A Corpus-Based Comparative Study of Malaysian ESL Learners and Native English Speakers in Compliment Patterns

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Abstract

Even though many language learners are concerned with to master target proficiency, owing to years of meticulous studies, immersion in TL environments, access to multimedia and educational amenities, in addition to availability of affluent sources or merely thanks to God-given language talents, many will seldom take off from conspicuous learner-language and might never produce authentic language either in speech or in writing. In recent years, however, with corpus linguistics gaining currency in academia, a new light has begun to glimmer at the end of the tunnel that corpus-based materials and data-driven language instructions can actively and consciously engage learners and acquaint them with what authentic language is rather than what the text books prescribe it to be. Already, a growing body of research has been dedicated to data-driven learning across the world to survey the effectiveness of incorporating corpora in ELT. As such, the purpose of this research is to investigate the patterns of compliments in writings of the Malay ESL students and compare the findings with native English speakers. The results showed that the Malay ESL learners used a rather different number of syntactic patterns compared to the English native speakers

and their frequency of patterns outgrew those of the natives.

Keywords: Compliment patterns, corpora, Malaysian ESL learners, Native English speakers

1. Introduction

The study of language via corpus has been in practice recently. Therefore, one of the recently developed subjects in the linguistic researches is corpora (Furko, 2016).O'Keeffe et al (2007) are of the opinion that a corpus is a compilation of written or spoken texts which is amassed on a computer. Corpora have been accessible for linguistic researches from the 1990s. In this regard, Wilhelm Kaeding and his colleagues generated a corpus of 11 million German words manually about a decade ago. In the 19th Century, a dictionary based on a gathering of 150,000 quotations pertinent to well-known authors was developed by Dr Johnson. Though a number of these studies may only painstakingly be considered as corpus-based in modern terms, they are undoubtedly some sort of corpus-based research (Belz & Vyatkina, 2008).

It should be mentioned that modern corpus linguistics is mainly electronic or computerized and, consequently, employs greatly authoring software to examine huge bodies of texts. These texts, in turn, run to millions in order to separate regularity regularities, irregularities, particular characteristics, rules, collocations, etc.   (Hunston, 2012). The period of modern corpus linguistics commenced with the work of Charles Fries in 1980s via his collection of spoken English through recording 250,000 words of telephone conversations. However, the corpus had to wait a lot longer time until it came into its own years when descriptive linguists and some moderate generative grammarians commenced to value the true worth of corpora in the study of the English language (Johansson, 2015; Römer, 2009).

Corpora are outstanding sources to verify the falsifiability, totality, ease, merit, and impartiality of any linguistic hypotheses. When the computerized corpora became accessible, researchers soon started to utilize them in order to make many novel findings. A number of these discoveries opposed and managed to invalidate pervious theories and assumptions about the nature and behaviour of the English grammar that were in common parlance in pre-corpus linguistics (Mauranen, 2014).

Since the early days of corpus linguistics, there has been an interest in using corpora as a means of exploring functional and contextual aspects of language use (Yoon, 2008). Pragmatics is concerned with meaning in context. It is defined as the ability to use language appropriately in a social context (Taguchi, 2009: 1). Because speakers can mean more than they say, pragmatics is "the art of analysis of the unsaid" (Ruhlemann, 2011, p.629). Due to the massive dependence of pragmatic phenomena on context, corpora, as a relatively contextualized environment, have been seen suitable by many scholars for use in pragmatic studies. The dominant area of investigation within L2 pragmatics has been the speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, Granger et al., 2015). Speech acts are the minimal units of speech. They are linguistic actions or utterances that serve a function in communication. Speakers perform or act some functions by uttering something through words such as requesting, apologizing, advising, suggesting, promising, complimenting and so on. The realization and function of speech acts may differ from culture to culture (Farashaiyan & Muthusamy, 2017).

Since non-native speakers' ability to perform speech acts appropriately in a given speech event is an indication of their pragmatic competence, it is important to understand how they perform speech acts in a second language (Tongqing, 2014). Among a variety of speech acts,

compliment is less studied and highly culture-specific. Compliment by definition is "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "goodness" (e.g., possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes, 1988:12). Research findings (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1986; Olshtain, 1991, to name a few) have exhibited that compliments are highly formulaic, both in their syntactic form and in their lexical items that carry positive evaluation.

Cross-cultural differences in how polite speech acts are realized can result in misunderstandings and even judgements about the sincerity of the speakers from another culture (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016).Therefore, it is important to investigate such differences in an objective way, using naturally occurring data (Farashaiyan & Muthusamy, 2016). There is also a shortage of information on how speech acts are actually used and performed in everyday communication, and it is argued that better information on actual use can benefit pedagogy (Simpson & Mendis, 2013). Thus, incorporation of research results based on natural language use data into pedagogy is thus urgently needed (Cheng, 2015).

Methodologically speaking, pragmatics research has used mostly discourse completion task (DCT) and questionnaires in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics studies. However, they have been criticized for providing limited context (Zuskin 2013), and for eliciting a minimal amount of linguistic features (Sasaki 2008, Yuan 2011), a narrow range of semantic formulas (Rose, 2004), and biased and aberrant responses (Wolfson et al., 2009). In addition, DCT methodology perpetuates the focus on a closed set of speech act types identified either by default (e.g., the DCT was designed to elicit requests; therefore, participants' responses must be requests), or by specific linguistic features predetermined to signal a specific speech act (e.g., the use of *I'm sorry* must mean that the elicited speech act is an apology). Because of these methodological shortcomings, L2 researchers have called for further examination of naturally occurring language data (Hyland et al., 2015; Furko, 2016).

Most studies were conducted in EFL contexts (Aijmer 1996, Koester 2002; Mauranen, 2014; Callies, 2016). Therefore, with the aforementioned reasons and in response to the need for L2 pragmatic research on naturally occurring data especially in ESL settings, the present study aims to provide a better understanding of a particular aspect of pragmatics: the speech act of compliment by non-native speakers of English based on naturally occurring data from a corpus. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to describe the frequency and percentage of compliment patterns in the written corpus of Malay ESL learners and to compare the patterns of learner' patterns with those by English native speakers. Based on the objective, the research question of this study is:

What compliment patterns do Malaysian ESL learners use comparing to English native speakers?

2. Methodology

This study adopted a contrastive learner corpus approach to examine data from non-native English speakers' corpus, Malaysian Learner English Corpus and a native English speaker

corpus. In planning the collection of the texts in this study, a number of decisions were made beforehand. Even though the native corpus would have contained both speech and writing, the researcher considered the subjects' writings. A number of variables were controlled for the entire corpus, such as the age and gender of the participants.

2.1 Participants

130 Malaysian university students of English literature provided the researcher with invaluable written data to be analyzed for the authenticity of the compliment patterns. Almost all of the students had taken a course in letter writing. They were in the same age range and all of them were female.

2.2 Materials

Two sets of corpus, a nonnative speaker (NNS) and a native speaker (NS) corpus were used in this study. The NNS corpus is a collection of electronic essays written by English senior students from several universities in Malaysia. The topics were concerned with contemporary social issues pertinent to the complimenting behavior. The total number of words in the NNS corpus is 45,500 words (100 essays in total). As a reference, native-speaker corpus, the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) was utilized. The LOCNESS is a corpus of native English essays written by British pupils and university students and American university students, which was compiled and has been widely used by the researchers. For the present study, only those essays collected from the American university students were utilized to ensure the comparability with the NNS corpus. The total number of words in the NS corpus is 82,500 words.

2.3 Research Instrument

Corpus condordancer, Ant Conc 3.2.2., a powerful software package containing several analytical and statistic tools was used. This tool was used in order to retrieve a specified search word or sentence in all the extracted texts.

2.4 Data collection Procedure and Analysis

The data were collected from the Malay students as a non-native speaker corpus from some universities for a period of six months, July to December 2016. They were given a subject to write an essay and after one week, the essays were emailed by them to the researchers . For the analysis of the data, all the tokens of each compliment pattern were extracted from each of the two corpora, using a concordancing program. For the concordancing program, this research utilized the WordSmith Tools (version 3.0). Concordancing program captures all occurrences of the target word or phrase from the corpus and show them in context. The concordance output was then closely examined in order to remove other patterns except the compliment pattern.

Then, all the patterns of were categorized based on their grammatical classes such as verbs, adverbs, nouns and adjectives. Finally, the two corpora, i.e., the Non-Native Speaker (Malaysian Learners) and the Native Speaker (American students) were compared and contrasted in terms of the ranges and frequencies of the compliment patterns.

3. Results

In order to answer the research question of the study, the data were analyzed via condordance program. The results show that the Malay students used six syntactic patterns that were frequently occurred in their writings. These patterns were shown as a list starting with the most frequent compliment pattern in non-native speakers (Malay students) corpus. In addition, the percentage of compliment patterns used by native speakers is also shown.

Table 1. The first major compliment patterns used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 1	Non-native	Native
YOU (intens) V NP (Adv) (+Variation)	42%	18%

For example: You sympathized with me.
         You know principle and techniques of letter writing.
         You talk to your friends in a gentle manner.		

The first most frequent pattern used by non-native speakers (Malay students) was subject+ verb+ Noun phrase (Adverb). Therefore, this syntactic pattern comprised 42% of the total compliments produced by non-native speakers. In contrast, 18% of native-speakers made use of this pattern which forms about twenty percent of the whole percentage. However, based on the data, some variants were observed which occurred with diverse frequencies.
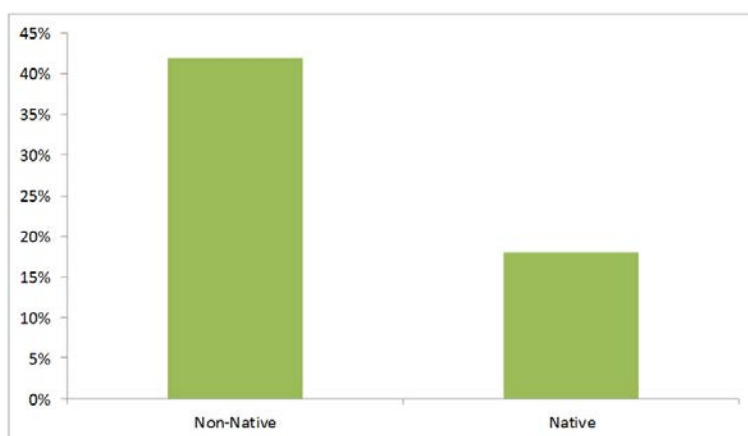

Figure 1. The comparison of NNS and NS in the first most frequent compliment pattern

The above figure shows the percentage of the first pattern which is produced by both NNS and NN. As it is clear, non-native speakers made use of this pattern about two times more than native speakers

Table 2. The second major compliment pattern used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 2	Non-native	Native

NP BE/SEEM/GET/LOOK Adj	21%	38%
For example: You seemed very active. *Your promises are reliable.*		

Pattern 2 is the second major pattern in this series which were produced by non-native speakers. This pattern was based on four copula verbs (be, get, seem, look, etc.) in addition to a number of diverse adjectives to be formed.   As the above table shows, contrary to the first pattern, more percentage (38%) of native speakers made use of this pattern while less number of non-native speakers (21%) complimented other person by using this pattern.
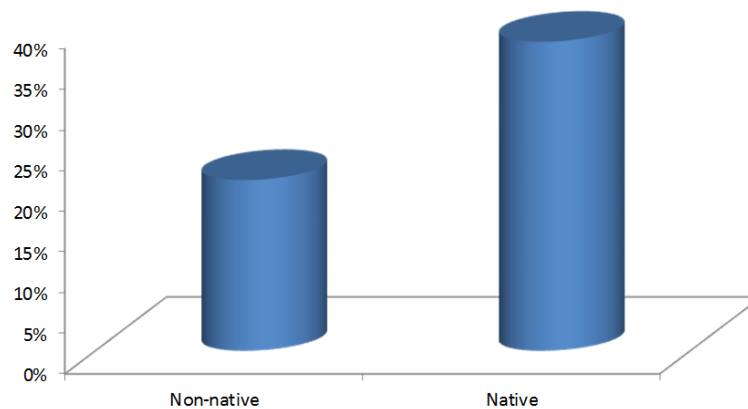

Figure 2. The comparison of NNS and NS in the second most frequent compliment pattern

The above figure illustrates that native speakers complimented other persons via this pattern about two times more than non-native speakers

Table 3. The third major compliment patterns used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 3	Non-native	Native
NP IS (a) (intens) Adj N	17%	7%

For example: Your job is a holy one.
        Affection and devotion are a few samples of your outstanding
        character.		

Pattern 3 is the third main pattern made by about 17% of the non-native speakers. This pattern comprises Noun phrase + to be verbs+ a (intensifier) + adjective+ noun. The adjective expresses the positive evaluation or compliment towards another person. On the other hand, only 7% of native speakers utilized this pattern in order to make the compliment.
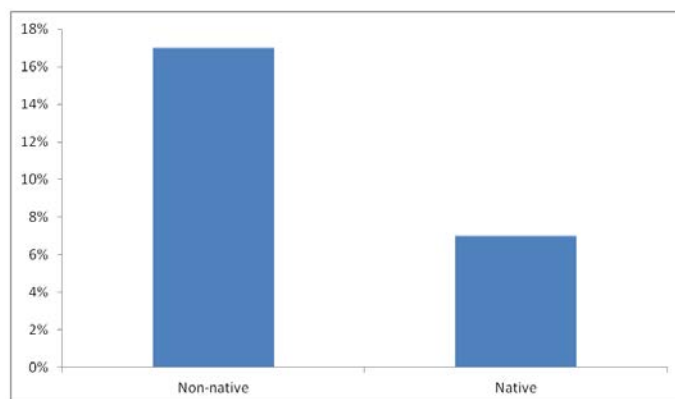
Figure 3. The comparison of NNS and NS in the third most frequent compliment pattern

Figure three shows the comparison of NNS and NS in the third most frequent compliment patterns. As it can be observed, non-native speakers produced this pattern about two and half times more than native speakers

Table 4. The fourth major compliment patterns used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 4	Non-native	Native
I (REALLY) LIKE/LOVE NP	13%	18%
For example: We really like you. I always remember you.		

With regard to pattern 4, the diversity was more than what is expected. The head pattern is subject+ (really) + like/love/ remember+ noun phrase. In addition, there are other variants of this pattern in the non-native speakers' data. This pattern comprised only 13% of the whole collected data by non-native speakers. In this systematic pattern, the verb carries the positive evaluative information. By contrast, 18% of native speakers made their compliments through this pattern which is more in comparison with non-native speaker data.
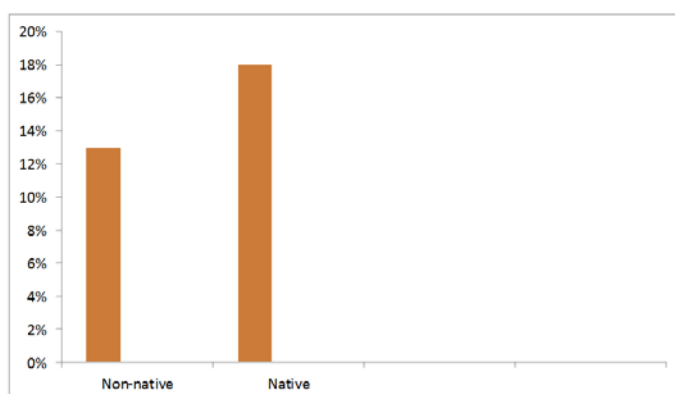

Figure 4. The comparison of NNS and NS in the fourth most frequent compliment patterns

As the above figure demonstrates, higher percentage of native speakers made use of pattern four compared to the non-native speakers

Table 5. The fifth major compliment pattern used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 5						Non-native	Native
NP	V	(DET)	(intens)	Adj	N	4.3%	14%
For example: You spent most of your dear time for me. You gave me useful experiences.							

Regarding the pattern 5, it seems that the students used this pattern to comment on actions taken during the teaching process. The pattern is subject (noun phrase)+ verb+ (intensifiers)+ adjective + noun. The actions were articulated with verbs such as give, spend, employ, choose and teach. In this pattern, more percentage of native speakers (14%) articulated this pattern in comparison with the non-native speakers (4.3%). Therefore, it can be said that there is not different variations of this pattern.
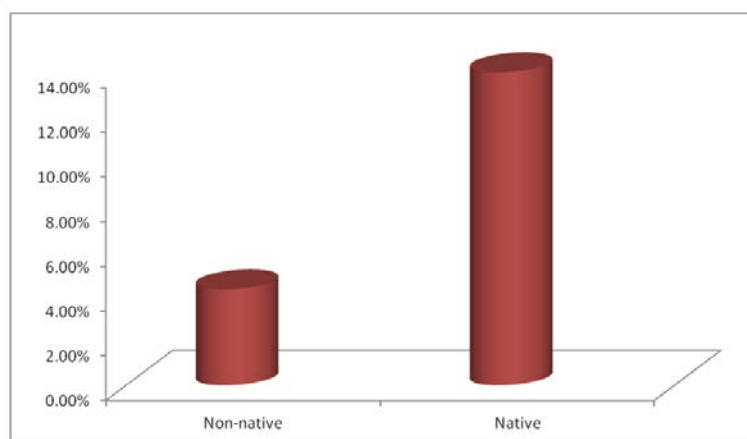

Figure 5. The comparison of NNS and NS in the fifth most frequent compliment patterns

Figure 5 illustrates the comparison of non-native speakers and native speakers with regard to the fifth compliment pattern. As it is shown, natives used this pattern more than non-natives.

Table 6. The sixth major compliment pattern used by non-native speakers and native speakers

Pattern 6			Non-native	Native
NP	INTEREST/HELP	Pronoun	2.7%	5%
For example: Your good management interested me. Your way of teaching helped me a lot.				

Pattern 6 is exceptionally different from other patterns to some extent. This pattern consists of noun phrase+ verbs (interest/ help/ assist/ benefit) + pronoun. This pattern is identified by a semantically positive verb. The above table shows that more percentage of native speakers (5%) produced this pattern compared to non-native speakers. Only about 2.7 % of non-native speakers made use of this pattern.
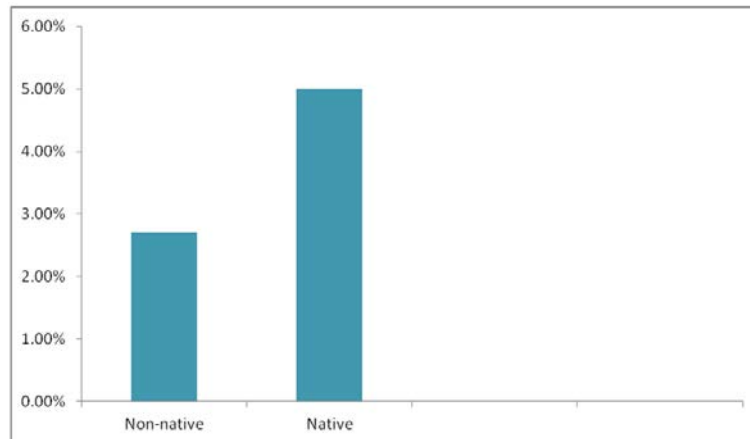

Figure 6. The comparison of NNS and NS in the sixth most frequent compliment patterns

As figure 6 shows, natives articulated this pattern about two times more than non-natives. Therefore, it can be said that as a whole, both group of speakers did not have sufficient knowledge to produce this pattern since this pattern comprises the least used pattern among other patterns.

In opposition to initial expectations, the Malay speakers made use of a rather diverse number of syntactic patterns compared to the English native speakers. Therefore, their range and frequency of patterns outgrew those of the American speakers.
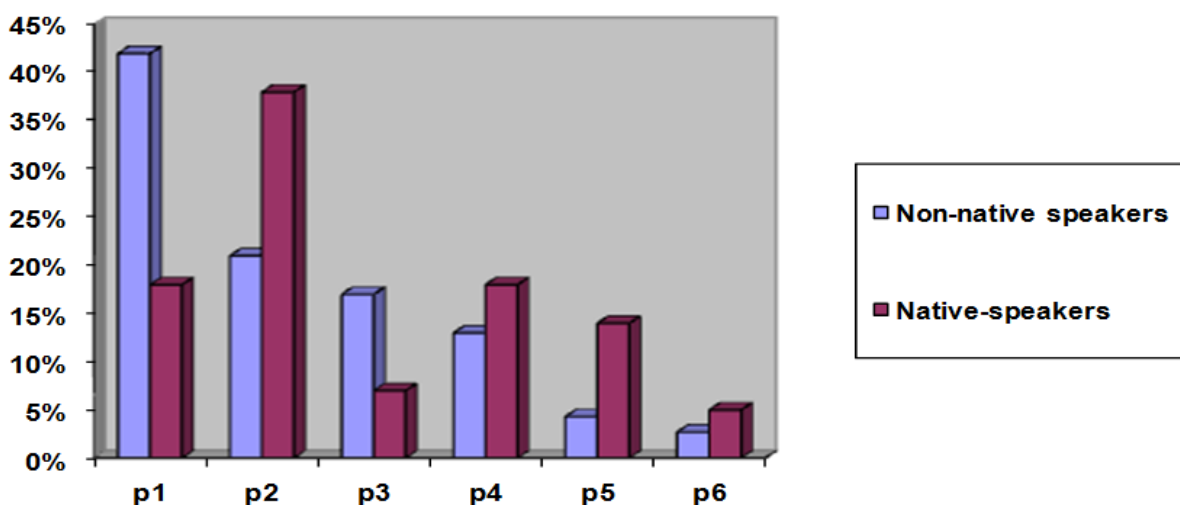

Figure 7. The comparison of native speakers and non-native speakers in all compliment patterns

As figure 7 demonstrates, the most frequent Malaysian complimentary patterns ranged up to six. While as the findings show, only three patterns were the most frequent in the native speakers' usage. As a whole, natives outreached four patterns than non-natives. Non-native speakers outperformed the native-speakers only in patterns one and three.

4. Discussion

The results showed that the Malay ESL students used a rather different number of syntactic compliment patterns than the English native speakers and their frequency of patterns outgrew those of the Americans. The research findings, therefore, played fast and loose with the research question for which it was hypothesized that non-native production would be as formulaic and frequent as that of English native speakers. The data left a surviving margin for this hypothesis by providing evidence that the more-than-normally wide range of compliments was significantly formulaic: approximately 76% of the compliments were expressed in only three groups of patterns, which was 21 percent greater than the corresponding data produced by English native speakers. It can be discussed that a large number of learners tend to master certain patterns and lexical combination at the stake of leaving others under-developed or ignored. In writing, in particular, though structures and tenses render themselves more readily to mastery by non-native learners, genuine patterns may remain painfully far-fetched (Biber &   Conrad, 2016).

The analyzed data connotes that the non-native speakers appeared to be more willing to load their compliments on action verbs and verbs followed by infinitives rather than on static verbs which were more common practice among native speakers. In technical terms, the product is the major deciding factor in addressing compliments to recipients rather than the personality and the appearance of the addressee. (Mauranen, 2014). The selection of appropriate topics and the use of compliments to perform additional functions depend on factors which are relevant to developing socio-pragmatic competence. The major focus is how native speakers select appropriate compliments in particular social contexts, cultural beliefs and social values. This becomes a question of who compliments whom in which contexts and on what topics (Tongqing, 2014).

In summary, it seems that the language learners in this study appeared to be considerably unaware of the social norms and codes of English complimenting which native speakers observe in everyday interactions. This is, to a large extent, instantiated by the lack of authentic English examples in course books and the inefficient instructions English learners receive (Callie & Götz, 2015).

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the formulaic nature of Malaysian compliments initially confirmed the fact that Malaysian learners used more varied syntactic patterns and more diverse adjectives than native speakers. Therefore, although non-native speakers' production contained changes at syntactic, social and lexical levels of language, the syntactic level was obviously liable to greatest unconformities with native production.

It should be mentioned that producing appropriate compliments and identifying them accurately is an aspect of communicative competence which may differ in a variety of forms from one culture to another. The markedly different patterns of linguistic form and function in expressing compliments indicate that there is no single set of linguistic features to be emphasized for all students, once they have mastered the rudiments of English grammar (Cobb, 2013). Rather, it is important to teach the linguistic characteristics and functions of particular target registers, so that students would be able to control the language structures they encounter in actual discourse and to adjust their language use appropriately for different registers (Schauer & Adolphs, 2016). Belz and Vyatkina (2014) underline how such activities can be learner- rather than teacher-directed with appropriate corpora providing a self-access resource from which learners can derive information for themselves.

If we can strengthen the students' awareness of the fact that they will be inevitably influenced by their first language on the path of achieving native-like proficiency in their second language, their development can potentially be much faster (Koester, 2015). Therefore, the data from the corpus of students' own writing can be employed to help them gain a better understanding of different structures and therefore, their motivational effect is increased.

This research has some implications for ESL teachers, students, materials developers and textbook writers. Teachers can make use of learner corpora to develop teaching strategies and techniques that can give them an accurate depiction of how their students are actually using the language. Therefore, they can incorporate the information into textbooks and lesson plans. In addition to using information from learner corpora to develop teaching strategies for learners of English, students themselves can study corpora to help them learn about English language and different native and non-natives' syntactic structures. Moreover, they are exposed to real examples of language usage rather than the contrived examples often found in textbooks. Materials developers and textbook writers can make use of real examples of language usage in order to develop authentic and pedagogical materials and curriculum design for language learners.

Like other studies, this research has some limitations. First, the number of non-native speakers was confined to 100 Malay students. Therefore, in order to confirm the results of this study, it is necessary to conduct other studies with a larger number of subjects. Moreover, this study was done with ESL learners as non-native speakers. Other studies can be conducted in other ESL settings or include EFL learners. Third, another topic for further study is the use of other tasks such as role-play or discussions. Finally, studies on other less studied speech acts can be conducted.

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