

*Article*

## **The Effect of Combining Computer-Mediated Communication with Instruction on EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence**

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### **Abstract**

In the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC), while many studies have focused on utilising various CMC-based tools (e.g. email, video conferencing and virtual worlds) to promote second language (L2) learning, scant attention has been paid to the crucial role of instruction. To enhance EFL learners' competence, this mixed-methods study investigates the effectiveness of CMC on EFL learners' competence in two settings: CMC-facilitated interaction alone and CMC-facilitated interaction combined with instruction. Fifty-three university-level Chinese EFL students took part in the study. The treatment group had CMC-based interaction with native speakers through instant messaging over the messaging software Skype and received two sessions of instruction in the targeted feature: the speech act of compliment responses (CRs), whereas the control group had CMC-based interaction without any instructional intervention. The result from an independent samples t-test on the post-intervention mean scores indicated a significant difference between groups for appropriately using CRs, favouring the treatment group ( $p = .011$ ). In addition, qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews to further interpret the quantitative data and unearth factors that would influence L2 learners' behaviours. Three main themes were derived based on the thematic analysis, encompassing learners' L2 pragmatic knowledge, the influence of first language on L2, and their English-learning experience. These findings provide further insight into the positive impact of combining CMC with instruction on EFL learners' competence. Pedagogical implications for adopting the integration between CMC-based interaction and instruction in L2 pragmatics are discussed.

### **Keywords**

Computer-mediated communication, instruction, L2 pragmatics, speech acts, EFL learners

## **1 Introduction**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been considered an effective tool for developing second-language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence (Taguchi, 2015). CMC-based devices, for instance, email, online chats, video conferencing and virtual worlds, can provide authentic input of the target language for L2 learners, especially for EFL learners who lack the target language environment. One of the trends with reference to CMC-based research is the synthesis of CMC and instruction (e.g. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Cunningham, 2016; Kakegawa, 2009; Sykes, 2013). These studies have indicated that combining

CMC with instruction is conducive to L2 learners' development since they are exposed to authentic input of the targeted pragmatic features. Despite the positive findings from previous studies, research in this field is still scarce in terms of the quantity of the studies. Additionally, the existing literature is inconclusive. Some studies have reported positive effects of using CMC platforms on enhancing L2 learners' pragmatic competence (e.g. Sykes, 2005), while others showed no improvement (e.g. Kakegawa, 2009). Thus, further investigation is needed to determine the efficacy of CMC-facilitated L2 acquisition.

In order to further explore CMC-based L2 pragmatic development, this study investigates the effect of CMC combined with instruction in L2 pragmatics in an EFL context. Specifically, this study focuses on Chinese EFL learners' compliment responses in two circumstances: (1) CMC-facilitated interaction alone; (2) CMC-facilitated interaction coupled with instruction in L2 pragmatics. Factors that would influence L2 learners' pragmatic behaviours will be discussed.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 CMC combined with instruction in L2 pragmatics research

Instructional studies regarding L2 pragmatics have shown greater advantages of adopting instruction over mere exposure to targeted pragmatic features with respect to enhancing learners' L2 pragmatic competence (Belz, 2007; Taguchi, 2015). However, much of the existing research has limitations. The vast majority of the studies were carried out either "in a laboratory setting or restricted institutional environment" (Taguchi, 2015, p. 52). Since the learning contexts lack the element of real-life interaction, it is unclear what impact the instruction has exerted on learners' ability when they are involved in "socio-culturally organized activities" (LoCastro, 2003, p. 15) in real-world contexts. In other words, it is unclear whether the instruction can assist L2 learners in using the targeted pragmatic features competently and appropriately in real-life social interaction.

Unlike traditional L2 pragmatics instruction, conducted in the context of a classroom or laboratory, CMC paired with instruction can be a great way of combining naturalistic real-life interaction with effective instruction (Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012; Sardegna & Molle, 2010). For instance, Kakegawa (2009) investigated L2 Japanese learners' use of four sentence-final particles (i.e. *ne*, *no*, *yo*, and *yone*) through email correspondence. After interacting with native speakers by email for five weeks, learners received the first instruction, including awareness-raising activities and metapragmatic explanations of the sentence-final particles. During the second instructional intervention, the teacher directed learners' attention to the targeted pragmatic feature in their previous email exchanges. Learners then had a discussion and compared the appropriate and inappropriate use of the sentence-final particles. The results demonstrated that after the instructional intervention, learners were able to use these particles more frequently and adopt a wider variety of them in the emails. The findings indicated that the combination of CMC and instruction exerted a positive effect on L2 learners' acquisition of the sentence-final particles.

Despite the positive influence of CMC-based interaction coupled with instruction on enhancing L2 learners' pragmatic competence drawn from these studies, they also demonstrate several limitations. First, none of these studies included a control group to make a comparison between the effect of CMC-based interaction alone and the integration of CMC-facilitated interaction and instruction. Thus, it is hard to clarify the role of instruction in developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence in that both CMC-based interaction and pedagogical instruction are included in one group without participants from a control group. Second, the existing research lacks data reflecting the learning process. There is a clear need for more self-reported data (e.g. through interviews) in the field of L2 pragmatics to help researchers gain a deeper insight into L2 learners' learning processes.

These gaps in the existing literature present opportunities to further investigate the effect of combining

CMC with instruction on enhancing learners' L2 competence. The current study pursues this direction in an EFL context. In order to fill the gaps, this study entails a control group and semi-structured interviews. Before focusing on the methodology of the study, the following section will briefly discuss the targeted pragmatic feature: compliment responses in English and Chinese.

## 2.2 Compliment responses in English and Chinese

There are many studies with regard to compliment responses in Chinese (e.g. Cai, 2012; Chen, 1993, 2001; Chen & Yang, 2010; Yu, 2003). Among the three broad strategies of responding to compliments: accepting, deflecting/evading and rejecting, some studies revealed that Chinese people tended to employ the rejection strategy to reply to positive comments. For example, Chen (1993) compared how Chinese EFL learners and American English speakers responded to compliments. This study showed that Chinese EFL learners had an inclination to reject compliments, whereas Americans tended to accept them. In another study, Yu (2003) also emphasized the vital role of humility played in replying to praise in Chinese. Yu pointed out that Chinese people exhibited humility by not accepting compliments since being humble was crucial in Chinese culture. In contrast, research carried out by Cai (2012) indicated that Chinese adopted the acceptance strategy more frequently than other strategies. Cai said that although Chinese were once reluctant to directly accept compliments because of Chinese traditional cultural values, under the influence of Western culture and globalisation they are now more likely to accept compliments.

Although the findings from Cai (2012) show that Chinese people have begun to adopt the acceptance strategy more frequently than the rejection strategy, the way Chinese EFL learners respond to compliments in English still lacks appropriateness. For instance, Cheng (2011) adopted role-play tasks to compare CRs produced by Chinese English-language learners and native English speakers. The Chinese EFL learners were found to use "thank you" or "thanks" to accept compliments in all of the situations. They had difficulty in using a wide range of CR strategies, whereas native English speakers used a variety of strategies, for example, expressing gladness (e.g. *Thanks. I am glad you liked it.*).

In brief, due to the complexity of CRs caused by various factors (e.g. different cultural values), it is important to incorporate instruction in L2 pragmatics to help Chinese EFL learners respond to compliments in English properly by drawing their attention to this speech act and providing them with meta-pragmatic information.

## 2.3 Research questions

In the context of Chinese EFL learners' compliment responses, this study aims to compare the effects of these two conditions: CMC-facilitated interaction alone and CMC-facilitated interaction combined with instruction in L2 pragmatics. The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) In terms of facilitating Chinese EFL learners' production of compliment responses, is combining CMC-facilitated interaction with instruction in L2 pragmatics more effective than CMC-based interaction alone?
- (2) What factors could influence Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic behaviours in terms of producing compliment responses?

## 3 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods design by analyzing quantitative data first and then dissecting qualitative data with the aim of further interpreting quantitative data. To answer research question 1 the study employed an experimental research design with two learner groups (i.e. a control group and a treatment group) and two instructional interventions. Quantitative data from the pre-intervention phase and the

post-intervention phase were compared. To answer research question 2 semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants from the treatment group to further explain the findings from the quantitative data. The interviews were also utilised to triangulate data.

### 3.1 Participants

The participants were 53 second-year students (28 females and 25 males) enrolled in a large public university in northern China. They were recruited from a university-level English speaking and listening course for non-English majors. Participants were aged from 19.2 to 22.3 years, with a mean age of 20.1. They were randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group. The control group comprised 27 students (14 females and 13 males, with a mean age of 19.9) who had only CMC-based interaction, while the treatment group consisted of 26 students (14 females and 12 males, mean age: 20.3) who had CMC-based interaction combined with instruction in compliment responses. All were categorized as intermediate-level English learners based on their scores in the speaking section of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exams.

In addition, a survey conducted before the experiment showed that there was no information regarding pragmatics in general or the targeted pragmatic feature (i.e. compliment responses) in the participants' English textbooks or course materials. The survey also demonstrated that none of the participants had lived in an English-speaking country.

Additionally, all participants reported that they were familiar and comfortable with computers, Skype, and the selected conversation topics. The two instructional sessions were taught by the researcher, who was also the interviewer in the semi-structured interviews.

A female native speaker of American English (age: 20.7) participated in this study as an interlocutor during the CMC-based interaction. She majored in Education and taught ESL for 1.5 years. All participants chatted with her individually over four sessions. All of the conversation topics (see Table 1) were about daily life. In the task, the interlocutor used different Skype account names across the four chat sessions to minimize the potential impact of familiarity on responding to compliments.

Table 1.

*The Conversation Topics of the Four Online Chat Sessions*

Chat session	Chat 1	Chat 2	Chat 3	Chat 4
Theme	Hobbies	Friends	Travel	College life

### 3.2 Materials

A video and handout were used as the main treatment materials in the study. The purpose of the video was to raise learners' awareness of the targeted pragmatic feature. This video comprised four dialogues. Some of the conversations contained appropriate compliment responses, and other dialogues encompassed less appropriate ones. Students worked in pairs and chose the more proper compliment responses. The context of each dialogue was about one of the four most common situations for people to offer compliments in English and Chinese, that is, appearance/clothing, personality, ability/work and possessions (Chen, 1993; Holmes & Brown, 1987).

With the aim of providing explicit metapragmatic explanations for the treatment group, the handout (see Appendix A) focusing on compliment response strategies was given to students. This handout listed 13 compliment response sub-strategies under three major categories: accepting, evading/deflecting and rejecting (Chen, 1993; Chen & Yang, 2010).

### 3.3 Procedures

There were four phases: the preparation stage, the pre-intervention stage, the intervention stage and the post-intervention stage. The control group went through three stages without the instructional intervention phase.

#### 3.3.1 Preparation stage

The researcher gave the interlocutor training with respect to the description of the task, time (up to 30 minutes) and techniques regarding naturally providing four positive comments during each chat (one compliment on each of these four aspects: appearance/clothing, personality, ability/work and possessions).

Additionally, each participant was asked to choose a weekly 30-minute time slot to chat with the interlocutor. In each chat session, participants interacted with the interlocutor individually via Skype at a designated time. Participants were also asked to prepare four photos (electronic version), which aligned with the four conversation topics. During each chat over Skype, they shared with the interlocutor one photo related to the topic.

#### 3.3.2 Pre-intervention stage

Participants in both treatment and control groups chatted with the interlocutor (appeared as four different individuals) via Skype. All chat sessions were carried out once a week for 30 minutes outside class. Each chat focused on one topic. The interlocutor was asked to initiate the conversation and pay four compliments (as described above) to each participant as naturally as possible throughout the chat. Thus, each student produced a total of eight compliment responses in the pre-intervention and post-intervention data, respectively. The interlocutor was asked to naturally respond to any compliment that she may receive from the students. Texts were saved immediately at the end of each chat session.

#### 3.3.3 Instructional intervention stage

For the treatment group, two consecutive instructional sessions took place in two class periods during Week 3 in the classroom. Each session lasted for 90 minutes. During the first instructional session,

- (1) students were asked to watch a video containing dialogues with appropriate and less appropriate compliment responses. Learners then chose the more appropriate examples. The aim of this step was to raise learners' awareness of the targeted pragmatic feature;
- (2) The instructor provided the treatment group with explicit meta-pragmatic explanations on the social functions and proper use of compliment responses in English. In the meantime, a hand-out concerning compliment response strategies with examples was offered to learners;
- (3) Cultural differences concerning compliment responses in Chinese and American culture were discussed in class;
- (4) Participants then worked in pairs and did a role-play activity to practice giving and replying to compliments;
- (5) The instructor also provided feedback to students.

The focus of the second instructional session was on reinforcing what students learned in the first lesson. After the instructor went over the previous session in relation to compliment response strategies, the students analyzed more examples of inappropriate and appropriate compliment responses. In addition, they rectified the inappropriate responses and wrote down how they would reply to the compliments. Subsequently, students worked in pairs and provided explanations for the revised compliment responses they came up with. In addition, the instructor provided feedback for students.



### 3.3.4 Post-intervention stage

This stage took place in the week following the instructional intervention. The treatment and control groups continued to perform the CMC tasks for two weeks.

In addition, at the end of Week 5, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with all participants from the treatment group were conducted to further interpret the findings from the quantitative data. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes and was carried out in the students' mother tongue to minimize any ambiguity. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## 4 Data Collection and Analysis

Before analyzing learners' performances, the interlocutor's dataset was checked. The average frequency of the compliments generated by the interlocutor was the same for the control group and the treatment group. Specifically, the interlocutor provided four compliments to each participant in each chat session. Hence, the influence from the interlocutor on learners' compliment responses was diminished.

In accordance with studies conducted by Chen (1993) and Chen and Yang (2010), all CRs were grouped into 13 sub-strategies, which were put under three broad categories: accepting, deflecting/evading and rejecting. Data analysis of CRs focused on two aspects: (1) appropriateness, (2) the variety of CR sub-strategies that were adopted. To assess these two criteria, an analytic rubric (see Table 2) was designed by revising an example provided by Ishihara (2010). The rubric was discussed with another experienced EFL instructor, and it was tested with a pilot study.

All of the data were coded separately and scored by two trained raters: two native English speakers who were experienced EFL instructors with master's degrees in Education. Inter-rater reliability gained by Pearson Correlations was .92 for the pre-intervention data and .91 for the post-intervention data.

Table 2.

*The Analytic Rubric for Rating Participants' Compliment Responses*

Score	Description
4	The student adopts <b>appropriate and an adequate number</b> of compliment response sub-strategies (e.g. explaining and returning) when responding to a compliment.
3	The student adopts <b>appropriate but an inadequate number</b> of compliment response sub-strategies when responding to a compliment.
2	The student adopts <b>some inappropriate</b> compliment response strategies (i.e. the deflecting/evading strategy) when responding to a compliment.
1	The student adopts <b>inappropriate</b> compliment response strategies (i.e. the rejecting strategy) when responding to a compliment.
0	The student does not respond to a compliment.

To answer the first research question regarding the two conditions: CMC-based interaction versus CMC-based interaction coupled with instruction in L2 pragmatics, an independent samples *t*-test was carried out to determine the effect of combining CMC with instruction on EFL learners' production of compliment responses. Additionally, Cohen's *d* was used to calculate effect sizes to determine the meaningfulness of the difference between the two learner groups.

To answer the second research question in relation to factors that could influence Chinese EFL

learners' pragmatic behaviours of compliment responses, qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were categorized into three themes: learners' L2 pragmatic knowledge, L1 influence on L2, and English-learning experience. The interview extracts cited in this study are English translations from their equivalents in Mandarin Chinese.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Quantitative data

Figure 1 illustrates the mean scores at the pre-instruction and the post-instruction stages for the two learner groups. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in the post-instruction mean scores between the treatment group ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ) and the control group ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ),  $t(51) = 4.656$ ,  $p = .011$ . The effect size is medium (Cohen's  $d = 0.5129$ ). These results suggested that compared with the control group, the treatment group that received instruction in L2 pragmatics made significantly more progress on producing compliment responses in terms of appropriateness and the variety of the employed CR sub-strategies. Thus, it can be seen that with the help of the teacher's instruction, EFL learners who lacked the authentic L2 environment were able to respond to compliments more appropriately in English.

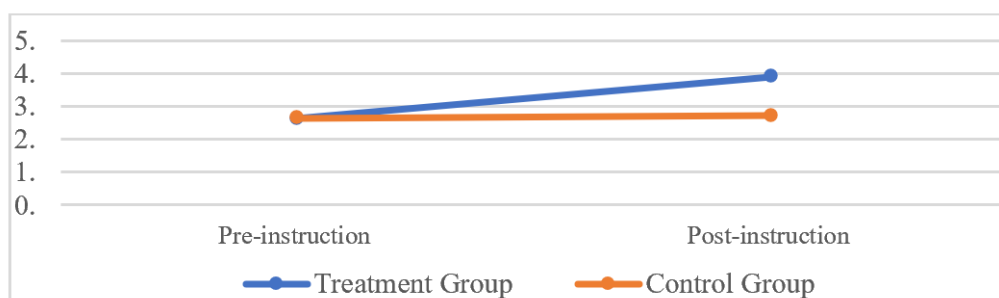


Figure 1. Mean scores at the pre- and post-instruction stages for the two groups

This finding suggests that the instruction helped learners become aware of the targeted pragmatic feature and gain more L2 pragmatic knowledge concerning how to reply to compliments more appropriately. Specifically, the explicit metapragmatic information, entailing three broad categories of compliment response strategies and 13 sub-strategies, not only made the targeted pragmatic feature more salient but provided learners with more pragmatic knowledge. With the explicit knowledge of the targeted pragmatic feature, learners from the treatment group were more likely to notice the feature in the authentic input (Schmidt, 1993). Moreover, the awareness-raising activities, such as form-comparison tasks and cross-linguistic comparisons, helped learners notice the differences between Chinese culture and American culture in terms of compliment responses. Also, these activities helped students further understand the pragmatic feature by being able to identify appropriate and inappropriate compliment responses in the examples.

If we take a closer look at the quantitative data, it is noteworthy that the data analysis at the pre-instruction stage and the post-instruction stage indicated that both learner groups adopted the accepting strategy more frequently than other strategies. This finding is consistent with studies conducted by Cai (2012) and Chen & Yang (2010), suggesting that due to the impact of Western culture and globalisation, Chinese people accepted compliments more often instead of declining them. Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the percentage of each compliment response strategy adopted by the treatment group and the control group respectively.

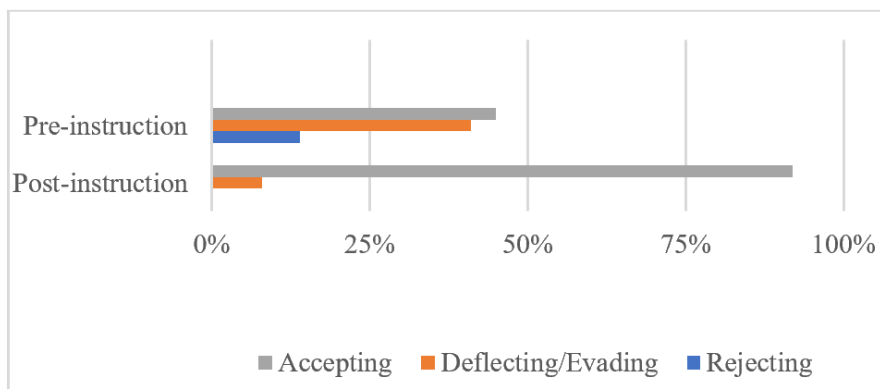


Figure 2. Percentage of each compliment response strategy that the treatment group adopted

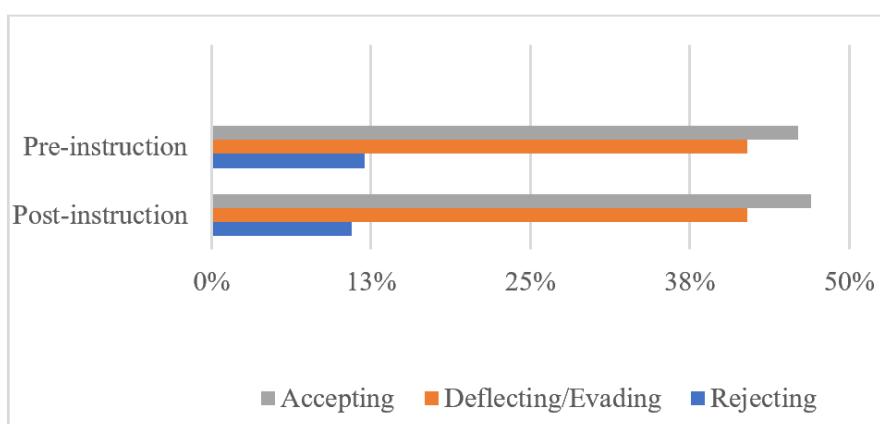


Figure 3. Percentage of each compliment response strategy that the control group employed

On further analysis of the quantitative data, even though both learner groups used the accepting strategy more frequently than the evading/deflecting and rejecting strategies, the way they implemented the accepting strategy differed greatly. After the instructional intervention, the mean scores for the treatment group and the control group were 3.92 and 2.72, respectively, indicating that the treatment group not only produced more appropriate compliment responses but adopted a wider variety of compliment response sub-strategies (e.g. explaining and returning), whereas the control group only resorted to the thanking sub-strategy by giving a simple response with “thank you” or “thanks”. This finding aligns with Cheng’s (2011) study suggesting that Chinese EFL learners have difficulty in executing a wide range of compliment response strategies, whereas native English speakers utilise a variety of strategies. After the intervention, the treatment group implemented various sub-strategies. For instance, one of the most frequently used sub-strategies for the treatment group was explaining, which accounted for 39% of their responses. Learners were able to give more detailed explanations after receiving positive comments, as was demonstrated by native English speakers in natural contexts (Cheng, 2011). The following are two excerpts from the CMC chats in the pre-instruction and the post-instruction phases from the same participant, who exhibited a typical change in adopting the explaining sub-strategy after the instructional intervention.

(1) Excerpt from the pre-instruction CMC chat, Week 1:

Interlocutor: *I love the picture that you sent to me. You look so good in the photo! I like the color of your dress.*

Participant A: *Thank you.*



(2) Excerpt from the post-instruction CMC chat, Week 5:

Interlocutor: *I love the picture that you shared with me! I really like the color of your hat.*

Participant A: *Thank you. My best friend gave it to me on my birthday. She picked my favorite color.*

In both excerpts, compliments were paid on the participant's appearance/clothing. Before the instruction, a typical way to respond to a compliment by most participants was a simple "thank you" or "thanks", as with the participant in the first excerpt. Even though this compliment response was not considered wrong or rude, the conversation usually came to an end abruptly when more information could be provided. This discontinuation in the flow of a conversation can potentially bring about silence, awkwardness or even misunderstanding.

In contrast, in the second excerpt, after receiving the instruction encompassing explicit meta-pragmatic explanations concerning a variety of compliment response strategies, the participant improved in replying to a compliment by giving explanations that helped the conversation continue to flow naturally. The contrast of the participant's responses before and after the instruction showed that CMC-facilitated interaction combined with instruction in L2 pragmatics was beneficial for learners to respond to compliments more appropriately.

In short, based on the results from the quantitative data, it can be seen that CMC combined with instruction in L2 pragmatics exerted a positive impact on improving learners' L2 pragmatic competence as they produced more appropriate compliment responses and adopted an adequate number of sub-strategies.

## 5.2 Qualitative data

An analysis of the qualitative data was conducted based on the treatment group's comments during the semi-structured interviews at the post-instruction stage. The analysis of the interviews is organized thematically under three categories: learners' L2 pragmatic knowledge, L1 influence on L2, and English-learning experience. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

### 5.2.1 L2 pragmatic knowledge

Almost two-thirds of the participants admitted that they lacked L2 pragmatic knowledge with regard to various compliment response strategies. This could explain their predominant use of a simple "thank you" or "thanks" as the accepting strategy at the pre-instruction stage. For example, one of the participants said: "*Saying 'thank you' is the only way that I know to respond to praise.*" Participants also commented further on the impact of not having sufficient L2 pragmatic knowledge, which could lead to miscommunication. One of them said: "*Before the instruction, I did not know any of the strategies except the 'thanking' one. I think that it is very important to have this kind of knowledge. Otherwise, native speakers will think that I am being impolite or not engaged in the conversation.*"

Additionally, of the 26 Chinese EFL learners interviewed, 23 indicated that they benefited a lot from the two instructional sessions. A participant commented: "*During the two classes the teacher explained very clearly about how to reply to praise. I became more informed of the different compliment response strategies. Now I feel more confident in using them in real life.*" Another student said: "*I really enjoyed the class activities where we chose more proper compliment responses. To be honest, I didn't pay much attention to replying to compliments before. The activities helped me realize the importance of providing appropriate compliment responses.*"

These comments support the two vital roles in L2 learning: explicit metapragmatic information and raising students' awareness (Schmidt, 1993, 2001). Clearly explaining metapragmatic information to learners makes the target pragmatic feature easier to be comprehended and mastered. And

consciousness-raising activities direct learners' attention to the targeted pragmatic feature and make it more salient.

### 5.2.2 L1 influence

This category goes hand in hand with the previous one: L2 pragmatic knowledge. It is because of learners' insufficient L2 pragmatic knowledge that they may depend upon the routines in their L1 pragmatics and transfer them to L2, for instance, rejecting and evading a compliment, which are the common ways to respond to compliments in Mandarin Chinese. About 30% of the interviewees implied that they were influenced by their L1 when responding to a compliment, especially before the instructional intervention.

*Rejecting a compliment is very common in Chinese culture, and doing so means that you are humble. That's why I do the same thing when people say nice things about me in English. I didn't realize that it was considered inappropriate in English until I took the two classes about how to reply to praise. (Ashley)*

*When people praise me in English, I always say 'so-so', which is translated as '一般' or '还可以' in Mandarin. It is a common formulaic expression in Chinese to respond to a compliment. (John)*

The example data above can be categorized into two types of communication transfer that Ellis (1994) proposed: strategic transfer and automatic translation. Ashley's comment was under the category of strategic transfer, which refers to learners' reliance on L1 for the comprehension and production of the L2 in a specific communicative context without being aware of the "non-transferability" (p. 338) of the feature. They relied on their understanding of compliment responses in their L1 and implemented the way how they normally responded to praise in Chinese to reply to compliments in English. As for John's response, it belongs to the other type of communication transfer: automatic translation, which occurs when fixed and automatised L1 routines surpass the consciousness of non-transferability (Ellis, 1994). John translated the fixed formulaic expression "一般" (meaning so-so) to English in response to a compliment.

### 5.2.3 English-learning experience

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was related to learners' English-learning experience. First, more than half of the interviewees acknowledged that none of their textbooks from primary school to college covered pragmatics (e.g. speech acts), and the only expression they learned to respond to praise was "thank you" or "thanks". A lack of emphasis on L2 pragmatics in English textbooks can hinder students' L2 pragmatic learning (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Boxer & Pickering, 1995); the paucity of meta-pragmatic information in textbooks can lead to EFL learners unaware of L2 pragmatic features (e.g. compliment responses), which can bring about "possible pragmatic failure in intercultural communication" (Ren & Han, 2016, p. 9). In addition to L2 textbooks, a third of the participants reported that their teachers' instructions were grammar-oriented, without incorporating L2 pragmatics. One student commented: "I hope that in the future our teachers will not just focus on grammar, and they will teach more practical lessons, like how to properly reply to a compliment or how to make a request." These data further indicate the necessity and importance of implementing instruction to make up for the drawbacks reflected in EFL learners' English-learning experience.

In summary, the findings from the qualitative data illustrate that learners' paucity of L2 pragmatic knowledge, the potential L1 influence on L2, a lack of authentic L2 input in textbooks, and the absence of instruction in L2 pragmatics present challenges for enhancing learners' L2 pragmatic competence. These factors may explain the inappropriate or less appropriate compliment responses in the quantitative

data. The findings further demonstrate that the instruction in compliment responses can help learners gain more L2 pragmatic knowledge, reduce the potential L1 influence on L2, and have more authentic input of the targeted pragmatic feature, which help develop learners' L2 pragmatic competence.

## **6 Discussion and Implications**

The first research question explored whether combining CMC-facilitated interaction with instruction was more effective than CMC-based interaction alone with respect to facilitating Chinese EFL learners' production of compliment responses. Results from the quantitative data demonstrated that the treatment group produced more appropriate compliment responses and adopted a wider range of compliment response sub-strategies just like native English speakers (Cheng, 2011). The remarkable improvement made by the treatment group lends support to previous literature confirming that CMC interaction coupled with instruction is conducive to L2 learners' pragmatic development (e.g. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Cunningham, 2016; Kakegawa, 2009). Furthermore, the findings have corroborated the benefits of providing explicit metapragmatic explanations and incorporating consciousness-raising activities. Explicit metapragmatic information makes the targeted pragmatic features more salient and less ambiguous (Schmidt, 1993, 2001). Awareness-raising activities help learners notice and understand the features that can be easily ignored in the input.

The second research question explored what factors could influence Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic behaviours. Findings from the qualitative data provided deeper insights into learners' thought processes and how these three aspects (i.e. learners' L2 pragmatic knowledge, L1 influence on L2, and English-learning experience) had an impact on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic choices. These themes derived from the interviews indicated that instruction in the targeted pragmatic feature helped learners gain more L2 pragmatic knowledge, reduce the potential L1 influence on L2, and have more authentic L2 input, which could ultimately enhance learners' L2 pragmatic competence.

To sum up, findings from the quantitative and qualitative data collectively reveal that authentic interaction with native speakers via CMC paired with instruction in L2 pragmatics was more effective in enhancing EFL learners' pragmatic competence compared with CMC-facilitated interaction alone. Appropriate compliment responses need not only an authentic L2 environment but also instruction in the targeted pragmatic feature. With insufficient pragmatic knowledge and a lack of attention to L2 compliment responses, it may take more time for learners to use compliment responses appropriately in real life.

Even though the study has limitations (e.g. the relatively small sample size), its implications have relevance for instructors teaching pragmatics in similar contexts. This study has provided useful suggestions regarding instruction in L2 pragmatics, especially for EFL instructors who do not have an authentic L2 environment and heavily focus on grammar. The fact that a positive effect was observed for the treatment group after the pedagogical intervention implies that combining CMC interaction with instruction is very effective. Hence, in order to help learners develop their L2 pragmatic competence, EFL instructors can incorporate the integration between CMC-facilitated interaction and instruction in L2 pragmatics into real-life teaching by providing an authentic L2 environment for learners via CMC-based devices, heightening students' awareness through warm-up activities, and equipping learners with explicit metapragmatic information.

## **7 Conclusion**

Focusing on EFL learners' compliment responses, this study investigated whether combining CMC interaction with instruction in L2 pragmatics was more effective for enhancing L2 learners' pragmatic

competence than CMC-facilitated interaction alone. Findings from the quantitative data suggest that the integration between CMC-based interaction and instruction can improve EFL learners' pragmatic performance through their producing more appropriate compliment responses and adopting a wider range of compliment response sub-strategies. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis indicates that this combination is more effective in that the explicit metapragmatic explanations and awareness-raising activities can help learners accumulate more L2 pragmatic knowledge, reduce potential L1 influence on L2, and have more exposure to authentic L2 input, which can ultimately enhance L2 learners' pragmatic competence.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

Handout provided for the treatment group: Compliment response strategies

#### *I. Accepting category*

##### **Sub-strategy 1: Thanking**

Examples: "Thank you!" or "Thanks!"

##### **Sub-strategy 2: Agreeing**

Examples: "I think so." or "Yeah, I like the color as well."

##### **Sub-strategy 3: Expressing gladness**

Example: "I'm glad that you liked it."

##### **Sub-strategy 4: Returning**

Example: "Your T-shirt looks great, too."

##### **Sub-strategy 5: Encouraging**

Example: "I'm sure that your presentation will be fantastic, too."

##### **Sub-strategy 6: Explaining**

Example: "It was a birthday present from my parents."

#### *II. Deflecting/evading category*

##### Sub-strategy 7: Offering

Example: "You can have it if you want."

##### **Sub-strategy 8: Joking:**

Example: "I make everything look good, right?"

##### **Sub-strategy 9: Questioning or doubting**

Example: "Really?"

##### **Sub-strategy 10: Deflecting/evading and explaining**

Example: "It's not new. I bought it at a thrift store."

#### *III. Rejecting category*

##### **Sub-strategy 11: Disagreeing:**

Examples: "No. I don't think so." or "I thought it looked a bit weird on me."

**Sub-strategy 12: Denigrating**

Example: "No. This watch has a lot of problems."

**Sub-strategy 13: Rejecting and explaining:**

Example: "I don't think so. The color is different from what I saw online."

**Appendix B**

## Questions for semi-structured Interviews

1. Please comment on your general experience of participating in this experiment. For example, what have you learned?

请你总体说说参加这个实验的体会，比如，你有哪些收获？

2. Did you find the teacher's instruction helpful? If so, why?

你认为老师的课堂讲授有帮助吗？如果有，为什么？

3. Have you learned things like how to respond to a compliment in your English textbooks or from your teachers before?

在你的英语教材里或者老师的英语课上，有没有涉及到像如何回复别人的赞美这样的内容呢？

4. In your eyes, is it necessary to incorporate content like how to reply to compliments into the existing curriculum?

在你看来，有没有必要把像怎样回复赞美这样的内容加入到现有的英语课程中？

5. How do you normally reply to a positive comment in Mandarin Chinese? Do you use the same way when you respond to a compliment in English?

别人用中文赞美了你，你通常会说什么？你会用同样的方式来回复英文的夸奖吗？

6. How do you feel when people praise you? Do you feel embarrassed, shy or glad?

当别人夸奖你的时候，你有什么感受？你觉得尴尬、害羞、还是高兴呢？

7. In your opinion, why is it difficult for Chinese EFL students to appropriately reply to compliments in English?

在你看来，对中国同学来说，为什么用英文恰当地回复对方的赞美有一定的困难呢？

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