



استكشاف الفشل البراغماتي في ردود الإطراء: دراسة على متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من الأكراد العراقيين

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## Exploring Pragmatic Failure in Compliment Responses: A Study of Iraqi Kurdish EFL Learners

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**Keywords :** compliment responses, Kurdish EFL learners, pragmatic failure, Pragmatic competence, English exposure, discourse completion task.

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### ملخص

تلعب الإطراءات وردود أفعالها دوراً حيوياً في التواصل بين الثقافات، إذ تعكس الأعراف الاجتماعية والقيم الثقافية الكامنة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الفشل البراغماتي من خلال استراتيجيات رد الإطراء التي يستخدمها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من الأكراد العراقيين. باستخدام نهج متعدد الأساليب، جمعت البيانات من خلال مهمة إكمال الخطاب (DCT) واستبيان التعرض. يتضمن DCT أربعة سيناريوهات مقتبسة من Zhang and Tang (2009)، تغطي مواضيع شائعة في الإطراء، بما في ذلك القدرة والمظهر والسلوك والشخصية. يستحوذ الاستبيان ردود أفعال المتعلمين العفوية تجاه الإطراءات في سياقات واقعية وثقافية. جمع استبيان التعرض روئي نوعية حول تفاعلات المتعلمين مع اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال وسائل الإعلام والتواصل عبر الإنترنت والقراءة والأفلام. تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد ما إذا كان التعرض العرضي للغة الإنجليزية يعزز الكفاءة البراغماتية، أم أن المتعلمين لا يزالون يُظهرون علامات الفشل البراغماتي. شارك في الدراسة 60 طالباً جامعياً متخصصاً في اللغة الإنجليزية. أظهر



التحليل الكمي أن المتعلمين استخدموه في أغلب الأحيان رموز التقدير (32.89%)، وعبارات الثناء (13.84%)، وقبول التعليقات (11.11%)، مما يشير إلى ميل نحو ردود فعل إيجابية و مباشرة. يشير عدم استخدام استراتيجيات مثل الاختلاف والنصيحة إلى تردد في استخدام أساليب المواجهة. كشفت النتائج النوعية أنه على الرغم من تعرض المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بانتظام للغة الهدف، إلا أن ردودهم على الإطراط غالباً ما فشلت في التوافق مع الأعراف الاجتماعية البراغماتية الإنجليزية. وبدلًا من ذلك، اعتمدوا في كثير من الأحيان على استراتيجيات استجابة متأثرة بلغتهم الأم. تؤكد هذه النتائج على أهمية دمج التعليمات البراغماتية في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدعم المتعلمين في التعامل مع تبادل الإطراط بدقة لغوية وملاءمة ثقافية.

## Abstract

Compliments and their responses play a vital role in cross-cultural communication, reflecting underlying social norms and cultural values. This study investigates pragmatic failure through the compliment response strategies employed by Iraqi Kurdish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected quantitatively using a discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaire which includes four scenarios adapted from Zhang and Tang (2009), covering common compliment topics including ability, appearance, possession, and character. It elicits learners' spontaneous responses to compliments in realistic and culturally relevant contexts. Qualitative data were collected using the exposure questionnaire focusing on learners' interactions with English through social media, online communication, reading books, and watching movies. The study aims to determine whether incidental exposure to English enhances pragmatic competence or whether learners still exhibit signs of pragmatic failure. A total of 60 undergraduate students majoring in the English language participated in the study. Quantitative analysis showed that learners most frequently used *appreciation tokens* (32.89%), *praise upgrades* (13.84%), and *comment acceptance* (11.11%), indicating a tendency toward positive and direct responses. Not using strategies like *disagreement* and *advice* suggests a reluctance to employ confrontational forms. Qualitative findings revealed that although EFL learners were regularly exposed to the target language, their compliment responses often failed to conform to English sociopragmatic conventions. Instead, they relied on response strategies influenced by their native language. These findings emphasize the importance of incorporating pragmatic instructions into EFL curricula



to support learners in navigating compliment exchanges with both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

## 1. Introduction

In applied linguistics the importance of pragmatic competence is acknowledged in the development of communicative competence, especially in intercultural communication, where linguistic appropriateness contributes to establishing social relationships (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Taguchi, 2011). Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to understand and use language that is not only correct as described by native speakers, but also appropriate to the social and cultural context in the target language. As an action that refers to and produces social formations, the act of complimenting is culture specific, which may vary with the community's speech system (Holmes, 1988; Yuan, 2002). Compliments are linguistic expressions conveying a message of praise and positive evaluation, but the way they are made and interpreted is heavily culturally dependent.

Mastering speech acts for learners of English as a foreign language, such as compliments, is a significant challenge, not because of limited grammar knowledge, but due to unfamiliarity with the social norms that govern their use in the target language. One common issue learners encounter is pragmatic transfer, where their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules from their first language (L1) are applied in the second language (L2) (Kasper, 1992; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). While positive transfer can improve communication, negative pragmatic transfer may cause pragmatic failure, which happens when learners' utterances are linguistically correct but socially inappropriate or misunderstood (Thomas, 1983). Compliment speech acts are particularly vulnerable to such failure, as their success depends not only on word choice but also on timing, topic relevance, social hierarchy, and cultural interpretations of praise (Chen, 1993; Tran, 2022).

Over the past decades, a growing body of research has examined complimenting behavior across languages and cultures, revealing notable cross-cultural variations (e.g., Wolfson, 1981; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Yu, 2003; Cheng, 2011). These studies have primarily focused on native-nonnative interactions, investigating how L2 speakers navigate compliment production and response in real or elicited settings. However, fewer studies have explored how EFL learners from underrepresented linguistic backgrounds, such as Kurdish speakers, manage complimenting in English, particularly concerning pragmatic failure. While some studies





have examined the pragmatic competence of Kurdish EFL learners (Mahmood, 2020; Rasheed & Salih, 2022), there remains a significant gap regarding their use of compliments in English and the influence of L1 Kurdish norms on their L2 pragmatic performance.

Furthermore, EFL learners' increasing exposure to English through digital communication, media, and online learning platforms introduces new variables in their pragmatic development (Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Ghazanfari & Bonyadi, 2020). Despite this, little research has incorporated learners' exposure patterns to account for how access to English in a virtual environment affects their production of culturally appropriate speech acts like compliments and responding to compliments. The lack of research in this area suggests the need to consider both learner-internal factors (e.g., proficiency and L1 influence) and external factors (e.g., media and technological exposure) in analyzing pragmatic failure.

This study aims to investigate the production of compliment response speech acts by Kurdish EFL learners, with the focus on instances of pragmatic failure. Using a discourse completion task (DCT) and an exposure questionnaire, the research examines how learners' L1 norms and levels of English exposure influence their ability to produce appropriate compliments in English. this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1.What are the most common compliment response strategies used by Kurdish EFL learners?
- 2.Does the use of strategies reflect English pragmatic norms or Kurdish cultural norms?
- 3.Does EFL learners' exposure to English-language through social media and online communication impact their pragmatic competence?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure refers to a learner's inability to interpret or produce language appropriately in social contexts, especially when performing speech acts such as giving or responding to compliments (Hmouri, 2021; Tai & Chen, 2021). This type of failure often stems from limited knowledge of how language functions pragmatically in the target culture. In second language contexts, learners may struggle with expressing their intended meanings due to a lack of familiarity with appropriate



expressions, tone, or conversational norms. Studies have shown that these challenges are present both in classroom settings and in study-abroad environments, where L2 learners may use inaccurate vocabulary, incorrect intonation, or culturally inappropriate forms, resulting in awkward or unclear communication.

In intercultural communication, pragmatic failure can lead to misunderstandings and strained relationships, especially when speakers from different cultural backgrounds interpret speech acts differently (He Ziran, 1988). A key reason for such failure is insufficient exposure to the communicative norms of the target language. As Brown and Yule (1983) observed, many cultural assumptions that native speakers take for granted may not be understood by learners without explicit instruction. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasized that politeness strategies differ across cultures. While some cultures favor indirectness to maintain politeness, others may value more direct forms of communication. As a result, learners from indirect communication cultures may find it difficult to adapt to the more assertive norms of English-speaking settings.

Research shows that EFL learners frequently experience pragmatic failure in complimenting due to culturally inappropriate topics or misjudgment of social distance and power relations (Tran, 2022; Ghazanfari & Bonyadi, 2020). For example, learners may offer compliments in situations where native speakers would avoid doing so, or they may use overly direct or exaggerated forms that sound insincere. Furthermore, studies comparing speakers of different languages have demonstrated how these cultural differences impact communication. For instance, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) found that Hebrew speakers tended to use more direct requests than English speakers, who often preferred indirectness. Such differences can easily lead to misinterpretation. In a study conducted at the University of Jordan, Altakhaineh and Zibin (2014) reported that both intermediate and advanced English learners often transferred cultural norms from their first language into English, both in speech and writing. Similarly, Alqarni and Alqarni (2021) highlighted how Saudi learners' reliance on formulaic Arabic expressions led to pragmatic failure in English compliment exchanges. This pragmatic failure could affect how meanings are conveyed and understood, particularly when learners are unaware of the different connotations and pragmatic values attached to words in the target language.





Given the serious consequences of pragmatic failure in both personal and professional communication, it is essential for language educators to raise learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences. Recognizing how culture influences communication and teaching learners how to adjust their language use accordingly can help prevent misunderstandings and improve intercultural competence.

## 2.2 Compliments and Compliment Responses

Compliments and their responses are a kind of speech act that has been examined in different languages and cultures. Compliments have long been recognized as a key component of everyday interaction and social politeness. Holmes (1988) defines a compliment as a speech act that explicitly or implicitly gives credit to someone other than the speaker—usually the addressee—for a quality, possession, or achievement that both the speaker and the hearer positively value. Complimenting is therefore more than a simple expression of praise; it is deeply embedded in the norms of social interaction and serves to maintain positive interpersonal relationships.

Research on compliment response strategies among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has grown significantly over the past few decades, with scholars emphasizing the influence of cultural norms on learners' pragmatic performance. Herbert (1986) conducted a study on compliment responses among American and South African college students. The findings showed that Americans give compliments more frequently but accept them less often, while South Africans gave fewer compliments but accepted them more. Herbert attributed these differences to underlying cultural norms: The American pattern reflected values of equality and democratic ideals, whereas the South African pattern was linked to more hierarchical and elitist social norms. These findings highlighted the potential for pragmatic transfer and underscored the challenges Middle Eastern learners face when applying their native politeness norms in English-speaking contexts.

Cross-cultural studies have consistently revealed differences in how speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds manage compliment responses. Tang and Zhang (2008) found that Chinese participants used fewer explicit acceptance strategies and preferred to either evade or reject compliments compared to their Australian counterparts, who more frequently employed direct expressions of appreciation. The study also noted that Australians were more likely to





combine multiple strategies when responding, suggesting a higher degree of effort and elaboration in their responses. Subsequent studies extended this inquiry to other Arabic-speaking populations. Alotaibi (2016) explored the compliment responses of Kuwaiti EFL learners and reported that Arabic politeness strategies—particularly those emphasizing modesty and indirectness—strongly influenced learners' responses in English. Furthermore, Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols (1996), for instance, examined the compliment responses of Egyptian Arabic speakers using English. They found that many learners frequently deflected or rejected compliments, adhering to cultural expectations of humility. The study also demonstrated that such cultural transfer could result in pragmatic failure, especially when the learners' behaviors conflicted with English-language norms for compliment exchanges.

### 2.3 Kurdish and English Compliment Norms

In Kurdish culture, compliment responses are influenced by values of modesty, respect and social harmony. Rather than directly accepting compliments, Kurdish people often use strategies such as deflection, return compliments, or modest denials that signal humility and preserve social harmony (Ali, 2019; Khalil, 2016). These responses are influenced by the cultural norm of Kurds that discourages overt praise, especially in public or hierarchical interactions (Khalil, 2016). The preference of indirectness highlights the collectivist nature of Kurdish society, where maintaining positive interpersonal relationships often takes precedence over individual recognition. As such, complimenting and responding in Kurdish serve not only as expressions of admiration but also as a tool for reinforcing social bonds and shared cultural identity.

In contrast, English-speaking cultures -especially the US and UK -tend to value individual achievements, directness in compliment exchanges (Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1990). Compliments are more likely focus on personal ability, appearance, or possessions and are often given freely across social hierarchies and between acquaintances. Responses such as “thank you” or “I appreciate that” are expected and socially encouraged, whereas deflecting or rejecting compliments may be misinterpreted as insincerity.

These differences in compliment responses may lead to pragmatic transfer where learners L1 norms transfer to learners' L2 context, which can lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). for example, Kurdish learners of English may unintentionally produce responses that are pragmatically inappropriate in English, even if grammatically correct.





These learners may interpret praise as a cue to humility rather than acknowledgment, thus employing strategies like, *wish* responses, *comment history*, or *praise upgrade*, which align with Kurdish norms but violate the expectations of English pragmatics.

Therefore, when analyzing compliment response strategies among Kurdish EFL learners, it is crucial to account for these culturally specific norms. Their linguistic background affects not only the types of responses they produce but also their perceptions of what is appropriate, sincere, or polite.

While a growing body of literature has examined compliment responses, Kurdish learners remain under-researched. Existing studies have not systematically explored pragmatic failure and digital exposure in shaping responses to compliment. Moreover, few have employed discourse completion tasks (DCT's) in combination with exposure questionnaires, which can offer a more holistic view of learner's pragmatic competence. Given the sociopragmatic distinctiveness of Kurdish complimenting norms, and the increasing influence of online English media in learners' lives, this study is well positioned to fill an important gap in interlanguage pragmatics research. It provides an in-depth perspective on how Kurdish EFL learners handle speech acts that are deeply influenced by culture, highlighting how pragmatic failure emerges from interaction between their native language norms and the influence of English exposure.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods, quantitative and qualitative design suitable for investigating the speech act of complimenting. The research aims to identify patterns of pragmatic failure among Kurdish EFL learners and examine how exposure to English influences their performance. This mixed method approach is methodologically supported in interlanguage pragmatic studies (Kasper, 1992; Taguchi, 2011), where both elicited production data and learner background information provide complementary insights into pragmatic development.

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 60 undergraduate Kurdish EFL learners (35 females and 25 males) from the Department of English at Salahaddin University–Erbil. Participants were purposively selected from third-year students, as they had already taken courses in linguistics and





intercultural communication, increasing the likelihood that they possess well-developed knowledge of cross-cultural communication. Based on the demographic survey, all participants were native speakers of Kurdish, aged between 21 and 25, and none had lived in an English-speaking country.

### 3.3 Instruments

This study employed two instruments: A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and an exposure Questionnaire. The primary instrument for data collection is a DCT, which is widely used in interlanguage pragmatic studies for eliciting speech act realizations (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kasper & Dahl, 1991). The DCT is especially appropriate for this study because it allows researchers to control the contextual factors and gather comparable data among participants. They are especially effective for eliciting speech acts that are not used frequently or not easily captured in natural speech, such as a compliment response in L2. (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Furthermore, the DCT allows for the collection of a large amount of quantitative data in a short period of time (Sharifian, 2005, 2008). While alternative methods such as naturally occurring conversation via observation or recorded interactions, may yield more authentic data, but they suffer from the lack of contextual variety, difficulties in comparing data, and participant reactivity (Kasper, 2000). Therefore, DCTs may not always reflect natural language use, their efficiency and comparability make them ideal for identifying patterns of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural studies (Galato, 2003).

The DCT used in this study consisted of four scenarios adapted from Zhng & Tang (2009), in which participants are prompted to respond to compliments in English covering common compliment topics such as appearance, ability, character, and possession. These four scenarios were deliberately chosen because they reflect the most frequent and socially relevant areas in which compliments are given across cultures (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1983). Previous research has shown that using these topics offers a comprehensive framework for examining the pragmatics of compliment responses (Yu, 2003; Nelson et al., 1996). However, the validity of the DCT instrument was evaluated by two specialists in applied linguistics to ensure their cultural relevance and their ability to elicit authentic compliment responses. A pilot testing was then conducted with 10 Kurdish EFL learners, to confirm that the scenarios effectively prompted the intended speech acts. Reliability was also assessed through inter-rater coding using Herbert's taxonomy of compliment response strategies. Two independent raters coded the data, and interrater



agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa which yielded coefficient above 0.80 indicating strong consistency. In addition, internal consistency of the DCT was supported by a Cronbach's Alpha which produced the value of 0.78. these results confirm the instrument's suitability for pragmatic research. Therefore, the selection of these four topics is sufficient as it allows the researcher to assess the learners' pragmatic competence in realistic, high-frequency contexts where cross-cultural miscommunication is most likely to occur.

On the other hand, to complement the DCT, the exposure questionnaire consisted of four items designed to explore EFL learners' interaction with English language input and its perceived influence on their pragmatic development. The questions addressed participants' frequency of interaction with native English speakers whether online or face-to-face, their exposure to English language media (e.g., movies and programs),, and their reflections on how such exposure has influenced their ability to give and respond to compliments, as well as the perceived importance of cultural knowledge in producing appropriate compliment responses. These questions aimed to elicit reflective responses that could provide insights into learners' awareness of cross-cultural pragmatics and the extent to which real-world exposure supports the development of sociopragmatic competence in English.

A noted by Taguchi (2011), exposure to authentic input is essential for L2 pragmatic development. By gathering self-reported data on learners' exposure, the questionnaire complements the DCT results and offers insights into sociocultural factors that may contribute to pragmatic success or failure. Therefore, measuring learners' exposure to English outside the classroom provides crucial background for interpreting their complementing behavior (Cohen, 2005; Ishtiara&Cohen, 2010). While the DCT captures learners' productive use of compliment responses, the exposure questionnaire helps assess external factors that might explain variation in pragmatic performance, including potential influence of L1 transfer or limited pragmatic awareness.

In sum, using these two instruments enabled the researcher to explore not only the types of strategies learners employ, but also the reasons behind their choices and the role English language exposure plays in shaping their responses. One of the key motivations for using both instruments is to determine whether learners' increased exposure to English- has contributed to their pragmatic development as would occur in their DCT





responses. As the digital age provides EFL learners with greater access to authentic language input, it becomes essential to assess whether this incidental learning is sufficient, or whether learners still require explicit instructions in speech acts as part of the language curriculum. Given the objective of the study. The DCT and Exposure questionnaire were the most effective, adaptable, and pedagogically relevant tools for investigating pragmatic failure among Kurdish EFL learners.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out in two phases:

1.DCT Administration: Participants were given the DCT questionnaire during regular classroom hours and asked to imagine themselves in each situation and provide responses in English to compliments. Responses were open-ended to allow authentic use of language. They students were given 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants were instructed to write what they would say in each situation, with the emphasis on the importance of responding as naturally and honestly as possible. It is worth mentioning that the DCT items in this study are framed around interaction with friend a “friend/classmate), rather than other possible interlocutors. This means that social relationships in these situations are mostly equal and friendly. Therefore, the findings may not represent groups who have different levels of power or social distance.

2.Exposure questionnaire: Following the DCT, participants completed the exposure Questionnaire to ensure that prior discussions of exposure did not influence learners' reflections. Participants were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire and were encouraged to respond in as much detail as possible. Participants were given sufficient time to reflect and respond, as the open-ended format required thoughtful, subjective input. Responses were later analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to learners' frequency of exposure, perceived influence on pragmatic ability, and awareness of cultural norms associated with English complimenting behavior.

### 3.5 Data Analysis procedure

#### 3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

For the analysis of the quantitative data, participants' responses to DCT were first coded and categorized using Herbert's (1986,1990) taxonomy of compliment response strategy which distinguishes between *agreement* ‘thank you”, *non-agreement* “rejection, disagreement), and formulaic or culture specific responses. Each response was double coded for accuracy and consistency, and disagreements were resolved through discussion



with a second rater in the same field. After that, the data were analyzed quantitatively using counting frequency and percentage to identify general patterns in learners' use of compliment response strategies. Herbert's taxonomy includes a three-category, twelve-strategy classification of compliment responses as shown below.

### **A. Agreement**

#### I. Acceptances

1. *Appreciation Token*- "Thanks; thank you; [smile]"
2. *Comment Acceptance*- "Thanks, it's my favorite too".
3. *Praise Upgrade*- "Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?"

II. *Comment History*- "I bought it for the trip to Arizona."

#### III. Transfers

1. *Reassignment* - "My brother gave it to me."
2. *Return* "So's yours."

### **B. Non-agreement**

#### I. *Scale Down*- It's really quite old.

#### II. *Question*- Do you really think so?

#### III. Non-acceptances

1. *Disagreement* - "I hate it."
2. *Qualification* - "It's all right, but Len's is nicer."

#### IV. No Acknowledgement [silence]

### **C. Other Interpretations**

#### I. *Request* - "You wanna borrow this one too?"

### **3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis**

The responses from the exposure questionnaire were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify learners' engagement with English outside the

classroom. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) framework, responses were reviewed, manually coded, and grouped into themes such as "media exposure", online communication, perceived influence of pragmatic ability, and cultural awareness. The themes were then reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure consistency and relevance to the research questions. This qualitative analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of how learners perceive the role of English exposure in shaping their compliment response strategies and sociopragmatic competence.

### **3.6 Results and Discussion**

#### **1. Total Number and Percentage of Compliment Response Strategies**

Table 1 displays the distribution of compliment response (CR) strategies used by the 60 Kurdish EFL learners, with a total of 693 responses analyzed. The responses were classified using Herbert's (1990) taxonomy.



Table 1. strategies used in responding to compliment speech acts across all situation

Strategy Used	Total Count	Percentage (%)
Appreciation Token	228	32.89%
Comment Acceptance	77	11.11%
Praise Upgrade	96	13.84%
Comment History	59	8.51%
Reassignment	33	4.76%
Return	39	5.63%
Scale Down	30	4.33%
Question	27	3.90%
Disagreement	0	0.00%
Qualification	9	1.30%
Advice	0	0.00%
Wish	39	5.63%
Reassurance	63	9.09%
<b>Total</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>100%</b>

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently used strategy was *Appreciation Token*, accounting for 32.89% of all responses. This suggests that Kurdish EFL learners overwhelmingly prefer direct expressions of gratitude when receiving compliments, which aligns with Herbert's (1990) observation that Appreciation Tokens are a universal and socially acceptable means of compliment acknowledgement.

The second most common strategy was *Praise Upgrade* (13.84%), followed by *Comment Acceptance* (11.11%). These strategies also fall under the broader category of *Accept* responses, indicating that the participants largely favored responses that reinforced or built upon the compliment rather than mitigating or deflecting it. This may reflect a shift in pragmatic behavior among learners with greater exposure to English norms, where accepting praise directly is more culturally acceptable than in traditional Kurdish norms, which often emphasize modesty.

Strategies included *Reassurance* (9.09%) and *Comment History* (8.51%), where learners expanded on the compliment or gave supporting context.



These strategies may reflect the learners' attempt to maintain modesty while still accepting the compliment.

Less frequently used strategies such as *Return* (5.63%), *Wish* (5.63%), *Reassignment* (4.76%), and *Scale Down* (4.33%) suggest that while learners were generally willing to accept compliments, they also employed a range of culturally influenced indirect strategies. *Question* responses (3.90%) reflect a more playful or modest reaction, questioning the sincerity or intent of the compliment.

Minimal use of **Qualification** (1.30%) and the complete absence of **Disagreement** and **Advice** (0.00%) indicate that learners avoided strategies that might be seen as face-threatening or confrontational. This pattern may be rooted in the Kurdish cultural emphasis on politeness, humility, and indirectness.

In summary, the findings show that Kurdish EFL learners favored **direct and positive responses** to compliments while still occasionally relying on culturally congruent strategies of modesty. The data suggest that exposure to English, along with instruction in pragmatic norms, may lead to greater adoption of native-like compliment responses, though cultural values continue to shape learner preferences. This aligns with previous research (e.g., Chen, 1993; Wang & Hsieh, 2021; Sadeghi & Fathi, 2023) emphasizing the role of both cultural background and linguistic input in pragmatic development.

## 2. Distribution of Compliment Response Strategies Across Situations

The analysis of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) responses reveals patterns in how Kurdish EFL learners respond to compliments across four different situations. Table 1 summarizes the frequency and percentage of each compliment response strategy used in each situation.

**Table 2. Distribution of Compliment Response Strategies Across Four Situations (S1–S4)**

Compliment responses	S1 n	S1%	S2 n	S2 %	S3 n	S3 %	S4 n	S4 %
Appreciation token	60	(31.91%)	63	(41.18%)	57	(28.79%)	48	(29.81%)
Comment acceptance	23	(12.23%)	12	(7.84%)	27	(13.64%)	15	(9.32%)
Praise upgrade	24	(12.77%)			21	(10.61%)	24	(14.91%)



			27	(17.65%)				
Comment History	9	(4.79%)	9	(5.88%)	15	(7.58%)	26	(16.15%)
Reassignment	9	(4.79%)	9	(5.88%)	15	(7.58%)	-	-
return	9	(4.79%)	21	(13.73%)	-	-	9	(5.59%)
Scale down	-	-	-	-	15	(7.58%)	15	(9.32%)
question	-	-	-	-	12	(6.06%)	15	(9.32%)
disagreement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
qualification	-	-	-	-	9	(4.55%)	-	-
advice	-	-	-	-	-	(0.00%)	-	-
wish	27	(14.36%)	-	-	12	(6.06%)	-	-
reassurance	27	(14.36%)	12	(7.84%)	15	(7.58%)	9	(5.59%)
Total	188	26.09%	153	21.23%	19	27.47%	187	24.92%

Across all four situations as shown in table (2), the *Appreciation Token* strategy was consistently the most frequently used, peaking in Situation 2 (41.18%) and remaining the dominant response type. This preference for direct expression of gratitude is typical of English compliment responses and suggests a degree of alignment with target language norms among Kurdish EFL learners. *Praise Upgrade* and *Comment Acceptance* also ranked among the top strategies, especially in situations 1 and 2 their use indicates a growing comfort among learners in not only accepting compliments but also reinforcing them, a behavior more typical of English-speaking contexts than Kurdish cultural norms, which tend to discourage overt self-praise. *Comment History* was notably higher in Situation 4 (16.15%), suggesting that learners were more inclined to provide context or explanations when receiving compliments about achievements or possessions. Similarly, *Reassurance* and *Return* were used more variably, showing the participants' tendency to soften compliments or reciprocate them depending on the social context of the scenario.

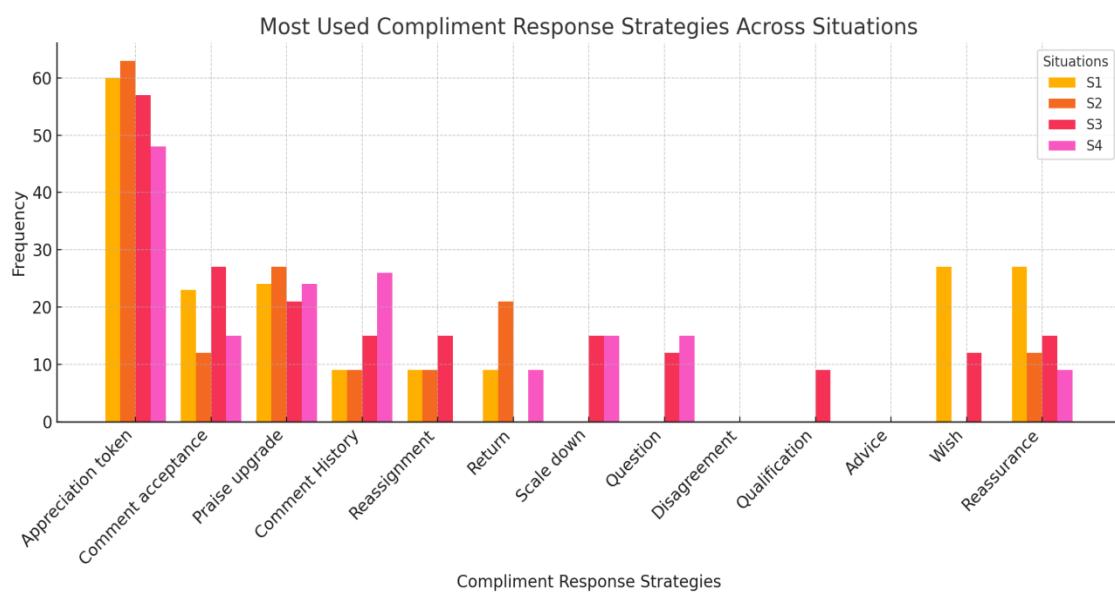
Interestingly, *indirect or modesty-based strategies* like *Scale Down*, *Question*, and *Reassignment* were employed more frequently in Situations 3 and 4—possibly reflecting the influence of Kurdish cultural values such as humility and indirectness. These strategies help avoid appearing boastful while still engaging with the compliment. On the other hand, *Disagreement* and *Advice* were not used in any of the four



scenarios, indicating an avoidance of potentially face-threatening or confrontational responses. The low usage of *Qualification* (only in S3) also supports the trend of favoring directness over ambiguity.

Overall, the results suggest that while Kurdish EFL learners show a strong tendency toward *acceptance-based compliment strategies*, traces of cultural transfer are evident, especially in their selective use of indirect or face-saving strategies. These patterns reflect a dynamic interaction between learners' first-language norms and their developing second-language pragmatic competence.

These findings support previous research (e.g., Nelson et al., 1996; Sadeghi & Fathi, 2023; Wang & Hsieh, 2021) indicating that EFL learners' compliment responses are shaped both by target-language exposure and cultural background. Explicit instruction in pragmatic norms, coupled with increased interaction in English-speaking contexts, could further enhance learners' ability to navigate such speech acts with appropriateness and confidence.



Here is a bar chart visualizing the total frequency of each compliment response strategy used by the participants. It clearly shows that **Appreciation Token** was the most dominant, followed by **Praise Upgrade**, **Comment Acceptance**, and **Reassurance**, while strategies like **Disagreement** and **Advice** were not used at all.



Ultimately, the results highlight the need for explicit teaching of pragmatic skills in language education. As Taguchi (2011) points out, failure to use compliments and responses appropriately can lead to communication breakdown, even when the grammar is correct. Therefore, language instruction should address not only grammatical accuracy, but also the sociocultural norms that govern appropriate language use in English –speaking contexts.

On the other hand, the qualitative analysis of participants' open-ended responses provided valuable insights into how English-language exposure shapes EFL learners' use of compliment response strategies. In response to question 1, the majority of participants indicated that they engage with native speakers primarily online through social media. Face-to-face interaction was rare, largely due to geographical and contextual limitation. This suggests that learners' exposure to spoken English is often asynchronous and informal, yet it still serve as a source of naturalistic input.

For question 2, nearly all participants reported watching English language movies and programs frequently. This form of media exposure was cited as a main contributor to their language development, particularly in improving their pragmatic awareness.

In question 3, participants acknowledged that frequent exposure to English through movies, TV shows, and social media platforms had a significant impact on how to respond to compliments in English. Many stated that such materials helped them become more familiar with common English phrases used in casual conversations, including compliments. learners also expressed that media exposure enhances their understanding of how and when to give and respond to compliment.

*Through watching films, reading books, and listening to conversations in English, we so become confident in using compliment expressions correctly."*

*I've learned countless ways of giving compliments in different contexts through books and social media."*

This finding reinforces Taguchi's (2011) claim that authentic, incidental exposure plays a vital role in building pragmatic competence, and aligns with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) conclusion that access to





naturalistic input significantly enhances learners' acquisition of sociopragmatic norms compared to formal instruction alone.

In question 4, Despite exposure input, many learners reported that their responses in English acknowledged clear differences. Thematic analysis of their responses revealed two major patterns: comfort with native language and uncertainty about contextual appropriateness in English.

Several students noted that expressing themselves in Kurdish felt more natural, and contextually accurate. They emphasized that in Kurdish, they can easily draw on culturally appropriate phrases that match the social situation. In contrast, while they recognized that English offers a variety of expressions for compliment, they often felt unsure about which expressions fit which context in English.

*“In our native language we can express any thoughts we have, but in English, the words may be correct, but for another situation.”*

*“Speaking our mother tongue is more comfortable than using a second language.”*

This reflects a common challenge in interlanguage pragmatic: even when learners have the linguistic resources in English, they may lack the sociopragmatic awareness to apply them appropriately (Thomas, 1983; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). This confirm that pragmatic failure remains strong, even among learners with regular media exposure, aligning with findings by Ishtiar & Cohen (2010). This underscores the importance of not only teaching the forms of compliment expressions in English, but also providing situational practice and explicit cultural instruction to enhance learners' confidence and accuracy in real-life contexts.

Additionally, in question 5, when asked about the role of cultural knowledge, nearly all participants emphasized its importance in effective complimenting. Thematic analysis of their responses revealed that learners expressed an understanding about responding to compliments in English involves not only the words themselves, but also how they are delivered including aspects such as tone, facial expressions, formality, and intensity. Many acknowledged that a compliment that feels natural in Kurdish may sound inappropriate, or even rude in English if not adapted to the target culture.



*“A compliment is unique to one language; in another, it may not carry the same meaning because of different cultures.”*

*“If we don’t know the compliment culture, we may sound rude, inappropriate, or extra.”*

In addition, learners associated correct use of English complimenting norms with cultural integration and language mastery. Several participants mentioned that culturally appropriate compliments show not only linguistic competence, but also engagement with the culture of the language.

*“Giving compliments in English in the correct way shows how much we know and are engaged with the culture.”*

These insights reflect learners’ ability to reflect on language use within a cultural context-and align with previous research showing that pragmatic competence is closely tied into cultural awareness (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, Taguchi, 2011)

This reflects awareness that language use involves more than correct grammar—it requires an understanding of sociocultural norms. Previous studies (e.g., Nelson et al., 1996; Farghal & Haggan, 2006) have shown that learners often carry over their first-language norms, which can lead to misinterpretation in English. For instance, the frequent use of strategies such as praise upgrades or indirect reciprocity may reflect culturally valued norms of humility or generosity but may be perceived differently by English speakers.

Finally, it is found that learners who reported higher and more diverse exposure- such as reading English books, chatting with native speakers, or engaging in online discussions- appeared to be more pragmatically aware and less reliant on native language norms. These learners were better able to describe context-specific uses of compliment responses, suggesting that quality and interactivity of exposure matter more than mere frequency. As Ishihara and Cohen (2010) suggest, building pragmatic ability requires not only exposure to the language but also guided reflection, feedback, and practice.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explored the pragmatic failure of compliment response strategies employed by Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners and examined the role of English-language exposure in shaping their pragmatic competence.





Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and an exposure questionnaire. The analysis of DCT revealed that *Appreciation Token* was the most frequently used strategy across all four situations, indicating a strong preference for direct and positive responses. Strategies such as *Praise Upgrade*, *Comment Acceptance*, and *Reassurance* were also commonly used, suggesting an emerging alignment with English pragmatic norms.

However, the study identified culturally influenced patterns. Indirect strategies such as *Comment History*, *Scale Down*, and *Question* appeared more often in certain situations, reflecting the learners' tendency to balance politeness with cultural expectations of modesty. The absence of strategies like *Disagreement* and *Advice* further supports the learners' avoidance of face-threatening acts, in line with both English politeness conventions and Kurdish cultural values.

The qualitative analysis added depth to these findings by highlighting learners' reflections on their own language use and the impact of English-language exposure. A significant number of participants attributed their pragmatic awareness to **media sources**, such as movies and conversations, rather than formal instruction. While many learners expressed confidence in giving compliments in English, their responses often lacked contextual appropriateness, revealing areas of **pragmatic failure**. Furthermore, learners noted greater ease with **formal complimenting** compared to informal situations—likely due to classroom emphasis on structured and polite language forms. Participants also demonstrated an increasing awareness of the **cultural differences** between Kurdish and English compliment norms. Many recognized that their English responses differed from their L1 behavior, signaling growth in meta-pragmatic **awareness**. However, this awareness did not lead to correct or appropriate use in practice, suggesting a gap between **what learners know about language and how they apply it in real situations**.

**The integrated findings from the DCT and exposure questionnaire reveal that, although EFL learners are widely exposed to English through social media, reading books in English, and online communication with native speakers, they still encounter difficulties in producing pragmatically appropriate compliment responses. Their DCT responses indicate that media exposure is not enough for mastering the nuanced sociopragmatic conventions of English.**



In conclusion, the compliment responses of Kurdish EFL learners reflect a complex interplay between L1 cultural norms and L2 pragmatic development. While many learners adopt direct and accepting strategies consistent with English norms, traces of cultural transfer remain evident. These findings underscore the importance of explicit instruction in pragmatics and increased opportunities for authentic language exposure to support learners in developing effective and culturally appropriate communication skills. Future research may further investigate the influence of gender, education level, and longitudinal exposure on pragmatic development in similar EFL contexts.

#### 4.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching, particularly in EFL contexts such as Iraqi Kurdistan. First, the strong preference for direct strategies like *Appreciation Token* and *Praise Upgrade* suggests that learners are becoming familiar with target language norms. However, the continued use of culturally influenced strategies such as *Comment History*, *Scale Down*, and *Wish* indicates that *pragmatic transfer* from the first language remains common.

To address this, explicit, context-based instruction in speech acts should be integrated into EFL curricula. It is recommended that language teachers, curriculum designers, and textbook developers integrate pragmatic-focused activities that model a variety of authentic speech acts, including compliments, requests, apologies, and refusals across different social situations. Classroom instruction should not only emphasize the forms of these speech acts, but also the cultural values, power dynamics, and social distance that govern their appropriate use. Such interventions can help learners bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and real-world communicative competence, fostering more confident and culturally aware language use.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of language exposure—both formal and informal—in developing pragmatic competence. EFL programs should provide learners with more opportunities to engage with authentic English input, such as films, podcasts, social media, and conversations with native or proficient speakers.

#### 4.2 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study focused on a specific group of Kurdish EFL learners, future research should explore larger and more diverse populations, including learners from different regions, academic levels, and proficiency bands. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into





how pragmatic competence evolves over time and with increased exposure.

Additionally, future studies may benefit from examining variables such as gender, classroom instruction methods, or study abroad experiences to determine their impact on the development of pragmatic awareness. Comparative studies between different cultural groups could also deepen our understanding of cross-cultural influences on compliment behavior.

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## Appendix

This questionnaire is designed to explore EFL learners' pragmatic failure through their responses to compliments in different social situations. Each situation involves a compliment focused on appearance, ability, character, or possession. Please read each situation carefully and write down how you would respond to the compliment in English, as naturally as you would in real life.

1. Age:

2. Gender:

3. Level:

4. Have you ever lived in an English-speaking country? If yes, for how long?

### Part A: Discourse Completion Task (DCT) Questionnaire

1. You have given a presentation in your class. After the presentation, one of your classmates comes to you and says:

“That was a great presentation. I really enjoyed it.”

How would you respond?

.....

2. You are wearing a jacket. One of your friends meets you and says:



“What a nice jacket! You look great in it!” You reply:  
How would you respond?

.....

3. You bought a new mobile phone, and a friend notices that and says:  
"Wow! that's a really nice mobile! It looks powerful and smart."  
How would you respond?

.....

4. You have recently changed your hairstyle, and a friend compliments you:  
"Your new haircut looks amazing on you! It really brings out your features."  
How would you respond?

.....

### Part B: Exposure Questions

Read each of the following questions carefully and respond in **complete sentences**. There are **no right or wrong answers**—we are interested in your honest thoughts and personal experiences.

1. How often do you interact with native English speakers? (e.g., online, in-person)
2. How often do you watch English movies/ programs?
3. How do you think exposure to English-language materials (e.g., films, books, conversations) has influenced your ability to respond to compliments?
4. Do you feel your responses to compliment in English are different from how you would respond in your native language? If yes, how so?
5. How important do you think cultural knowledge is when responding to compliments in English?

