

A Study of Interrelations Between Sociopragmatic and Linguistic Competences

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This study aims to investigate the sociopragmatic perspective of compliment behavior of Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners at different stages of general proficiency, so as to find out how the development of sociopragmatic competence correlates with English proficiency. The DCT (Discourse Completion Test) data of three groups of Chinese EFL learners of different proficiency levels are compared with that of a group of native speakers of American English from the perspectives of compliment strategies, compliment focus, and compliment content. The study finds that learners' sociopragmatic competence does not develop in a positive relation to their linguistic proficiencies. While their knowledge of target pragmatic norms at the macro level (e.g., the overall use of Main Compliment Strategies) may increase as they become more linguistically proficient, the knowledge at the micro level (e.g., compliment focus and variations of compliment strategies according to contextual cues) cannot be gained automatically because it is difficult to notice their saliency and nuances. The study points to the need for the instruction of pragmatics, especially at the sociopragmatic level.

It has been argued by researchers in sociolinguistics that in order to acquire native-like competence, learners must not only develop linguistic competence in the target language (TL), but also acquire the speech community's rules for language use and ways of speaking in a given social context, i.e., develop interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) competence. There have been very few studies investigating the factors that may affect interlanguage pragmatic development, and still fewer of those deal with the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence. The scarce ILP studies focusing on the effect of L2 (the second language) proficiency on pragmatic competence development have often presented different findings (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Hill, 1997; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996). There has not been a definite answer to the question of how a learner's language proficiency and pragmatic competence correlate with each other. One view is that grammatical competence and pragmatic competence are independent of one another though a lack of grammatical competence in a particular area may cause a particular utterance to be less effective (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Another view argues that pragmatic competence is built on the platform of grammatical competence, and a low level of grammatical competence may constrain the development of pragmatic competence. A third view also suggests that grammatical competence is the pre-requisite of pragmatic competence, but it argues that these two aspects are interrelated, and the way they correlate with each other is not linear, but rather complex. This controversial status drove Kasper and Rose (1999) and Bardovi-Harlig (1999) to call for more research to be conducted on this issue.

This study aims to investigate the correlation of the sociopragmatic perspective of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' compliment behavior with their English proficiency by examining the speech act of complimenting by adult Chinese EFL

learners at three proficiency levels, namely, beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

Literature Review

Sociopragmatic Competence

Sociopragmatic competence is the appropriate usage and selection of language in accordance with context and the ability to understand the social conventions that govern communication. Failure to use appropriate sociopragmatic features may result in serious communication breakdown between speakers even at a rudimentary level. Thomas (1983), based on Leech's (1983) distinction between sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics, discusses two kinds of "pragmatic failure": sociopragmatic failure; and pragmalinguistic failure. She defines sociopragmatic failure as the failure to perform the required speech act in the right context. She also makes clear that while pragmalinguistic failure is basically a linguistic problem caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior. She argues that sociopragmatic failure is concerned with miscalculation of size of imposition, cost/benefit, social distance, and relative power, which may be caused by cross-cultural differences in understanding certain social values.

Studies on EFL Learners' Interlanguage Sociopragmatic Development

The majority of studies that have looked at the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence show that higher proficiency learners are generally better at drawing inferences (Carrell, 1981), using speech act strategies (Trosborg, 1995), and comprehending illocutionary force (Koike, 1996). For instance, Hill (1997), in his study of the correlation between the pragmatic competence of Japanese English learners and their English proficiency found that as Japanese English learners' level of proficiency rises, their employment of direct and indirect strategies and their use of internal and external modification move in the direction of the native speaker norm. Holtman's (2005) study investigated the acquisition of complimenting by second learners of French and found differences in sociopragmatic performances correlated with the learner's French proficiency.

On the other hand, some other studies have shown that learners' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence are separate and independent components of communicative competence. For example, Niezgodna and Rover (2001) found that the learners with low proficiency recognized more pragmatic errors than those with high proficiency. Some research evidence shows that proficiency may have little effect on the range of realization strategies that learners use. Li (2006), in her study on Chinese EFL learners' ILP competence based on the speech act of request, found that there is no positive correlation between the higher score and higher frequency of supportive moves, indicating higher proficiency does not ensure a higher sociopragmatic competence. Similarly, through a study on ILP development based on the speech act of apology, Zeng (2006) concluded that the pragmatic competence and language proficiency go hand-in-hand at the beginning phase of the development, but they do not when the learner's proficiency reaches the intermediate level, suggesting that language proficiency does not determine the development of pragmatic

competence.

The Speech Act of Complimenting

Complimenting is one of the most frequently performed speech acts that occur in our everyday life. Manes and Wolfson carried out a series of studies on compliments in American English, which likely has exerted more influence than any other research on this speech event (Manes, 1983; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1981, 1983, 1989). It has been generally agreed throughout the literature on compliment behavior that compliments may vary cross-culturally, not only “in the way they are structured, but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and the functions they serve” (Herbert, 1990; Holmes 1988, 1990; Manes, 1983; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1983, p. 87).

Despite the subtle differences among what people compliment, many studies have shown that the vast majority of compliments fall into only a few general topics: appearance, ability/performance, possession, and personality (Holmes, 2003; Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983). While these topics of compliments may be found in almost all cultures, the degree of preferability and acceptability of these topics may vary from one culture to another, causing the difference in the frequency of these topics. It is found that Americans are most likely to compliment on personal appearance, especially clothes and hair-dos (Manes, 1983). Second to appearance, the most frequent type of compliments in American society, as found by Manes based on her data, are those on ability/performance or the quality of something produced through the addressee’s skill or effort, e.g., a well-done job, a skillfully played game, a good meal. Conversely, Ye (1995), through his studies on Chinese data of compliments, concluded that in Chinese society “a change in appearance may not be deemed as worthy of complimenting as an achievement in performance” (p. 233). Performance is more likely to be felt as a socially acceptable safer topic than appearance.

Research Methods

Participants

There are altogether 100 participants in the present study, all of whom are females. The purpose for not including males as subjects is to eliminate gender as a confounding variable because studies show that men and women differ greatly in compliment behaviors (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988). The overall participant profile reflects a homogeneous group in terms of age (24-35), education level (above university level), and socio-economic status (from middle class in cities or towns). The participants form five groups, including a group of Americans speaking English who provided the native English data, a group of native speakers of Chinese who provided the native Chinese data, and three groups of Chinese EFL learners who provided non-native English data. The EFL learners are divided, according to their general English proficiency, into three groups, namely a beginning group, an intermediate group, and an advanced group, each of which consists of 20 subjects. Learners who had had the experience of going to an English-speaking country were not included so as to make sure that the differences in the subjects’ compliment behavior is not the result of difference in learning environment. The inclusion of the two native-speaker groups is to determine a

baseline for comparison, so as to see to what extent the EFL learners' use of English deviates from that of the native speakers.

Data Collection Methods

The instruments adopted for the present study include a DCT and a retrospective interview. The DCT, which consists of 20 scenarios, is written in both English and Chinese so that the EFL learners with low English proficiency can fully understand the description of the scenarios. The subjects were required to provide the pragmatic linguistic formulae that they considered as appropriate and typical for each described situation in which they pay a compliment to the addressee. They might also choose to opt out if they think paying a compliment in the given situation is not appropriate due to cultural factors.

The topics covered in the DCT were selected based on the previous studies of preferred compliment topics discussed above, namely appearance, ability/performance, possession, personality, and family member, each represented by four scenarios. In view of the fact that complimenting is a type of behavior which is constrained by the structure of politeness formula, two social variables were taken into consideration when the DCT situations were constructed, namely "social distance between interlocutors" and "relative power." Each variable is treated as binary-valued so that interlocutors are either family members/friends (-D) or acquaintances/strangers (+D), and they are of either equal status (-P) or unequal status (+P). The combinations of these two variables form four politeness systems, i.e. Solidarity Politeness System (-P, -D), Deference Politeness System (-P, +D), Power-Up System (\uparrow P, +D) (\uparrow P means the addressee has more social power than the speaker), and Power-Down System (\downarrow P, +D) (\downarrow P means the addressee has less social power than the speaker). This classification is modified from Scollon and Scollon's (2000) model, which contains three politeness systems, namely Solidarity Politeness System (-P, -D), Deference Politeness System (-P, +D), and Hierarchical Politeness System (+P). The reason for further classifying Scollon and Scollon's Hierarchical System into the Power-Up and the Power-Down Systems is that the speaker normally behaves quite differently when paying compliments to people with a higher status than not than those with a lower one. In the Power-Up System, where the addressee has a higher status than the addresser, the latter needs to speak up to the former by adopting independent strategies. On the contrary, in the Power-Down System, the addressee has a lower status than the addresser, who can use involvement strategies when speaking down to the addressee. The distribution of the social variables for each scenario is shown as Table 1.

A retrospective interview was conducted with the EFL learners right after the completion of the DCT so that they could give a reliable account of why they responded to the compliments in the DCT in the way they did in the task. The interview was carried out in Chinese so that the subjects could express their thoughts as clearly and adequately as they wished. During the interview, the participants were each given back their own DCT sheets. They were asked several open-ended questions and were requested to explain the rationale behind their answers.

Table 1. Distribution of the social variables for the 20 Scenarios

Topics items variable	Appearance				Ability/ performance				Possession				Personality				Family member			
	4	10	11	16	1	2	8	9	3	5	14	19	7	13	18	20	6	12	15	17
Solid -arity (-D, -P)	√							√		√			√					√		
Defer -ence (+D,-P)			√				√				√			√				√		
Power- Up (↑P,+D)		√				√						√				√				√
Power -Down (↓P, D)				√		√						√			√				√	

Table 2. Main Compliment Strategies

- A. Unbound Compliment Strategies
 - a. Explicit Strategy
 - b. Implicit Strategy
- B. Bound Compliment Strategies
 - a. Explanation
 - b. Question
 - c. Future reference
 - d. Comparison
 - e. Advice
 - f. Request
- c. Non-compliments
- d. Opt-Out
- g. Wish
- h. Gratitude
- i. Conjecture
- j. Congratulation
- k. Obligation
- l. Small Talk

Coding Scheme

The coding scheme for compliment strategies used in this study is based upon that used in Yuan’s (1998) and Yu’s (1999) studies on compliment event in Mandarin speaking community because their classifications can characterize both compliments in English and in Chinese. However, some amendments have been made. The classification of compliment strategy for the present study is summarized in Table 2.

Main Compliment Strategies

Unbound Compliment Strategies

Yuan created the term “unbound” to refer to the core of a compliment. These type of compliments can stand alone all by themselves. They may also co-occur with one or more Bound Compliment Strategies. The category of Unbound Compliment Strategies consists of three sub-categories, namely Explicit Compliment Strategy, Understated Compliment Strategy, and Implicit Compliment Strategy. Explicit compliments, also called direct compliments by

other researchers (e.g., Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999), refer to utterances that “overtly carry positive meanings towards the interlocutor” (Yuan, 1998, p. 90). In other words, these compliments unambiguously and directly frame these comments as compliments. On the other hand, an implicit compliment usually does not have a positive semantic carrier. However, the positive meaning of this type of compliment can often be inferred from what is stated, though they are not explicitly directed to the aspect that the speaker intends to praise, and the linguistic forms of the compliments are more indirect and less conventionalized for the addressee to make possible interpretations of the intended meaning.

Non-Compliment

The strategy of Non-Compliment is used to code utterances supplied by respondents that do not carry any positive semantic meaning, or are ambiguous in interpretation because of the lack of explicitly or implicitly positive evaluative language for a praiseworthy behavior of the addressee. When bound compliments stand alone, they are treated as non-compliments.

Opt-Out

Opt-Out, also termed No Response or No Answer in some other studies (Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999), refers to the strategy employed in situations where respondents either do not know what to say in a given situation for lack of experience, or they feel it more appropriate not to say anything in that given situation.

Bound Compliment Strategies

Bound compliments strategies refer to the supportive elements or adjuncts external to the core. They do not carry any positive meaning when standing alone, and have to co-occur with an unbound compliment in order to be coded as a compliment. Bound Strategies included, but are not limited to, the following 12 types:

Explanation. An explanation is the element that provides the reason why the agent/object complimented is considered to be good. For example, “Thanks for the great lecture today! I really enjoyed the part about (*give specific information about what you like about the lecture. Use an example from the lecture.*)”

Question. It is usually an information question that requires an answer. For example, “You’ve done a beautiful job decorating in here! Did *you do this all yourself?*”

Future Reference. It is a statement by which the speaker shows his/her positive expectation of the agent/object complimented. For example, “Well Mary, your boyfriend is so talented. *He certainly has a good future ahead of him.*”

Comparison. The speaker compares the person or the object s/he compliments with another person or object that is considered to have a lower quality. For example, Your child is so good, *not like mine*, who doesn’t come home until midnight.”

Advice. The speaker gives advice or a suggestion to their interlocutor as to what to do after giving a direct compliment. For example, “Your house is so well modeled. *You should become a house designer.*”

Request. The speaker expresses his/her hope to get something from the interlocutor or to

have the interlocutor do something on her behalf. For instance, “You are such a good cook. *Teach me how to cook someday.*”

Wish. The complimenter expresses either his/her desire for having the complimentee’s certain object, ability or quality that s/he thinks is worth complimenting. For instance, “You are such a competent person. *I wish I had that talent of yours.*”

Gratitude. In the case where the complimenter is a direct or an indirect beneficiary of the complimentee’s behavior, the former often accompanies his compliment to the latter with gratitude. For example, “*Thank you for preparing the meal for us. You certainly are a great cook.*”

Conjecture. A complimenter sometimes may follow his/her compliment with a statement, opinion, or conclusion based on guesswork. For example, “Your apartment looks great. *You must have put a lot of effort into it.*”

Congratulation. The complimenter shows his/her joy in the success or good fortune of the complimentee as in “I heard that your son has been accepted by Harvard. That’s great. *Congratulations!*”

Obligation. The complimenter uses this strategy to express the idea that the complimented act of the complimentee should also be done by some other people. For example, “You are really a warm-hearted person. *We should all learn from you.*”

Small Talk. Small talk refers to utterances that touch on topics other than those related to the intended action. For example, “What a coincidence to meet you here! *I heard that your son has just entered Tsing Hua University. He is great!*”

Results and Analysis

Two thousand compliments were gathered from 100 participants of five groups through the 20 scenarios of the DCT. These compliments produced 2,853 tokens of compliment strategies, including 2,000 Main Strategies and 853 Bound Strategies.

Main Compliment Strategies

Table 3 summarizes the overall distributions of the four Main Strategies produced across all situations by the five subject groups. The present study’s results of overall compliment strategy used by the Americans and the Chinese shown in the chart seem to support those of the previous researches on this issue (e.g. Wolfson & Manes, 1980, 1981; Yu, 1999), which showed that American English speakers were freer and more direct in their use of compliments, whereas Chinese speakers were more conservative and indirect. The result gained from Post-hoc ANOVA (post-hoc analysis of variance) indicates that the groups of intermediate learners and the beginners differed significantly from the Americans in the use of compliment strategy ($p < 0.05$), whereas the group of advanced learners did not. On the other hand, the advanced learners differed significantly from the Chinese ($p < 0.05$), whereas the other two EFL-learner groups did not. A subtle qualification was done to see whether the

Table 3. Overall distribution of the four Main Strategies by the five subject groups

STRATEGY	GROUP					
	NSAETPT	AEFLLTPTP	IEFLLTPTP	BEFLTPTP	NSCTPTP	Total
Explicit	253 ^{TPTPa}	298	195	208	178	1132
	63.3% ^{TPTPb}	74.5%	48.8%	52.0%	44.5%	56.6%
Implicit	42	35	71	32	94	274
	10.5%	8.8%	17.8%	8.0%	23.5%	13.7%
Non Compliment	30	20	45	22	42	159
	7.5%	5.0%	11.3%	5.5%	10.5%	8.0%
Opt-Out	75	47	89	138	86	435
	18.8%	11.8%	22.3%	34.5%	21.5%	21.8%
Total	400	400	400	400	400	2000
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Notes for Table 3:

NSAE: native speakers of American English

AEFLL: advanced EFL learners

IEFLL: intermediate EFL learners

BEFLL: beginning EFL learners

NSC: native speakers of Chinese

a: The frequency of the type of strategy used by the group

b: The percentage the compliments with that type of strategy took up in the total compliments used by the group

five groups differed when the social variables of power relationship, social distance, and topic are taken into consideration.

The findings gained from comparisons of Main Strategies used by different subject groups under the interactive influence of the three social variables (Table 4) show that the advanced learners tended to be very explicit when complimenting. 74.5% of the compliments given by these learners used Explicit Strategy. They apparently showed no significant difference from the Americans except when addressing the non-acquaintances or commenting on the addressee's family member where the Americans tended to be less explicit. However, their preference for Explicit Strategy did not vary much according to topic, social distance, or power relationship between the interlocutors. The retrospective interview of the advanced learners suggested that they were still not very clear about the social constraints of compliment strategy choice. A case in point is that the advanced learners show significant difference ($P=0.015$ in a Chi-square test) in the compliments for appearance in the Deference System, where they used explicit strategy highly frequently, but the Americans would

Table 4. Raw frequencies of the Main Strategies used by the five subject groups for each topic in the four politeness systems

Topic	GROUP	Strategy	Politeness				Total
			Solidarity	Deference	Power-Up	Power-Down	
Appearance	NSAE	Explicit	19	6	15	18	58
		Implicit	1	0	0	0	1
		Non-Compliment	0	1	0	2	3
		Opt-Out	0	13	5	0	18
	AEFLL	Explicit	20	13	13	14	60
		Implicit	0	0	1	0	1
		Non-Compliment	0	3	0	2	5
		Opt-Out	0	4	6	4	14
	IEFLL	Explicit	19	11	10	5	45
		Implicit	1	4	3	3	11
		Non-Compliment	0	1	1	3	5
		Opt-Out	0	4	6	9	19
	BEFL	Explicit	17	12	8	9	46
		Implicit	0	0	0	1	1
		Non-Compliment	1	0	0	1	2
		Opt-Out	2	8	12	9	31
NSC	Explicit	17	12	6	4	39	
	Implicit	2	6	3	1	12	
	Non-Compliment	1	0	1	2	4	
	Opt-Out	0	2	10	13	25	
Ability	NSAE	Explicit	15	18	18	17	68
		Implicit	3	1	2	1	7
		Non-Compliment	0	0	0	2	2
		Opt-Out	2	1	0	0	3
	AEFLL	Explicit	14	19	16	18	67
		Implicit	6	1	3	2	12
		Non-Compliment	0	0	0	0	0
		Opt-Out	0	0	1	0	1
	IEFLL	Explicit	11	11	10	13	45
		Implicit	3	5	6	2	16
		Non-Compliment	2	4	3	2	11
		Opt-Out	4	0	1	3	8
	BEFL	Explicit	13	11	9	15	48
		Implicit	2	5	1	1	9
		Non-Compliment	1	2	2	1	6
		Opt-Out	4	2	8	3	17
NSC	Explicit	13	8	4	13	38	
	Implicit	6	5	8	7	26	
	Non-Compliment	0	6	3	0	9	
	Opt-Out	1	1	5	0	7	
Possession	NSAE	Explicit	16	8	16	17	57
		Implicit	1	2	1	0	4
		Non-Compliment	0	4	1	3	8
		Opt-Out	3	6	2	0	11
	AEFLL	Explicit	19	16	16	16	67
		Implicit	1	0	0	1	2
		Non-Compliment	0	0	3	3	6
		Opt-Out	0	4	1	0	5
	IEFLL	Explicit	16	4	14	6	40
		Implicit	2	5	2	0	9

		Non-Compliment	2	3	3	8	16
		Opt-Out	0	8	1	6	15
	BEFL	Explicit	11	3	13	8	35
		Implicit	1	0	0	1	2
		Non-Compliment	4	0	2	5	11
		Opt-Out	4	17	5	6	32
	NSC	Explicit	13	2	10	4	29
		Implicit	0	2	8	2	12
		Non-Compliment	4	4	1	8	17
		Opt-Out	3	12	1	6	22
Person-ality	NSAE	Explicit	13	7	9	13	42
		Implicit	2	4	6	1	13
		Non-Compliment	0	0	1	1	2
		Opt-Out	5	9	4	5	23
	AEFL	Explicit	15	5	12	12	44
		Implicit	1	3	7	4	15
		Non-Compliment	3	0	1	1	5
		Opt-Out	1	12	0	3	16
	IEFL	Explicit	8	4	3	10	25
		Implicit	6	0	11	6	23
		Non-Compliment	3	0	4	1	8
		Opt-Out	3	16	2	3	24
	BEFL	Explicit	12	4	7	11	34
		Implicit	2	0	5	4	11
		Non-Compliment	1	0	0	0	1
		Opt-Out	5	16	8	5	34
NSC	Explicit	9	4	2	10	25	
	Implicit	6	0	15	4	25	
	Non-Compliment	5	0	2	3	10	
	Opt-Out	0	16	1	3	20	
Family member	NSAE	Explicit	10	5	10	3	28
		Implicit	1	9	7	0	17
		Non-Compliment	2	5	0	8	15
		Opt-Out	7	1	3	9	20
	AEFL	Explicit	15	17	15	13	60
		Implicit	1	3	1	0	5
		Non-Compliment	0	0	1	3	4
		Opt-Out	4	0	3	4	11
	IEFL	Explicit	12	10	5	13	40
		Implicit	2	4	3	3	12
		Non-Compliment	0	2	2	1	5
		Opt-Out	6	4	10	3	23
	BEFL	Explicit	14	12	11	8	45
		Implicit	2	3	1	3	9
		Non-Compliment	0	0	1	1	2
		Opt-Out	4	5	7	8	24
NSC	Explicit	13	13	8	13	47	
	Implicit	3	7	7	2	19	
	Non-Compliment	0	0	0	2	2	
	Opt-Out	4	0	5	3	12	

normally opt for saying nothing. Americans tend to avoid commenting on the appearance of non- acquaintances for the fear of being mistaken for having ill-intention. As an American participant reported:

I seek to avoid situations of sexual harassment or rudeness. One of the risks that arises is that a person may mistake a compliment meant in friendship for a remark meant for intimate relationships. Another risk that such comments draw attention to people's bodies, and some people are not comfortable with that attention to their appearance due to feeling underweight, overweight, unattractive, or of a different ethnicity.....The amount of personal physical compliments I give a person increases with the higher degree of intimacy I have with a person. Therefore, I sparingly compliment the appearance of non-acquaintances.

However, most of the advanced learners named appearance as one of Americans' preferred topics. Some of them further pointed out that Americans liked to comment on the addressee's appearance regardless of their relationship with the addressee. As one of the participants said,

I think compliments on appearance were the dominant topic for women in America. I noticed in movies that it is very common for Americans to comment on each other's appearance.

The advanced group also demonstrated significant difference in the choice of strategies for the topic of family member from the American group ($\chi^2_{PP}=27.163, P<0.0001$). For the American participants, Explicit Strategy was much less frequently used for the topic of family member than for the other topics, especially in the Deference and Power-Down Systems. Family member is often a topic that is avoided in America, just as one of the American participants reported,

Family members, with the exception of children being introduced to me for the first time, I often avoid complimenting, because it feels awkward for me to do so. ...The individual is so strong as a concept in our society that it feels odd to give someone accolades for such a quirk of genetics as who one might be related to.

The findings seem to indicate that the advanced learners were not very clear about how social factors such as compliment topic, power and social distance between the interlocutors may influence Americans' choice of Main Compliment Strategies.

The intermediate learners showed great similarity to the Chinese-speaker group in choice of Main Strategy in almost all the social aspects examined, but they significantly differed from the Americans in most of the situations. Apart from the topic of ability, on which the compliments paid by the intermediate learners fell somewhere between the two L1 groups, the intermediate learners showed no significant difference from the Chinese speakers for all the other topics and in all the politeness systems. This seems to indicate that the social factors of power, social distance, and compliment topic influenced their choice in similar ways to that of the Chinese-speaker group. This was further proved by their responses gathered from the retrospective interview, which showed that they tended to use their native social norms to govern their choice of compliment strategies. Like the Chinese-speaker group, they seemed

Table 5. The overall raw frequencies and percentage of the Bound Strategies

Strategy	Group					Total
	NSAE	AEFLL	IEFLL	BEFL	NSC	
Explicit	253 ^a TPP (155) ^{TPPB} (61.26%)TP ^c	298 (230) (77.52%)	195 (165) (84.62%)	208 (22) (10.58%)	178 (151) (84.83%)	1132 (723) (63.87%)
Implicit	42 (21) (50%)	35 (20) (57.14%)	71 (35) (49.30%)	32 (1) (3.13%)	94 (52) (55.32%)	274 (129) (47.08%)
Total	295 (176) (59.66%)	333(251) (75.38%)	266 (200) (75.19%)	240 (23) (9.58%)	272 (203) (74.63%)	1406 (853) (60.67%)

Notes for Table 5:

a: The raw frequency of Explicit or Implicit Strategies

b: The raw frequency of Bound Strategy used in combination with Explicit or Implicit Strategy

c: The ratio between the number indicated in 1 and 2, i.e. the percentage of the compliments using combined strategies out of the total number of explicit or implicit compliments

highly sensitive to the factors of distance and power. The frequency of Explicit Strategy dropped sharply when they addressed non-acquaintances or non-equals compared to the situations where they addressed friends or acquaintances.

The picture seems a little complex for the beginners in the aspect of Main Strategies. Their choice was sometimes close to that of the American participants, sometimes to that of the native Chinese speakers, and sometimes to neither of them. However, underlying this swaying phenomenon, there was also a consistency of a high frequency of opt-outs in all four systems. The information gained from the retrospective interview revealed that their high frequency of Opt-Out Strategy was mainly due to their lack of adequately required language devices to express the meaning they intended to convey.

Bound Strategies

Table 5 shows the overall frequencies of Explicit and Implicit Strategies used by each of the five subject groups, the frequencies of Bound Strategy used to combine with these two strategies, and the percentages that the combination (i.e., Explicit+Bound or Implicit+Bound) took up in the explicit and implicit compliments given by each group. Of the two L1 groups, native Chinese speakers used Bound Strategies more often. The compliments with Bound Strategies took up 74.90% of all the explicit and implicit compliments they paid. In contrast, the Americans seemed more straightforward in that they less frequently used Bound strategies, which accounted for 58.98% of the explicit and implicit compliments they paid. The native Chinese speakers used Bound Strategies more frequently than the Americans in all the politeness systems except in the Deference System, as we can see from Table 5. The Americans used Bound Strategy very often only in the Deference System, but only occasionally in the systems of Solidarity, Power-Up, and Power-Down. On the other hand, the native Chinese speakers used it quite frequently in all the systems except in the Power-Down Systems. This seems to indicate that paying compliments is quite natural in

America and there is no need to justify it in most situations except when the complimentee is not familiar to the complimenter. Contrarily, Chinese people feel more conservative in paying compliments and find it necessary to justify their compliments to make them sound more sincere and less intrusive. As was argued by Yu, by resorting to Bound Strategies, “both parties can constantly assess ongoing conversation so as to make appropriate face adjustments to each other if necessary” (1999, p. 90). This is especially true when the addressee is socially distant or superior to the speaker.

Difference between the two L1 groups was also found in their use of specific Bound Strategies, as is shown in Table 7. For both L1 groups, Explanation and Question were the most frequently used Bound Strategies. Though the two groups did not differ greatly in the frequencies of some of the other Bound Strategies, including future reference, conjecture, congratulation, request, advice, and wish, they showed great difference in comparison, gratitude, obligation, and small talk. The Americans used Gratitude much more frequently than the native Chinese speakers. This is consistent with many cross-cultural findings (Jia, 1998) which have shown that Americans tended to verbalize their gratitude more often than Chinese. The native Chinese speakers used Comparison, Obligation, and Small talk much more frequently. The latter often buoyed up the complimentee through self-denigration. For example,

你可真行。换了我，可没这勇气。

(You are really great. If I were you, I would not have this courage.) (Scenario 7)

The reason for Chinese frequent use of self-denigration is that Chinese culture puts great emphasis on modesty, as was argued by many Sinologists (e.g., Gu, 1990; Ho, 1976). The speaker, by comparing with the complimentee, humbles himself and demonstrates his knowledge of Chinese face, thereby achieving public acknowledgement of his reputation. With respect to Obligation, the Chinese speakers used it 7 times, while the Americans did not use it at all. For example, many Chinese speakers used such expression as “真应该向你学习 (We should all learn from you).” Saying “to learn from others” is a common way to show modesty in China. The collective Chinese society promotes the idea of setting up good models for others to follow so that the whole society can move forward at the same pace. On the contrary, individualism-oriented American society holds the value that each person should behave in his own way, rather than follow others’ suit. Small talk is also a strategy that more frequently found in Chinese data than in American English data. Complimenting is often considered as an FTA (face threatening act) in China, thus small talk can help establish the solidarity between the interlocutors so as to make the compliment sound less abrupt. Contrarily, compliment in America serves as a great icebreaker, thus it is much less necessary to precede a compliment with small talk.

Among the three groups of EFL learners, the advanced learners used Bound Strategies even more frequently than the Chinese native speakers, whereas the intermediate learners

Table 6. Raw frequencies and percentages of the Bound Strategies used the five groups in the four politeness systems.

	NSAE		NSC		AEFLL		IEFLL		BEFLL	
Solidarity	$\frac{40\text{TPTP}}{\text{PTPT}^{\text{a}}/8}$ $\frac{1}{\text{bTPTP}}$	49.38% TPTP	63/ 82	76.83 %	71/ 92	77.17 %	60/ 80	75 %	13/ 74	17.57%
Deference	56/60	93.33%	53/ 59	89.83 %	66/ 77	85.71 %	53/ 58	91.38%	5/ 50	10%
Power-up	45/84	53.57%	56/ 71	78.87 %	73/ 84	86.90 %	53/ 67	79.10%	3/ 55	5.45%
Power-down	35/70	50%	31/ 60	51.67 %	40/ 80	50%	34/ 61	55.74%	2/ 61	3.28%

Notes for Table 6:

- a: The raw frequency of Bound Strategies used by this group in the specific politeness system
- b: The total frequency of Explicit and Implicit strategies used by this group in the politeness system
- c: The ratio between the two figures given in the grid on the left

used it more frequently than the Americans, but somewhat less so than the Chinese native speakers. The beginners rarely used Bound Strategies. The advanced and intermediate learners demonstrated great similarity to the native speakers of Chinese in the choice of Bound Strategies. They had close percentages of compliments with Bound Strategies in each of the four politeness systems. Like the Chinese speakers, they used Bound Strategies quite frequently in all the politeness systems except when complimenting the subordinates, as is shown in Table 6.

The advanced and intermediate learners also showed similarity in the rank order of the 12 Bound Strategies in terms of frequency. As we can see from Table 7, Explanation and Question were used much more frequently than the other strategies. Like the Chinese speakers, they showed great preference for such strategies as Comparison and Small Talk. Although they did not use Obligation as frequently as the Chinese speakers, this was still a strategy that they turned to from time to time. However, these two groups also showed some similarity to the Americans: both groups used the strategy of Gratitude at a relatively high frequency. In addition, compared with the two L1 groups, the advanced and intermediate learners seemed to overuse the strategy of Congratulation, which is possibly due to the influence of teacher talk, because this strategy is seldom found in the Chinese data and only occasionally found in the American English data.

The beginners' use of Bound Strategies was significantly different from both the Americans and the Chinese. They used Bound Strategies only occasionally. Again, this was mainly due to their poor English proficiency which restrained them from expressing what they intended to convey. Unlike the participants from the other groups who used Explanation more frequently than any other Bound Strategy, the beginners more often chose Question. This was primarily because it requires more language resources to fulfill the strategy of Explanation than Question. Besides, the beginners had formed great familiarity with

Table 7. Raw frequencies of the Bound Strategies used by the five subject groups

Bound Strategy	Group				
	NSAE	AEFLL	IEFLL	BEFL	NSC
Explanation	64TPTP ^a (1) ^b PTPT	79(1)	64(1)	5(2)	61(1)
Comparison	3(11)	13(6)	13(3)	1(4)	19(3)
Gratitude	21(3)	19(3)	11(6)	3(3)	3(11)
Question	41(2)	52(2)	39(2)	11(1)	40(2)
Future Reference	9(5)	12(6)	12(5)	1(4)	14(5)
Conjecture	10(4)	16(5)	11(6)	0	6(10)
Congratulation	4(10)	10(9)	9(8)	0	1(12)
Request	8(6)	11(8)	6(11)	0	14(5)
Advice	4(9)	6(11)	9(8)	0	9(8)
Wish	5(8)	9(10)	8(10)	1(4)	10(7)
Obligation	0(12)	4(12)	5(12)	1(4)	8(9)
Small Talk	7(7)	19(3)	13(3)	0	18(4)
Total	176	250	200	23	203

Notes for Table 7:

a: The frequency of the Bound Strategy

b: The rank order of the Bound Strategy

questions due to their intensive practice of this type of structure at the early stage of English learning.

In summary, the findings in the above indicate that the advanced and intermediate learners, when speaking English, still follow the routines of their native language in choice of Bound Strategies and only conform to American norms in a few aspects. The beginners seldom used Bound Strategies due to their poor language proficiency.

Compliment Focus

Table 8 shows the frequencies and proportions of the compliments used by the five subject groups with first person, second person, third person, impersonal, and omitted subjects. The five groups did not have much difference in the percentages of the compliments with third person focus and omitted subject, yet their use of first person, second person, and impersonal focus varied in different degrees.

The American participants had a much higher percentage of first-person- and impersonal-focus compliments than the Chinese speakers. The following examples are from the data of American participants.

Table 8. Raw frequencies and percentages of the compliment focuses used by the five subject groups

Personal focus	Group					Total
	NSAE	AEFL	IEFL	BEFL	NSC	
First	70	37	14	3	13	137
	21.2%	10.5%	6.2%	1.4%	6.8%	10.4%
Second	58	153	140	130	110	591
	17.6%	43.2%	62.2%	60.2%	57.3%	44.9%
Third	16	24	9	17	8	74
	4.8%	6.8%	4.0%	7.9%	4.2%	5.6%
Impersonal	146	99	33	26	39	343
	44.2%	28.0%	14.7%	12.0%	20.3%	26.0%
Omitted	40	41	29	40	22	172
	12.1%	11.6%	12.9%	18.5%	11.5%	13.1%
Total	330	354	225	216	192	1317
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%□

“I have never had such a tasty meal.” (1st person focus)

“I like the way you decorate your apartment.” (1st person focus)

“That is really cool that you are going to teach in China.” (3rd person focus)

“That color suits you to a T.” (3rd person focus)

On the other hand, the native speakers of Chinese provided more compliments with second person focus:

“王教授，您讲的课很精彩。” (Professor, your talk is really good.)

“你的儿子真棒啊！你可真是教子有方。” (Your son is great. You have a unique way to cultivate your son.)

“你穿这件裙子真漂亮。你真有审美眼光。” (You look great in this dress. You really have good taste.)

In the compliments given by the American participants, those with an impersonal focus took up the largest proportion and those with a first person focus ranked the second. The high rate of compliments with a first-person focus by the Americans was partly due to the individual and self-oriented nature of Americans and the importance of enhancing self in their culture. They like to show their personal feelings, and use *I* to seek solidarity and equality in interpersonal communication.

On the contrary, Chinese people, who are more *you*-oriented, tend to show politeness and respect to the addressee by putting the addressee in a higher position. Second person focus, which puts *you* in the subject position, has the effect of empowering their addressee. On the few occasions when the Chinese speakers did use first-person pattern in this study, they tended to opt for addressee-inclusive-*we* rather than *I*, compliments starting with *we* taking up

Table 9. Raw frequencies and percentages of first person embedded clause used by each of the subject groups

	NSAE	AEFLL	IEFLL	BEFL	NSC
Frequency	5	15	29	2	16
Percentage (in explicit compliments)	1.52%	4.24%	12.88%	1.04%	8.38%

75.8% of those with a first person focus. This stems from the value of collectivism in Chinese society which expects people to identify with groups which protect them in exchange for loyalty and compliance.

The group of the advanced learners, as a Chi-square test showed, significantly differed from both native-speaker groups in the use of compliment focus, with $P < 0.0001$ and $P = 0.027$ respectively. The percentages of first-person, second-person, and impersonal-focus compliments all fell between those of the American participants and the Chinese speakers, but tilted more towards those of the Chinese speakers. Like the Chinese speakers, the compliments with a second person focus paid by the advanced learners accounted for a much higher percentage than those with the other types of compliment focus.

The intermediate learners' use of compliment focus was quite similar to that of the Chinese speakers, but largely deviated from that of the Americans. The percentages of all types of compliment focus used by the intermediate learners were close to those of the Chinese speakers. Almost two thirds (62.2%) of the compliments given by these learners had a second person focus. This seems to indicate that the intermediate learners still behaved according to their native sociopragmatic norms.

The beginners' use of compliment focus deviated from that of the American participants even further. Similar to Chinese L1 speakers, compliments with a second person focus took up the highest percentage (60.2%) in those paid by the beginners. However, they rarely gave compliments from the first person perspective. The compliments with omitted subjects had slightly more occurrences than those given by the other groups. This was partly due to their limited linguistic knowledge, which hindered their use of complete sentences to express their meanings.

A point worth noticing is the relatively high percentage of first person embedded clause, such as *I think (feel, find...)*, *I have to say*, used by the Chinese participants (including the EFL learners), as is shown in Table 9. First person embedded clause was not counted as first-person focus in this study because the nature of this pattern is different from that of first-person focus: the former somewhat reduces the force of a compliment, while the latter increases it. For example,

- a. "You look great."
- b. "I think you look great."

The degree of appreciation shown by Utterance b is lowered compared with that shown by Utterance a because it sounds like this is only the complimenter's personal feeling and s/he is not sure what others will think. We could see from Table 8 that first person embedded clause used by the American participants and the beginners took up very low percentage (1.52% and 1.04%, respectively) of the explicit compliments they paid, but that of the

intermediate learners and the Chinese speakers took up much higher percentages (12.88% and 8.38%, respectively). The pattern used by the advanced learners fell somewhere in the middle. The overuse and pragmatic overextension of *I think* as an epistemic expression has been noted in the interlanguage performance of learners with very different native language backgrounds (House & Kasper, 1981; Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). These authors mainly proposed the following reasons why *I think* becomes EFL learners' favorite epistemic marker: L1 transfer and low processing costs. For Chinese, compliments may sometimes be considered as face-threatening acts by which the speaker imposes his view on the hearer. By embedding an explicit compliment within the *I think* frame, the speaker suggests that the remark is only his personal feeling, leaving more freedom to the addressee to either accept the compliment or refuse it. The intermediate learners in this study used the highest percentage of *I think* pattern among the five subject groups. This was partly a result of their transferring the Chinese social value of avoiding threatening the addressee's face, and partly a result of formal instruction through which *I think* clause is taught, reinforced, and thus acquired at a relatively early stage. It has also been a habit for many Chinese EFL learners, especially intermediate learners, to begin their utterance with *I think*. On the contrary, the beginners in this study used this pattern only twice. This was probably because most of them had just learned how to form a simple sentence at the time of doing the DCT, and complex sentence such as *I think* clause was still beyond their procedural knowledge.

Discussion

Explanation of EFL-Learners' Performance

The findings of the present study on the compliment strategies used by the five groups show that there indeed exist significant differences in the choice of strategies between different EFL-learner groups. However, the differences were not very clearly cut. The results manifested that the learners' sociopragmatic knowledge was neither positively nor negatively correlated with their English proficiency.

The beginners' compliment behavior at the sociopragmatic level seemed less deviated from that of the Americans compared with the intermediate learners. Their sociopragmatic knowledge showed some similarity to that of the Americans in the choice of Main Compliment Strategies, manifested by their relatively high frequency of Explicit Strategy. However, the apparent similarity to the Americans might not be due to their knowledge of the relevant pragmatic rules. Instead, it was mainly a result of their limited linguistic devices, which constrained them from realizing the intended strategies. As was argued by Takahashi and Beebe (1987), "the higher frequency of direct expressions among lower proficiency learners is not a function of NL transfer, but rather most probably a developmental stage where simpler, and also more direct, expressions are being used" (p. 150).

The sociopragmatic knowledge demonstrated by the intermediate learners greatly deviated from that of the Americans, but was very much similar to that of the Chinese L1 speakers. The advanced learners had demonstrated a better command of sociopragmatic knowledge in English at a macro level. However, a closer examination of various sociopragmatic elements revealed that they still fell short of full native-like knowledge of the speech act of compliment, especially at the micro level. For example, in the aspect of Main

Strategies, the advanced learners tended to be overly explicit, i.e. they often gave explicit compliments regardless of politeness system or topic, and their choice of strategies showed no significant variations from one situation to another. This was partly because instruction of the salient sociopragmatic elements is often unavailable in the English classroom in the EFL setting so that learners often do not notice gaps between their interlanguage productions and those of native speakers of the L1. Another reason was, as Beebe and Takahashi (1989) observed, that “psychological convergence,” became a factor that led the high-proficiency learners to bluntly use direct strategies when performing face-threatening speech acts (p. 214). These learners were attempting to converge towards a stereotypical norm of American speech behavior, but instead diverged from the native speakers. This seems to indicate that their ability to vary their use of language in accordance with changing factors was not in full fledge. Their sociopragmatic knowledge of Americans’ compliment behavior was rather superficial, and they still lacked the knowledge of sociopragmatic aspects with low perceptual salience but important pragmatic meanings.

Our findings indicate that, despite the obvious differences found among the EFL-learner groups, there was not a definite tendency for a positive correlation or for a negative one found between mastery of linguistic knowledge and usage of more sophisticated social norms. While there is no easy answer, one possible reason, as Takahashi and Beebe suggested, may be that sociopragmatic development is not much “affected by just a few years’ difference in school in the EFL context” (cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 180-181). It is the limited exposure to target norms in the EFL classroom that may have limited even the more proficient learners’ L2 pragmatic knowledge.

Proficiency Effect on Interlanguage Pragmatic Development

The findings of this study seem to support those of Hoffman-Hicks (1999) study that linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite to pragmatic competence but that it does not itself guarantee pragmatic competence. Learners’ limited grammatical competence could restrict their capacity to produce linguistic action in a native-like way, and lower-proficiency learners seemed to have more difficulties in expressing their intended meanings in the L2 than their higher-proficiency peers. For adult learners, as Kasper (1997) argues, some universal pragmatic knowledge already existed in their minds and can be used for free. However, what they need is the requisite grammar that can put the pragmatic knowledge into use. That is to say, a certain level of linguistic proficiency must be attained before learners are able to convey their message with socio-cultural appropriateness. In this study, most of the beginners reported that they could not use Bound Strategies which they intended to use to justify their compliments. They had knowledge of various compliment strategies, but could not realize some of them for lacking requisite linguistic devices. This point was further proved by the high frequency of Opt-Out they used.

On the other hand, the level of linguistic competence needed for adequate communication in given situations does not necessarily assure learners of socio-cultural appropriateness in these contexts. That is to say, a certain level of grammatical competence does not automatically lead to a corresponding level of pragmatic competence. The present study found evidence of the three different aspects discussed by Kasper and Rose (2003) that show learners’ pragmatic competence does not often develop concomitantly with their

grammatical competence so that they often deploy grammar in sociopragmatically non-target-like fashion.

The first aspect is that “learners demonstrate knowledge of a particular grammatical structure or element but do not use it to express or modify illocutionary force” (Kasper & Rose, 2003, p. 115). Complimenting is often considered as an act easy to conduct in English because it does not demand many complex syntactical structures. However, our findings seemed to show that the compliments paid by the learners, including intermediate and advanced learners, were often pragmatically inappropriate. Particularly, the learners sometimes learned grammatical forms but did not learn all their functions, with the result that they did not always put them into the correct pragmatic use. For example, although the intermediate learners could use *I like (love) NP* pattern very fluently, they seldom used it because they did not feel appropriate to use such a pattern in compliments, especially when the topic of the compliment is possession, due to the influence of L1 norms.

The second aspect is that “learners demonstrate knowledge of a grammatical structure and use it to express pragmalinguistic functions that are not conventionalized in the target language” (Ibid, 2003, p. 115). Evidence was found that the learners grasped certain grammatical structures, but put such structures into non-target-like pragmatic use. There were also numerous cases in which the learners used idiomatic expressions, but the use diverged from the target practice. For example,

Let your youth be more beautiful. (Scenario 7)
Your father can be called a cook. (Scenario 8)

The third aspect is that “learners demonstrate knowledge of a grammatical structure and its pragmalinguistic functions yet put the pragmalinguistic form-function mapping to non-target-like sociopragmatic use” (Ibid, 2003, p. 115). The learners in this study were often found to use structures or forms that were grammatically correct and pragmalinguistically acceptable for a given topic, but sociopragmatically inappropriate for the given social context in which the variable of power and social distance played a role. Sometimes, the learners were too formal and polite when addressing a friend or a subordinate, e.g. using “It’s my honor to work with you” when complimenting on a friend’s ability. In some other cases, however, they were too straight when addressing the superior or non-acquaintances, e.g. using “You look sharp today” when complimenting the boss’s new dress.

Hence, learners’ sociopragmatic competence may not grow automatically as the grammatical competence develops because the more subtle features brought about by the social variables are more difficult for self-notice but are always left out of the formal instruction. Therefore, there still exist great discrepancy between the advanced learners’ grammatical proficiency and pragmatic competence.

Conclusions

To sum up, the findings of this study show that Chinese EFL learners’ sociopragmatic competence does not develop in a positive relation to their linguistic proficiency. While their knowledge of target pragmatic norms at the macro level (e.g., the overall use of Main Compliment Strategies) may increase as they become more linguistically proficient, the

pragmatic knowledge at the micro level (e.g., compliment focus and variations of compliment strategies according to contextual cues, especially when a few social factors come to interplay) cannot be gained automatically as it is more difficult to notice the subtle features in knowledge of this aspect. Despite the relatively high level of pragmalinguistic competence of advanced learners, their L2 sociopragmatic competences often lag somewhat behind.

The findings of this study point to the need for the instruction of pragmatics in order to help learners gain awareness of the target sociopragmatic norms and develop pragmatic competence, especially important is the need for the instruction of realization schemes of various speech acts, particularly the act of compliment, which is often overlooked by language teachers for its apparent simplicity. Foreign language teachers can help learners prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings by presenting them with L2 sociopragmatic knowledge.

Furthermore, since it is difficult for learners to notice the micro features of compliment behavior, it is especially important to provide relevant metapragmatic knowledge—for instance, as Kasper suggested (1997), what function complimenting has in mainstream American culture, what appropriate topics for complimenting are, and by what linguistic formulae compliments are given and received, and under what circumstances and for what reason each specific formula is used, etc. Noticing of the subtle pragmatic features will be further enhanced if awareness-raising activities are conducted with regard to the pragmalinguistic realization of the speech act of compliment and the relevant sociopragmatic constraints.

Additionally, L2 teachers need to ensure that their learners avoid overgeneralizing classroom pragmatic behavior in a different social situation. Also, since textbooks constitute a crucial source of input, especially in the foreign language context, there is a need for research-based rather than native-speaker, intuition-based descriptions of speech acts if textbooks are to offer realistic input to learners.

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