

# The Effect of Explicit Teaching of American Compliment Exchanges to Chinese Learners of English

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the efficacy of explicit instruction of American compliment exchanges. Cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research has demonstrated that there are substantial differences between American and Chinese complimenting behaviors and that learners tend to differ from American native speakers when performing such a speech act. However, scant research has been conducted to date as to the extent to which instruction would benefit learners' acquisition of American complimenting behaviors. This study used an experimental design in which forty university students at higher and lower proficiency levels received an eight-hour intervention in the order of presentation, practice and production. To test the learners' pragmatic ability over time, two DCT tasks containing twelve compliment situations were constructed and administered to these students before the instruction, immediately after the instruction and nine weeks after the instruction. Two trained American raters were asked to evaluate their pretest, posttest and delayed posttest performance. The statistical results showed that there was a positive instructional effect on the learners' pragmatic ability to produce compliment exchanges in English, and such an effect could be partially retained in the longer term. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence in support of pragmatics instruction and shed light on developing greater pragmatic competence for Chinese EFL learners.

Key Words: compliment, speech act, instruction

## INTRODUCTION

In interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) research, plenty of evidence has shown learners' problems in mastering L2 pragmatics, so the question is how their pragmatic competence can be effectively developed. Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis claims that acquisition takes place only when learners consciously attend to the target features in the input. In other words, simple exposure to language samples does not suffice, and learners have to raise their awareness of the L2 distinguishing features through systematic practice to master its forms. His theory enjoys a firmly established status, arguing for incorporation of pragmatics into a language curriculum, which is particularly important to the EFL learning environment where there is comparatively less L2 input compared to the ESL setting.

When it comes to compliment exchanges, both cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research have demonstrated that there are substantial differences between Chinese and American English. Such differences generally lead to negative pragmatic transfer and influence learners' performance in giving and responding to compliments (R. Chen, 1993; S. H. Chen, 2003; Chen & Chen, 2007; Yu, 2003, 2004, 2005). As a result, pedagogical interventions are necessary to improve learners' complimenting behaviors. However, very few studies to date have investigated Chinese learners' pragmatic development cross-sectionally or longitudinally as a result of instruction. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the instructional effectiveness of explicitly teaching compliment exchanges in an EFL classroom in Taiwan. The findings thus

obtained should provide insights into the pedagogical action useful to language teachers.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **American and Chinese Compliment Exchanges**

Holmes (1986) defines a compliment as a speech act “which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speakers, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possessions, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (p. 485). However, such an act may be perceived variably from culture to culture. The comparison between American and Chinese compliment exchanges has demonstrated that they differ in terms of functions, topics, strategies, speaker-hearer relationship and responses to compliments (R. Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Yu, 2003, 2005).

First, the most important function of American compliments is to establish and reaffirm solidarity between speaker and hearer. In American society, equality and egalitarian democracy are publicly espoused, so there is a greater need to identify solidarity by showing admiration or approval because the boundaries between strata are fluid (Herbert, 1989). In that sense, compliments play a solidarity-negotiating role to build up rapport between interlocutors. On the other hand, Chinese society is hierarchically structured and the boundaries between social statuses are more clearly defined. Consequently, there is lesser call for Chinese to negotiate solidarity among interactants, and compliments are generally used to show

simple admiration for the object or qualities the hearer possesses (Yu, 2005).

Second, in both American and Chinese cultures, compliment topics fall into two broad categories—appearance/possessions and ability/performance (Wolfson, 1983; Yu, 2005). Americans are culturally obliged to give favorable comments to new acquisitions or appearance, the omission of which can be considered as a sign of disapproval or rejection (Herbert, 1989; Manes, 1983). On the contrary, Chinese tend to compliment a person's ability or performance more frequently than on his/her appearance or possessions (Ye, 1995; Yu, 2005). The preference for ability/performance over appearance/possession may be interpreted as influences from the Ru School in the Chinese tradition, which believes that physical appearance correlates negatively with a person's ability and that explicit appreciation of appearance is considered to be uncultivated and thus avoided (Ye, 1995).

The third difference is that even though both Americans and Chinese employ direct compliments more often than indirect compliments,<sup>1</sup> they use different positive semantic carriers.<sup>2</sup> For example, Americans prefer using the verbs *like* or *love* to give

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<sup>1</sup> According to Yu (2005), direct compliments refer to “remarks including linguistic forms that directly and unambiguously frame these comments as compliments” (e.g., “I really like your hair that way”). On the other hand, indirect compliments refer to “remarks which would be seen as compliments by the addressee, although the positive semantic carrier generally associated with complimenting is missing at the level of the linguistic form” (e.g., “Wow, what did you do to your hair”) (p. 98).

<sup>2</sup> In Ye's (1995) and Yu's (1999b) studies, Chinese use adj/stative verbs and adverbs most frequently as carriers to express appreciations. However, these two categories seem to overlap in Chinese because adjectival compliments use similar words as adverbial compliments. Words such as hao (好) and bucuo (不錯) can function as either adjectives or adverbs.

compliments (Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983). However, there is a low frequency of verbs in Chinese compliments. The rare use of *ai* “love,” as opposed to the English equivalence *love*, may originate from a conservative communicative style in Chinese. As for the word “like,” the literal translation of “I like” is *wo xihuan* (我喜歡), but these two terms indicate different degrees of semantic strength. Basically, “I like” in American English is weaker than *wo xihuan* in Chinese since the former is applicable to whatever the speaker has a positive feeling for, while the latter shows the speaker’s preference and may occasionally be interpreted as an indirect request (Yu, 2005).

Fourth, Americans tend to give more compliments to both intimates and total strangers than Chinese. This may be because social distance is considered as “no insuperable boundary to easygoing interaction” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 245) in American society. Moreover, although compliments occur most frequently between status-equals for both speaker groups, it was found that Chinese tend to give fewer compliments to superiors than Americans (Yu, 2005). One explanation is that compliments from inferiors are usually regarded as flattery and therefore discouraged in a hierarchical class structure like Chinese society. However, this is not the case for Americans since the suppression of asymmetric power relations in American society (Brown & Levinson, 1987) may legitimize compliments from inferiors to superiors (Yu, 2003).

Finally, most empirical studies to date have revealed an important difference between American and Chinese compliment response behaviors: *acceptance* tends to be a normative compliment response in American English, while *rejection* or *deflection* seems to be socially prescribed in Chinese (R. Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Yu, 2003,

2005). R. Chen (1993) attempted to explain such a difference following Leech's (1983) Politeness Principles (PP). American compliment responses are motivated by the Agreement Maxim. The norm in responding to a compliment in this culture is to address the complimenter's positive face and to think positively about oneself, as evidenced in Etiquette books and socialization advice to American children to receive compliments gracefully (Herbert, 1990). On the other hand, Modesty Maxim is the overriding motivation for Chinese speakers in responding to a compliment (R. Chen, 1993). Modesty, often misunderstood as denigration and humbleness by other language groups (Ye, 1995), is a critical constituent of self-image in Chinese society. Such an image will not be damaged by appearing humble because the complimentee denies only the proposition, not the complimentary force itself (Ye, 1995). In fact, the complimentee's self-image is generally enhanced through lowering oneself since attention is paid to the complimenter's face to show respect and politeness (Ye, 1995; Yu, 2003).

### **Complimenting Behaviors of Chinese Learners of English**

As discussed in the preceding, American and Chinese compliments differ from each other in various aspects. Such differences may result in negative pragmatic transfer in learner performance since when called upon to produce L2 items not yet fully acquired, learners tend to employ L1 forms and features wherever they believe these can be successfully applied to a given L2 context (Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). Negative pragmatic transfer generally manifests itself in the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions (Kasper, 1992). Sociopragmatic failure refers to the

inaccurate judgments of social context by learners, and is basically the consequence of misunderstandings between the learner's culture and the L2's. On the other hand, the latter occurs when the pragmatic force used by learners in a given utterance differs from the force mapped by native speakers (Thomas, 1983).

In terms of sociopragmatics, Wolfson (1989) reported that most learners of English do not understand "the strong tendency of status-equal Americans to negotiate their roles through opening speech sequences involving such behaviors as complimenting" (p. 226). This is often reflected in cases where learners respond to compliments with a simple *thank-you*, which is socially unacceptable in American society because the use of this formulaic gratitude is generally conditioned in situations where lower-status females are complimented by higher-status males or strangers. As for pragmalinguistics, Yu (2004) indicated that when responding to compliments, the strategies used by the ESL learners in the United States were more similar to those used by the American native speakers, while the strategies used by the EFL learners in Taiwan were more similar to those used by the Chinese native speakers. Chen and Chen (2007) found that positive L1 transfer existed in the high-proficient learners' use of all the strategies, but there were variations of transfer in the low-proficient learner performance. In addition, proficiency affected the selection of strategies when dealing with different topics. When the topics were appearance-related, the high-proficiency learners used significantly less *returning* than the Americans, while the low-proficiency learners used similar strategies with the Americans. On the other hand, when the topics were performance-related, the high-proficiency learners used significantly

more *mitigating* than the Americans, but the low-proficiency learners used significantly less *rejecting* and combined strategy of *mitigating* and *rejecting* than the Americans.

The gap between Chinese learners and American native speakers when performing compliment exchanges calls for the need for instruction in L2 pragmatics. Rose (2005) pointed out that almost all the intervention studies in L2 pragmatics address two major research questions no matter what the teaching targets are. First, do learners who receive treatments outperform those who do not? Second, if treatments improve learners' pragmatic competence, which teaching approach is the most effective? For the first question, research has indicated that the learners who receive treatments perform better than those who do not. For the second question, there seems to be a consensus that explicit instruction (with metapragmatic information) is more effective than implicit instruction (without metapragmatic information) (Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Rose & Ng, 2001; Soler, 2005; Takahashi, 2001).

Furthermore, the intervention studies in L2 pragmatics tend to adopt a pretest-posttest design, that is, learners are tested prior to and immediately after instruction and then their productions at Time 1 and Time 2 are compared. However, Kasper and Rose (2002) point out that a standard intervention study should include delayed posttest to examine whether instructional effects can be retained after a certain period of time. They also explained that the failure to do so in most of the studies may be due to institutional constraints or inaccessibility of learners. Until now, only a very small number of studies in L2 pragmatics reported the use of delayed posttest in their research design. For example, Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) indicated that the



learners of French maintained the social and cultural contextualization of the question “Did you have a good weekend?” after one year of instruction, but the forms they used in realizing such contextualization shifted back to those they produced prior to the instruction. Koike and Pearson (2005) found that even though the explicit group performed significantly better than the control and implicit groups in the learning of Spanish suggestion exchanges, the effects of such instruction and feedback were not represented in the delayed posttest administered four weeks after the instruction. Halenko and Jones (2011) investigated the instructional effects in developing Chinese learners’ pragmatic awareness and producing spoken requests in an EAP context. Their study showed that immediately after the instruction, the explicit group performed significantly better than the control group, but the learners receiving explicit teaching failed to retain the same level of pragmatic competence six weeks after the instruction. Overall, then, it is still unclear the extent to which instructional gains in L2 pragmatics can be durable in the longer term. More research seems to be needed.

Building on previous work, this study aimed to answer three research questions:

1. How can explicit instruction in American compliment exchanges be implemented in an EFL classroom in Taiwan?
2. Does explicit instruction improve the high and low proficient learners’ performance of American compliment exchanges?
3. Can the instructional effects of American compliment exchanges be sustained for at least nine weeks in a given eighteen-week semester for both proficiency groups?

## THE STUDY

### Participants

Forty college students participated in this study. They were enrolled in the *Language and Culture* course at a university of technology in central Taiwan. This was a selective course and open to all university students from various disciplines. Of the forty students, twenty were English majors, while the other twenty were non-English majors. Twenty-five were females and fifteen were males. Before the semester began, these learners were tested with a sample copy of the intermediate level General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) to evaluate their English ability in listening and reading. Each learner's listening and reading scores were averaged to arrive at a final score. This test was not originally intended to place the learners into different proficiency groups, but to give the instructor a basic understanding of their language ability. However, an apparent discrepancy in the scores was found in this intact class and happened to categorize the learners as either a high or a low proficient learner. Twenty high-proficiency learners were English majors. Their GEPT scores ranged from 80-114 ( $M = 99.65$ ,  $SD = 7.45$ ). On the other hand, twenty low-proficiency learners were non-English majors. Their GEPT scores ranged from 32-58 ( $M = 49.60$ ,  $SD = 10.25$ ).

### Instruments

In this study, two written questionnaires in the format of a DCT were designed, each of which consisted of six hypothetical, compliment provoking situations. Of these six situations, half of them dealt with appearance/possessions, while the other half dealt with

ability/performance. The manipulation of the social variables included power (high to low, low to high and equal) and distance (whether the interlocutors know or do not know each other). The  $3 \times 2$  combinations resulted in six situations, which were constructed based on Wolfson's (1983) and Manes' (1983) works and the author's observations of the learners' college lives where compliment exchanges were most likely to be given.

The first questionnaire was used as the pretest and delayed posttest, while the second questionnaire was used as the posttest. They paralleled each other in terms of power and distance in each corresponding situation. The learners were requested to write down what they would say if they were in that situation. Tables 1 and 2 show the situations in the two questionnaires.

### **Procedures**

In the beginning week of the semester, the first questionnaire was distributed to the learners. The pretest was administered during the learners' normal class hours and took approximately 40 minutes. The course was taught by an American native speaker who was also fluent in Chinese. Instruction started from Week 2, following the 3P's methodology—presentation, practice and production (McCarthy, 1998). The entire instructional session lasted eight class hours spread out over a four-week period. In L2 pragmatics literature, treatment lengths may vary from a minimum of two or three 20-min sessions to a maximum of nine-week sessions depending on the complexity of the targets to be taught (Rose, 2005). More recent studies indicate that six to nine class hours seem to be moderate instructional time for the teaching of a given speech act. For example, Ghobadi and Fahim

**Table 1**  
**Compliment Situations in the First Questionnaire**

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<b>Situation 1:</b>	You are in the park and notice that a kid is skating. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the skating? How do you think he/she would respond? (Skating: H-L, +D, Ability/performance)
<b>Situation 2:</b>	You are a tutor and notice that your student has a new backpack. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the backpack? How do you think he/she would respond? (Backpack: H-L, -D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 3:</b>	You are at a welcome party for international students and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her Chinese. What would you say to compliment him/her on his/her Chinese? How do you think he/she would respond? (Chinese: Equal, +D, Ability/performance)
<b>Situation 4:</b>	Your roommate just got a new haircut two days ago. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the haircut? How do you think he/she would respond? (Haircut: Equal, -D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 5:</b>	You are at your friend's parents' house for the first time and are impressed by their house. What would you say to compliment his/her parents on the house? How do you think they would respond? (House: L-H, +D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 6:</b>	You work part time at a company. You were invited to your boss's house for dinner one Sunday evening. You are quite impressed by the dinner. What would you say to compliment him/her on the dinner? How do you think he/she would respond? (Dinner: L-H, -D, Ability/performance)

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(2009) designed a nine-hour instruction (30-minute sessions over an 18-week period) to teach compliments to a group of Iranian EFL learners. Halenko and Jones (2011) designed a six-hour instruction to teach requests to a group of Chinese EFL learners in an EAP context. Both studies demonstrated that explicit instruction of such lengths

**Table 2**  
**Compliment Situations in the Second Questionnaire**

<b>Situation 1:</b>	You are in the park and notice that a kid is drawing a picture. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the drawing? How do you think he/she would respond? (Drawing: H-L, +D, Ability/performance)
<b>Situation 2:</b>	You are a tutor and notice that your student is wearing a new pair of sneakers. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the sneakers? How do you think he/she would respond? (Sneaker: H-L, -D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 3:</b>	You are at a welcome party for the freshmen and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her dance. What would you say to compliment him/her on his/her dance. How do you think he/she would respond? (Dance: Equal, +D, Ability/performance)
<b>Situation 4:</b>	Your roommate is dressed with the best clothes. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the clothes? How do you think he/she would respond? (Clothes: Equal, -D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 5:</b>	You are at your friend's parents' car for the first time and are impressed by their car. What would you say to compliment him/her on the car? How do you think he/she would respond? (Car: L-H, +D, Appearance/possession)
<b>Situation 6:</b>	You work part time at a company. You were invited to listen to your boss's speech one Wednesday afternoon. You are quite impressed by the speech. What would you say to compliment him/her on the speech? (Speech: L-H, -D, Ability/performance)

benefited the development of pragmatically appropriate compliment and request behaviors in English. Immediately after the instruction was completed, the learners were asked to respond to the posttest (i.e., the second questionnaire). Then, nine weeks after the instruction, they were asked to respond to the delayed posttest (i.e., the first

questionnaire) to measure if instructional gains could be retained in the longer term. The nine-week time frame was determined to conform to the school calendar.

### **Data Analysis**

Two American native speakers were recruited to evaluate learner performance. Both of them were English teachers and had at least five years of teaching experience in Taiwan. Before actual rating began, the raters were provided with a packet of training materials, which included the four-point Likert scale and a set of benchmark DCT samples representing each ability level as illustrated below:

#### **The Dinner Situation:**

You work part time at a company, and your boss invited you to dinner at his/her house. After the dinner, what would you say to compliment him/her on the meal? How do you think he/she would respond?

- 4 (Excellent): An exchange close to native speaker response  
Example:  
You: *I really enjoyed the dinner. The food was great.*  
Boss: *Thanks. I'm glad you liked it.*
- 3 (Good): An exchange with appropriate and accurate language but still different from native speaker responses  
Example:  
You: *This was a great meal. Everything tasted so great!*  
Boss: *Thanks! I hope you can come again.*
- 2 (Fair): An exchange with sociopragmatic and/or pragmalinguistic errors but comprehensible to native speakers

Example:

You: *Hi, Boss, I have a nice dinner.*

Boss: *Really! I'm very happy you like it.*

- 1 (Poor): An exchange with sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic errors not comprehensible to native speakers

Example:

You: *I'm very please can invited my boss house for dinner and say I hope it is not too much trouble. Welcome to house. The dinner is very great.*

Boss: *I enjoy in my dinner time I hope come again. Thank you.*

Any identifying information such as students' names and numbers along with time of production was removed to avoid a possible bias against particular learners during the rating process. The interrater reliability coefficients were 0.87 on the pre-test, 0.90 on the post-test and 0.84 on the delayed post-test, respectively. Each learner's final score for each situation was the average of the two raters' scores. The score data were then analyzed in two stages. First, using descriptive statistics, the total means of the pretest, posttest and delayed posttest were compared for each proficiency group. Then, inferential statistics was applied to examine if the mean differences on the three tests were significant.

## RESULTS

Research question 1 concerns how explicit instruction in American compliment exchanges can be implemented in an EFL classroom in Taiwan. As mentioned in the Procedures section, the

instruction followed the presentation-practice-production stages. At the presentation stage of the instruction, the learners were first presented with 15-minute film clips adapted from three American movies<sup>3</sup> containing compliment exchanges. Next, the learners worked in groups, each of which was asked to generate a compliment exchange in Chinese and then to translate it literally into English. After that, the instructor used handouts to explain when to compliment, what to compliment, whom to compliment and how to compliment and respond to compliments in American English. This session lasted four class hours.

At the practice stage, all the learners were asked to write down their responses to the open-ended situations described in the handouts distributed by the instructor. During this period, the learners were free to ask any questions about strategy use, choice of vocabulary items, and so on. Later, the instructor typed and projected some of their productions onto a large computer screen for discussion. Explicit feedback was given by the instructor and the class on the appropriateness of the performance in terms of coherence, strategies, as well as lexical and grammatical use. This session lasted two class hours.

Finally, at the production stage, the learners were given role play tasks in which they were asked to take on the imaginary roles and to employ interactional skills such as conversational management, manipulation of turn-taking mechanism, use of intensifiers and downgraders, and accurate choice from a range of strategies (House, 1996). At this stage, implicit feedback, or recasts, was provided by

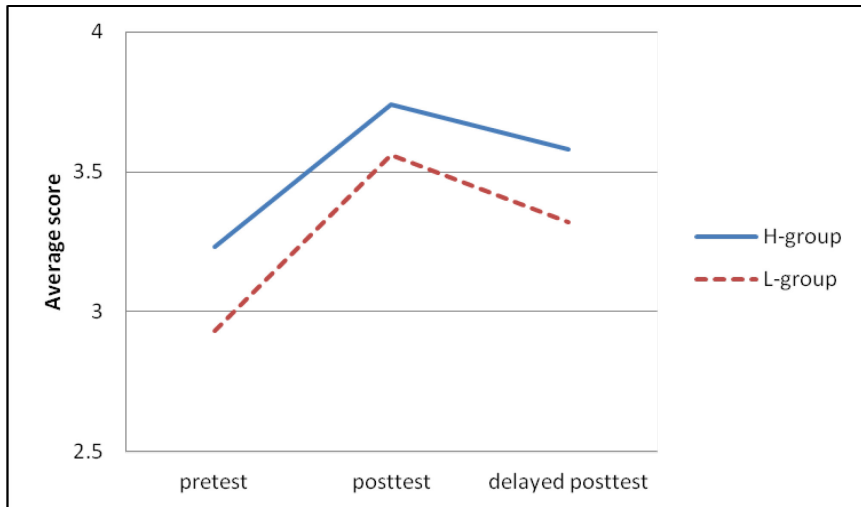
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<sup>3</sup> These movies were *Legally Blonde II: Red, White and Blonde*, *Bewitched*, and *Made of Honor*.



the instructor to allow the learners to compare their utterances with the target forms. This session lasted two class hours.

As for research questions 2 and 3 regarding instructional effectiveness, the results can be observed from Figure 1, which presents the tendencies of the pretest, posttest and delayed posttest scores obtained from the high- and low-proficiency groups. The total means of the three tests indicate that both groups produced the lowest means on the pretest, but the highest means on the posttest. The means of the delayed posttest were in between.



**Figure 1**  
**A Plot of Means of the High- and Low-Proficiency Groups on the Pretest, Posttest and Delayed Posttest**

In addition to the overall means of the tests, the instructional effects can also be seen in the number of learners whose scores increased over these three intervals. Table 1 shows the results.

In Table 1, it can be seen that almost all the learners improved in the posttest compared to the pretest (H-group: 100%, L-group: 95%). However, only five learners (25%) of the high-proficiency group and three learners (15%) of the low-proficiency group performed better on the delayed posttest than on the posttest. Nevertheless, for the majority of learners the delayed posttest performance was still better than the pretest performance for both proficiency groups, since 90% of the learners gained higher scores on the delayed posttest than on the pretest.

Both Figure 1 and Table 3 support one major finding: The explicit instruction had a positive effect on the learners' pragmatic knowledge in producing compliment exchanges, and such an effect was partially retained after a nine-week period of time. To verify the descriptive statistics, the data were submitted to ANOVA using the subjects as block. Table 4 shows the results.

**Table 3**  
**Raw Frequencies and Percentages of the Learners**  
**Whose Scores Increased Over the Period**

	Pretest– Posttest	Posttest– Delayed posttest	Pretest– Delayed posttest
H-group	20 (100%)	5 (25%)	18 (90%)
L-group	19 (95%)	3 (15%)	18 (90%)

In terms of the entire measure, the high-proficiency group had a pretest score of 3.23, a posttest score of 3.74 and a delayed posttest score of 3.58, a statistically significant change at the  $p < 0.001$  level

**Table 4**  
**Comparisons among Pretest, Posttest and Delayed Posttest**  
**for High- and Low-Proficiency Groups**

Situation	Pretest		Posttest		Delayed posttest		<i>p</i> -value from ANOVA	Post hoc results		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		Pretest– Posttest	Posttest– Delayed posttest	Pretest– Delayed posttest
Entire measure										
H-group	3.23	0.223	3.74	0.228	3.58	0.309	0.000**	**	ns	**
L-group	2.94	0.353	3.56	0.228	3.32	0.284	0.000**	**	**	**
Situation 1										
H-group	3.23	0.678	3.73	0.444	3.53	0.786	0.004**	**	ns	ns
L-group	2.90	0.661	3.70	0.441	3.38	0.626	0.000**	**	ns	*
Situation 2										
H-group	3.23	0.499	3.73	0.630	3.45	0.456	0.000**	**	**	ns
L-group	2.65	0.540	3.70	0.503	2.98	0.525	0.000**	**	*	ns
Situation 3										
H-group	3.43	0.294	3.60	0.417	3.65	0.329	0.114	ns	ns	ns
L-group	3.38	0.510	3.58	0.494	3.48	0.413	0.182	ns	ns	ns
Situation 4										
H-group	3.63	0.275	3.73	0.255	3.63	0.944	0.830	ns	ns	ns
L-group	3.50	0.363	3.70	0.410	3.63	0.455	0.043*	*	ns	ns
Situation 5										
H-group	2.85	0.587	3.80	0.340	3.48	0.550	0.000**	**	ns	**
L-group	2.83	0.936	3.73	0.302	3.43	0.494	0.000**	**	ns	**
Situation 6										
H-group	3.03	0.550	3.75	0.344	3.75	0.414	0.000**	**	ns	**
L-group	2.33	0.467	3.28	0.444	3.03	0.444	0.000**	**	**	**

Note. (1) H-group: high-proficiency group

(2) L-group: low-proficiency group

(3) \*\*: significantly different at  $p < 0.01$ ; \*: significantly different at  $p < 0.05$ ;

ns: non-significant

of confidence. The low-proficiency group had a pretest score of 2.94, a posttest score of 3.56 and a delayed posttest score of 3.32, again a statistically significant difference at the  $p < 0.001$  level of confidence.

A post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD showed that for the high-proficiency group, the statistical significance of the score change existed in the pretest-posttest and pretest-delayed posttest comparisons, but not in the posttest-delayed posttest comparison. For the low-proficiency group, however, the post-hoc results indicated that the statistical significance existed across all the three types of comparisons.

Table 4 also shows that the total means of the three tests for the high- and low-proficiency groups were statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level of confidence in most situations (Situations 1, 2, 5 and 6). The only exceptions were Situations 3 and 4. In Situation 3, the p-values of the high-proficiency (0.114) and low-proficiency (0.182) groups were not statistically significant, which suggests that learners in both groups did not have any performance change across the three tests. In Situation 4, the p-value of the high-proficiency group (0.830) was not statistically significant. However, even though the p-value of the low-proficiency group (0.043) was statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level of confidence in this situation, it was very close to the marginal value .05. One explanation could be that Situations 3 and 4 asked for compliments between status-equals, which were close to the learners' real-life situations. Their pretest scores were high enough on the pretest in these situations, thus leaving little room for progress on the tests that followed.

To summarize, research question 1 asked how to teach American compliment exchanges to Taiwanese students. For this question, the descriptions of "how it worked" is presented here in this section. Further comments on "why it worked" will be presented in the Discussion section.

Research question 2 asked whether explicit instruction improved Chinese learners' production of pragmatically appropriate compliment exchanges. For this question, the learners of the high- and low-proficiency groups were found to perform significantly higher on the posttest compared to the pretest in producing American compliment exchanges. Although the low proficiency learners performed less well than the high proficiency learners on both tests, the extent of progress for both groups was very similar. This finding demonstrates the applicability of pragmatics instruction to a class with mixed proficiency levels, which also adds to the current intervention studies in L2 pragmatics because the majority deal with learners of homogenous linguistic proficiency (e.g., Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Martinez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005).

Research question 3 asked if the instructional effects of American compliment exchanges could be sustained nine weeks after instruction. For this question, the results showed that the learners of both proficiency groups did not perform as well on the delayed posttest as they did on the posttest, but their performance on the delayed posttest was still significantly better than that on their pretest. That is, the effect of instruction was partially sustained over the nine-week period. The different magnitude of sustained effects in the handful of intervention studies is a complex issue since it relates to factors such as duration of the treatments, intervals between tests, and complexity of the speech act under investigation.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study concur with previous research on the positive effects of explicit instruction in L2 pragmatics, which, is especially significant to an EFL environment like Taiwan. In Taiwan, language teachers have long recognized the importance of developing learners' communicative competence and the need to practice communicative language teaching (CLT) in their classrooms. However, one of the key components of communicative competence—sociolinguistic competence—seems to be overlooked in their pedagogical agenda. Yu (2008) worked with 24 Chinese teachers of English teaching 732 intermediate-level college freshmen. These classes were categorized into *high*, *mid* and *low* orientations based on the number of communicatively-based features observed during a four-month period. It is interesting to note that none of the classes, no matter what their communicative orientations were, spent much time on sociolinguistic instruction. Of the very few instances of sociolinguistic instruction observed, the teachers always provided “answers to learners' questions or reactions to students' performance or to learner requests for comments on their language use” (Yu, 2008, p. 42). A typical example Yu observed about compliment exchanges is cited as follows:

...in group work observed in an LO class, a student started with a compliment on how great a fellow student looked. The complimentee responded by saying, “No, I don't. Don't make fun at me. I know I'm just plain looking.” The instructor later commented that such a response might seem odd to Americans because they generally expect a simple “thank you”

in the given circumstance, but the teacher then suggested that it might be okay to use a negative, self-denigrating response for Chinese learners of English because L2 learners certainly have the right to retain their distinct cultural traits... (p. 42)

Yu remarked that the teacher's comment was confusing and that he/she should have taken this opportunity to supply the students with relevant sociolinguistic information about whether a negative response to compliments could be regarded as appropriate under this circumstance. Furthermore, Yu's study indicated that after four months of communicatively based instruction, the learners made significant improvement on the IELTS listening and speaking, but still performed poorly on the sociolinguistic posttest. This came as no surprise because little time was spent on developing the learners' sociolinguistic competence. The learners' lack of improvements in Yu's study and the learners' progress in the present study seem to complement each other and both studies support the necessity of explicit instruction at the pragmatic level in an EFL classroom.

As mentioned earlier, this study adopted the 3P's approach (presentation, practice and production) to teaching American compliment exchanges, which can be theorized by Bialystok's (1993) model of language processing. In her model, Bialystok posited two cognitive components—*analysis of knowledge* and *control of processing*. Her theory, though not tested empirically, has been used primarily as a post hoc explanation in most ILP research (Kasper & Rose, 2002). *Analysis of knowledge* helps L2 learners to transform their mental representations from formal representations (metalinguistic knowledge) into symbolic representations (the

relationship between linguistic forms and intended meanings in a specific context). In this way, learners' mental representations of pragmatic knowledge are expected to become more integrative and organized.

In this study, analysis of knowledge was implemented at the presentation stage. At this stage, the instructor systematically structured the knowledge about American compliment exchanges into 4W1H—*warm-up, when to compliment, what to compliment, whom to compliment, and how to compliment*. In the warm-up session, the learners were presented with three American film clips containing compliment exchanges, which aimed to alert their perceptions to the complimenting behaviors in American society, to foster later discussion. Films were used at this point because they can generate discussions of “what may or may not constitute appropriate behaviors” (Rose, 2001, p. 319). In addition to film watching, the learners were asked to work in groups to create dialogues on compliments in Chinese and then to translate them literally from Chinese to English. The purpose of doing so was to allow the learners to realize that culture and language are interrelated and that some of the speech act strategies in L1 cannot be used in L2 (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). For example,

(1)

A: Nide gangqin tande zhenhao (你的鋼琴彈得真好。)

Your piano play very well

B: Nali Nali (哪裡!哪裡!)

Where Where

A: Your piano plays very well. B: Where! Where!



After the warm-up session, the instructor began to introduce *when*, *what*, *whom* and *how* to perform American compliment exchanges. The first three question words were related to sociopragmatic information, while the last question word concerned the pragmalinguistic strategies used to realize this given exchange. Sociopragmatics was discussed before pragmalinguistics because through the development of L2 sociopragmatic knowledge, the production and interpretation of pragmalinguistic strategies in the target language would be more accessible to the learners (Bou-Franch & Carces-Conejos, 2003). For the *when* question, the learners were instructed that unlike Chinese people who tend to give genuine praise, Americans are more likely to use compliments as conversation openers to build up rapport between interlocutors. In a social gathering, compliments would be a good start to shorten the distance between people.

For the *what* question, most of the learner problems on the pretest showed that they tended to ask about the price following a compliment of a person's possession. For example,

(2)

A: This is a nice bag. How much is it?

B: I paid 200 dollars. It was cheap.

(H5, The Backpack situation)

Therefore, during the instruction, they were reminded to be cautious about the mention of money (e.g., "That's a nice dress. How much is it?"), age (e.g., "You look so young. How old are you?") and marital status (e.g., "You have a wonderful boyfriend. Why don't you

get married?”) in the compliments because these issues are considered as intrusions on one’s privacy for Americans. Safer topics would be new hairstyle, new clothes, new cars, new homes, good performance, and so forth. As for the *whom* question, compliments occur mostly between status-equals in American and Chinese societies, but compliments from a lower to a higher standing person is also legitimate in American culture. In addition, there is a greater likelihood for males to compliment females in American society than in Chinese society.

As far as pragmalinguistics is concerned, the learners were instructed that American compliments are usually formulated by two verbs (like, love), three structures (e.g., NP {is, looks} (really) ADJ (PP), I (really) {like, love} NP, and PRO is (really) (a) (ADJ) NP), and five adjectives (*nice, good, pretty, beautiful* and *great*) (Wolfson, 1983). When it comes to responding to compliments, the learners were presented with Herbert and Straight’s (1989) response strategies of how to accept, mitigate and deflect the compliments received. One issue was specifically mentioned to bring it to the attention of learners. Unlike Chinese who are more likely to denigrate or reject compliments, Americans generally accept compliments with an acknowledgement token. However, since one important function of American compliments is to establish rapport between interlocutors, a simple *Thank-you* from the complimentee may appear insufficient in the flow of conversations. Therefore, an acknowledgement plus a comment (e.g., “Thank you. I bought it from New York.”) may be a more appropriate option in the L2 community.

Apart from analysis of knowledge, control of processing is the other element of Bialystok’s model of language processing. She

argues that adult L2 learners make pragmatic errors not because they do not know the forms, structures or vocabulary items to express their intentions, but because they fail to “attend to a social distinction that needs to be marked linguistically” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 54). She further contends that for adult learners, pragmatic competence cannot be achieved until they develop the control strategies for the intended interpretations of a communicative situation and for the selection of forms from a range of possibilities. For example, House (1996) made an observation about advanced German EFL learners’ interactions and concluded that their poorly aligned responses were a result of insufficient development of processing control.

According to Bialystok, control of processing refers to “the process of controlling attention to relevant and appropriate information and integrating those forms in real time” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 48), which suggests that a language teacher should provide learners with ample opportunities to produce their acquired pragmatic knowledge. This argument is in line with Swain’s (1993) output hypothesis, which proposes that language acquisition takes place through producing the language and that output can promote both accuracy and fluency in second language acquisition. In this study, DCTs and roleplays were used to develop the learners’ control of processing at the practice and production stages respectively. DCTs were used prior to roleplays since they elicit the most critical part of a given speech act (Yuan, 2001). In addition, when completing the DCT task, learners are allowed more time to plan and monitor what they intend to say, which is helpful in the reinforcement of the newly acquired sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge of the target language (Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2010; Cohen, 1996). At this

practice stage, the learners were also given explicit feedback on their DCT performance as to why the answers were or were not pragmatically appropriate. As shown in Koike and Pearson's (2005) study, English learners of Spanish who received explicit instruction plus explicit feedback realized the best results for recognizing and producing appropriate suggestions and they retained the most instructional effects four weeks after instruction. This approach is assumed to be useful to the acquisition of complimenting behaviors as well.

While the DCT task aimed to increase level of accuracy, the roleplay task at the production stage focused on fluency, in which the learners were given the opportunity to manage on-line conversational skills such as impromptu planning, turn-taking and meaning negotiations. At this stage, implicit feedback (i.e., recasts) was provided to force the learners to resort to existing L2 pragmatic knowledge and to refine their speech act utterances on their own. In L1 acquisition, recasts have been demonstrated to be effective since when an adult responds to a child's ungrammatical utterances with correct ones, the child perceives the adult form as an accurate alternative and therefore acquires it (Saxton, 1997). In L2 pragmatics, Fukuya and Zhang (2002) experimented with Chinese learners of English and confirmed the effectiveness of recasts in acquiring pragmalinguistic conventions of requests. Martinez-Flor and Fukuya (2005) further argue that there are at least two cognitive processes involved in learners' minds when the instructor provides implicit feedback. *Cognitive comparison* refers to the notice of the linguistic gaps in the utterances produced by the native speaker and the learner. In addition, *cognitive mapping* refers to the matching of linguistic

forms with social parameters like power, distance and imposition. In this study, the pedagogical techniques the instructor used to give implicit feedback included a simple “Yes” or “That’s right” when the learners produced pragmatically appropriate compliment exchanges; as well as “You said...,” “I didn’t understand” or “What you meant was...” when the learners’ creations were less satisfying.

However, pragmatics instruction is not without its limitations. As Bouton (1999) argues, such instruction may accelerate learners’ process of acquisition, but cannot alter the route of their pragmatic development. His argument could provide a plausible explanation as to why the learner performance shifted back to various degrees of pragmatic use found before instruction after a certain period of time, as shown in the Liddicoat and Crozet’s (2001), Koike and Pearson’s (2005) and the present study. To put it another way, learners may perform well beyond their current stage of pragmatic development on tests or restricted pedagogical exercises, but they still need to go through a certain path of pragmatic development.

In pragmatics literature, there are two broad, yet seemingly opposing scenarios describing learners’ route of acquisition: (1) pragmatics precedes grammar, and (2) grammar precedes pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). In the former scenario, L2 learners’ pragmatic ability is believed to precede grammatical ability because they can capitalize on the pragmatic universals such as Cooperative Principles (Grice, 1975), Politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or L1-based pragmatic knowledge to acquire the L2. The most representative figure was Wes (Schmidt, 1983). After three years of observation, Wes demonstrated tremendous improvements in pragmatic and discourse competence, but he made little progress in

his interlanguage grammar. This scenario usually applies to beginning adult language learners when they have the need to perform an L2 pragmatic function upon arrival in the target language community but have not yet acquired the grammatical resources available to them.

A larger body of evidence, on the other hand, supports the grammar-precedes-pragmatics scenario, which describes the circumstance where grammar is used in a pragmatically non-target-like fashion. This scenario applies to more advanced learners, especially in an EFL setting where grammatical competence is usually the instructional focus and there is a neglect of pragmatic competence in a language curriculum. Kasper and Rose further notes that this scenario comes in three different forms:

1. Learners demonstrate knowledge of a particular grammatical structure or element but do not use it to express or modify illocutionary force.
2. Learners demonstrate knowledge of a grammatical structure and use it to express pragmalinguistic functions that are not conventionalized in the target language.
3. Learners demonstrate knowledge of a grammatical structure and its pragmalinguistic functions yet put the pragmalinguistic form-function mapping to non-target-like sociopragmatic use.

The first dimension discusses how learners' grammatical knowledge does not ensure accurate pragmalinguistic use to upgrade or downgrade the illocutionary force of a speech act. In the studies conducted by Takahashi (2001, 2005), Japanese EFL learners were found to have difficulty using bi-clausal sentences (e.g., "I wonder if you could VP") to mitigate the force of a request even after

instruction. This is probably because in Japanese, polite expressions are primarily morphologically encoded honorifics, rather than syntactically embedded sentences. In this study, some learners did not use intensifiers such as “really” and “very well” in situations where they were supposed to, even though these intensifiers are very simple words that the learners had already acquired in junior high school.

The second dimension deals with how learners’ grammatical knowledge does not guarantee target-like pragmalinguistic use. In other words, L2 learners may produce sophisticated, grammatical utterances, but these utterances are not conventionalized in the target language. For example, one of the gratitude expressions cited by Kasper and Rose (2002) from Bodman and Eisenstein (1988) is “May God increase your bounty.” Similar cases were found in this study as well. For example, in the House scenario which required the participants to compliment on the house, one learner wrote: “I really like the layout and the decoration in your house.” This utterance is grammatically fine, but not the conventional way to give compliments on someone’s house in American English.

The last dimension discusses the possibility that learners may be able to demonstrate grammatical and pragmalinguistic knowledge, yet be unable to produce target-like sociopragmatic expressions. For example, in Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford’s (1993) study, a graduate student rejected the advisor’s suggestion to take a linguistics course by saying “I think I am not interested in that course,” which is considered to be an ineffective refusal by American native speakers. In this study, utterances such as (2) “This is a nice bag. How much is it?” belonged to this category.

Even though Kasper and Rose contribute to an explanation of learners' pragmatic development in general, it would be more beneficial for language teachers to know learners' developmental paths of a given speech act before they implement instruction. However, unlike grammatical morphemes, negations, questions and relative clauses, which have been widely explored and well established in SLA research, it seems that in pragmatics literature, the only speech act for which the developmental sequence has been outlined is the act of requesting. Kasper and Rose (2002) identified five stages of development for this particular act. Stage 1 is *Pre-basic*, which is highly context-dependent and consists of minimal language (e.g., "Me no blue."). Stage 2 is *Formulaic*, which involves unanalyzed routines and imperatives (e.g., "Don't look."). Stage 3 is *Unpacking*, which refers to the less use of formulas and increasing use of productive language and mitigation (e.g., "Can you pass the pencil please?"). Stage 4 is *Pragmatic expansion*, in which the learner develops a repertoire of forms and uses more complex language (e.g., "Can I see it so I can copy it?"). Stage 5 is *Fine tuning*, which refers to the refinement of requestive force to the communicative goal (e.g., "You could put some blue tack down there."). More research on the *developmental* sequences of a given speech act is important because it can assist language teachers to distinguish developmental (those which are only teachable in a given order because they are developed according to the learners' internal calendar) and *variational* features (those which are teachable at any given time in learners' pragmatic development) (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In this way, the teacher would know when the learner is ready to learn and when the right time is to provide the learner with necessary instructions. It is also



suggested that verbal reports, whether concurrent or retrospective, should be collected at the same time to supplement production data in this area of investigation. By obtaining cognitive information, learners' pragmatic development can be more accurately observed relative to how they transform declarative pragmatic knowledge (knowledge that) to procedural pragmatic knowledge (knowledge how) during the process of acquisition.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the flurry of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research on complimenting behaviors, it is curious that there has been very little work on instruction of this intricate, yet important, speech act. Therefore, this study set out to fill this gap by experimenting with university-level students to determine the effectiveness of explicit instruction and sustainability of instructional gains of American compliment exchanges. In line with previous research, the findings of this study are encouraging for the incorporation of pragmatics instruction in the classroom to develop learners' competence in producing appropriate speech act behaviors. Such a need is especially important as English has become a global lingua franca. EFL learners often find themselves communicating not only with native speakers of English, but also with speakers from various L1 backgrounds. Hence, violating the pragmatic principles would cause misunderstanding or communication breakdown in the world of English as an International Language (EIL).

As a result, language teachers should equip themselves with adequate pragmatic knowledge of the target language to help their

learners. This is not an easy task, especially for non-native teachers. Ishihara (2010) proposed four qualifications which effective teachers of pragmatics should prepare for in their life-long professional development. First, teachers should have the knowledge of pragmatic variations in the target language. Unlike grammar, which is judged primarily in terms of correctness, pragmatics is subject to degree of appropriateness based on contextual parameters. Second, teachers should be able to provide metapragmatic information about the target language. Since many textbooks on the market do not reflect actual L2 pragmatic use, Ishihara suggested using research-based resources to complement these commercially circulated materials. Two websites which the author found very useful are introduced here. The first one is <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/index.html>. This website consists of a collection of research-based descriptions of speech acts such as apology, request, gratitude, compliment, complaint and refusal. The second one is <http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/resforteach/pragmatics.html>. This website offers practical, step-by-step lesson plans of pragmatic awareness, conversational management, conversational openings and closings and speech acts. Thirdly, teachers should know how to assess learners' pragmatic competence. This refers to the ability to develop production and comprehension tests in either the oral or written format of DCTs, role plays and multiple choices. Finally, teachers should develop a sensitivity to learners' subjectivity and cultural being. Since the learning of pragmatics is inextricably intertwined with the target culture, there is much to be learned about striking a balance between one's ethnic identity and mastery of L2 pragmatics.

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## 大專院校學生美語讚美行為之教學成效研究

### 摘要

本研究的主要目的在於探討美語讚美行為之教學成效。在臺灣，有關於本言語行為教學成效的研究至今仍然非常少見。四十位科技大學學生接受八個小時的美語讚美行為的教學，並分別在教學前、教學後、及教學後九週測試學生的學習成效。結果顯示教學對學生的美語讚美行為具有正面的效果，同時部分教學效果在九週後得以延續。本研究證實了教學確實可以提升學生的語用能力，同時亦呼籲語言課程中應該盡量包括對學生語用能力的訓練。

關鍵詞：讚美 言語行為 教學