



## L2 English Compliment Responses: An Investigation of Pragmatic Transfer

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### Abstract

The present study is aimed at examining the compliment responses (CRs) used by Thai EFL learners. It has been discovered from the discourse completion tasks (DCTs) that the learners' level of English proficiency seemed to determine how they responded to compliments in such a way that the high-proficiency learners apparently employed CR patterns resembling those in American norms. The learners with low proficiency, by contrast, appeared to transfer pragmatic knowledge from their native language, rejecting and downgrading the compliments. The findings evidently bear out *the Compliment Response Continuum Hypothesis* (Tran, 2007), which claims that the CR strategies which tend to be transferred are at or towards the end of the acceptance to denial continuum.

**Keywords:** Compliment responses, pragmatic transfer, interlanguage pragmatics, EFL learners, learners' proficiency, second language acquisition, intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

Compliments and compliment responses (CRs) in English have been studied for decades. Not only have these studies focused on how native English speakers give and respond to compliments (e.g. Herbert, 1986; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Pomerantz, 1978), but there have also existed a number of research works that aim at investigating the use of CRs by English learners of different first-language (L1) backgrounds (e.g. Bulut & Ozkan, 2005; Cedar, 2006; Chen, 1993; Falasi, 2007; Han, 1992; Lin, 2008; Liu, 1995; Qu & Wang, 2005; Sattar & Lah, 2009; Tran, 2007; Yu, 1999, 2003, 2004).

It has been revealed that different cultures have different ways to deal with compliments (e.g. Chen, 1993; Gajaseni, 1994; Herbert & Straight, 1989). For example, Americans usually regard saying *Thank you* in response to a compliment as the most common practice, whereas speakers of Asian languages often reject or disagree with praise to show modesty (Falasi, 2007). It is likely that these people could transfer their pragmatic norms in L1 when encountering English compliments, which may result in pragmatic failure or communication breakdown in the target language (Lin, 2008).

Although some researchers have studied English CRs used by Thai speakers (e.g. Cedar, 2006; Gajaseni, 1994), there seems to be no study to date that investigates the use of CRs in relation to the proficiency-level differences of Thai EFL learners. For this reason, the present study was conducted to compare and contrast the ways Thais and Americans responded to compliments, aiming at figuring out to what extent Thai EFL learners of high and low proficiency transferred their L1 pragmatic norms to their English CR patterns.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1 Compliments and compliment responses

According to Holmes (1988, p. 446), a compliment is defined as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer". The major function of a compliment, as a positive speech act, is to build or foster solidarity between speakers and addressees through showing admiration or approval (Wolfson, 1983, p. 89). A compliment, in addition, also has other functions. Wolfson (1983) maintained that it can be used to strengthen or replace other speech acts, e.g. apologizing, thanking, or greeting. Furthermore, a compliment may also serve as a criticism softener when it is followed by



but or though and a criticism. Holmes (1988) also remarked that a complimenter may imply that s/he wants to possess something, whether it is an object or skill, owned by the complimentee.

When a compliment is given, the speaker expects a compliment response (CR) in return. However, to produce a response to the compliment, the complimentee, seems to be faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, s/he is supposed to agree with the speaker to save the speaker's face and demonstrate solidarity. The complimentee, on the other hand, feels that it is also necessary to avoid self-praise by not accepting the compliment (Pomerantz, 1978). These two conditions obviously pose a problem for the addressee in responding to compliments.

## 2.2 Previous research on compliment responses

The pioneer who studied compliment responses was Pomerantz (1978). She claimed that, as mentioned earlier, Americans when responding to a compliment are confronted with the dilemma of choosing between (a) accepting the compliment and (b) avoiding self-praise. Deciding to do (a) violates (b) and vice versa. It was discovered that recipients of compliments use a variety of solutions to solve such a conflict. For instance, they tend to conform to the American norms by saying *Thank you* or *Thanks*, as an appropriate response to compliments, followed by praise downgrade or a compliment return.

Herbert (1986) proposed a taxonomy of CRs, based on Pomerantz (1978), which was used to analyze American English CRs. The data of CRs were collected for three consecutive years from American college students. Of all the CRs, only 36.35% accounted for agreement, which was apparently against the prescriptive norms of American speech behavior, which emphasize the importance of compliment acceptance with saying *Thank you*. Many of the responses fell into the non-agreement and request interpretation categories. In other words, language performance in reality is clearly different from language prescription.

Herbert and Straight (1989) also undertook a comparative study on American and South African compliment responses used by college students. The findings reveal that Americans display a high frequency of compliment expression and a low frequency of compliment acceptance. In contrast, South Africans give relatively lower number of compliments than Americans but accept compliments with higher frequency. The differences between the two groups are ascribed to their respective socio-cultural background. That is, egalitarianism is reflected through the high frequency of compliments and the low rate of compliment acceptance in American culture. Conversely, the low compliment frequency and the high rate of acceptance represent elitism in South African society.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, there have also been plenty of research in interlanguage pragmatics of CRs used by English learners of various L1 backgrounds, such as Korean (e.g. Han, 1992), Chinese (e.g. Liu, 1995; R. Chen, 1993; Qu & Wang, 2005; W. Chen, 2012; Yu, 1999, 2003, 2004), Arabic (e.g. Al-Humaidi, 2006; Falasi, 2007), Turkish (e.g. Bulut & Ozkan, 2005), Vietnamese (e.g. Tran, 2007, 2008), and Thai (Cedar, 2006). It has been found that these English learners differing in first languages respond to English compliments in different fashions.

Han (1992) investigated how differently female Koreans responded to compliments in Korean and in English. Han revealed that Korean females responded to compliments in different manners according to the language they were using. To be specific, when they produced CRs in Korean, most of them seemed to disagree with compliments, accounting for 45% of the total responses. The next most frequent response was to deflect or evade compliments, accounting for 35% of the whole responses. Compliment acceptance occurred with the lowest frequency. Nevertheless, these Korean participants' CRs turned out to be significantly different when responding to English compliments. In particular, the most frequent CRs (75%) were used to accept compliments, while only 20% was to reject them. This means that female Korean speakers, when given compliments in English, were more inclined to follow the prescriptive norms of CRs of native English speakers. Further, the Korean females were also found to transfer their L1 cultural norms to English CRs since some of them disagreed with compliments, as they usually do in their first language. The evidence of pragmatic transfer, however, was not substantial.

With respect to Chinese learners of English, R. Chen (1993) studied CRs between Chinese learners and native speakers of American English. The study indicated that the majority of Chinese speakers rejected compliments, whereas the Americans were found to accept and appreciate compliments. Liu (1995) also carried out a study on English CRs of Chinese speakers, collecting the data from a questionnaire and an observation. The study provides clear evidence of socio-cultural or pragmatic transfer in the CRs which the Chinese participants produced. Pragmatically transferring how to respond to compliments in Chinese to the CRs in English, these



learners were seen to commit 26% of transfer errors, although their English proficiency was very high. 75% of the learners stated that they knew the appropriate way to fulfil the speech act in the target language “but still unconsciously employed the native Chinese pattern” (Liu, 1995, p. 261).

The fact that different native cultures underlie different uses of CRs is also corroborated by Yu (1999), who revealed that Chinese speakers were generally found to use non-acceptance CRs more often than English speakers did, while the latter more frequently applied acceptance strategies. According to Yu (2003), Chinese society places an emphasis on modesty and humility. Put differently, Chinese complimentees often humble themselves by lessening the complimentary forces of the praise directed to them. This may explain why they often disagree with a compliment, trying to be modest.

Qu and Wang (2005) analyzed compliment responses used by Chinese learners of English, exhibiting evidence of pragmatic transfer from Chinese. It was found that they sometimes used a metaphor, as they normally do in Chinese CRs, to respond to a compliment in English as in Smile is the best medicine of our spirit in response to the compliment Your smile is so sweet. Employing such a metaphor allows the complimentee to indirectly accept the praise as opposed to becoming embarrassed to take the compliment directly. The study also shows no significant relationship between the English major and non-English major students' CRs.

Lin (2008) reported on pragmatic failure in intercultural communication of Chinese learners of English, focusing on CRs and requests in English. This research, collecting data through a discourse completion task and an interview, shows that the learners stated in the interview that their communication broke down since they were not fully aware of English culture and since they employed their language use habit in L1. Put simply, they lacked pragmatic knowledge in L2; meanwhile, the influence of Chinese pragmatics on responding to English compliments was strong.

Evidence of pragmatic transfer in L2 English CR strategies is also present in a study by Cheng (2011), who explored a comparison between CRs produced by native English speakers and Chinese ESL and EFL learners. The naturalistic role play demonstrated learners' English CR patterns that are similar to native speakers'. The learners were found to successfully use *Thanks* and *Thank you* in response to compliments, which corresponds to the American pragmatic norm. The data from the retrospective interview showed that, compared to the EFL group, the ESL counterpart, immersed in authentic language contexts on a daily basis, gained more opportunities to communicate with native English speakers. It is also worth noticing that their problems regarding CR strategy application were attributed to their L1 culture as well as limited L2 proficiency.

A recent study by W. Chen (2012), focusing on the English CRs used by Chinese ESL learners in comparison with those of native speakers of American English, indicates some strikingly outstanding similarities between the two groups. The Chinese-speaking learners, most of the time, responded to compliments with acceptance, similar to what Americans conventionally do. Another very interesting result lies in the L1-based use of *Really?* and *Oh, really?* as a CR strategy. While Americans seldom produce *Really?* in response to a compliment, Chinese usually view this as a proper CR use in their native culture, thereby transferring this pragmatic norm to their English CRs. This, as noted by W. Chen, may result in a potential cross-cultural miscommunication between speakers of Chinese and American English.

Apart from English learners speaking L1 Korean and Chinese, there are also studies on CRs of Arabic learners of English. As indicated in Falasi (2007), Arabic speakers, irrespective of their English proficiency, produced English CRs which represent their L1 pragmatic norms. In other words, they evidently transferred CR strategies from Arabic to English. For instance, they said I'm ashamed as a CR to show gratitude or appreciation despite the fact that this expression, in English, is supposed to be used when an offence is committed. Additionally, the learners seemed to produce longer CRs than Americans generally do because, as Falasi claimed, they might have thought that doing so helps intensify the degree of sincerity. They even responded to compliments, with some jokes as well as prayers.

In contrast to Falasi (2007), Al-Humaidi (2006), with the use of questionnaires to collect data from Arabic learners of English in Saudi Arabia, reveals that the learners' English proficiency apparently correlated to their pragmatic awareness in responding to English compliments. That is, the learners with higher level of proficiency had a higher level of pragmatic awareness of native English speakers with regard to giving and receiving compliments.

In support of Al-Humaidi (2006), Bulut and Ozkan (2005) found that Turkish learners of English with higher L2 proficiency had better comprehension of English compliments than those with lower level of proficiency. Also,



Al-Humaidi (2006) gains further support from Yu (2004), who demonstrates that the CRs used by English learners in the United States were significantly more like the native American English speakers' norms, i.e. with more compliment acceptance, than those in Taiwan, whose English proficiency was lower.

In a cross-linguistic examination of CRs by Vietnamese learners of English and Australian English speakers, Tran (2007) has postulated the Compliment Response Continuum Hypothesis (CRCH), which she claims to universally account for CR patterns across languages. From this hypothesis, Tran suggests that CR strategies are not separate but connected with one another to constitute a continuum. That is to say, according to Figure 1 below, CR strategies are placed on the acceptance to denial continuum with compliment upgrade at one end and disagreement at the other.

Figure 1: the acceptance to denial continuum (Tran, 2007, p.8)

compliment upgrade → agreement → appreciation token → return → explanation/comment history → reassignment → compliment downgrade → disagreement

Examples of each strategy are given here (Tran, 2007, pp. 8-9):

*Compliment upgrade:*

A: Nice car!

B: Thanks. Brand new.

*Agreement/Agreement token*

A: It's really stylish.

B: Yeah.

*Appreciation token*

A: What a lovely dress!

B: Oh. Thank you.

*Return*

A: You're looking good.

B: Thanks. So are you.

*Explanation/Comment history*

A: I like your tie. It suits you well.

B: Thanks. Mom bought it for me. She likes to buy me nice ties now and again.

*Reassignment*

A: You look good today.

B: Oh, thanks. It must be the jacket.

*Compliment downgrade*

A: It's a really nice car.

B: Oh no. It looks like that but actually it has a lot of problems.

*Disagreement/ Disagreement token*

A: You're looking radiant.

B: Oh. No, I don't think so.

Tran (2007) presented intriguing findings that patterns of pragmatic transfer of L1 CRs deal with the positions of strategies on the CR continuum. In a nutshell, the CR strategies which are likely to be transferred are at or towards both ends of the acceptance to denial continuum. By contrast, those in the middle of the continuum have



less tendency to be transferred. It is worth noticing from this study that most of the CR strategies which Australians used were at or towards the acceptance end, whereas Vietnamese speakers were more likely to deny or disagree with compliments. Nonetheless, to a lesser extent, the Vietnamese were also found to accept compliments, and Australians sometimes showed disagreement with compliments. Thus, in spite of “the cross-cultural differences in CRs, the same range of CR strategies exists in both the Australian and Vietnamese cultures” (Tran, 2007, p. 16). This lends support to the assumption that the CR continuum is universal and underlies CRs in various cultures.

As regards pragmatic transfer, it is discovered that Vietnamese learners of English, as predicted, appeared to transfer their modesty in L1 to the use of CRs in English. That is, they by and large seemed to disagree with complimenters and deny praise given to them.

A study of Tran (2008) bears out the CR Continuum Hypothesis and provides additional evidence of pragmatic transfer in the interlanguage of Vietnamese English learners. The research shows that the way strategies of CRs are combined in the learners’ data resembles that in Vietnamese rather than the target language. In other words, such strategies go towards the denial end of the CR Continuum Hypothesis. They clearly employ disagreement and compliment downgrades to a large extent.

Similar to Vietnamese culture, Thai society also values modesty. Thais are often humble when responding to compliments (Gajaseni, 1994). Given a compliment, Thais are very careful to be humble and modest even though they are actually happy about the praise they receive. They often refrain from expressing any outward sign of pleasure. Cedar (2006) demonstrates that Thai learners of English transferred their L1 pragmatic norms into their English CRs; they avoided acceptance of compliments to sound modest. They were also found to smile in response to praise (approximately 25%), which obviously reflects Thai culture, while no Americans responded to compliment with smiles. In fact, “the function of smiling in Thai culture is to lessen embarrassment and tension between interlocutors.” (Cedar, 2006, p. 6)

Cedar (2006) also displays significant differences between Thai males and females in their CR patterns. Particularly, Thai males use acceptance responses more frequently than Thai females. In addition, denial responses are not employed by Thai female complimentees, whereas they are used more often by male counterparts. Like Thai females, American females, as Cedar indicates, do not use denial response to compliments at all.

There seems to be little research to date that investigates the use of English CRs by Thai EFL learners in relation to their English proficiency level. It is for this reason that the present study was initiated to bridge this gap, focusing on an analysis of the interlanguage English CRs of high-and-low proficiency learners who speak L1 Thai, in comparison with CRs used in American English and Thai. Such a comparative study of CRs in both languages permits an examination of pragmatic transfer from Thai.

### 3. Research questions and Hypotheses

The present study aimed at finding answers to the following questions:

1. How differently do Thais and Americans respond to compliments?
2. Is there any correlation between Thai EFL learners’ proficiency and their CR use in English?
3. To what extent do Thai EFL learners pragmatically transfer from their native language when responding to English compliments?

With respect to the above research questions, the following hypotheses were also formulated:

#### Hypothesis 1:

Thais use L1 CRs at or towards the denial continuum, whereas Americans’ CR patterns ascend towards the acceptance continuum.

#### Hypothesis 2:

There is a correlation between Thai EFL learners’ proficiency and their CR use in English in that high-proficiency learners’ CR strategies rather than low proficiency ones’ are more similar to those employed by Americans.

#### Hypothesis 3:

Thai EFL learners with lower proficiency transfer more CR patterns from Thai to their CR use in English.



#### **4. Research methodology**

##### *4.1 Data collection*

The current study involved four groups of participants: native speakers of American English (NAE), native speakers of Thai (NT), high-proficiency Thai EFL learners (HTL), and low-proficiency Thai EFL learners (LTL). The reason why two groups of learners were required lies in the fact that this would make it possible to conduct a cross-sectional interlanguage study, to observe how differently the two non-native groups responded to compliments in English and how close to the L1 norms their CR patterns were. In particular, ten Americans, males and females, working in Thailand and ten Thai people of both sexes were recruited. Regarding the learner groups, both were also male and female first-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. It should be noted that because this study did not concentrate on how gender differences could influence CR use, mixing up the participants' sexes in all of the groups was allowed.

In terms of the differences in English proficiency of the learner groups, the high-proficiency learners were randomly recruited from English-major students, while the learners with low level of proficiency were non-English majors. Both groups have learned English in an EFL setting in Thailand for at least twelve years, so they should be competent enough to understand all the English compliments in the task in which they would be asked to fill.

With respect to the research instrument, a discourse completion task (DCT), consisting of ten items of compliments and blanks for responses, were administered to the participants to elicit CRs (See Appendix A). The task distributed to the Americans and the Thai EFL learners was in English, whereas, for the group of native Thai speakers, a translation in Thai (See Appendix B) was provided. There are two major reasons why a DCT was chosen as a tool for collecting CRs. Firstly, a DCT enables the researcher to elicit adequate pragmatic data within a relatively short time. The other reason is a DCT has been confirmed by many previous studies that it really serves as an effective tool to elicit CRs (e.g. Falasi, 2007; Qu & Wang, 2005; Sattar & Lah, 2009).

##### *4.2 Data analysis*

The data obtained from the DCT were analyzed to test the CR Continuum Hypothesis (Tran, 2007), which posits that the CR strategies at or towards both ends of the acceptance to denial continuum are likely to be transferred from L1 into L2 CR use. As a matter of fact, Tran (2007) also proposed another continuum called the avoidance continuum to explain CRs, which includes opting out or avoiding responding to compliments. However, since the present-study data were gathered from DCTs, which the participants had to complete, there appeared little or no chance for avoidance to occur. This has really been confirmed by no token of avoidance in the data. Still, the avoidance continuum also includes (doubting) question, which actually exists in the data; as a result, only (doubting) question was added to the acceptance-denial continuum and placed on the denial end since they show some non-acceptance or disagreement with the complimenter.

Example

(Doubting) question

A: (Referring to B's article published last week) Fantastic actually.

B: Really?

(Tran, 2007, p. 10)

In the analysis of the CR data, the CR strategies applied by the Americans and the Thais were first compared and contrasted. Next, how CRs were used by the two groups of Thai EFL learners was comparatively investigated. The analysis also sought evidence of pragmatic transfer by comparing the interlanguage CRs of Thai learners and the CRs in Thai.

The framework for the current research project is presented in the acceptance-denial continuum below:

compliment upgrade → agreement → appreciation token → return → explanation/comment history → reassignment → (doubting) question → compliment downgrade → disagreement

N.B. The CR strategies on the right of the arrows go towards the denial end

(adapted from Tran, 2007)

Another important point for consideration is that some of the CRs found in the study are composed of more than one strategy. For instance, it may begin with an appreciation token, e.g. *Thanks*, followed by a compliment downgrade, e.g. *I think it's not that beautiful*, which represents the principal content of this CR. To analyze the data qualitatively, the classification of CR strategies was thus based on the main content of a compound CR. In other words, concerning a compound CR, "the perceived intention of the speaker was crucial in determining category assignment" (Herbert, 1986, p. 80).

### 5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Percentage of CR strategies among all of the participant groups

CR strategies	Percentage of CRs			
	NAE	NT	HTL	LTL
1.compliment upgrade	14	19	11	9
2.agreement/agreement token	6	3	6	7
3.appreciation token	51	26	58	30
4.return	3	17	8	14
5.explanation/comment history	17	16	6	7
6.reassignment	2	-	1	2
7.(doubting) question	3	4	2	10
8.compliment downgrade	4	15	7	16
9.disagreement	-	-	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

- N.B.     NAE     native speakers of American English  
           NT     native speakers of Thai  
           HTL    high-proficiency Thai EFL learners  
           LTL    low-proficiency Thai EFL learners

#### 5.1 Comparison between Thai and American CRs

As there were 100 tokens of CRs in each group of the subjects, these tokens were equated with percentage. According to Table 1, a comparison between the Americans' CRs and the native Thais' was performed. It reveals that both groups employed CR strategies in remarkably different ways. In particular, the Americans were found to accept compliments more often than the Thais did. On the whole, most of the CRs used by the Americans occurred towards the acceptance end of the CR continuum (Tran, 2007) with 71% of acceptance, i.e. compliment upgrade, agreement/agreement token, and appreciation token. The Thais, on the other hand, responded to compliments with only 48% of acceptance. The Equality of Two Population Proportion revealed that the Americans produced significantly more CR patterns towards the acceptance continuum than the Thais did,  $Z = 3.4079 > Z_{1-\alpha} = 2.326$ .

In contrast, more CRs used by the Thais were found to occur towards the denial end (19%), i.e. doubting question and compliment downgrade, than those which the Americans produced (7%). The Equality of Two Population Proportion demonstrated that the Thais employed CRs towards the denial end more significantly than the Americans,  $Z = -2.5642 < -Z_{1-\alpha} = -2.326$ . For instance, they apparently used 15% of compliment downgrade, e.g. *Not that good. I have to practise more.*, as in (1), which is indicative of their modesty in L1 culture, compared to 4% in the Americans' CRs.

(1)

A: You speak very good English.

*You will say: Not that good. I have to practise more.*

Furthermore, the Thai group obviously produced 17% of return, such as *Yours is also stylish.*, as in (2), or *So is*

*yours* in response to the compliment in (3). By contrast, only 3% of return was discovered in the Americans' CRs, e.g. *So is yours* in (4).

(2)

A: I really like you hairstyle.

*You will say: Yours is also stylish.*

(3)

A: Your presentation today is impressive.

*You will say: So is yours.*

(4)

A: Your cat is really cute.

*You will say: So is yours.*

It is clearly seen, as demonstrated above, that the Thais were more likely to disagree with compliments so as to avoid self-praise than the Americans did. Meanwhile, the Americans evidently accepted compliments far more often than the Thais. That is, the use of CRs by Thai speakers seemed to stay at or towards the denial end. This provides support for Tran (2007)'s the CR Continuum Hypothesis and also confirms Hypothesis 1, which claims that the use of CRs in Thai goes towards the denial continuum, whereas that in American English largely occurs along the acceptance continuum.

#### 5.2 Thai EFL learners' CR use

The present study also aimed to seek a relationship between the application of CRs in L2 English and learners' proficiency. As Table 1 shows, the high-proficiency learners seemed to employ CRs in English which are similar to those used by the Americans. For example, it is very noticeable to find 75% of compliment acceptance, which comprises compliment upgrade, agreement/agreement token, and appreciation token, in the high-proficiency group's CRs, in comparison to 71% in the native American-English speakers'.

With a more thorough investigation, the data indicate that the high-proficiency learners employed 11% of compliment upgrade, whereas the Americans produced 14% of this CR strategy. As for agreement/agreement token, both groups came up with the same frequency (6%). It is worth noticing that more use of appreciation token, represented by saying *Thank you* or *Thanks*, was spotted in the data of the high-proficiency learners (58%) than 51% in the Americans' CRs. This may suggest that the learners with high proficiency were probably fully aware of the pragmatic norms in the target language in that the most appropriate response to a compliment is *Thank you* or *Thanks* (Johnson, 1979). According to the Equality of Two Population Proportion, the proportions of the CR strategies between the high-proficiency learners and the Americans are not significantly different,  $Z = -0.6377$ , which is between  $-Z_{1-\alpha/2} = -2.575$  and  $Z_{1-\alpha/2} = 2.575$ .

In contrast to the high-proficiency learners, the learners with a low level of proficiency apparently responded to English praise in a noticeably different manner from the American normal practice. That is, only 46% of them accepted compliments, compared to 71% in the American data. To be specific, the low-proficiency learners produced only 30% of appreciation token, while the Americans employed 51% of saying *Thank you*. Additionally, the learners with low proficiency used 9%, compared to 14% in the American data, of compliment upgrade. The frequencies of agreement/agreement token in both groups were very close, with 7% in the low-proficiency learners' CRs and 6% in the Americans'. The Equality of Two Population Proportion confirmed that the CR strategies towards the acceptance continuum used by the Americans significantly outnumbered those which the low-proficiency Thai EFL learners employed,  $Z = 3.7091 > Z_{1-\alpha} = 2.326$ .

Nevertheless, the low-proficiency learners were found to use more compliment downgrade than the Americans, which will be discussed later when it comes to pragmatic transfer.

In summary, it is evident that the Thai EFL learners with high level of proficiency were more inclined to use CR strategies which correspond to the American norms, i.e. towards the acceptance continuum, whereas the learners whose proficiency was lower apparently responded to English compliments far more differently from the American convention, accepting praise with less frequency. The finding as such is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Al-Humaidi, 2006; Bulut & Ozkan, 2005; Yu, 2004) in that proficiency apparently correlates with learners' pragmatic knowledge in L2. The higher proficiency in L2, the higher likelihood for learners to have CR performance closer to the native English speakers' norms. For this reason, the second hypothesis is proved.



When the CRs used by the Thai learners of different English-proficiency levels were compared and contrasted, it was discovered that the learners with high proficiency produced more CRs towards the acceptance end (75%), compared to only 46% in the low-proficiency group. The Equality of Two Population Proportion also confirmed that the high-proficiency learners obviously accepted significantly more compliments than those with low proficiency did,  $Z = 4.3924 > Z_{1-\alpha} = 2.326$ .

Moreover, it has been shown that the learners with high level of English proficiency produced significantly fewer CRs (10%) towards the denial end than those whose proficiency was low (31%), as confirmed by The Equality of Two Population Proportion,  $Z = 4.3924 > Z_{1-\alpha} = 2.326$ .

It is worth noting that such a result concerning proficiency levels provides some evidence against some other research works which indicate no correlation between proficiency and CR use (e.g. Falasi, 2007; Qu & Wang, 2005).

### 5.3 Evidence of pragmatic transfer

Pragmatic transfer with regard to the CR use by Thai EFL learners was also examined in the current study in answer to the third research question. It is indicated that the levels of learners' proficiency seemed to be connected with the degree of pragmatic transfer. This means that those whose proficiency was lower were found to depend on the L1 pragmatic norms when responding to compliments in English. The Equality of Two Population Proportion also indicated that this group of low-proficiency learners used CR strategies which are akin to those in their native language, Thai,  $Z = -1.9787$ , which is between  $-Z_{1-\alpha/2} = -2.575$  and  $Z_{1-\alpha/2} = 2.575$ . For example, they evidently employed compliment downgrade (16%) approximately as frequently as the native speakers used in Thai (15%). The use of compliment downgrade, as in (5), and return, as in (6), may represent their modesty in Thai culture, in which they are not expected to directly accept compliments since such an action is considered impolite, not humble, or even conceited (Cedar, 2006).

(5)

A: The project you proposed at the meeting is fantastic!

You will say: *It needs some improvement though.*

(6)

A: You have such a lovely daughter.

You will say: *Your son is also nice.*

In addition, the frequency of compliment acceptance in the low-proficiency learners (46%) seemed to correspond to that in the group of native Thai speakers (48%). The Equality of Two Population Proportion also revealed that the low-proficiency learners and the native Thai participants produced CRs towards the acceptance continuum at a very similar rate,  $Z = 0.2834$ , which is between  $-Z_{1-\alpha/2} = -2.575$  and  $Z_{1-\alpha/2} = 2.575$ . This may also pinpoint their reliance upon Thai culture as they might think that willingly agreeing to complimenters is often associated with self-praise, which should be avoided.

In contrast, the high-proficiency learners were assumed to be less dependent on the L1 pragmatic norms. As can be seen earlier, the learners with high proficiency appeared to use more CRs which conform to the pragmatic norms of the Americans; they were clearly more distant from the norms in their mother tongue, in comparison to the low-proficiency learners. Like the Americans showing their agreement with the compliments for 71%, the high-proficiency learners clearly accepted the praise from the complimenters (75%), whereas the native Thais seemed to use significantly fewer CRs towards the acceptance end (48%), as confirmed by the Equality of Two Population Proportion,  $Z = -4.0839 < -Z_{1-\alpha} = -2.326$ . Contrary to the low-proficiency learners, those with high proficiency level seemed not to transfer the CR strategies at or towards the denial continuum, which are characteristic of Thai culture.

It is remarkable that the degree of pragmatic transfer is apparently closely related to the level of English proficiency in that the learners with low proficiency probably fell back to their pragmatic knowledge in L1 in responding to compliments in English, while the high-proficiency ones were seen to produce more CRs which largely follow the American convention. In other words, the CR patterns that are likely to be transferred, for Asians, are at the denial end, as predicted in the CR Continuum Hypothesis (Tran, 2007).

Generally, the evidence of pragmatic transfer in Thai EFL learners' CR patterns supplied by the findings of the present study lends support to past studies of L2 English CRs. (e.g. Chen, 2012; Cheng, 2011; Falasi, 2007; Liu,

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1995; Qu & Wang, 2005; Sattar & Lah, 2009; Tran, 2008) and thus confirms the third hypothesis.

### 6. Pedagogical implications

As the results of the present study demonstrate, Thais and Americans conspicuously have their own CR patterns associated with their native cultures. Differences in pragmatic conventions of the two cultures probably account for how differently they respond to compliments. It should follow that misunderstanding or communication breakdown could arise as a consequence of such pragmatic differences, e.g. when Thais transfer their L1 CR norm into their English use. According to the present-study findings, the learners with low English proficiency often apply compliment downgrade as they normally do in Thai. This may confuse or even offend the complimentee who may think s/he is losing her/his face when the compliment is rejected.

It should be useful if EFL teachers are aware of such cultural differences between the speakers of both languages. They are advised to focus on pragmatic aspects as to CR patterns in English when teaching English to not only Thai but also other EFL learners, with their major goal to increase the learners' pragmatic competence (Lin, 2008). To put it simply, teachers can familiarize the learners with appropriate responses to praise through authentic media, such as English films, plays, interviews, downloaded video clips, etc., from which they can learn natural English use, supplemented by some useful guidance from teachers.

### 7. Conclusion

The findings of the present research provide interlanguage pragmaticists with some new aspects in relation to Thai EFL learners. To be specific, there seems to be a correlation between proficiency levels and CR strategies in English in such a way that high-proficiency learners' CR patterns are more like those occurring in the native speakers' corpus, i.e. more target-like, compared to the strategies used by learners with low proficiency. As to pragmatic transfer, the current study finds support for the CR Continuum Hypothesis (Tran, 2007) since the learners evidently transferred compliment downgrade, which is towards the denial end, into their CR use in English. Finally, it is advisable that EFL teachers prepare materials based on authentic media in order to boost their learners' pragmatic awareness.

### 8. Recommendations for further research

As the present study did not address the issues of genders, social statuses, and ages of complimenters and complimentees, researchers interested in interlanguage pragmatics regarding compliment responses are encouraged to bridge these gaps by highlighting the differences in sexes between the interlocutors which could lead to significant differences in CR strategy application. Additionally, social distance and statuses between the speaker and the listener should also be taken into account since the CR use may be influenced by such differences. Further, future research focusing on the CRs produced by the complimentees who differ in ages from the speakers may provide some new beneficial findings as well.

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**Appendices**

*Appendix A: discourse completion task*

**Questionnaire**

Directions: The situations in 1-10 involve your conversation with your friend who is at your age. Please fill in the blanks with responses that you think correspond to the situations given.

1. I really like your hairstyle.  
*You will say:*.....
2. You speak very good English.  
*You will say:*.....
3. Your house is so beautiful.  
*You will say:*.....
4. Oh nice sweater you wear in there. You look stylish today.  
*You will say:*.....
5. What a wonderful car you have?  
*You will say:*.....
6. The project you proposed at the meeting is fantastic!  
*You will say:*.....
7. You have such a lovely daughter.  
*You will say:*.....
8. Your cat is really cute.  
*You will say:*.....
9. Your presentation today is impressive.  
*You will say:*.....
10. The cookies you gave me were very delicious.  
*You will say:*.....

*Appendix B: discourse completion task (Thai version)*

แบบสอบถาม

คำชี้แจง: สถานการณ์ในข้อ 1-10 เป็นบทสนทนาของคุณกับเพื่อนที่อายุเท่ากับคุณ กรุณาเติมข้อความลงในช่องว่างตามสถานการณ์ที่กำหนดให้

1. ฉันชอบทรงผมคุณจริงๆ  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
2. คุณพูดภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีมาก  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
3. บ้านของคุณสวยมาก  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
4. เสื้อหนาวที่คุณใส่สวยจัง คุณดูทันสมัยมากวันนี้  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
5. รถของคุณช่างวิเศษจริงๆ  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
6. โครงการที่คุณเสนอในที่ประชุมยอดเยี่ยมมาก  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
7. คุณมีลูกสาวที่น่ารักมาก  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
8. แมวของคุณน่ารักจริงๆ  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
9. การนำเสนอรายงานของคุณวันนี้ช่างน่าประทับใจ  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_
10. คุกกี้ที่คุณให้ฉันอร่อยมากๆ  
 คุณจะตอบว่า \_\_\_\_\_