

Compliment Response Strategies by Thai and Chinese EFL Teachers: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract—This study investigated compliment responses (CRs) by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers. The data were collected through the written discourse test (DCT) in English, containing four settings in terms of appearance, character, ability and possession. A total of 60 Thai and Chinese EFL teachers participated in the study. The results revealed that more similarities were observed than differences in CR strategies used by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers. The teachers from the two countries followed the same patterns of preferences: that is, they employed *Accept* strategies the most and *Reject* strategies the least. However, *Accept* strategies and *Evade* strategies used by Chinese participants were slightly more frequent than those used by Thais, whereas Thai teachers employed more *Reject* strategies than Chinese teachers did. In the four situations, some differences existed between the two groups. Chinese teachers employed more varieties of micro strategies than their Thai counterparts did. Interestingly, Thai and Chinese EFL teachers transferred their native cultures in L1 to L2 in some situations. The findings suggested that EFL teachers' awareness regarding their L2 pragmatics should be improved.

Index Terms—compliments, compliments response, EFL teachers, Chinese, Thai

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behavior that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Whether we speak in a first or second language, we are influenced by socio-cultural norms and constraints that affect the way we communicate. Rizk (2003) points out that what is considered appropriate in one language might not be so in another. People of different cultures belong to different value systems. Different value systems are reflected in speech acts, thus, different interpretations of a certain speech act sometimes cause misunderstandings of the speakers' intentions. Compliments and CRs are speech acts that may influence the success or failure of intercultural communication. They play very important roles in intercultural communication.

"A compliment is a speech act which bestows the credit upon the addressee" (Hobbs, 2003, p.249). It is "an utterance containing a positive evaluation by the speakers to the addressee" (Wolfson (1989, p.220). Compliments are recognized as an important speech act in a socio-cultural context. Holmes (1988) states that compliments are "positively affective speech acts, the most obvious function they serve is to oil the social wheels, paying attention to positive face wants and thus increasing or consolidating solidarity between people". Wolfson (1983, p.89) also claims that a compliment functions to "grease the social wheels" and thus to serve as "a social lubricant". CRs are responses to compliments. The speech acts of compliments and CRs are conversational devices of interpersonal relationships in daily life. The use of CR as a phatic expression (more of a 'ritual' type) may also play a particular role in maintaining the solidarity of interpersonal relationships and the harmony of social interaction (Tang and Zhang, 2009).

Numerous studies on CRs have been conducted by many researchers, such as Chen (1993), Gajasen (1995), Rose & Kwai-fong (1999), Qu (2005), Cedar (2006), Tang and Zhang (2009), and Chen and Yang (2010), etc. These studies mainly focus on the comparison of CRs between native and non-native English speakers. However, the research investigating the differences of CRs among non-native English speakers seems scarce. Particularly, there is no relative research on compliment responses among Thais and Chinese. Although Thailand and China are Asian countries, they are different in cultural backgrounds and English language exposure. People of different cultural backgrounds belong to different value systems. Different value systems are reflected in their speech acts. The objective of this study is to find out the similarities and differences of English CR strategies employed by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. The Participants

The participants in this investigation were two groups: 30 Chinese and 30 Thai teachers of English. This study aimed to reveal cultural differences between Chinese and Thais in terms of responses to compliments in English; therefore, all the participants were required to provide the CRs in English.

B. Data Collection

The data were collected through a written role-play questionnaire called a 'Discourse Completion Task' (DCT). DCTs are widely used as controlled elicitation tools to collect written data for discourse analysis. DCTs are consistent with naturally occurring data, at least in the main patterns and formulas (Golato, 2003). DCT can elicit stereotype that reflects the values of the native culture (Wannaruk, 2005). The DCT of this study consists of four situational settings: appearance, character, ability and possession. These four settings were widely investigated by many previous research works and they could reveal the cross-cultural differences in the content of CRs to some extent. In each situation, CRs were made to interlocutors of equal status.

C. Data Analysis

The CRs were analyzed mainly based on Holmes' (1988, 1993) categories of CR strategies, which, as adapted here, have three macro strategies (Accept, Reject and Evade) and ten micro-strategies, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE I:
HOLMES' CATEGORIES

Macro level CRs	Micro level CRs	Examples
Accept	Appreciation token	"Thanks"; "Thank you"; "Cheers"; "Yes"; "Good"
	Agreeing utterance	"I know"; "I am glad you think so"; "I did realize I did that well"; "Yeah, I really like it."
	Downgrading/qualifying Utterance	"It's nothing"; "It was no problem"; "I enjoyed doing it"; "I hope it was ok"; "I still only use it to call people"; "It's not bad."
	Return compliment	"You're not too bad yourself"; "Your child was an angel"; "I'm sure you will be great"; "Yours was good too."
Reject	Disagreeing utterance	"Nah, I don't think so"; "I thought I did badly"; "Nah, it's nothing special"; "It is not"; "Don't say so."
	Question accuracy	"Why?"; "Is it right?"
	Challenge sincerity	"Stop lying"; "Don't lie"; "Don't joke about it"; "You must be kidding"; "Don't, come on."
Evade	Shift credit	"That's what friends are for"; "You're polite"; "No worries"; "My pleasure."
	Informative comment	"It wasn't hard"; "You can get it from [store name]"; "It's really cheap."
	Request reassurance	"Really?"

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the findings of the use of CRs are presented in two parts: (1) general patterns (the macro level); (2) patterns in the four settings (including micro level)

A. The General Pattern of CR Strategies

Fig. 1 shows the general patterns used by the Thai and Chinese EFL teachers at macro level. An apparent trend demonstrates that in general, the two groups preferred *Accept* the most and *Reject* the least. Thai and Chinese EFL teachers followed the same order of preferences in the use of CRs. When taking a closer look at the percentage of strategy employment, Chinese EFL teachers employed *Accept* strategies slightly higher than their Thai counterparts. While Thai EFL teachers employed *Reject* strategies considerably higher than Chinese EFL teachers. This may suggest that Chinese were slightly straight forward than Thais in accepting compliments, while Thais tended to feel more uncomfortable in accepting compliments compared with Chinese as revealed by their greater use of *Reject* strategies. However, the two groups were likely to employ *Evade* strategies almost more or less the same. The use of *Evade* and *Reject* strategies by Chinese confirms what has been found by the previous researchers, such as Chen (1993) who pointed out that Chinese speakers tend to be reluctant to accept compliments in a direct manner. According to Fong (1998), in Chinese culture, the deny response is an indirect communication pattern of modest acceptance. With regard to Thai EFL teachers, the *Reject* and *Evade* strategies they used probably indicates language stereotyping of Thais whose culture values humility and modesty (Cedar, 2006).

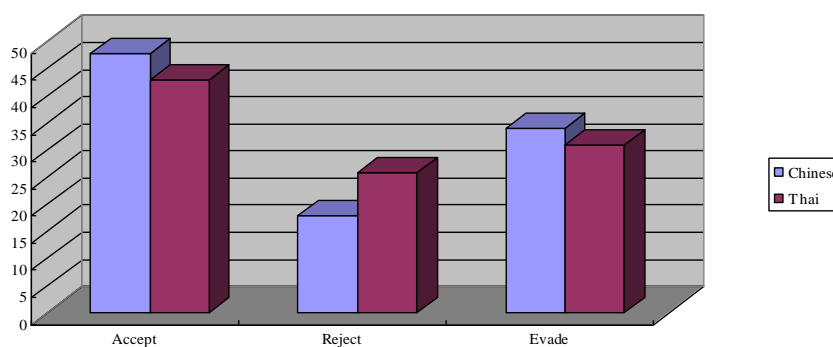


Fig1: General patterns of CRs

B. The CR Patterns Corresponding to the Four Specific Situations

In this section, the findings of the use of CRs are presented at both macro level and micro level with regard to four situational settings: appearance, character, ability and possession. This provides us to see more detailed distribution of CRs in each situational setting.

1. CRs for Appearance

The frequency of Thai and Chinese CRs at macro level in the setting of appearance is presented in Fig. 2. It shows that the distribution of CRs in the setting of appearance is different from that in the CRs in general pattern shown in Fig 1. Chinese EFL teachers employed *Accept* strategies considerably higher than their Thai counterparts. It probably explains that Chinese were happier to show their outward signs of pleasure in accepting appearance compliments compared with Thais. On the other hand, Thai EFL teachers made more use of *Reject* and *Evade* strategies than their Chinese counterparts. According to Cedar (2006) complimenting, particularly on the appearance does not occur frequently in Thai culture. It is considered as “a carefully controlled speech act with a much more restricted purpose than a compliment in American English” (Cedar 2006, p. 8). This is probably a reason why Thais seem to be careful to show outward sign of pleasure for being complimented for their appearances. Most Thais refrain from showing their pleasure explicitly and tend to be modest in this setting.

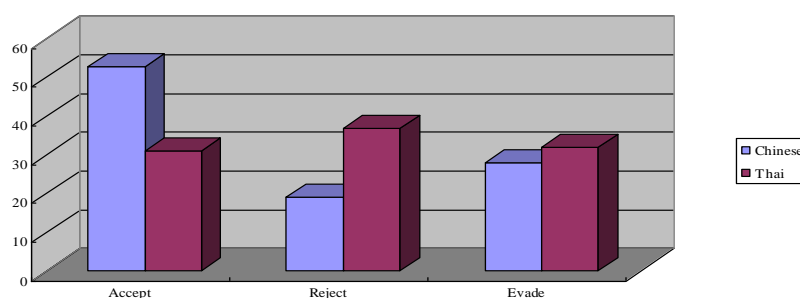


Fig 2: Macro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to appearance compliments

Based on the content analysis of CRs of two groups at micro patterns, Fig 3 shows that Chinese and Thai EFL teachers employed a variety of CR strategies in this setting. Chinese EFL teachers employed 7 out of 10 different strategies while Thai employed 6 strategies differently. This may reflect that Chinese and Thais are sensitive to appearance compliments as they elaborate a more variety of CR strategies to deal with this setting compared with other settings. Examples of CRs in the setting of appearance are presented as follows.

Mr. Bosson: Wow! You look wonderful today!

Thai (CR27): Come on! Don't say that. (*Reject/Disagreeing Utterance*)

Thai (CR7): Really? (*Evade/Request reassurance*)

Chinese (CR18): You know, I have made a new hair style. (*Evade/Shift credit*)

Chinese (CR22): Ha, ha! You're kidding me. (*Reject/Challenge sincerity*)

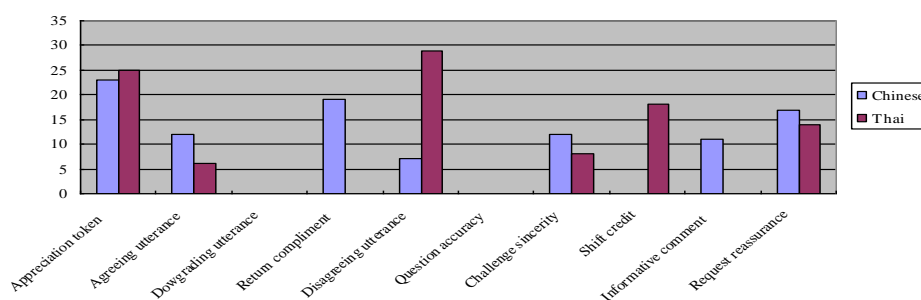


Figure 3: Micro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to appearance compliments

2. CRs for Character

The distribution of CRs for character (Fig. 4) was quite different from that of CRs for appearance. The noticeable tendency illustrates that Thai and Chinese EFL teachers made more use of *Evade* strategies than the other two strategies. This may indicate that character compliments are considered praises for Chinese and Thais. Therefore, it prompts them to evade to their character compliments. According to Tang and Zhang (2009), Chinese accept compliments on character indirectly using *Evade* strategies, possibly due to the value of modesty. One explanation could be that being modest in speech is considered a good value of people in some Asian countries, such as Thailand and China. The evidences from CRs for character might reflect a close native cultural rule of Thai and Chinese societies. Responding to character compliments with high use of *Evade* strategies by Thai and Chinese may demonstrate the virtues and collectivism of people from the two countries.

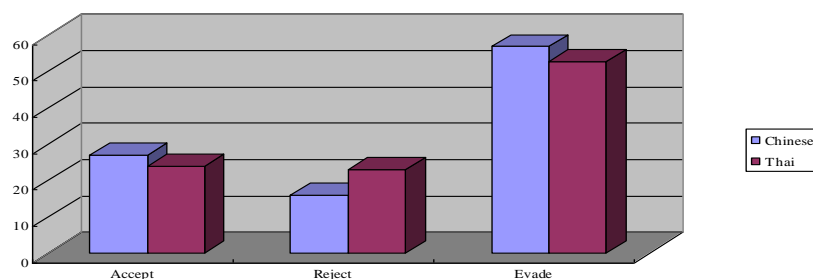


Fig 4: Macro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to character compliments

Fig 5 shows the micro pattern of character CRs. The noticeable tendency shows that Thai and Chinese EFL teachers did not employ a variety of CR strategies when dealing with character compliments. 4 and 3 different CR strategies were used by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers respectively. The two groups obviously employed Shift credit strategies considerably higher than other strategies. This may indicate that Thais and Chinese interpret character compliments similarly. Being complimented for their characters makes Thais and Chinese feel uncomfortable or somewhat uneasy. Receiving character compliments is probably considered an embarrassing experience for them. Consequently, they attempted to attribute credit to someone or something else other than themselves. Examples of CRs in the setting of character are presented as follows.

Ms. Lee: "Thanks! Without your help, I don't know what to do. How kind and helpful you are!"

Thai (CR16): Don't mention it! I'm happy to do that. (*Reject/Disagreeing utterance*)

Thai (CR9): No problem. We're friends. (*Evade/Shift credit*)

Chinese (CR11): A neighbor who is near is better than a brother who is far. (*Evade/ Shift credit*)

Chinese (CR26): You're welcome. (*Evade/ Shift credit*)

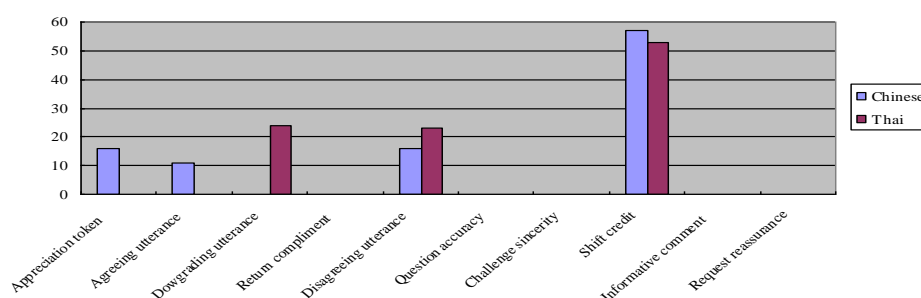


Fig 5: Micro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to character compliments

3. CRs for Ability

As shown in Fig 6, at macro level, both Thai and Chinese EFL teachers preferred *Accept* strategies the most. More than half of the Thai and Chinese EFL teachers selected *Accept* strategies when receiving compliments on their abilities. It is apparent that Thai and Chinese EFL teachers tended to outwardly show more of their pride in this setting compared with the other settings. This probably explains that both Thais and Chinese are quite willing to accept compliments on their abilities. The CR strategy used by the two groups in this setting more closely resembled to that of English native speakers. According to Chen and Yang (2010), English native speakers have a clear preference for compliment acceptance over rejection. This is consistent to Chen (1993) who discovered that American English native speakers were likely to accept compliments and appreciated them. According to Thais and Chinese, being complimented on ability may be regarded as being praised for one's positive self-image. With regard to Brown and Levinson (1987), 'face' can be referred to a public self-image that one wants to keep for themselves. The desire to be approved of may be considered a positive face for Thais and Chinese as they similarly tended to employ *Accept* strategies the most.

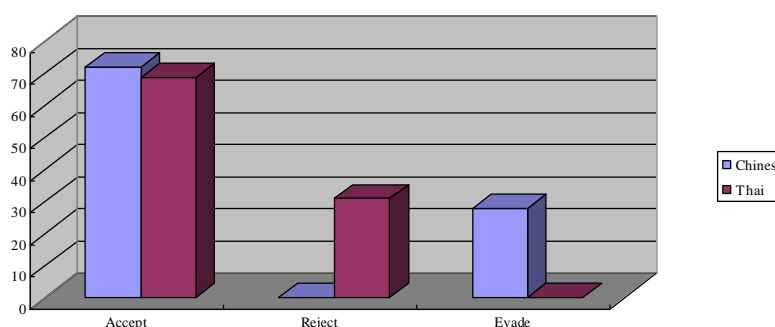


Fig 6: Macro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to ability compliments

At micro level, the distribution of CRs in this setting was different from that of CRs for appearance and character. Fig7 illustrates that a variety of CR strategies were employed by Chinese EFL teachers while a fewer types of CRs were employed by Thai EFL teachers. It can be seen that the two groups preferred "*Appreciation token*" the most. Thai and Chinese EFL teachers appreciated saying "Thank you" to the compliment givers when they were complimented for their abilities. However, some of the Thais and Chinese were comfortable to humiliate themselves to the compliment givers by using the "*Downgrading utterance*". This reflects that even though Thais and Chinese take pride on their ability, they still maintain the value of modesty in their acceptance. Examples of CRs in the setting of ability are presented as follows.

Mark: "Wow!" "You did a very good job". "How clever you are!"

Thai (CR22): Oh no! I was very excited. (*Disagreeing utterance*)

Thai (CR18): I think it was just ok. (*Accept/Downgrading utterance*)

Chinese (CR18): I prepared for a long time. (*Evade/Informative comment*)

Chinese (CR22): Thanks for your encouragement. (*Accept/Appreciation token*)

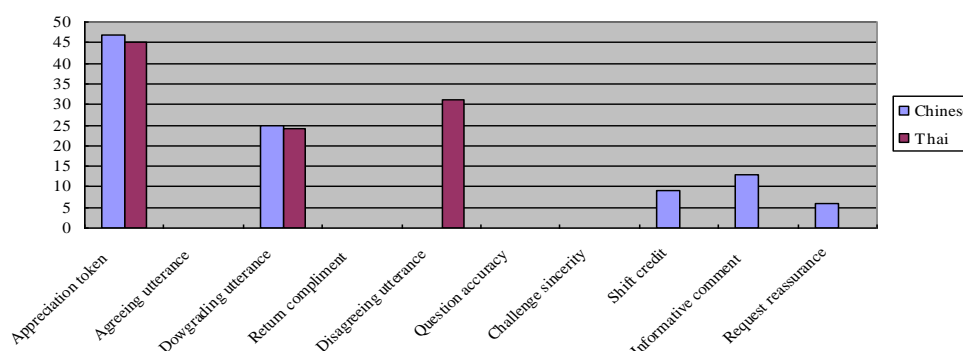


Fig 7: Micro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to ability compliments

4. CRs for Possession

Fig 8 shows that the two groups followed the same pattern of preferences. Thais and Chinese EFL teachers preferred to employ *Accept* strategies the most and *Reject* strategies the least. The findings reveal that the two groups tended to be less direct to accept possession compliments compared with ability compliments as they employed more *Reject* and *Evade* strategies. Thai and Chinese EFL teachers almost responded to possession compliments in a similar manner. This could suggest that Thais and Chinese consider possession compliments as defensive compared with ability

compliments. The findings could be in line with Holmes (1988, p.448) who remarked that “compliments can be regarded as face threatening to the extent that they imply that the complimenter is envious of the addressee in some way or would like to have something belonging to the addressee”. The findings from the present study suggest that Thais and Chinese considered possession compliments as face-threatening acts due to the judgment on another person’s belongings. Therefore, they tended to employ less *Accept* but more *Reject* and *Evade* strategies compared with CRs for ability.

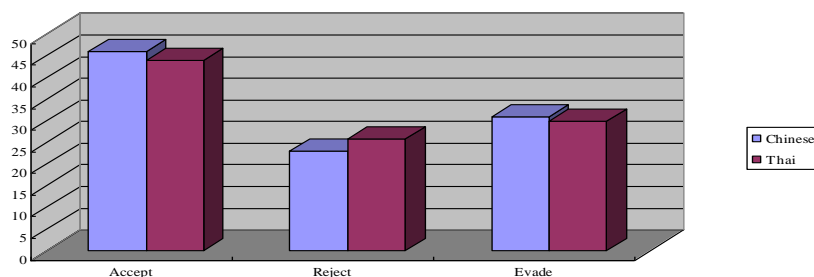


Fig 8: Macro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to possession compliments

The micro patterns of possession CRs between Thai and Chinese EFL teachers (Fig. 9) highlight a number of subtle differences of the two groups in CR strategy use. There are more strategies for CRs among Chinese EFL teachers than in Thai EFL teachers. Considering CRs in micro level, Chinese EFL teachers employed 7 different strategies, whereas only 4 strategies were employed by Thai EFL teachers. This may suggest that the differences exist in the choices of selecting CRs strategies between Thais and Chinese in this setting. Examples of CRs in the setting of possession are presented as follows.

Jane: “Wow!” “Your laptop looks so cool!”

Thai (CR20): I bought it from Bangkok. (*Evade/Informative comment*)

Thai (CR29): Really? It’s cool right? (*Reject/Question accuracy*)

Chinese (CR3): Oh! It is a good brand. (*Evade/ Informative comment*)

Chinese (CR28): It is my birthday present. (*Evade/Informative comment*)

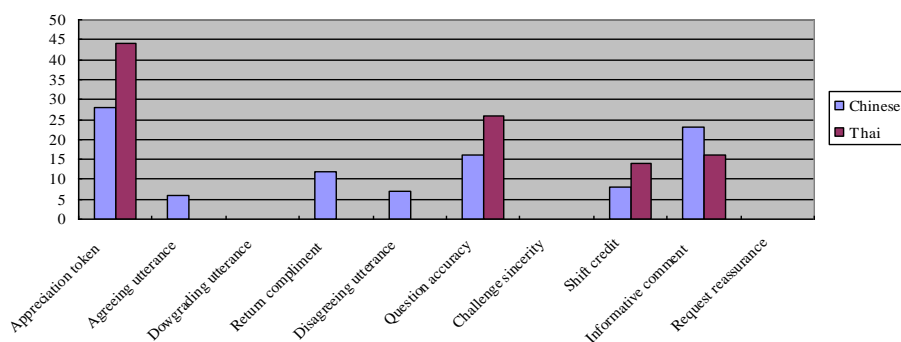


Fig 9: Micro patterns of Thai and Chinese CRs to possession compliments

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Thai and Chinese speakers. Nevertheless, the evidences from CRs of the two groups do provide insights to better understand the use of CRs in English by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers. Based on the findings, there seem to be more similarities than differences in CR strategies used by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers. The cultural closeness of Thai and Chinese has been presented in the use of CRs in general patterns as Thai and Chinese EFL teachers followed the same pattern of preferences: they employed *Accept* strategies the most and *Reject* strategies the least. However, *Accept* strategies and *Evade* strategies used by Chinese participants were slightly more frequent than those used by Thais, whereas Thai teachers employed more *Reject* strategies than Chinese teachers did. This probably indicates that Thai people are a little more conservative than Chinese when facing the compliments from others. In the four situations, some differences existed between the two groups. In addition, the closeness of values of the two cultures is also revealed in the use of CRs in the setting of character compliment as Thai and Chinese EFL teachers tended to be modest in their speech acts of CRs in this setting.

As a whole, the use of CR strategies by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers resembles to that of English native speakers who favor *Accept* over *Reject* and *Evade* strategies. However, the percentage of *Accept* strategies of English native

speakers is much higher than that of Thais and Chinese, as in Holmes' (1988) and Herbert's (1989) studies. Furthermore, the use of CR strategies by Thai and Chinese EFL teachers in certain settings, such as in the setting of character compliments, seems to be different from that of English native speakers. The results reveal that Thai and Chinese EFL teachers transferred their characteristics of being modest in L1 to L2. The findings emerged from the present study led to the important notion of the development of language teachers who use English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). As English language teaching in many Thai and Chinese middle schools and universities are still conducted mainly in traditional ways in the classrooms, such as the teacher-centered teaching, the findings and discussions above may indicate that it is necessary and useful to develop ESL/ EFL teachers in terms of their pragmatic knowledge of L2 language since teachers normally function as language models of the students. Conversational routines, such as giving compliments and responding to compliments, are not universal. These speech forms are specific to the language being used (Aijmer, 1996). Mastering intercultural competence is not necessarily assimilated to the target culture (Pohl, 2004). To solve the problems, EFL teachers need to have pragmatic awareness in L2 when they are using it.

V. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is important to note that this study has investigated the CRs in English between Thai and Chinese EFL teachers with written role-play or DCT. The CR was required only to the interlocutors of equal status. Carrying out any further research using other research method, like employing oral role-play, might yield different insights. Furthermore, CR to interlocutors of higher and lower status should be included to examine whether or not the status of interlocutors can yield the variation patterns in using CR strategies. Other possible social variables, such as, gender and level of formality should be taken into consideration as factors that might affect CR strategy use. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of CR strategy use, follow-up interviews should be conducted to broaden the understanding the the rationales behind the participants' strategy choices.

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