

Compliment Response Strategies in Institutional Discourse within an Emirati Context: Focus on Power and Gender Differences in University Student-Professor Exchanges in English

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ABSTRACT

Background: Context plays a significant role in effective communication. Among various aspects of context, culture is particularly important since it necessitates that language be used effectively so that a specific purpose can be achieved successfully. One key element of such communication is the effective use of speech acts including compliment and compliment responses (CR).

Purpose: This research aimed to identify the CR strategies produced by Emirati users of English in a university setting, as a response to a compliment received from an international professor on their academic performance and the psychological effect such a compliment is likely to have on them. It also investigated the influence of gender on CR strategies.

Method: The data were collected using a discourse completion task. Fifty-eight students (33 male and 25 female) participated in the study. The CR strategies were analyzed using Holmes' (1988) classification scheme.

Results: The results showed that a compliment from a professor, irrespective of his/her gender, would make the students happy, with positive effects on their motivation, self-confidence, and feeling of closeness to the professor. The students also thought a CR was necessary for politeness purposes. The most commonly used CR strategy was that of acceptance. The male and the female students produced similar CR strategies in responding to the professor, irrespective of his/her gender. Yet they were more likely to use micro-level strategies (e.g., appreciation token, comment, and promise) with the male professor. The students also used downgrading and disagreeing but only while responding to the male professor. In their conversation with the female professor, they used the strategies of shifting credit and requesting reassurance.

Conclusion: These results provide evidence for the face-enhancing nature of CR strategies as utilized by Emirati users of English with international faculty in a university setting.

KEYWORDS

compliment, compliment response, Emirati university students, gender, power, speech acts

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INTRODUCTION

Communication with other people helps us understand ourselves better, and the more we understand ourselves, the better we can communicate and connect with others (Deveci & Nunn, 2018), which points to the significant role interpersonal communication plays in well-being at individual and societal levels. One of the key determinants of effective communication is the context in which communication takes place. The four dimensions

of context are physical, temporal, social-psychological, and cultural (DeVito, 2013). Within the scope of this paper, the latter two are of particular importance. Social-psychological context includes the status relationships between those involved in communication while cultural context determines what we say and how we say it according to cultural norms. Both of these contexts require "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas,



1983, p. 92). This includes the effective use of speech acts, the theory of which is based on “the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication [is] the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, etc.” (Searle, et al., 1980, p. vii). This paper is related to one such act, namely complimenting, and focuses more specifically on *compliment responses* (CRs), the performance of which is heavily influenced by a variety of factors including the interlocutors’ gender as well as cultural backgrounds.

Holmes (1988) emphasizes the importance of studying the contexts in which compliments and CRs occur. What is central to the current research is the social-psychological context (DeVito, 2013), which studies CRs in a particular situation involving a higher-lower-status relationship in an institutional setting (a university). A related term, ‘social distance,’ “determines the way in which interlocutors converse precisely because it is an important determinant of the degree of comfort or politeness/deference in a verbal exchange. This, in turn, determines the constraints felt and the liberties taken in speech exchanges» (Boxer, 1993, p. 103).

Previous research has revealed that social distance in different contexts, including student-professor, can be perceived differently by interlocutors from distinct cultural backgrounds, which impacts strategy choices (Maeshiba et al., 1996). The utilization of a variety of speech acts in student-professor contexts has been studied. Among these were complaint (Önalán & Çakır, 2018), request (Deveci & Hmida, 2017; Yang, 2009), apology (Bataineh, 2005), and refusal (Deveci & Midraj, 2021). However, there is a dearth of studies on students’ CR strategies when receiving a compliment from their professors, a situation which is heavily influenced by the role social power plays in determining how interlocutors use the language.

It also appears that in this particular setting (i.e., university professor-student exchanges) how a professor’s gender impacts CRs has not been investigated, especially within an Emirati context. Neither has the students’ gender. Gender is an important aspect of culture, and how it plays out in daily conversation is of great significance. Tannen (1994) approached gender differences in language use from the cultural difference perspective and noted that men differ from women in that they communicate factual information, while women tend to pay closer attention to building and maintaining relationships. However, it appears that the impact of gender on compliments and CRs has been generally investigated in studies situated in western cultures, with a lack of reference to the Middle Eastern cultures, particularly in the Emirati context, where gender plays a substantial role in daily communication, whether in non-academic or academic settings.

There indeed is empirical evidence that differences exist between male and female Emirati speakers’ overall communication styles and linguistic tendencies. About the former, Ahmad (2014) points to several differences. In comparison to Emirati women, Emirati men are more direct and to the point and less hesitant to share opinions. They also take the initiative to speak more often. Emirati men are also noted to use abusive terms and harsh language during conversations with friends and colleagues whereas Emirati women refrain from such language. Ahmad (2014) also notes that Emirati women are more open to conversations with other nationalities than they are to conversations with Emirati men. In a study on expressive writing produced by male and female students in her Emirati context, Almazroui (2009) found that the female students expressed their personal experiences and feeling more often than the male students while the male students exhibited domination and overstatements of self. In a more recent study on expressive writing in the form of reflective essays, Deveci and Ayish (2021) found that male students tended to use adjectives more often than their female counterparts did. However, the female students used attitudinal adjectives with higher frequencies. Together, these studies point to potential differences in the language used by Emirati males and females when producing a CR.

Because 88.52% of the UAE residents are expatriates from a variety of countries¹ (GMI, 2019), the English language is used extensively in daily life. It is also used as the medium of instruction in all UAE universities. Although the profile of faculty may vary to a great extent, students are expected to interact with their professors in socially and culturally appropriate ways. The same is true for faculty as well. Effective instruction includes positive feedback, which helps build strong relationships with students (Kington et al., 2014), thus increasing motivation for learning. Positive feedback can take the form of a compliment *or* be perceived as one by students. And students’ perceptions of compliment matter, especially when it comes from a professor of the opposite gender because it is likely to determine how they respond or if they respond at all. It is also possible that female and male students behave differently in such a situation. Therefore, it is important to identify student tendencies in responding to male and female professors’ compliments. Toward this end, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- (1)
 - a) What are the psychological effects of a compliment paid to Emirati university students by a professor on their assignment?
 - b) How do the female and the male students’ responses compare?
 - c) Do their responses differ according to the professor’s gender?

¹ GMI. (2019, January 30). United Arab Emirates population statistics. <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/>

- (2)
- Do the students think a compliment from a professor on their performance would require a response? Why (not)?
 - How do the female and the male students' responses compare?
 - Do their responses differ according to the professor's gender?
- (3)
- What CR strategies do the students use in English?
 - How do the female and the male students' CRs compare?
 - Do their CRs differ according to the professor's gender?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness

The notion of 'face,' borrowed from Goffman, is central to Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness. They elucidate that face is related to embarrassment or humiliation. Face can be 'threatened,' 'lost,' 'maintained,' 'saved,' or 'enhanced.' Considering the mutual vulnerability of face, interlocutors are encouraged to cooperate in maintaining face. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 312) also note that "while the content of face will differ in different cultures ... the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image or face, and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction, are universal."

There are two categories of face: positive face and negative face. The former is related to people's general desire for recognition, appreciation, and approval. The latter is related to their desire to avoid imposition and to be free in their choices and actions. The notions of positive face and negative face are linked to the notions of positive politeness and negative politeness. While positive politeness is "oriented toward the positive face of the hearer," negative politeness is "oriented toward partially satisfying [the hearer's] negative face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). For communication to be effective, both aspects ought to be respected and maintained.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 312) point to the fact that some acts are intrinsically face-threatening; that is, they "run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker." Three factors determine the extent to which an act is face-threatening and therefore the kinds of politeness strategies an individual would employ. The first one is 'power,' which is the perceived power dynamic between individuals (e.g., a teacher vs. a student). The second one is 'distance,' which is related to social distance between individu-

als. Compare, for example, a close friend to an acquaintance in the neighborhood. The last one is 'rank,' which refers to the relative sensitivity of a topic in a particular culture (e.g., a person's age).

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has received some criticism. Al-hindawi and Alhkazaali (2016) identify the main reasons for this. This first one is related to the model being static. That is, a rule-like system of strategies and their linguistic realizations fails to explain human interaction in diverse and dynamic contexts. In support of this, Werkhofer (1992) notes that a variety of social factors including distance and power have a determining role in interactive negotiations. Another criticism rests upon the argument that their theory of politeness is Western-centric with a bias towards individualistic cultures; therefore, it does not explain variations in other cultures (Fukada & Asota, 2004).

Despite the criticism it has drawn, Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has attracted much interest from researchers in diverse cultures. Research results pointed to the various conceptualizations of the notion 'face' in different contexts. We now have a greater understanding of politeness strategies as utilized by people from different cultures as well as their manifestations during exchanges between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, in this study, I, too, use Brown and Levinson's (1987) conceptualization of face as a foundation for understanding how politeness manifests itself in the context of Emirati speakers of English responding to compliments when interacting with male and female international professors. As a face-saving act, compliments can best be conceptualized using Brown and Levinson's model of politeness; they maintain and improve the addressee's face and maintain harmonious relations (Leech, 1983). They, therefore, have been labeled as «social lubricants» (Holmes, 1988, p. 486). Compliment responses, in the same way, save and enhance the complimentee's and complimenter's faces, thus improving social interaction. The impacts of compliments and compliment responses on politeness are further discussed below.

Speech Acts

The foundations of the speech act theory laid by Austin's (1962) seminal work proposed the term 'performative utterances.' While 'performative' is derived from the verb 'perform,' 'utterances' are taken as a functional unit of communication (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). Searle advanced the notion of performative utterances as the basis for the speech act theory. Searle (1965, p. 2) defined a speech act as "the production of the sentence token under certain conditions ...and the minimal unit of linguistic communication." Examples of speech acts include thanking, complimenting, responding to compliments, complaining, apologizing, refusing, and requesting. Searle (1969, p. 18) also noted that

“every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts).” This points to the significance of context for the speech act theory. Searle (2002) stated that a particular utterance would have a particular meaning under certain conditions. He also emphasized the distinction between ‘speaker meaning’ and ‘sentence meaning’ in any given context. These notions can be clarified and illustrated via the speech acts of compliment and CRs.

The Compliment Speech Act

Among the widely cited definitions of the compliment speech act is Holmes’ (1988, p. 446): an utterance that “explicitly or implicitly attributes credit 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.” Four main functions of the compliment speech act have been identified (Hatch, 1992, pp. 138-139): a) to establish rapport and ease the transition from greeting to the first topic of conversation, b) to reinforce and encourage desirable performance, c) to reinforce the speech act of thanking, and d) to soften the speech act of criticism.

A compliment is considered a face-enhancing act (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008) since it serves to enhance the face of the hearer. In this way, a compliment helps oil the wheels of social relations (Holmes, 1988). However, a compliment can also be a face-threatening act when it obligates the hearer to “offer the desirable good to the complimenter” (Holmes, 1988, p. 448). Whether it is face-enhancing or face-threatening, a compliment normally produces a CR (Xiang, 2013). Just

as a compliment serves to negotiate solidarity, so does a CR (Ziaei, 2012), and they both play a key role in determining the extent to which communication between interlocutors is successful (Al Harbi, 2017).

CRs were first analyzed by Pomerantz (1978) in American English; she identified three broad strategies: acceptance, rejection, and avoidance of self-praise. A later study by Holmes (1988) also identified three main categories at the macro level (i.e, broad categories of compliment responses including ACCEPT, REJECT, and DEFLECT/EVADE.) Each of these in turn are divided into micro-level strategies, that is, “sub-categories with fairly transparent labels” like ‘appreciation’ and ‘agreeing’ (Holmes, 1988, p. 461). These are described in Table 1. Note that the micro-level strategy ‘comment’² and the macro-level strategy ‘promise’ in the table are additional ones based on the results of the current study.

Previous Studies on CR Strategies around the World

The interest in research on CR strategies has increased significantly over the years. Many researchers have investigated CRs in face-to-face communication and more recently an interest in complimenting in computer-mediated communication is gaining momentum (e.g., Placencia & Eslami, 2020; Sartini, 2019; Dehkordi & Chalak, 2015). The focus of this study is on face-to-face communication and therefore, the studies reviewed below are all related to face-to-face communication.

Researchers investigated CR strategies in different languages and cultures. Guo, Zhou, and Chow (2012) studied CR strategies in Mandarin Chinese. The data collected using a

Table 1
Compliment Response Strategies

Macro- level	Micro-level	Examples
Accept	Appreciation token	“Thanks”, “Cheers”
	Agreeing utterance	“I know”, “I am glad you think so”
	Downgrading/qualifying utterance	“It’s nothing”, “It’s not bad”
	Return compliment	“I’m sure you will be great”, “Yours was good too”
	Comment	“I have worked hard on this work”
Reject	Disagreeing	“I thought I did it badly”, “Don’t say so”
	Question accuracy	“Is it right?”, “Really?”
	Challenge sincerity	“Don’t lie”, “Don’t joke about it
Deflect/Evade	Shift credit	“No worries”, “My pleasure”
	Informative content	“It wasn’t hard”, “It’s really cheap”
	Request reassurance	“Really?”
Promise		“I will impress you more in the future”

² Comment was also identified by Herbert (1986) to accompany acceptance.

naturalistic observational method showed that young participants tended toward acceptance strategies. Their use of down-graders and disagreements was rather limited. The researchers argued that this was similar to the behaviors of western cultures. They noted that a possible reason was the prominent use of English in the context where the research was conducted. However, in another study investigating Chinese university students' CR use with a classmate (i.e., a relationship based on equality and solidarity), Tang and Zhang (2009) found that the participants were more likely to evade and reject than to accept. This was particularly the case when the compliment topics involved character and possession. Due to its collectivist culture, the authors argue, the students likely felt that it was their duty to help peers so they did not expect praise/a compliment. The authors also note that people in a collectivist culture are expected to be modest and refrain from showing their wealth. Therefore, the participants tended to reject a compliment on their possessions.

In a more recent study, Tang (2020) investigated the impact of *gender* on responding to different types of compliments (e.g., appearance, ability, possessions) in Mandarin Chinese. She found that the participants' perceived gender roles played a role in the ways they produced CRs, which were influenced by "the social expectations on masculinity and femininity in their particular speech community" (Tang, 2002, p. 545). Tang (2021) also studied Taiwanese Mandarin speakers' CR strategies. In doing so, she focused on the participants' gender as well as the gender and relative social power of their addressees. The findings indicated that these variables all had an impact on the participants' CR strategy-use. The types of microstrategies employed differed according to the social expectations of the addressees with different positions and of a different gender. The addressees' psychological perceptions of the compliment played a role, too. Tang (2021) also found that acceptance was a popular strategy among the participants. She believes this is likely because of the emphasis placed upon positive politeness in Taiwan together with «the value of prioritizing the self rather than the traditional Confucian value of humility» (Tang, 2021, p. 99). The latter, however, appear to contradict findings from earlier research by Yu (2004), who found that Mandarin Chinese speakers from Taiwan often opted for nonacceptance in responding to compliments. The author states that this possibly stems from the Chinese culture attaching high value to relative power and modesty in spoken interactions. She also compares this finding to another indicating that American speakers of English tend to favor acceptance as a CR strategy.

Other researchers studied CR strategies in western languages. For example, Dimova (2014) investigated their use in Bulgarian and German. She found that although the speakers of both languages generally accepted compliments, the Bul-

garian speakers were more likely to use this strategy than their German counterparts. The appreciation token (i.e., thanking) was the most frequent micro-level strategy utilized by both groups of speakers. The female participants in both groups were more likely to accept compliments. Exclusive to the male participants was the use of humor and explaining as micro-level acceptance strategies. Regarding the impact of interlocutors on CR strategies, Furkó and Dudás (2012) found that more acceptance was produced during female-female interaction in the Hungarian context.

It is also important to note that some research results point to the presence of certain collectivist elements in individualistic cultures (or vice-versa). To exemplify, Gonzalez-Rodriguez (2012) studied Icelanders' use of CR strategies and found that the most frequent strategy was rejection in the form of disagreement. They also used the strategies of evasion and down-graders. The researcher reasons that this was due to Icelanders' tendency for modesty. The results also revealed that the female participants were less likely to accept compliments. It is interesting to note that the participants tended to accept compliments on their personal belongings rather than their physical appearance. This indicated that the topic of compliments had a determining effect on the participants' choice of CR strategies. Recent research in Iran revealed that CR strategies used by university students were shifting from rejection and/or evasion to accepting (Sarkhosh, 2022). Acceptance was also found more common among female students. The author reasons that the former is likely because of young Persians' increased exposure to and interaction with foreign media (e.g., the Internet, satellite TV). The latter, he argues, may be due to psychological reasons making the compliment receiver want her appearance "to be acceptable and worthy of a compliment" (Sarkhosh, 2022, p. 288). Together, these results indicate that it is not always possible to draw a line between CRs used by people of different cultures and of a different gender.

Studies on CR Strategies in the Arab World

Given that users of English are likely to rely on their mother language and transfer aspects from it while complimenting/responding, both at the pragmalinguistic (linguistic resources) and the sociopragmatic (weighing of the situational variable like power and the selection of the available linguistic resources) levels, it is of interest here to report some recent studies and shine a light on certain trends of Arabic speakers. Dendenne (2021) investigated compliments and CR strategies in colloquial Algerian Arabic based on naturally-occurring data. Results showed that compliments were often accompanied by divine invocations for the well-being of the hearer, which has cultural underpinnings. For example, the utterance "*It was a delicious dish*" uttered after/during having a meal, which may be accompanied by another

one like *"May God grant him [the cook] all his wishes"* can be perceived as a "verbal gift" and, to which the hearer may respond using a formulaic phrase. Dendenne (2021) also states that the hearer may respond to such verbal gifts non-verbally or ignores if he/she is very familiar with them.

Another study conducted by El-Dakhs (2017) found that Egyptian speakers of Arabic preferred the agreement strategy, which included explicit appreciation tokens, attribution to complimenter, and offering gifts. They also used some additional responses, examples of which were prayers for complimenter and terms of endearment. The researcher noted that the participants often used CR Arabic phrases without their literal meanings in a humorous manner. These phrases were generally used to express attribution to the complimenter and self as well as the expectation of self.

The acceptance strategy in Arabic was encountered by other researchers too. For example, Ebadi and Salman (2015) found it in CRs used by Iraqi speakers of Arabic. They also noted that the participants often used formulaic sequences (e.g., Shukren [Thanks]). The results did not reveal statistically significant differences between the female and the male students' utilization of CR strategies in Arabic. In one of the earliest studies on Arabic CRs, Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols (1996) investigated CRs in Syrian Arabic and found that the majority of the participants (67%) opted for acceptance often utilizing formulaic language.

The utilization of CR strategies by Arabic-speaking users of English has been studied by some researchers, too. For instance, Nouichi (2018) studied Algerian university students' CRs in English. The results showed that a significant proportion of CR strategies (86.4%) was in the form of acceptance. The students mainly produced an appreciation token while a small group of students either agreed with the compliment or provided a supplication to God (3.84% and 2% respectively). Rejection was produced by 7.8% of the students and deflection by 3.2%. Similarly, in her master's thesis investigating female Saudi university students' CRs in English, Al Harbi (2017) found that the students showed a greater tendency towards the acceptance strategy. This was mainly due to their cultural norms indicating that acceptance of a compliment was polite and therefore the expected behavior. Similarly, Alsalem (2015) also found that Saudi university students tended to accept compliments, irrespective of gender. It was also found that the students tended to attribute their success to their professors. However, another study conducted in Jordan revealed that female university students used the acceptance strategy more often than their male counterparts (AlRousan & Awal, 2016). In the Iraqi context, female learners of English were found to use more appreciation tokens and questions than male students (Ebadi & Salman, 2015). The researchers explained that the latter might be due to females' tendency towards asking for reassurance and/or repetition of the compliment paid.

Considering the interlocutors' gender, Almallah (2017) investigated the English CR strategies utilized by Palestinian and Jordanian university students. He found that both the female and the male students opted for agreement with compliments paid by both the same and the opposite genders. However, the female students were found to utilize acceptance on appearance and performances more often than their male counterparts, who had a greater tendency towards disagreement with compliments on appearance made by males. Similar results occurred in previous research conducted by Salameh (2001) in the Saudi context; the female speakers had a greater tendency to accept compliments made by females.

To the best of my knowledge, the only research conducted on Emirati language learners' CRs is one by Al Falasi (2007), which focused on female students. The results showed that the students often committed pragmatic transfer. Some CRs (e.g., *"I am ashamed!"*) used as a politeness strategy were considered inappropriate in the target language (i.e., English). It was also found that the students' CRs were long, which was attributed to their belief that longer CRs would express more sincerity.

The aforementioned studies indicate a growing interest in understanding the face-enhancing/threatening nature of the compliment speech act and CR strategies in the Arabic language as well as by Arab non-native speakers of English. However, there are still major lacunae in the study of this speech act, in the UAE context in particular. Neither does the current literature elucidate how Emirati university students respond to positive feedback, which may be considered to be a compliment, from faculty with whom they are in constant contact. It is also important to identify the impact of faculty's status and gender on students' utilization of CR strategies. The current research could make a substantial contribution to the literature.

METHOD

Participants

Data were collected from 58 students registered in Introduction to Linguistics at a UAE-based university. The Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval was sought and granted to utilize data from student responses to an instructional activity designed both to introduce students to the concept of speech acts, compliments in particular, and to demonstrate data collection methods via discourse completion tasks (DCT). Twenty-five (43%) were female and 33 (57%) were male. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 with an average age of 21. The students were proficient speakers of the English language; before their university studies, they had attained sufficient passing scores from international examinations such as iTOEFL (minimum score of 91) and IELTS (minimum score of 6.5). They also enhanced their English

language skills through the various courses they took before they were registered in Introduction to Linguistics. The comparison of the male and the female students' grades from the compulsory first-year English course taken previously, which has a heavy emphasis on writing skills, also revealed that their average grades were in the same band (B).

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected using a discourse completion task (DCT) comprised of three sections. The first section collected data related to demographics including gender and age. The second section described two hypothetical situations³ as described below. The students were asked to indicate how a compliment paid by an international male and an international female professor would affect them.

Situation 1: Imagine you are taking X course from a *male* British professor in his late forties. And you are visiting him in his office to talk about a recent assignment you have written. Your professor seems happy with your work. He hands the assignment to you saying, "Well-done! This is a well-written assignment. Not only did you use the language effectively but you also explained the topic well with good examples and evidence."

Situation 2: Imagine you are taking X course from a *female* British professor in her late forties. And you are visiting her in her office to talk about a recent assignment you have written. Your professor seems happy with your work. She hands the assignment to you saying, "Well-done! This is a well-written assignment. Not only did you use the language effectively but you also explained the topic well with good examples and evidence."

The third section asked the students if they thought the compliments in the hypothetical situations would require a response. They were asked to justify their responses. Fol-

lowing this, they were asked to write the exact words they would use if they chose to respond to their professor.

Although a DCT fails to collect naturally occurring data, it is not always possible or practical for researchers to collect such data (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). In the context of the current study, for instance, the local culture does not allow recording people's voices, particularly those of females, without their permission. Even if permission were granted, the authenticity of such data would still be questionable. There is also evidence from previous research that a DCT and naturally occurring data may reveal similar trends concerning directness and lexical modification in a request speech act (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013), which might be the case for CRs on which the current study focused.

Data Analysis

Data related to demographics and data for the first and the second research questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and averages. A t-test was used for statistical comparisons between these data sets. A p-value of less than .05 was considered significant.

The CR strategies produced by the students in response to the third research question were analyzed using Holmes' (1988) scheme. Data analysis, however, revealed one additional macro-level strategy (i.e., promise) and one micro-level strategy (i.e., comment). Hence, data specific to these were categorized accordingly. To ensure the correct categorization of the strategies, inter-coder reliability was sought. To this end, an independent researcher participated in the analysis. The inter-coder reliability was assessed using the following formula by Miles & Huberman (1994): Reliability=Number of agreements/Number of agreements

Table 2

Effect of the Professor's Compliment on Students

		Female students (n=25)	Male students (n=33)	t	p*	All students (n=58)	t	p*
Compliment by a female professor	Min	4	3			3		
	Max	5	5			5		
	X	4.8	4.6	1.4841	.0717	4.7		
	SD	.37	.6			.52	.5073	.3064
Compliment by a male professor	Min	4	3			3		
	Max	5	5			5		
	X	4.7	4.6	1.0117	.1579	4.6		
	SD	.43	.65			.57		

Note. p<.05.

³ A two-week interval was given between the data collection phases for the first and the second situations. This was so that the students would be prevented from being influenced by their responses to the first situation.

+ disagreements. The reliability result was 85%. Divergences were discussed, and agreements were reached.

No statistical test was used in analyzing the data for the third research question mainly because of the limited number of participants and too few data available preventing a reliable comparison made between the data sets related to some macro and micro strategies in particular. The chi-square test, for instance, fails to yield (reliable) results if cell frequencies drop below one. Instead, therefore, the results were reported considering the frequencies and the total number of instances. Also important to note is that no statistical test may be required in the absence of a hypothesis (Swinscow, 2009), as was the case in this study.

RESULTS

The first research question aimed to identify the effects of a compliment the students were paid by a professor on an assignment. To this end, they were first asked to indicate the extent to which they thought the compliment would make them happy (1=not at all, 5=extremely). Their responses are given in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the students' responses ranged from 3 (moderately happy) to 5 (very happy) with an average of 4.7 (SD=.52) and 4.6 (SD=.57) for a compliment by a female and a male professor respectively. There was no statistical difference between their responses for the two professors (t=.5073, p=.3064 >.05). The t-test conducted according to the students' gender did not reveal differences either.

The students were also asked to justify their reasons. Their responses included the compliment increasing their motivation (f=30), enhancing their self-confidence (f=23), acknowledgment of their efforts (f=20), and making them feel closer to the professor (f=5). One student said, «It is normal if I produced good work.»

The second research question asked if the students thought the compliment from their professor would require a response. Table 3 summarizes their responses.

Table 3
Student Reactions to Compliment

	Reactions	Female students (n=25)	Male students (n=33)	All students (n=58)
Compliment by a female professor	Yes, it would.	25	33	58
	No, it would not.	-	-	-
Compliment by a male professor	Yes, it would.	25	33	58
	No, it would not.	-	-	-

⁴ Student responses are reported verbatim – without editing.

As can be seen in the table, all the students speaking to a female professor said they would say something in return for the compliment they were paid. Only one male student added that he would smile, which is a non-verbal response. Similarly, all the students said they would say something in return for the compliment paid by a male professor. When asked to justify their responses, most of them (f=54) said that it would be rude to behave otherwise. Some said thanking the professor would acknowledge their feedback. The male student that indicated he would smile said he was a shy person and being praised would make him blush.

The third research question was related to the students' strategy use in their CRs. The results are given in Table 4.

CRs to a Female Professor

According to Table 4, a total of 118 micro-level CRs were produced in the DCTs for the female professor. Of this number, appreciation token and commenting accounted for the majority (42.4% and 40.7% respectively). The former mainly included a thank-you note to the professor (e.g., "Thank you very much," "I am grateful for your nice words."). The latter mainly concerned the amount of time spent doing the assignment (e.g., "I have worked hard on this work").

There were some other less frequent micro-level strategies. Five students (4.2%) expressed their agreement with the professor. For example, one student said, "I thought it would make you happy." Another one simply said, "Yes." Five other students (4.2%) produced a promise committing the students to maintain the quality of their work (e.g., "I will impress you more in the future."). On the other hand, four students (3.4%) responded by paying the professor a compliment in return. One said, "You are the best professor.» Another remarked, «You are good at your job." There were also three instances of evasion in the form of shifting the credit toward the teacher (2.5%) (e.g., "Thanks to you," "I thought it will be hard but you make it easy to us") and three instances of requesting assurance (2.5%) (e.g., "Did it make you happy?," "I hope you are serious.").

Table 4
Compliment Response Strategies*

Macro-level	Micro-level	CRs to a Female Professor				CRs to a Male Professor			
		Female ss (n=25)		Male ss (n=33)		Female ss (n=25)		Male ss (n=33)	
		<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Accept	Appreciation token	27	23	50	42.4	31	34	65	43.9
	Agreeing utterance	2	3	5	4.2	5	3	8	5.4
	Downgrading/qualifying utterance	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.7
	Return compliment	4	0	4	3.4	1	4	5	3.4
	Comment	25	23	48	40.7	30	28	58	39.2
Reject	Disagreeing	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.7
	Question accuracy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Challenge sincerity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Evade	Shift credit	1	2	3	2.5	0	0	0	0
	Informative content	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Request reassurance	0	3	3	2.5	1	0	1	0.7
Promise		4	1	5	4.2	3	6	9	6.1
<i>Total</i>		63	55	118	100	73	75	148	100

Note. Frequencies and percentages were calculated from the total number of utterances as the students often employed more than one strategy.

The data were also compared considering the gender variable. The female students were found to utilize more micro-level CRs than the male students ($f = 63$ vs. $f = 55$). It is also important to note the occurrence of return compliment in the female data set ($f = 4$). Similarly, a promise was detected four times in the female data set and only once in the male data set.

CRs to a Male Professor

Table 4 shows that there was a total of 148 occurrences of micro-level CRs. The most frequently occurring micro-level strategy was that of appreciation token (43.9%). The most frequent sentence/phrase used was "Thank you." Another one was "I appreciate your kind words." Comment was the second most frequent micro-level strategy (39.2%). Many focused on the hard work the students engaged in. Note these sample utterances: "I have truly tried to make sure the assignment checked all the requirements" and "I tried to do my best in this assignment."

Less infrequent, other micro-level strategies were adopted: promise (6.1%) (e.g., "I will please you always" and "I promise I will try and keep improving upon my language skills"), agreeing utterance (5.4%) (e.g., "I am glad this good work fulfilled your expectations"), return compliment (3.4%) (e.g., "You are a great teacher" and "I really think you should be proud of

yourself"), downgrading (.7%) ("How small it is!"), disagreeing (.7%) ("I wish it was really that good."), and requesting assurance (.7%) ("Really?").

The comparison of the data set according to gender showed that the female and the male students produced a similar number of CRs ($f=73$ and $f=75$). However, an appreciation token was used slightly more often by the male students than the female students ($f=4$ vs. $f=31$). Similarly, the male students were more likely to produce a promise than the female students ($f=6$ vs. $f=3$). They had also more of a tendency to return the compliment ($f=4$ vs. $f=1$). On the other hand, a comment was produced slightly more often by the female students than the male students ($f=30$ vs. $f=28$). And the female students were slightly more likely to agree with the compliment by the professor ($f=5$ vs. $f=3$). Although used only once each, downgrading, disagreeing, and requesting assurance were used only by the female students.

Comparison of CRs according to Professors' Gender

Table 4 shows that the students generally produced similar CRs in their responses to the male and the female professors. Yet it is still important to note that the total number of the micro-level strategies employed with the male professor ($f=148$) was higher than that of the micro-level strategies

with the female professor ($f=118$). For instance, the former included 15 more appreciation tokens, ten more comments, and four more promises. Infrequently, downgrading and disagreeing were also used only with the male professor. On the other hand, shifting credit was only used with the female professor. Also, requesting assurance was used slightly more often with the female professor than the male professor.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that both the male and the female students believed a compliment from their professor, whether a male or a female, would make them quite happy. They said this would increase their motivation to engage in further learning. This finding is in line with the findings of previous research. For example, Hancock (2000) also found that university students who received positive verbal feedback, which could be considered a compliment (Pillet-Shore, 2012), from their professors significantly increased the amount of work they did outside the classroom. The students in the current study also maintained that the compliment they were paid would enhance their self-confidence and make them feel closer to the professor. This feeling, earlier research found, would cause more positive and less negative teacher-student interaction (Conroy et al., 2014). Some students in the current study also remarked that the compliment would indicate the professor's acknowledgment of their hard work, which provides support for previous research indicating verbal praise provided college-aged students with information on their competence and the value of their accomplishments, thus enhancing their well-being (Barker, 1992).

These data lend credence to the speech act theory suggesting a compliment enhances the hearer's face (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008). The positive effects on the students' self-confidence and feeling of closeness to the professor, who is of a higher position, also support the compliment's role in enhancing social relations (Holmes, 1988). Further, the students' answers to the second research question indicated that the students, irrespective of their gender, found it necessary to produce a CR. This was the case for the exchanges with both the male and female professors. Considering the Middle Eastern context in which the current study was conducted, this is an important finding, supporting the observation that a compliment is often accompanied by a CR (Xiang, 2013). This finding also underscores the nature of a compliment as a face-threatening act if not responded to properly (Ziaei, 2012; Al Harbi, 2017), which was reflected in the students' responses related to a CR being courteous.

From the social-psychological perspective (DeVito, 2013), the students' approach can be said to have considered the higher-lower status relationship they often engaged in. However, it is also important to note that the higher status of the complimenter may render CRs even more face-threatening than in normal circumstances.

The third research question investigated CR strategies utilized by the students in responding to compliments from an international male and an international female professor. The results showed that in both scenarios the students of both genders used similar micro-level strategies, an appreciation token and comment being the most common ones. The former may have been prompted by the students' general tendency to be humble, which is one of the values considered to make up the Emirati culture⁵. A simple phrase of 'Thank you' is humble and expresses gratitude⁶. The appreciation token commonly used by the male and the female students in this study, irrespective of the professor's gender, also supports the findings of the earlier research indicating that accepting a compliment was a polite, expected reaction in the Gulf region (Al Harbi, 2017; Alsalem, 2015). However, the observation that Emirati females tend not to accept a compliment from a male unless he is a family member (Al Falasi, 2007) is not supported by the data in the current study. The academic context in which the current study was conducted must have caused this difference. It is a context in which female students are usually in contact with male faculty from different backgrounds. Previous research showed that female students were more likely to contact their professors than male students regarding their coursework (Halawah, 2006), which would generate ample praise for their performance.

Commenting is also an important strategy to note, which was noted by Herbert (1986) too. Its occurrence in the current study can be attributed to the academic context in which the study was set; conversations on student performance have been found to trigger comments in the form of justification for a grade students considered too low (Deveci, 2010, 2015).

It is also interesting to note the significantly higher number of micro-level strategies used when responding to the male professor in comparison to the female professor. This was mainly caused by the male students' more frequent use of an appreciation token and a return of the compliment. Albeit less frequent, the male students also produced twice as many promises as the female students. It is also important to note the female students' tendency to produce a greater number of strategies in their CRs to the female professor. For instance, they produced more promises and appreciation tokens than the male students. This finding is similar to the

⁵ Perrett, R. (2018, August 9). Why cultural preservation is on top of the agenda here. Retrieved from <https://adwonline.ae/cultural-preservation-top-agenda/>

⁶ Whitmore, J. (2015, June 10). How to gracefully accept a compliment. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-to-gracefully-accept_b_7042718

findings of Ebadi & Salman (2015), indicating that Iraqi female speakers of English also had a greater tendency to utilize the appreciation strategy than their male counterparts. Taken together, these data seem to indicate that the male Emirati students might have felt more at ease responding to a compliment by a male professor while the female Emirati students felt more comfortable responding to a female professor's compliment. For female Emiratis, this finding may suggest that a CR to the opposite gender is more face-threatening than it is for male Emiratis. This may be attributed to the social forces in the region limiting (and sometimes even preventing) Emirati women's interaction with men outside their families (Dariela et al., 2017), despite the ever-increasing interaction between female tertiary students and male faculty members. But then the female Emirati students' tendency to use a greater number of strategies, acceptance in particular, is in line with findings of earlier research focusing on the effects of interlocutors' on CRs (Almallah, 2017; Furkó & Dudás, 2012; Sarkhosh, 2022; Salameh, 2001).

Infrequent as it was, the students' utilization of promise (that of the female students in particular) bears reiterating. Promises act as a positive politeness strategy indicating cooperation on the part of the speaker (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this way, the students performed an illocutionary act to maintain the professor's positive impression of them and thereby the good relationship that has been established. Thus, a promise in CRs can be said to enhance the complimenter's positive face (Ogiermann, 2009), but it might be misunderstood by an outsider to the Emirati linguaculture. The students' realization of promise may be due to the heavy emphasis placed upon obedience in the Emirati culture; individuals are often raised to show respect to people of higher status, one way of which is to be obedient. During student-teacher interaction, this may manifest itself in the form of a promise to maintain good work, which naturally results in the teacher's positive impression of the student. This approach is common in high power distance cultures (Jandt, 2018) like that of the UAE. Therefore, the likelihood of a student's promise to sustain the quality of work complimented upon may be rather low in many western cultures with a low power orientation.

It is also important to note the presence of reassurance requests by the male students only in their CRs to the female professor. Similarly, a request reassurance was used by a female student responding to the male professor. Ebadi & Salman (2015) also found that female students in their study opted for a question when paid a compliment. Only very few students indeed produced a request in the current study, but I believe this still raises the question of whether a compliment from a professor of the opposite gender is likely to cause Emirati tertiary students to seek confirmation. The possible socio-cultural motivation behind this warrants further investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify the effects of a compliment paid in English from international male and female professors on Emirati tertiary students. It was found that the students, irrespective of their genders, thought it would enhance their well-being through its positive impacts on their motivation for studying and self-confidence. The students also felt their interpersonal relationships with the professors would be improved. In addition, the students thought that they would need to be polite and produce a compliment response. The type of compliment responses they produced mainly included acceptance. To this end, they often produced an appreciation token.

Although the female and the male students used similar strategies to a large extent, there were some differences in their strategy use when interacting with the male and the female professors. These differences point to the possibility of the male students feeling more at ease responding to a compliment from a male professor. And the opposite appears to be the case for the female students. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of Emirati English language speakers' socio-linguistic behavior patterns they appear to adopt despite the universal politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Such orientations ought to be recognized by the international faculty dominating the tertiary education in the region. Only in this way can interpersonal relationships between distinct cultures run smoothly and chances of cross-cultural misunderstandings decrease enormously.

At the very end, it is important to acknowledge that this study has some limitations. One of these is the data collection technique used: a DCT may fail to adequately represent the actual language use in natural settings. However, the context in which this study was conducted does not allow researchers to record conversations; one of the reasons is the fact that female participants – in particular – reject being recorded even when their performance is only audio-taped. Future researchers can aim to collect naturally occurring data where possible. It would also be interesting to do a comparative study between Emirati Arabic and other varieties of English present in the Emirati land (e.g., Australian, British, American). In this context, it is also important to investigate how compliments and CRs are negotiated in such a setting where people from different L1 backgrounds (e.g., Arabic, American/British English, Hindi, Pakistani) communicate using 'English as an international language' – often beyond the native English speaker authority as the sole norm provider (see, e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2011). This would help identify possible pragmatic transfer students likely to make between the two languages. Another limitation is related to the relatively small sample size, which could be increased in future studies. As

well, the limited number of the hypothetical situations used in this study can be increased in future studies. Neither can the results of the study be generalized to the larger UAE context, not even to the immediate university context in which the study was undertaken. Therefore, future research can include a larger sample size, possibly from different university contexts. It would also be appropriate to investigate university professors' thoughts on students' utilization of CRs. This would help identify how Emirati students can be helped

to improve their intercultural communication through language-focused instruction where relevant.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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