Close friend: I like your boots. They are cool!
   Japanese student: ( )
   1. Thank you.  
   2. Do you think so?  
   3. I like them too.  
   4. Oh, they aren't nice.
4. Imagine that one of your students played the guitar well at the school festival concert, and receives compliments on his/her good performance. Suppose his/her (1) close friend and (2) English teacher (middle-aged man), both native speakers of English, gave the following compliments, and he/she responds to them as below. Please evaluate each possible response in terms of appropriateness.

(1) Close friend: You played the guitar very well! That’s great!
Japanese student: ( )

1. Thank you.  
2. Really?  
3. I’m good at playing the guitar.  
4. I didn’t play well.

(2) English teacher: You played the guitar very well! I enjoyed it.
Japanese student: ( )

1. Thank you.  
2. Really?  
3. I’m good at playing the guitar.  
4. I didn’t play well.