A Cross-Cultural Study of Compliment Responses: A Pragmatic Analysis of a Persian and English Speech Act

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Abstract

The present study sought to cast light on differences in strategies of compliment responses used across Persian and American English. For this purpose, 110 participants, under three groups of Persian native speakers, American native speakers, and Persian learners of English, answered a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), followed by a semi-structured interview with the Persian learners of English to cross-check the findings of the DCTs. The collected responses from the DCTs were coded at macro and micro-levels. Moreover, a macro-level of Persian cultural schemas was used for the Persian groups. The chi-square test revealed the independent performance of the three groups. Judged by the written DCTs while performing in English, the learners' responses displayed cases of utilizing the native Persian cultural schemas. More specifically, the English learner respondents employed different instances of *ta'arof* and *shekaste-nafsi*. Confirmed by the interview, such failures resulted from insufficient exposure to the American English culture and more importantly from their lack of instruction and awareness of cross-cultural pragmatic differences.

Keywords: pragmatic speech acts, compliment responses, cross-cultural linguistics, cultural schemas

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1. Introduction

Following the advancement of communication technologies, making the world appear smaller, more frequent interactions with the foreigners necessitate learning of an international language such as English. Although it is not an official language in Iran, English is considered as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) and treated as either compulsory in schools and universities or voluntarily in private institutions. Predominantly functioning as a tool for providing access to knowledge, knowing English is regarded as an indication of social and academic accomplishment among Iranians (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Accordingly, the English textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education seem to attempt to fulfill the students' future needs for reading and comprehending academic papers and books (Eslami-Rasekh & Fatahi, 2008). Then, in university English courses reading comprehension and, occasionally, translation are promoted; however, the focus of the texts shifts from general topics to more specific materials of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Special Purposes (ESP) (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Alternatively, in recent decades, along with free-discussion classes, private institutions offer more communicative courses that are guided by mainstream international books such as *Interchange* (Richards, 2012).

Nevertheless, Persian EFL students still do not have much exposure to English outside the classroom as opposed to EFL learners in other contexts (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004). Therefore, the need for exposure to the pragmatic aspects of language and other tools to enhance their pragmatic knowledge is strongly felt. To compensate for this dearth of exposure, EFL teachers are expected to use English with functional abilities in communicating across language skills (Eslami-Rasekh & Fatahi, 2008; Paltridge, 2012). Additionally, a further consideration in the present study is raising students' awareness of some cross-cultural pragmatic differences between English and Persian.

Following a description of the compliment response systems of English and Persian as criteria, to investigate the cross-cultural influences on the production of this speech-act, the produced responses by Persian learners of the English language were compared to both languages. Put differently, the study aimed to see whether the produced responses by the Persian EFL learners, in English, tend to be closer to American native speakers of English, or whether, by employing Persian cultural schemas, they commit pragmatic failures. This has pedagogical

implications at the classroom level. The findings could be implemented to not only improve the learner's linguistic competence concerning compliment responses but also, by highlighting inappropriate instances of recourse to the Persian schemas and pragmatic failures, increase their awareness of cross-cultural differences and consequently enhance their pragmatic competence.

2. Review of the Literature

Establishing a fruitful interaction with native speakers essentially requires learning how to appropriately employ pragmatic features in particular social contexts (Beltrán-Planques & Querol-Julián, 2018). This knowledge, known as pragmatic competence, consists of not only the ability to produce socially and contextually appropriate utterances but also requires the capability of interpreting the intended meaning. Defined by Crystal (2008), pragmatics consists of investigating language from the standpoint of its users; specifically "the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication" (p. 379).

Despite acknowledging its role in maintaining successful interactions, either due to lack of proper syllabus design or complications in material selection (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017), pragmatic competence is sometimes neglected in favor of linguistic competence. Therefore, language classes ordinarily focus on differences at the lexical or morpho-syntactic level (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Pragmatic competence, however, as Kasper (1997) believes, is not subordinate; rather, it is coordinated to formal linguistics; so Kasper insists on the positive effect of teaching pragmatic competence and raising awareness of students. Likewise, Ishihara (2019) suggests a pragmatics-focused instruction that concentrates on "exposure to and understanding of the norms, explicit awareness-raising of the cultural meaning behind them, and interactive practice involving their linguistic realizations" (p. 170).

Generally, members of each speech community hold definite metalinguistic beliefs, and via those beliefs, they are capable of, intuitively and instantaneously, assessing the dichotomies of polite vs. rude and tactful vs. offensive. In this sense, politeness is corresponding to the normative concept of appropriateness (Pizziconi, 2006). Politeness in its core, as Brown (2001) maintains, is "a matter

of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be interactionally treated, including behaving in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for interactors' social status and their social relationship" (p. 11620). In Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, face is considered as a public self-image that each individual tries to maintain; and is defined as "something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 66). Face stems up from two desires of every individual: a) gaining the approval of the others (positive face) and b) being unimpeded in the actions and beliefs (negative face) (Wagner, 2004). Within this system, apologies are avoidance-based strategies in that rather than friendliness and involvement they express respect, deference, and distance (Wagner, 2004). Compliments, on the other hand, are generally considered as positive politeness strategies, because they display the speaker's perceiving and acknowledgment of the complimentee's interests and needs (Chen, 1993).

Although, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model, some speech-acts are potentially face-threatening and politeness strategies are utilized to rectify that effect, sometimes the Persian politeness system displays a different behavior. In other words, rather than rectifying the face-threatening effect, the use of some routine strategies maintain and enhance interlocutors' face. Accordingly, some acts that regularly are identified as FTAs in English (e.g., invitations, offers, and some compliments) are used by Persians as face-enhancing acts (FEA) (Koutlaki, 1997). Paying ritual offers such as *ta'arof* or invitations are manifestations of Persians' sympathy toward each other (Koutlaki, 1997). For instance, consider the following situation:

A: What a nice wallet! (*Che kife poole qashangi*)

B: It's not worthy of you (*Qabele shomaro nadare,* meaning: You can have it.).

A: Thank you very much (Always meaning, "No, thank you.").

Monitoring daily communications of Iranians confirms that the Persian compliment and compliment response (C & CR) system – among other conversational strategies – should be regarded as an exhibition of their cordiality, goodwill, and warm feelings toward each other (Koutlaki, 1997). Ritual politeness strategies are heavily involved in expressing these concepts. Several studies have confirmed that the utilization of different speech-acts by Iranians is deeply influenced by Persian cultural schemas (Eslami & Derakhshan, 2020; Sharifian

2005, 2008; Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011; Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017). As claimed by these studies, Persian speakers evaluate the utilization of any speech-act, as well as its proper responses, by their system of politeness, which, generally includes notions such as *adab*, *ehteram*, and *aberu* (respectively: civility, courtesy, and face).

The macro cultural schema of *adab* is responsible for conceptualizations of politeness and impoliteness strategies in Persian. This notion, which can be an approximate equivalent for 'courtesy', 'politeness', 'social etiquette' or 'manners', is an umbrella term that includes a web of several other sub-schemas (Eslami & Derakhshan, 2020; Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017) such as *ta'arof* (ritual courtesy or offer), *shekaste-nafsi* (self-lowering), *sharmandegi* (being ashamed), *aberu* (face), and *rudarbayesti* (state/feeling of respect out of distance or face out of obligation). Within the cultural schema of *aberu*, face is a representative of one's social image and it is "a metonym for how a person as a whole would appear to others" (Sharifian, 2011, p. 141). Thus, in a given interaction, Persian interlocutors attempt to participate in exchanges in a way that preserves their own face (*aberu*) and does not cast any harm to the other party's face (Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017).

The study of speech-acts and their construction in daily communication appears to be beneficial in keeping the non-native speakers away from miscommunications triggered by the inappropriate use of their native cultural norms. In other words, instructions must inform the learners of the cross-cultural differences regarding adopting pragmatic norms in utilizing speech-acts. Perhaps because they are generally considered as *social lubricants* (Wolfson, 1983) that grease the social wheels and *the mirror of the cultural values* (Manes, 1983) through which we can gain "insights into speakers' reactions to external appraisals of their personal, and social identity" (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001, p. 108), Cs and CRs are among the speech-acts that require more attention in cross-cultural studies.

The fundamental idea behind cross-cultural studies of Persian speech-acts is that "a disparity in the cultural schemas that the interlocutors bring to a communicative event can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication" (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011, p. 228). For instance, the cultural schema of *ta'arof* in Persian, as Sharifian (2011) maintains, generally provides "a form of social space for speakers to exercise face work, project certain social personas, and also

to provide communicative tools to negotiate and lubricate social relationships" (p. 144). The reason behind Persians insisting on enacting *ta'arof* is that this schema is so intertwined with politeness and respect that they do their best to make themselves recognized as polite and not to offend others by neglecting it (Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017).

Regarding the cultural misunderstanding among the Persian learners of English, several studies have argued that even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language, EFL learners may fail to communicate effectively (Sharifian, 2005; Sharifian & Palmer, 2007; Motaghi-Tabari & Beuzeville, 2012). Moreover, some studies have shown that such failures have happened for not only Persian EFL learners but also for those Persian speakers who already live or are in contact with other cultures (Sharifian, 2005, 2008; Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011; Motaghi-Tabari & Beuzeville, 2012).

Sharifian (2005) studied CRs among Persians and Anglo-Australians in terms of the cultural schema of *shekaste-nafsi*. A Persian DCT and its English translation were administered to collect data from two groups. The results revealed that Persian speakers draw upon their cultural schemas, particularly *shekaste-nafsi*. Sharifian (2008) further explored the relation between CRs and cultural schemas. A group of Iranians with an average of three years of learning English, mostly at the intermediate level, took part in that study. Participants answered an English DCT and after two weeks, the same participants answered the same DCT, this time in Persian. The results revealed that Persian participants, in either L1 or L2, in varying degrees draw on their cultural schemas, especially on *shekaste-nafsi*. However, supported by his data, he added that skillful speakers are not restrained within the boundaries of cultural schemas and show dynamicity in drawing upon their resources. In other words, such interlocutors might draw on a cultural schema in L1 but not in L2, or, accept a compliment in one language and reject it in another (Sharifian, 2008).

Informed by cultural schema (Sharifan 2005), recently, Eslami and Derakhshan (2020) investigated the CRs in Persian. Their data included naturally occurring language in multiple settings. Their study showed that compliment responses, compared to other strategies, abound in the interactions of Persian speakers. Further analysis of their data marked *shekasteh-nafsi* (Sharifan 2005, 2008) and avoidance of self-praise as not a prominnat schema in the CR strategies used Persian speakers.

Derakhshan et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive survey of cross-cultural compliment studies in the Persian language from 1994 to 2020. For such a systemic review, they collected a database of nine studies on Persian compliments. The review included a detailed discussion of methodologies, compliment functions, linguistic strategies, and the role of variables such as age, gender, and culture. The findings revealed some of the tendencies in the complimenting behavior of Persian speakers such as a limited number of linguistic strategies and lexical items, which consequently lead to the formulaic nature of compliments.

Despite the valuable findings of the previous studies, there are still some issues that need to be addressed. For instance, EFL participants of the former studies were undergraduate students of English. Different language learning backgrounds and unequal levels of proficiency among them might have influenced the researchers' final interpretations of their data. Moreover, except for the analysis of pragmatic errors, which was the primary concern of the present study, because of the educational background of participants, the probable damage of linguistic errors by the novice language learners was minimized. Hence, supported by the collected data for the present study, no trace of linguistic errors were found in their answers. Furthermore, concerning its special attention to the Persian cultural schemas, whereas the previous studies were only limited to *ta'arof* or *shekaste-nafsi*, the data of the present study accounts for a wider range of schemas that are associated with the CRs and also covers instances of *cheshm-zakhm* (jaundiced-eye, used in complimenting a beautiful object or appearance, where the complimenter wants to show he/she does not have bad intentions) and *sharmandegi*.

Therefore, by adopting a data-based investigation of pragmatic transfer analysis, this cross-cultural study aimed at investigating whether the CR realization patterns are shared across English and Persian or culture-specific in the data gathered from observations and analysis of the three groups of Persian EFL learners (PEFL), native speakers of Persian (PNS) and American native speakers (ANS). Moreover, the PEFLs were specifically investigated in terms of their recourse to the Persian cultural schemas. The study intended to see whether the CRs produced by the PEFL participants tend to be closer to the ANS group, or whether they commit pragmatic failures. Thus, the present study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference among the PEFL, PNS, and ANS groups regarding the CRs invoked by a Discourse Completion Test (DCT)?

2. What pragmatic functions do the CRs, produced by the above groups, perform?

3. Methodology

The study maintained a descriptive analysis and followed a deductive approach to fit its findings into the generally accepted categories and taxonomies of CRs. Considering the cross-cultural nature of this study that necessitated a comparative methodological approach, to identify similarities and differences in the speech behavior of the participants, who represented two different cultures, the research comprised both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

3.1 Participants

Following a purposive method of selection, 110 participants were clustered in three distinctive groups. Unlike the previously mentioned studies, the present study gathered a more harmonious group of participants; in that, the PNS and PEFL groups had corresponding educational levels. Moreover, being higher education students, PNS participants were expected to demonstrate a perfect grasp of the Persian politeness system. Furthermore, the PEFL participants were not simply learners of English, nor were they Iranian immigrants living abroad. Rather, there were well-defined guidelines for the qualification of prospective participants. Thirty PEFL participants were chosen from the intact classes of English Language Teaching at the master's level at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. They had already passed four years at the BA level as students of English Literature or Translation Studies, which requires that they pass several courses in conversation, reading, writing, grammar, linguistics, and content-based courses. Moreover, before entering their Master's program, they had passed a language proficiency test as partial fulfillment for entrance into graduate programs. Altogether, each participant had a minimum of five years of intensive formal education plus the time they spent in private language institutions. Thus, PEFL learners were assumed to possess sufficient knowledge of English to produce a CR that is culturally acceptable though they were not asked to take a language proficiency test for practicality

reasons. To minimize the effect of the age difference, an age limit was set to include no participants under 20 or over 40 years of age. However, the actual range of participants' age was between 23 and 39.

The PNS group included 60 MA level students of Persian Literature from the same university. They had inadequate exposure to the English language and English culture, except for the limited compulsory English courses they had passed at high schools and a three-unit credit course at university. Their age ranged from 23 to 41.

Besides, 20 ANS participants, who were the working staff of two separate health care institutions in the state of California, took part in this research via email. Their ages ranged from 23 to 38 and most of them had college degrees or higher education levels. None of the participants were American born Chinese, Mexican migrants, or with a nationality other than American. Since direct access to the American participants was almost impossible, the prepared English DCT was sent to an Iranian friend living in California. The prospective participants were invited to a friendly meeting and they were briefed about the general goals of the study. However, either due to conservation regarding political restrictions or reasons other than that, some of the invitees showed reluctance and declined to take part in the research. Nevertheless, to expedite the process, one of the participants voluntarily suggested constructing the DCT within the online format of Google forms. The remaining American participants, hence, were invited to fill out an online version of the DCT that was prepared via Google forms. Ultimately, 20 answered DCTs were collected.

3.2 Instrument

To simulate conversational exchanges in which Persian interlocutors would probably recourse to their cultural schemas, a DCT containing 12 complimenting situations was prepared. The plots and interlocutors were *prototypical situations* of compliment exchanges in the Persian culture. The principal structure for the DCT of the present study was based on a ten-item questionnaire that was first prepared by Sharifian (2005). To investigate the CRs in situations not frequently considered, two more items were added to the original DCT. The 12 items of the DCT present a diverse range of situations, roles, and social distances. Consistent with the weightiness of the FTA, the speakers are supposed to select the linguistic

framing of their speech by assessing variables of distance, power, and rank of imposition (Brown, 2001). This issue was observed by having the roles of family members, friends, colleagues, and superiors as complimenters.

The PEFL and ANS groups answered the same English DCT and the PNS group answered the Persian translated version of that DCT. Concerning the authenticity of language, these two DCTs were checked and verified by two university instructors for each language. As a renowned method for preserving content equivalence between the two versions of the DCTs back translation, a technique introduced by Brislin (1970), was conducted. First, the researcher translated the original English DCT into Persian. Next, two Master's students of English Language Teaching, independently, back-translated it into English. Then, two university professors of English compared the original DCT with the two back-translated versions and identified the DCTs as identical.

Considering the difficulties of accessing the ANS group, conducting a pilot study for the DCT was ruled out. However, Cronbach α was calculated to investigate the internal consistency across items of the questionnaire. Having collected all the responses of the American data, we administrated Cronbach α for the English DCT; and, the calculated outcome was 0.826; thus α, based on standardized items, was 0.816. Although it is suggested that a score of around 0.70-0.80 is accepted as normal, yet the higher scores are certainly more desirable (Loewen & Plonsky, 2016). Therefore, the reliability measure of the English DCT was within a favorable range.

To cross-check the findings invoked by the DCT and inspired by the analysis of the PEFL participants' responses, a semi-structured post-hoc interview with 12 questions was prepared. To drive off unnecessary stress of performing in L2, the interviews were administered in Persian. Of the 30 PEFL respondents of the DCT, 15 respondents (7 males and 8 females) were reachable for the interviews.

3.3 Framework and Coding

Researchers have presented different frameworks for CR classification such as the taxonomies of Pomerantz (1978), Wolfson (1983), Herbert (1986), and Holmes (1986). Both taxonomies proposed by Herbert (1986) and Holmes (1986) are divided into three macro-categories which encompass 12 subdivisions. These micro-levels, notwithstanding some differences, are moderately analogs. In

Herbert's taxonomy (1986, p. 79), CRs are divided into three broad categories: agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretations. However, rather than the broad category of *other interpretations* in Herbert's (1986) classification, Holmes's (1986) taxonomy includes the definitive category of *evade/deflect*. Another advantage for Holmes' classification is because several CRs that, through Herbert's taxonomy, go under *agreement*, will be better handled through *evade/deflect* strategies in Holmes' taxonomy (Ruhi, 2006). Finally, having *accept* and *reject* at both ends and *evade/deflect* in the middle, forms a continuum that can be used to compare the tendency of responses across languages and some generalizations can be made (Chen & Yang, 2010).

Additionally, to account for the Persian schemas, a fourth macro-level, including four micro-levels, was annexed to the taxonomy. Consequently, the coding of CRs was done based on the following classification:

A. Accept
1) Appreciation token
2) Agreeing utterance
3) Downgrading utterance
4) Return compliment
B. Reject
5) Disagreeing utterance
6) Question accuracy
7) Challenge sincerity
C. Evade/deflect
8) Shift credit
9) Request reassurance
10) Informative comment
11) Ignore
12) Legitimate evasion
D. Persian cultural schemas
13) *Ta'arof*
14) *Shekaste-nafsi*
15) *Cheshm-zakhm*
16) *Sharmandegi*

4. Data Analysis

Considering the dynamic nature of speech events, one's response is not confined to only one category and might contain different parts. Moreover, CRs could be contradictory in terms of macro-levels and one might show rejection and acceptance at the same time, as is indicated by the following example:

A.After reading your essay, your friend/classmate says to you, "You're very intelligent and knowledgeable!"

B.*I'm not, definitely; but thank you.*

Utilizing a disagreeing utterance, the recipient first rejects the compliment because she thinks otherwise. However, she then, out of respect, accepts the compliment by employing an instance of appreciation token.

Altogether, 110 participants, each presented with a 12-item DCT, answered 1320 questions. Their answers, often, included a variation of *thank* followed by a second part from the other categories. Hence, 2640 slots were allocated for the CRs. Overall, the first parts and their follow-ups occupied 1805 of the slots; also, since some of the responses did not have follow-up second parts, 835 slots remained unoccupied.

4.1 Chi-square Tests of Independence

To check the independence of the PEFL responses from those of the two other groups, two separate tests of chi-square were administered. In each test, the null hypothesis was that the proportion of each variable (i.e., category) is independent of the groups. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis assumed an association among the use of categories and the groups.

The first chi-square test was performed to examine the association between the PNS and PEFL groups and the utilization of the categories. As Table 1 displays, the calculated value is 51.502 (N = 1420) which is significantly greater than the critical value of 15.507 (an alpha level of .05, X^2 = 51.502, p> .05), rejecting the null hypothesis. Moreover, to calculate the strength of association, the effect size test of Cramer's V was performed, as reported in Table 2.

Table 1

Chi-square Test for the PNS and the PEFL Groups

	Value	*df*	Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	51.502[a]	8	.000
Likelihood Ratio	52.671	8	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.639	1	.018
N of Valid Cases	1420		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.06.

Table 2

Cramer's V for the PNS and the PEFL Groups

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.190	.000
	Cramer's V	.190	.000
N of Valid Cases		1420	

The second chi-square test was performed for the ANS and the PEFL groups. As Table 3 displays, the chi-square value is 45.712 (N = 862) which is significantly greater than the critical value of 15.507 (an alpha level of .05, $X^2 = 45.712$, p> .05), rejecting the null hypothesis and proving the association of the categories with the groups. The strength of the association between the categories and the groups was also calculated via the effect size test of Cramer's V (See Table 4).

Table 3

Chi-square Test for the ANS and the PEFL Groups

	Value	*df*	Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	45.712[a]	8	.000
Likelihood Ratio	51.120	8	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	16.510	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	862		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.49.

Table 4

Cramer's V for the PNS and the PEFL Groups

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.230	.000
	Cramer's V	.230	.000
N of Valid Cases		862	

4.2 Analysis of the Research Situations

Situation 1

The respondents received compliments upon their good job or a recent achievement from the people of higher ranks (institutionally) or people for whom the complimentees held a certain amount of respect.

Analyzing the PNS responses revealed that *lotf* (translated as mercy, blessing, or kindness) was the most frequently used word in the answers provided by the participants. This roots in the Persian traditions and instructions of avoiding self-praise or bragging about self-achievement; hence, they tried to either downgrade or deflect the compliments by attributing their success to the help they had received, or to *lotf-e khoda* (God's blessings); and others expressed *lotf darid* (you are too kind toward me). Similarly, *kind* was the most frequently used word among the PEFL responses. However, there exists a difference between 1. *You're too kind* (a returning device for a compliment) and, 2. *It's kind of you* (a pattern similar to *lotf darid* that the PNS participants used; hence, counted as a shift credit).

The equal number of the cases of downgrades and shift credits among the PEFL answers displayed a tendency to either mitigate the compliment by saying they were doing their job/duty or share (or deflect) its credit with the other factors such as their mother, boss or teacher. Thus, the PEFL respondents expressed their love, gratitude, and appreciation toward their mothers and/or tried to return the compliment by expressing their affection for their job or by admiring their bosses or teachers. Although the PEFL respondents insisted on attributing the credit of the compliment to the respected complimenter, none of the PEFL answers to this situation contained an instance of Persian schemas. Nevertheless, there were two instances of *shekaste-nafsi* among the PNS responses; in one instance, a 41-year-old PNS respondent humbly told her mother *"khake patam"* (*I am merely nothing in front of you*).

Having accepted 60 percent of the compliments, the ANS responses showed less variety than the Persian speakers. Instances of appreciation token were respectively followed by agreeing utterances, returns or downgrades. Although some of them opted for shifting the credit, none of the ANS participants rejected a compliment on achievements.

Situation 2

The complimentees received compliments for a specialty, talent, good trait, or ability. Hence, *ta'arof* and *shekaste-nafsi*, were specifically expected to appear in responses of the Persian participants. Predictably, the PNS responses displayed a variety of cultural schemas and formulaic answers. Particularly, they utilized instances of *shekaste-nafsi*, *ta'arof* and *sharmandegi* to display their humbleness. A formulaic instance of *shekaste-nafsi* was *"be paye shoma nemirese"* (not as good as you are). Likewise, there were two cases of *sharmandegi*, in which the participants expressed formulaic answers: *"sharmande nafarmaeid"* and *"khejalat nadid"*; both sentences mean *don't make me embarrassed*. Iranians, especially for downplaying purposes, utilize these expressions frequently in response to the received compliments. Besides, several cases of the PNS participants mentioned their continuous efforts, studies, and practices as the cause of their abilities. Some of them, modestly, rejected the compliment by saying *"na, intoria ham nist"* (no, it's not like that). Moreover, consistent with the other situations, some of the recipients attributed the compliment to kindness (*lotf*) of the complimenters. Furthermore, referencing to *cheshm-zakhm*, a participant, jokingly, asked the complimentee not to be jealous.

Almost similar to the PNS group, *acceptance* had the largest share among the PEFL responses at the macro-level, and shift credit was a big shareholder at the micro-level, where PEFL participants had frequently used the formulaic answer *"that's very kind of you"*. In the case of *shekaste-nafsi*, a 24-year-old woman, humbly stated, *"the hardest part is eating what I've cooked"*. Moreover, a 26-year-old woman responded in a way that implied she was perplexed by the compliment: *"Thank you. Your compliment is blushing me. You're blushing me"*. She not only declared her embarrassment (*sharmandegi*) but confirmed it for the second time. Furthermore, in two cases of *ta'arof*, a male respondent offered the guest to have more food and another respondent said: *"for a dear guest like you, it is not a fancy meal"*. In situation 2, cultural schemas occupied five percent of the responses of each Persian group. More interestingly, both groups shared the same percentage of utilizing *shekaste-nafsi* in response to receiving compliments on their talents.

The American participants accepted 60 percent of the compliments, half of which went to instances of appreciation token. The other half was divided between the other three micro levels of *acceptance*. Occupying less than ten

percent, evasions were mostly shift credit. The rejections occupied only 6.6 percent that was equally divided between disagreements and instances of challenging the complimenters' sincerity.

Situation 3

The recipients were paid compliments for *having* a smart child. The PNS respondents openly accepted many of compliments. After expressing their happiness and gratitude, most of the participants, stated a sentence to approve the compliment. Thus, agreeing utterances were the predominant category of the responses. Some others returned the cordiality of the complimenters by stating that they too have beautiful children. One of the common returns in Persian culture that was also identified within the responses is to ask God to grant the same thing to the complimenter. For example, a 29-year-old man prayed to God to grant the complimenter a smart and cute child. Moreover, three cases of utilizing the Persian schemas were found within the responses. One participant, utilized *shekaste-nafsi*, when he expressed that his child is not as smart as the complimenter's child is. Moreover, in situations of receiving compliments for their children, it is common among Iranian parents to express phrases that convey a sense of humbleness of their child. In that sense, this action is similar to *shekaste-nafsi*; however, since the parents do not mean what they say, such sentences are classified as *ta'arof.* Two female participants utilized such *ta'arofs* in their responses. The first one responded as *"kanize shomast"*, meaning *she is your servant* and the other participants expressed *"dast boose shomast"*, meaning *she kisses your hand* (as a sign of respect and courtesy).

In more than 55 percent of their responses, the PEFL participants accepted the compliments for their children. Then, in cases of expressing agreeing utterances, the participants either presented reasons for the cleverness of the children or upgraded the compliments. Similar to the other situations, in several cases, the PEFL participants attributed the compliment to the kindness of the complimenters. Leaving these out, at macro and micro-levels, the response patterns of the PEFL participants were much similar to those of the American group. The American participants accepted almost three-quarters of the compliments. After expressing their gratitude, the American participants stated a sentence with explanatory or upgrading functions. For instance, one of them mentioned that his child was *self-motivated*; the other believed that her son *works*

very hard. On the other hand, there was only one rejection among the PEFL responses, and no compliment was rejected by the ANS participants; moreover, even the frequency of PNS rejections for this item was much less than the other items. This is probably because the recipients were not directly responsible for the topic of the compliments and they acted as if they were responding on behalf of their children.

Situation 4

The participants received compliments for their appearance and physical shape. In cases of receiving a compliment for a physical object, one of the most frequent responses in Farsi is "*qabele shoma ro nadare*" (It is not worthy of you) that is employed as an expression of (in)sincere offers (*ta'arofs*). Nevertheless, being generally aware of the intended meaning, Iranians usually take such offers as gestures of gratitude and politeness. Typically used as a reassigning instrument, another formulaic answer is "*Cheshmetoon ziba mibine*" (Your eyes see things beautifully).

Among the PNS responses, acceptation techniques were the predominant categories, and evasions were employed in the second place. Some of the respondents attempted to reassign the credit of the compliment by expressing the mentioned formulaic responses. Moreover, in a few cases the recipient utilized *shekaste-nafsi* to show their humbleness, and some others, by utilizing *ta'arofs*, offered to hand over their admired article of clothing to the complimenters.

Generally, the PEFL respondents first appreciated the compliments and then added agreeing utterances to reinforce them. However, some of the participants shifted the credit of the compliment to other factors such as getting help from their sister or friends. Additionally, there were several cases where the participants requested a reassuring utterance from the complimenter or they had tried to evade the compliment by providing more information. Likewise, some of the PNS respondents employed formulaic responses such as "*vaqean?*" and "*jeddi?*" (really? and seriously?) as devices for requesting reassurance. Furthermore, except for a case of *shekaste-nafsi*, there was one case of *ta'arof* where a 39-year-old man insisted that the complimenter should take the complimented object as a gift. Compared to the other groups, the PEFL responses displayed more variety. More importantly, the PEFL participants felt free to reject more compliments

about this situation.

Rejecting no compliments upon their appearance and physical status, the acceptations of the American participants occupied almost 80 percent of the responses. Leaving out a case of return and six cases of downgrades, the acceptations were mostly distributed between instances of appreciation token and agreeing utterances.

Situation 5

The respondents received compliments for their newly bought cars or recently built houses. In such situations, Iranians tend to respond in formulaic sentences to show the complimenter that he/she is more valued and respected than the object of compliment. Therefore, *"qabele shoma ro nadare"* and *"cheshmetoon ziba mibine"* were the expected answers. When receiving compliments for their houses, the Persians express formulaic answers such as *khuneye khodetune* (consider here as your own house). This should not be mistaken for the English expression of *make yourself at home*, because when this is intended, the Iranians would say *raahat bashid* (make yourself comfortable). Furthermore, the schema of *cheshm-zakhm* is associated with the compliments on beautiful objects and valuable possessions. In such situations, the interlocutors tend to state expressions that contain praises of the lord and the holy prophet. For instance, they would say *Masha Allah*, an Arabic religious expression that literally means "what God wants", and it is frequently used among the Muslims to wish for God's protection over the concept of the jaundiced-eye.

The provided PNS responses were generally acceptations followed by returning devices or agreeing utterances. In many cases, the participants returned the compliment by wishing the complimenter to be bestowed *better* and *more beautiful* houses/cars by God. Numerous instances of *ta'arof* (38 cases) and *cheshm-zakhm* (7 cases) were identified among the responses. In cases of *ta'arof,* the participant employed formulaic sentences such as *"khuneye khodetune"*. Some others, with three different formulaic religious expressions, tried to defend the house from the *jaundiced-eye* and keep it *blessed*. Referencing to *cheshm-zakhm*, the respondents asked the complimenter to praise the Lord or to say *Masha Allah*. Likewise, another respondent humorously asked the complimenter not to cast an ill omen upon the house. He expressed that, *"cheshmet shoor*

nabashe ke khune kharab she ru saremun"; which means "I hope you don't have jaundiced-eyes; because that might ruin the house".

The ANS respondents generally started their answers by displaying gratitude and then attempted to back up their answers with other micro levels of acceptance, which were mostly agreeing utterances or in some cases were either downgrades or returns. Obviously, the Americans not only openly accepted, but they were also willing to promote the compliments on their possessions. Although the PEFL participants accepted most of the compliments for their houses, similar to the PNS responses, no instance of downgrading utterances was found among their answers. Therefore, their answers were respectively from categories of appreciation, returns, and agreeing utterances. Moreover, some respondents made good use of the expression and said, "*Make yourself at home*"; however, a PEFL participant, responded, "*It's your own house*", which is a literal translation of *khuneye khodetune* and it must be counted as *ta'arof*. In response to the compliment on his car, a participant, similar to the PNS respondents, made a wish for the complimenter to have a better car: "*hope you buy a better one soon*". Moreover, in seven cases, the PEFL participants made offers to the complimenters that could not be categorized under instances of return compliment. These participants did not offer a ride; instead, they offered the *car* itself. For instance, one participant answered "*take it as your own*"; and, another participant responded as *"Gift for you"*. Moreover, a 25-year-old female answered as *"oh, keep it. It's like your own car"*. Knowing that the topic of the compliment is a car and not a pen, such offers sound strange and are not expected to be heard from an English learner in a cross-cultural situation. Moreover, a 27-year-old participant answered *"Not as nice as yours. Yours is better"*. This response was categorized under *shekaste-nafsi* because the respondent *insisted* on downgrading his side and upgrading the other side of the conversation.

The fact that all groups tended to accept more compliments upon their possessions and reject almost none makes a difference with the responses for personal traits and abilities, where the participants displayed a tendency toward evading techniques. Whereas in compliments on personal traits *shekaste-nafsi* was recurrent, in their responses for compliments upon their properties, the Persian native speakers frequently employed *ta'arof* and *cheshm-zakhm*.

Situation 6

Here, the complimentees were credited for the help they offered that ended in the achievements of somebody else, not themselves. Hence, a shift credit has already happened at the first chain of the conversation when the student acknowledges the instructor's efforts.

Evade/deflect micro-level had a greater share than acceptations among the PNS responses. Within the acceptations, by expressing duty (*vazife*) and job (*kar*), they made downgrading utterances the recurrent micro-level category. Moreover, two-thirds of the participants employed shift credit to reassign the credit of the compliment to the student. Particularly, they first tried to downgrade (or to reject) the compliment and then, followed it with a shifting strategy to transfer the credit back to the complimenter. Furthermore, whereas by downgrading utterances the respondents minimized their roles in the achievements, in two cases of *shekaste-nafsi*, maintaining that *they did nothing* for the complimenters, the respondents denied their roles.

Although no supremacy was found among the micro-levels of the PEFL responses, at macro-levels, acceptations were almost two times more than evasions. In cases of accepting the compliments, expressions of appreciation and gratitude were the respondents' priority and then they would opt for downgrading techniques. Therefore, like the PNS respondents, the PEFL participants generally mentioned that it was their *duty* or *job* and that they did *what they had to do*. Moreover, in four cases the respondents tried to return the compliment by giving positive remarks and mentioning good attributes such as *hard-worker* to the complimenter. Although the PEFL participants did not employ any rejecting techniques, they utilized two cases of *ta'arof* and one case of *shekaste-nafsi*.

The ANS responses were selected from either evasions or acceptations. However, the frequency of the former was one-fifth of the latter. Altogether, from the 16 prospective categories, only five of them were identified among the ANS responses. In the cases of appreciation token, the respondents, generally, thanked the copmlimenters or expressed their satisfaction by the results. In cases of returning the compliments, similar to the Persian groups, they used sentences with adjectives such as motivated or talented. In the three cases of downgrade, similar to the Persian groups, they mentioned their duty and job. Finally, in five cases of shift credit, as expected, the respondents expressed that the students carried the heavier burden and they should be credited for it.

4.3 Post-Hoc Qualitative Interview

Evident from the interviews, the PEFL participants were not adequately acquainted with the American culture owing to the difficulty of the learners to have direct interactions with the American native speakers in Iran; similarly, they had not traveled to any English speaking country before the study, as they admitted. Therefore, it is very unlikely that they have learned the strategies from real-life interactions. Hence, different media such as movies, talk shows, and podcasts are their accessible sources of learning cultural differences. However, these are not the sole reliable sources, because first, the learner might not be a good judge of the quality of the provided material and second, even if they are presented with the right material, they might not be able to benefit from it by highlighting the differences. Moreover, none of these is produced for educational purposes.

Judged by their responses to the DCTs and the information in their interviews, theoretically, the PEFL respondents showed awareness of the cultural differences. For instance, there was only one example of utilizing *sharmandegi* and no instance of *cheshm-zakhm*. The bigger cultural differences in using these two schemas with the target language norms might justify avoidance of the PEFL respondents of those strategies. However, *shekaste-nafsi* and *ta'arofs* have deeper roots in the Iranian personality and they are not easily eliminated from the speech of the Iranians. *Shekaste-nafsi* is rooted in the Persian avoidance strategies of self-praise and it is, to some extent, encouraged to be employed (when performing in Persian). The sincerity of *ta'arofs*, as one of the interviewees mentioned, is hard to distinguish even for a native Persian speaker; yet several PEFL respondents utilized it within their responses to the DCT. What makes the situation more severe for the PEFL respondents is that some of the response strategies are (even remotely) corresponding to the Persian schemas. Overemphasizing shift credit, downgrade, return, and insincere offers pushes them out of their normal forms and transforms them into schemas of *shekaste-nafsi* and *ta'arof*. Therefore, neglecting such limits, as one of the interviewees mentioned, causes the PEFL respondents to use these schemas. She mentioned that for her, the safest strategy is a simple appreciation, which probably never takes a negative aspect.

Based on the instances of recourse to the Persian schemas identified within the data of the present study, in case a successful instruction of the cultural differences is desired, highlighting the mentioned limits would be remarkably

beneficial. Because evident from the DCTs and asserted by the interviewees, although they acknowledge the cultural differences at the theoretical level, in real-life interaction, they might fail to put their knowledge into practice.

5. Discussion

Revealed by the analysis, except for a few pardonable mistakes in diction, which might have been due to hasty responses to the DCTs or insufficient concentration, the PEFL respondents did not commit linguistic and syntactic mistakes. However, in meaning-making and phraseology, many cases seemed like Persian sentences, thus, sounding strange to a native English interlocutor (e.g., *"take the car as your own"*). Regarding their recourse to their native language schemas, the instances where the PNS participants utilized the schemas comprised more than eight percent of their responses; whereas, this number for the PEFL respondents was less than five percent. However, no matter to what degree the PEFL participants employ their native language schemas when they interact in their own culture and language (which is normal), employing those schemas in a cross-cultural setting is a digression from the target language norms which might lead to resentment, bewilderment, or even laughter. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of CR categories across the groups.

Table 5
A Cross-tabulation of Groups/Categories for The Three Groups

Categories	group			n
	ANS	PNS	PEFL	
Appreciation token	161	270	181	612
Agreeing utterance	94	143	69	306
Downgrading utterance	36	46	27	109
Return compliment	35	115	65	215
Disagreeing utterance	5	14	8	27
Question accuracy	0	1	2	3
Challenge sincerity	4	5	6	15
Shift credit	34	227	58	319
Request reassurance	13	36	22	71
Informative comment	2	5	12	19
Ignore	0	3	3	6
Legitimate evasion	1	0	1	2
Ta'arof	0	50	14	64
Shekaste-nafsi	0	17	8	25
Cheshm-zakhm	0	8	0	8
Sharmandegi	0	3	1	4
Total	385	943	477	1805

Regardless of self-proclaimed awareness of the cultural differences in their interviews, it appears as if in practice the PEFL respondents did not observe the boundaries of the regular strategies. Specifically, their cases of *shekaste-nafsi* were unduly overemphasized downgrades. Moreover, undue emphasis on returning techniques pushed the PEFL respondents to the realm of *ta'arofs*. Altogether, except for some instances where the PEFL respondents provided English literal translations of the Persian expressions within their answers, their errors were the result of overemphasizing the regular micro-levels. For instance, in response to the compliment on his car, a 27-year-old man expressed "*Not as nice as yours. Yours is better*". This response was categorized under *shekaste-nafsi* because the respondent insisted on downgrading his side and upgrading the other side of the conversation. Or when a PEFL respondent reaffirmed her embarrassment (*sharmandegi*) in the second situation, such an undue emphasis on speech is a Persian specific behavior that the PEFL respondents carried out in a simulated cross-cultural setting.

Consistent with the results of the present research, wherein the Iranian groups (PNS and PEFL) displayed a meaningful tendency toward downgrade, shift credit and *shekaste-nafsi*, Sharifian (2008) concluded that Iranians, in either L1 or L2, draw on their cultural schemas, specifically on *shekaste-nafsi*. Moreover, in investigating the employing of *shekaste-nafsi* among the Iranians who were residing in Australia, Sharifian (2005) concluded that even those Iranians who were exposed to the foreign culture used several instances of *shekaste-nafsi*. Interestingly, informed by the interviews, the PEFL respondents mentioned the lack of exposure to the English culture and inadequate contact with the American native speakers as one of the reasons behind pragmatic failures.

Furthermore, although the same DCT was utilized for three studies (i.e., Sharifian (2005, 2008 and the present study), unlike the studies conducted by Sharifian wherein *shekaste-nafsi* was utilized the most frequently, in the present study instances of *ta'arof* were utilized far more than any other schemas. Moreover, annexing a new macro-level of cultural schemas to the CRs taxonomy, the present study covered a wider range of Persian schemas and accounted for *sharmandegi* and *cheshm-zakhm* too.

6. Conclusion and Implications

As a concluding remark, it should be noted that the choice of a proper response to a speech-act could be influenced by several unstable variables such as age, gender, social status of the interlocutors and the cultural context of the interaction. Nevertheless, the present study carries some cross-cultural and pedagogical implications. This study added to the literature on the cross-cultural differences in the realizations of speech-acts, especially CRs, between English and Persian. Moreover, it provided insights into the role of the Persian culture (including its customs and traditions) in the responses they give and into the differences that the ANS respondents displayed in their responses (e.g., accepting the majority of compliments). Therefore, the present study might be a good assistant in raising awareness of the differences among the groups. Furthermore, the findings could inform the foreign readers of the Persian CR system and cultural schemas. Finally, it is important to note that the majority of the PEFL respondents were also English teachers at private institutions. This might facilitate the transfer of errors of their speech to their students. Each participant, therefore, not only as an English learner but also as an English teacher, should attempt to implement self-monitoring techniques to check his/her performance.

In an ideal situation, analyzing multiple speech-acts might provide more fruitful results in terms of cultural differences. Moreover, the limited number of participants eliminates the possibility of generalizing the findings. Particularly, considering the political complications between the two governments, it was very difficult to find American respondents (e.g., as tourists) in Iran. Moreover, even when they were asked to fill out the online forms, the Americans were generally reluctant to participate. Nonetheless, in future studies, as far as the limits of time and resources allow, participants from different regions of the country might be invited in order to reach better conclusions. In terms of data collecting instruments, it is suggested that researchers implement various instruments and cross-check the results invoked by each. Taking field-notes for authentic confrontations and recording role-plays are specially suggested. However, these strategies expand the scope of the study and require more time, a well-trained workforce, and energy. Moreover cross-gender or cross-generation investigations of such recourses to native language schemas could expand the existing literature. In terms of the methodology, one could plan long-term research with a pre-test and a post-test, with proper explicit/implicit instruction in between and check the effects of instruction on the participants.

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