

AUE Students' Practice of the Speech Act of Compliment

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Abstract

This paper investigated AUE students' practice of the speech act of compliment while they were communicating in English; it also investigated the most common positive adjectives adopted by them and the effect of the topic of the situation on the compliments. The participants of this study were 15 female and 15 male students at AUE. To gather the required data for the study, the researcher designed a questionnaire in the format of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which had eight situations, provoking the speech act of compliment. The results of the study revealed that the factor of gender among AUE students had almost no effect on their compliment forms, on the adopted positive adjectives, nor on their interest in the topic of the compliment. The participants did not compliment properly: They ignored some of the most common forms of compliment in English, they used a lot of compliments that are not common in English, and they used jokes and Arabic words transcribed in English to convey compliments. The most two frequent positive adjectives adopted by the participants were 'nice' and 'good'. Finally, the results revealed that the topic of the setting was not a crucial factor to enhance the participants to convey the compliments. In conclusion, the researcher recommended that the speech act of compliment must be taken into consideration while teaching English language courses to enable students to use them more properly.

Key words: AUE (American University in the Emirates), sociolinguistic competence, speech acts, the speech act of compliment

Introduction

Communicating through English language is not satisfied through mastering grammatical competence. This competence is considered the first basic component of the communicative competence which is the ultimate goal for learning a language. Several linguists such as Canale (1983) describe four main components of this communicative competence: Linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. This study deals with one of these components which is sociolinguistic, defined by Thomas (1983) as the ability to communicate efficiently with others beyond the level of grammar. The sociolinguistic competence can be achieved through different channels; one of them is through mastering the different functions of the language or what the professional linguists call speech acts of the language such as apology, greeting, and compliment. This study focused only on the speech act of compliment "which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristics, skills, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes, 1986, 485). According to Matsuoka (2003) "we generally exchange compliments as an effort to keep relationships solid". Besides, Boyle (2005, 356) mentioned five reasons behind compliments "1- to avoid hurting other people's feelings; 2- to give people some hope and encouragement; 3- to protect oneself from more powerful people; 4- because they want other people to compliment them too; 5- it's encouraging".

As it is very fundamental to master the speech acts of English language to be able to communicate efficiently, the researcher has found that it is interesting to study and investigate the speech act of compliment at American University in the Emirates (AUE). English language is the main medium of instruction at (AUE). Students communicate in English; they need to learn how to express themselves functionally in different situations that they encounter in their daily life at the university. Failing to do so may cause misunderstandings and communication breakdowns between the students themselves, on one hand, and the students and their teachers, on the other hand.

Literature Review

There are a number of studies conducted to analyze the speech act of compliment in English language and many others conducted to analyze second or foreign language learners' practice of this speech act. Manes and Wolfson (1981) listed down the most common American compliments, putting them in the following nine formulas: 1- 'NP is/looks (really) ADJ', 2- 'I (really) like/love NP', 3- 'PRO is (really)a ADJ NP', 4- 'You V a (really) ADV NP', 5- 'You V (NP) (really) ADV', 6- 'You have (a) ADJ NP!', 7- 'What (a) ADJ NP!', 8- 'ADJ NP!', and 9- 'Isn't NP ADJ!' The two researchers identified two compliment topics: 'Appearance/possession' which is the most common topic in the compliments in American English and 'ability/accomplishments'. Nelson, El Bakary and Al Batal (1993) studied Egyptian and American compliments using both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. They concluded that that both Egyptian and American compliments tended to be adjectival. Kim (2001) revealed that Korean and Japanese EFL learners adopted their native language compliment forms while they were communicating in English; they did not adopt the common English language compliment forms. Matsuoka (2003) investigated the influence of gender on explicitness of proffering compliments; he found that the explicitness ratings for male participants were higher than female participants, and this result is contradicting the results of the previous studies. Al Falasi (2007) studied the pragmatic transfer from Arabic into English

among Arabic learners of English while they were responding to compliments. The researcher found that the learners did not produce target-like compliment responses; they adopted some Arabic expressions to respond to the compliments in English as they perceive their native norms as being universal and not language specific. And Abdul Sattar and Lah (2008) investigated Iraqi students' compliment responses in English, and if pragmatic transfer can occur. They found that the participants adopted the Arabic expressions to respond to the compliments in English; this result was explained by learner's lack of knowledge of different sociolinguistic rules among cultures. In this paper, the researcher tried to enhance the sociolinguistic competence literature by studying AUE students' practice of the speech act of compliment.

Questions of the study

As the purpose of this paper is to study AUE students' practice of the speech act of compliment, three research questions will be answered:

- 1- To what extent is the English speech act of compliment practiced properly by AUE female and male students?
- 2- What are the most common positive adjectives adopted by AUE female and male students?
- 3- To what extent does the topic of the situation enhance AUE female and male students to convey compliments?

Methodology

To assure validity of the study, the researcher reviewed the related literature, adopting the most common forms of compliment in English language; these forms were adopted in the analysis sheet which was used to analyze the responses of the participants for the different situations in the Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Moreover, to achieve intra-rater reliability, the researcher herself repeated the analysis of the data collected from the DCT after three weeks; and to achieve inter-rater reliability, another analyst who is a holder of Ph.D in Curricula and Methods of Teaching English Language was asked to analyze the data again.

Participants of the study

The participants of this study were 15 female and 15 male students at AUE. They were chosen randomly from different colleges at this university: College of Business Administration (COBA), College of Media and Mass Communication (CMMC), College of Computer Information Technology (CCIT), College of Fine Arts and Design (CFAD), and College of Law (CLAW). The participants were not native speakers of English as they learned English as a second or foreign language; they had different Arabic nationalities such as Emirati, Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Sudanese.

Instrument of the study

To gather the required data about AUE students' practice of the speech act of compliment, the researcher designed a questionnaire in the format of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The questionnaire had eight situations which provoked the speech act of compliment; all of the situations can be encountered by the students at AUE's campus. Some of the situations are about the topic (appearance /possession) and some about the topic (ability / performance). The questionnaire was designed in a way to alternate equally between the two topics (See the

appendix). Table 1 and Table 2 show the situations that are about (appearance/possession) and (ability/ performance) respectively.

Table 1. Compliment situations that are about (appearance/ possession)

Situation 1	You are at the car parking and notice that your friend has bought a new luxurious car. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her / him ?
Situation 2	Your classmate is dressed up. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?
Situation 3	Your friend has got the highest tech mobile. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?
Situation 4	Your friend has a new nice haircut. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

Table 2. Compliment situations that are about (ability/ performance)

Situation 1	Your friend has just finished her/his wonderful presentation at the class. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?
Situation 2	You are at the orientation session for the freshmen, and you meet a new friend. You are really impressed with her / his suggestions and questions . What would you say to compliment her/him?
Situation 3	You are at AUE Carnival and Global Day, you like the traditional food prepared by your Palestinian friend. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?
Situation 4	Your classmate has got an 'A' in the course. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

Results and discussion

The first question of the study was: 'To what extent is the English speech act of compliment practiced properly by AUE female and male students?' To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the compliment forms used by the participants in the (DCT). The frequencies and percentages of the compliment forms were calculated. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the compliment forms practiced by AUE female and male students

Gende r	NP is/look s	I (really) like/lov	PRO is (really) a ADJ	You V a (reall	You V (NP) (reall	You have (a)	Wha t (a) ADJ	ADJ NP!	Isn' t NP	Total
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	(really) ADJ		e NP		NP		y) ADV NP		y) ADV		ADJ NP!		NP!				AD J!			
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Female	15	23	22	33	5	8	0	0	2	3	1	1.5	1	1.5	2	3	0	0	66	100
Male	10	15	10	15	17	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	4	0	0	65	100
Total	25	19	32	24	22	17	0	0	2	1.5	1	1	2	1.5	4	3	0	0	131	100

Table 3 shows that the participants used only 131 compliments that can be classified under the nine most common compliment forms in English Language; females and males used almost the same number of compliments, but each group had prominent forms that were different from the other. The female participants used the second most common compliment form in the English language which is 'I (really) like/love NP', e.g., 'I like the new haircut!' most as they used it 22 times with a percentage of 33%; next, they used the eighth most common compliment form which is 'ADJ NP!', e.g., 'Good job!' 20 times with a percentage of 30%. Third, they used the most common compliment form which is 'NP is/looks (really) ADJ', e.g., 'Your dress is very nice' with a frequency of 15 and a percentage of 23%. The third, fifth, sixth, and seventh compliment forms were adopted with small frequencies and percentages; respectively, they are (5-8%), (2-3%), (1-1.5%), and (1-1.5%). Two forms were not tackled at all which were the fourth and ninth common compliment forms in English language.

Regarding the male participants, they used the eighth most common compliment form in the English language which is 'ADJ NP!', e.g., 'Nice presentation' most as they used it 27 times with a percentage of 42%; next, they used the third most common compliment form which is 'PRO is (really)a ADJ NP', e.g., 'It's delicious food!' 17 times with a percentage of 26%. Third, they used the first and second most common compliment forms which are 'NP is/looks (really) ADJ', e.g., 'Your haircut looks nice!' and 'I (really) like/love NP', e.g., 'I loved the food' with the same frequency and percentage which are 10 and 15% respectively. The seventh form was adopted once and the fourth, fifth, sixth, and ninth compliment forms not at all.

On the other hand, the participants of the study used a lot of compliments that cannot be classified under any of the most common compliment forms in English language. The female participants used the following expressions to convey compliments: 'My dear', 'My friend', 'Nice to meet you!', 'Wow!', 'Where did you get it from?', 'How do you make this?', 'Keep it up', 'Congratulations!'. One female student adopted the joke as a way to compliment by saying: 'I hope it falls down and gets broken!'; and definitely this is not the proper way to compliment neither in English language nor in Arabic. Moreover, some female students used Arabic words transcribed in English to convey compliments such as: 'Mashallah' which means 'God's well'; it is an Islamic expression used to indicate that everything good happens to a person is because of God's well and 'Mabrook' which means congratulations. In fact, this goes with Abdul Sattar and Lah's study (2008); they found that the Iraqi participants used the Arabic expressions to respond to the compliments in English; their result is explained by learner's lack of knowledge of different sociolinguistic rules among cultures. And this what Thomas (1983) called pragmatic failure; this failure usually occurs when learners transfer their first language pragmatic rules into the second language, so they are perceived as being odd or even rude .

Regarding the male participants, they adopted the following compliments that cannot be classified under any of the most common compliment forms in English language: 'Wow!', 'I hope I can get one!', 'Keep it up!', 'I hope I do the same', 'From where did you get it?', 'Congratulations!', 'Who learned you how to cook?', 'Yummy!', 'Good luck!', 'When will you do for us a dinner?', 'It will be my honor to become one of your friends!', 'Wow! You are the first to have it!', 'I wish you the best', 'All of the students are jealous because of your presentation!'. Furthermore, three male students adopted the jokes as a way to compliment by saying: 'From whom did you cheat?', 'Who did it for you?', 'Are you dating someone? We are not in the Dubai Mall!', 'Congratulations for your new mobile. Next time buy me one!', 'You are very smart. Help me in some exams to get an 'A', and 'Wow! Your phone is so nice. Can I take it?'. As mentioned earlier this is not a proper way to convey compliments. It is obvious that those participants wanted to compliment others regardless of the uttered words. Al Falasi (2007) mentioned that compliments in the UAE are no more than a routine and they are perceived to be insincere in many contexts.

The second question of the study was: 'What are the most common positive adjectives adopted by AUE female and male students?'. To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the positive adjectives adopted by the female and male participants while complimenting. The frequencies and percentages of the positive adjectives were calculated. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of the positive adjectives adopted by AUE female and male students

Positive Adjective	Female		Male		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Nice	24	35	45	65	69	100
Good	12	36	21	64	33	100
Great	8	80	2	20	10	100
Amazing	7	78	2	22	9	100
Delicious	2	29	5	71	7	100
Others	29	66	15	34	44	100
Total	82	48	90	52	172	100

As shown in Table 4, the most two frequent positive adjectives adopted by the female students were 'nice' and 'good' with frequencies of 24 and 12 respectively. And the most two frequent positive adjectives adopted by the male students were also 'nice' and 'good' with frequencies of 45 and 21 respectively. The positive adjectives: 'Great', 'amazing', and 'delicious' were used with modest frequencies. Some positive adjectives were rarely used by the participants, so they were all listed under *others*; these adjectives are the following: 'Smart', 'pretty', 'beautiful', 'excellent', 'interesting', 'gorgeous', 'cute', 'perfect', 'elegant', 'lovely', 'tasty', 'attractive', 'cool', 'wonderful', 'gentle', 'handsome', 'clever', and 'fantastic'. This result goes with (Manes and Wolfson, 1981) who found that the positive meaning, in the speech act of compliment in English language, is carried mainly by the two adjectives: 'Nice' and 'good' and by other less frequent positive adjectives which are: 'Pretty', 'beautiful', and 'great'. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the two positive adjectives: 'Nice' and 'good' are very well recognized by the Arabic learners of English as a second or foreign language to the extent that they use to adopt them while they are communicating in Arabic.

Finally, the third question of the study was: 'To what extent does the topic of the situation enhance AUE female and male students to convey compliments?' To answer this question, the researcher designed the (DCT) in a way to have four settings about the topic of 'appearance / possession' and other four settings about the topic of 'ability/ accomplishments'. The frequencies and percentages of the compliments responding to the settings about 'appearance / possession' and 'ability/ accomplishments' were calculated. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequencies and percentages of the compliments responding to the settings about 'appearance / possession' and 'ability/ accomplishments'

Gender	settings about appearance/ possession		settings about ability/ accomplishments		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Female	56	51	53	49	109	100
Male	58	51	56	49	114	100
Total	114	51	109	49	223	100

Table 5 shows that the settings about 'appearance/possession' evoked female participants to convey 56 compliments with a percentage of 51% while the settings about 'ability/ accomplishments' evoked them to convey 53 compliments with a percentage of 49%. Almost equally, the settings about 'appearance/possession' evoked male participants to convey 58 compliments with a percentage of 51% while the settings about 'ability/ accomplishments' evoked them to convey 56 compliments with a percentage of 49%. So, in total, the settings about 'appearance/possession' evoked 114 compliments with a percentage of 51%, and the settings about 'ability/ accomplishments' evoked 109 compliments with a percentage of 49%. In the designed (DCT), the settings about 'appearance/possession' revolved around: A new luxurious car, dressing up, the highest tech mobile, and a new nice haircut while the settings about 'ability/ accomplishments' revolved around: A wonderful presentation, impressive suggestions and questions, preparing traditional food, and receiving an 'A' in the course. Despite the fact that the topics of the first category seemed to be more interesting to the participants than the topics of the second category, the number of compliments for each category was nearly the same. It turned out that the topic of the setting was not a crucial factor to encourage and enhance neither female nor male participants to convey the compliments to the addressed people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is recognized that the factor of gender among AUE students had almost no effect neither on their compliments forms, on the adopted positive adjectives, nor on their interest in the topic of the compliment. The participants did not use all of the nine most common compliment forms in English Language. Two forms were totally ignored: 'You V a (really) ADV NP' and 'Isn't NP ADJ!'. On the other hand, the participants of the study used a lot of compliments that cannot be classified under any of the most common compliment forms in English language. Surprisingly, they sometimes used jokes and Arabic words transcribed in English to convey compliments. The most two frequent positive adjectives adopted by the participants were 'nice' and 'good'; these two adjectives are very well recognized by the Arabic learners of English as a second or foreign language. Finally, the results showed that the topic of the setting was not a crucial factor to enhance the participants to convey the compliments. Accordingly, the researcher believes that the speech acts namely compliments must be taken into

consideration while teaching English language courses to enable students to master them, so they can communicate more efficiently and smoothly in the different situations of their daily life. Rose and Kasper (2001), Al Falasi (2007), and Abdul Sattar and Lah (2008) emphasize the benefits of the implicit and explicit teaching of the sociolinguistic competence and how it should be used and adopted in the different contexts and settings.

About the Author:

Dr. Niveen Mohammad Zayed holds a Ph.D in Curricula and Methods of Teaching English from Yarmouk University (Irbid-Jordan). she has a master degree in English Language/ Translation from the same university. She has taught for five years at the Language Centre at Philadelphia University (Amman-Jordan), teaching English language skills for different proficiency levels. Dr. Zayed has a special interest to do researches concerning the pragmatic field of the English language and the role of translation in teaching. Presently, she is an Assistant Professor at American University in the Emirates, Dubai.

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Appendix A. Discourse Completion Task

Gender:

Nationality:.....

Dear Students,

Respond to the following situations by giving a compliment to the person involved in each setting:

1- You are at the car parking and notice that your friend has bought a new luxurious car. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her / him ?

.....

2- Your friend has just finished her/his wonderful presentation at the class. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

3- Your classmate is dressed up. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

4- You are at the orientation session for the freshmen, and you meet a new friend. You are really impressed with her / his suggestions and questions. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

5- Your friend has got the highest tech mobile. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

6- You are at AUE Carnival and Global Day, you like the traditional food prepared by your Palestinian friend. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

7- Your friend has a new nice haircut. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

.....

8- Your classmate has got an A in the course. You are really impressed. What would you say to compliment her/him?

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*Thank you
The researcher*