

## **Complimenting Functions by Native English Speakers and Iranian EFL Learners: A Divergence or Convergence**

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**Abstract:** The study of compliment speech act has been under investigation on many occasions in recent years. In this study, an attempt is made to explore appraisals performed by native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners to find out how these two groups diverge or converge from each other with regard to complimenting patterns and norms. The participants of the study were 60 advanced Iranian EFL learners who were speaking Persian as their first language and 60 native English speakers. Through a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) comprised of eight different scenarios, compliments were analyzed with regard to topics (performance, personality, possession, and skill), functions (explicit, implicit, and opt-out), gender differences and the common positive adjectives used by two groups of native and nonnative participants. The findings revealed that native English speakers praised individuals more implicitly in comparison with Iranian EFL learners and native speakers provided opt-outs more frequently than Iranian EFL learners did. The analysis of data by Chi-square showed that gender and macro functions are independent of each other among Iranian EFL learners compliments while for native speakers, gender played a significant role in the distribution of appraisals. Iranian EFL learners complimenting patterns converge more towards those of native English speakers. Moreover, both groups favored explicit compliments. However, Iranian EFL learners were more inclined to provide explicit compliments. It can be concluded that there were more similarities rather than differences between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers regarding compliment speech act. The results of this study can benefit researchers, teachers, material developers, and EFL learners.

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**Keywords:** Compliment, EFL learners, English Speakers, Gender, Iran, Speech Act

## 1. Introduction

Complimenting is considered a complex sociolinguistic skill (Holmes, 1988). Compliment speech act is argued to be worthy of study because it is ubiquitous, valued, and problematic (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984, p. 12). Holmes defined the compliment imperfectly<sup>✓</sup> Holmes did not take into considerations the negative aspects (such as insults) of complimenting in her definition and also she mentioned that compliments are positively valued which is not generalizable to some cultures such as Polish<sup>✓</sup> as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good<sup>✗</sup> which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer ignoring the negative aspects of compliments (Holmes, 1988, p. 446). Likewise, Nkwain (2011) defined compliments, much more inclusively, as a positive politeness strategy that expresses goodwill and solidarity between interlocutors, although compliments tend to serve other functions, depending on the interpretation they are coded (p. 61). The perplexing issues surrounding the compliment speech act are not as easy and clear-cut as the definitions put forward by Holmes and Nkwain. Compliments function differently vis-à-vis individuals and cultures throughout the world. Many Arab people, for instance, believe that compliments would invoke the *evil eye* (Nelson, El Bakary, & Al Batal, 1993). For New Zealanders, it is considered inappropriate and rude to compliment a man on his wife since the illocutionary force of the compliment view the wife as a possession (Holmes & Brown, 1987). In American culture, compliments act as a social lubricant, albeit formulaic, and are performed to create rapport among individuals (Manes & Wolfson, 1981). For Polish speakers, as Jaworski (1995) argued, compliments are considered to be insincere and are interpreted as purely social act[s] (p. 70). In other words, Polish speakers reject the complimentary force of sentences. In Poland, therefore, compliments are interpreted as both a positive politeness device as well as a threat to the addressee's negative face since they may imply a desire for the addressee's possession or trait.

Previous works on compliments illustrates that context plays an essential role in figuring out the true interpretation of compliments. The influence of compliments on social success is compared with the role of oxygen in breathing (Knapp et al., 1984). Compliments are largely subconscious (Wolfson, 1981) and it is necessary to collect and analyze compliment patterns across cultures to avoid cross-cultural misunderstanding. Compliment can also be direct or indirect and requires interpretation beyond linguistic norms.

The purpose of this study is to compare complimenting patterns between native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to topics, functions, gender differences and adjective types used in utterances. To this end, the following detailed research questions are proposed:

- (1) What are the differences between compliment functions produced by native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to gender?
- (2) What are the differences between compliment functions produced by native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to topics?
- (3) What are the differences between native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to the common positive adjectives used in compliments?

A general question of this paper would be to address whether the language system of Iranian EFL learners approximates more to L1 or L2 norms. TESOL programs are now widely practiced in Iran. In this multicultural country, members of speech communities interact with each other using various sociocultural and linguistics norms. Therefore, it is more likely that Iranian EFL learners would follow specific conventions of their L1 to produce sentences in L2. On the other hand, there might be some divergence from the first-language norms. The learner language may be more inclined towards the L2 culture being influenced by media or textbooks that are produced by English speaking countries. In this way, Iranian EFL learners' utterances may be more similar to L2 norms, and speech acts used by learners are among the first manifestation of this influence. Therefore, a comparison between the complimenting patterns performed by Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers would be fruitful in determining the learners' preference for convergence or divergence.

## 2. Literature Review

As mentioned by Boyle (2000, p. 26), of all the speech acts studied by researchers in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis, few can have received more widespread attention in the past 20 years than compliments. The vast literature reveals that compliments are studied according to the function(s) they play in interactions (Czopp, 2008; Maíz-Arévalo & García-Gómez, 2013; Mustapha, 2012; Wolfson & Manes, 1980), gender differences (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Rees-Miller, 2011; Wolfson, 1984), cross-cultural comparison (Chen & Rau, 2011; Maíz-Arévalo, 2012; Sharifian, 2005; Wolfson, 1981), and compliments at the workplace (Hudak, Gill, Aguinaldo, Clark, & Frankel, 2010).

### **2.1. Functions of the Compliments**

Among the current studies done on compliment speech act, most of them contributed to determine various functions of compliments. The study conducted by Wolfson and Manes (1980) is regarded as the pioneer one, considering the investigation of compliment functions. Although Wolfson and Manes (1980) believed that compliments can have various functions within a conversation such as, *inter alia*, a greeting or offering a topic for conversation, American compliments have the primary role of reinforcing solidarity among the interlocutors (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Knapp et al. (1984) found out that compliments are categorized into four main dimensions, namely, direct/indirect, specific/general, comparison/no comparison, and normal/amplified. It was also revealed that 89 percent of 396 American compliments are categorized under the direct form. In an interesting study on Polish compliments, Jaworski (1995) proposed that Polish speakers do not maintain solidarity by means of compliments. Compliments are considered as a purely social act and are interpreted as insincere praise. Polish speakers may even regard compliments as an act of cheating. Polish compliments have multiple functions such as reinforcing desired behaviour, congratulating, information seeking, and teasing.

Some researchers, however, were not much satisfied with the quality of studies done on compliment functions. Boyle (2000) critically mentioned that a more balanced picture of complimenting is required and that the neglect of the study of implicit compliments should not continue (p. 26).

After these groundbreaking works, many other studies were conducted to find out the functions of compliments in different cultures. Czopp (2008) mentioned that compliments might not be welcomed by some speech communities, such as African Americans, because compliments include negative stereotypes. Grossi (2009) investigated various functions of compliments in Australian English. Similar studies are done on Cameroon Pidgin English (Nkwain, 2011), Nigerian English (Mustapha, 2012), Iranian EFL students (Sadeghi & Zarei, 2013), and Japanese speakers (Kondo, 2014). In all of these studies, an attempt was made to find the function(s) of compliments in different situations.

### **2.2. Gender Differences in Compliments**

A large portion of research on complimenting is devoted to the role of gender in giving and receiving compliments. The first attempt to gather empirical data on gender differences in compliment speech act was made by Wolfson (1984). She reported that women use adjectives such as *adorable*, *charming*, *sweet*, *lovely*, and *divine* most often in their

compliments. More interestingly, it was understood that women receive the great majority of compliments both by male and female speakers. The most controversial issue that Wolfson mentioned and contradicted sharply with Lakoff's (1973) argument, is that the way a woman is spoken to is, no matter what her status, a subtle and powerful way of perpetuating her subordinate role in society (p. 243). Holmes (1984) endorsed that compliments have various functions in men and women conversations and further mentioned that females are more apt to give and receive compliments (about 51%). She associated this feature to the women's positive attitude to compliments (p. 451). For men, as Holmes argued, compliments do not function to maintain solidarity, as was the case for women. However, in 2002, Mojica's findings provided counter evidence to Holmes's findings. Mojica found out that Filipino males' compliments have the primary role of establishing solidarity with the females but females want to assert their power in language (p. 123). Another contradiction in the compliment literature was addressed by Rees-Miller (2011). Unlike what was proposed by Wolfson and Holmes, Rees-Miller (2011) suggested that in goal-oriented settings, men give and receive more compliments than women. Nevertheless, women complimented on appearances more often. Women dominated men in giving and receiving compliments in unstructured settings.

### **2.3. Common Adjectives and Compliments**

After extensive literature review, it was understood that there is paucity of research regarding the investigation of adjectives among the appraisals. The most well-known are the studies done by Wolfson (1981, 1984). The amount of seventy-two adjectives was identified in compliments and five types of adjectives were recognized among the appraisals, viz., nice, good, beautiful, pretty, and great. Nice (22.9%) and good (19.6%) were observed most frequently in the data.

Wolfson (1984) mentioned that *nice* is the most commonly used adjective among American English speakers (23 per cent). In Wolfson's (1984) study, *good* was observed more often after *nice* (20 per cent). The sequence of common five adjectives in compliments according to frequency as revealed by Wolfson is *nice, good, beautiful, pretty, and great*.

### **2.4. Current Study**

Literature review showed that there is paucity of research with regard to the analysis of compliment utterances performed by native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners through a written Discourse Completion Test. Most of the studies in the field have employed different participants or instruments. Sharifian's (2005) research is one of the best-known

studies which investigated the compliment responses of Persian speakers of Australia and native Australian speakers. In recent years, compliment speech act has gained the attention of the researchers. Behnam and Amizadeh (2011) analyzed compliments and compliment responses in TV interviews manifested by Persian and English interlocutors. Likewise, Karimnia and Afghari (2011) used TV interviews to study compliment responses of native Persian speakers and Native American English speakers. In addition, more recently, Sadeghi and Zarei (2013) studied compliments produced in Persian and English by a group of Iranian EFL learners. The current paper is unlike earlier studies done on Persian compliments with regard to the variables of this study. Precisely, this study focuses mainly on functions of the compliments, and topics and gender as two moderating variables.

### 3. Method

In pragmatic studies, data can be elicited empirically or can be gathered naturally through conversation analysis. Each method has advantages and disadvantages (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). In this contrastive study, a descriptive research design was used. The type of research questions and data analysis used in this study pairs with some of the underlying elements of descriptive design.

#### 3.1. Participants

The completed forms were received from two groups, namely, 60 advanced Iranian EFL learners who were speaking Persian as their first language and 60 native English speakers. As argued by Kasper and Dahl (1991), for studies which employ a Discourse Completion Test as the main instrument, it is considered appropriate to use a sample size of at least 30 participants. Similar works have included less than 60 participants in their study (Chen & Rau, 2011; Lin, Woodfield, & Ren, 2012; Sadeghi & Zarei, 2013; Sharifian, 2005). In this study, the participants were equally distributed with regard to gender. Other variables such as educational level, field of study, and age were also recorded for further analysis.

Iranian participants were mainly postgraduate students and a small number of them were undergraduates from different universities in Iran, aged between 21 and 50 years. All of the Iranian participants were studying English Language Teaching, Translation Studies, or English Literature as their main field of study. It was preferred to use postgraduate students to ensure that the situations provided in surveys are understood completely. Undergraduate students who were in the final year of their program were allowed to contribute.

Native English speakers were mainly university students (26 non-degree participants or high school level, 33 BA/BS level, 6 MA, 1 PhD). Ten participants out of 66 cases were aged

under 20, thirty two participants between 21 and 30, sixteen participants between 31 and 40, and eight cases over 40. They were volunteer participants from different English-speaking countries. One reason to choose participants from different English-speaking countries was lack of native speakers' availability. It is true that there may be cultural differences among individuals but with regard to compliment speech act, there might be some universals among native English speakers.

Moreover, although Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers do not share the same characteristics, comparing these two groups would help the researchers to find out whether advanced Iranian EFL learners' linguistic patterns are similar to or different from native speakers' norms. In pragmatic studies, appropriateness is the key factor and native speakers' compliments are regarded as a norm to be compared with Iranian EFL learners' appraisals.

### **3.2. Instrument**

A written Discourse Completion Test was used to elicit data from Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers. Appendix A has manifested the DCT employed in this study. The application of DCTs in pragmatic and discourse studies has not been without controversies. They have been criticized for their non-interactive nature (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005), excluding non-verbal features of communication (Kasper, 2008), and inability to record subtle features of face-to-face conversations (Kasper, 2008).

However, despite the criticisms levelled against DCTs, there have been arguments for the administrative advantages of them. Golato (2003) discussed that the DCT allows the researcher to control for certain variables and to quickly gather large amounts of data without any need for transcription, thus making it easy to statistically compare responses from native and non-native speakers (p. 92). The decision to gather data through the DCT fits appropriately with the purpose of this study. It allows the researchers to have control over variables and is time effective.

### **3.3. Procedure**

The DCT was designed in English and two native English speakers and a specialist in the field of pragmatic research proofread the content both grammatically and semantically. Content validity of the tests was checked by the use of subject matter experts. The DCT was then modified based on the received feedbacks. There were eight situations provided in the DCT and the participants were required to write down suitable compliments for each situation. Scenarios were developed in a way to address four different common topics of

compliment, i.e., appearance, possession, skill/ability, and personality. That is to say, for each topic, two scenarios were provided. In addition, respondents were asked to provide information about their age, gender, place of birth, education level, field of study, native language, and email address. Power relations and the distance between individuals were excluded from the study since they were not included in the research questions and were beyond the scope of this work. Respondents were also allowed to provide comments about the DCT. A synopsis of comments is provided in Appendix B.

Participants were informed about the survey and purpose of the study mainly through two venues: 1) *InterPals* that is a website for finding friends throughout the world, and 2) *Facebook*. The questionnaire was posted online on Google Docs and the completed questionnaires were automatically sent back to our mailbox.

Participants were required to provide written responses for each of the eight situations. The situations used in the survey were neutral regarding gender. In other words, it was not mentioned whether the participants should compliment a man or a woman. They were simply asked to mention how they would provide a compliment in different situations. It is true that some respondents may not have experienced the situations given in the survey but they all may know the norms through which they should provide the most contextually appropriate response. Scenarios required individuals to give compliments to people of equal status. Table 1 reveals a synopsis of the scenarios used in the DCT as well as the related compliment topic.

**Table 1.** A Synopsis of the Compliment Situations and the Topic used in the DCT

Compliment Situation	Compliment Topic
1. Beautiful Dress	Appearance
2. Handwriting	Skill/ability
3. Helping to Clean the House	Personality
4. New Phone	Possession
5. Hair Cut	Appearance
6. Driving Skill	Skill/ability
7. Good Character	Personality
8. New Jacket	Possession

### 3.4. Coding System

The following coding system is adapted from Lin, Woodfield, and Ren (2012, pp. 1491-1492) and some minor changes were made with regard to the addition of micro strategies to make the classification more inclusive. Four micro strategies were added to the original work. These micro-strategies are *no acknowledgment*, *appreciation*, *reciprocation*, and *positive non-verbal comment* which were absent in the original coding system. Explicit compliments are characterized as being generally direct and unambiguous positive statements that contain



at least one positive semantic carrier, for instance, *pretty*, *great*, *nice*, *good*, etc. Implicit compliments are those remarks that do not possess a positive lexical item as manifested by linguistic form, thus need more inferences from the interlocutor to reconstruct the implied meaning. In addition, in opt-outs, individuals decide not to participate in providing a complimentary act.

The data were analyzed and the compliment sentences that were gathered through the DCT were classified under the three generic categories of *Explicit*, *Implicit*, and *Opt-out*. Another rater who was familiar with pragmatic studies and was informed about research questions and methodology coded the same data. The Cronbach Alpha reliability statistic showed the inter-rater reliability of .77, though not perfect yet acceptable. The coding system that is used in this study is presented in Table 2.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the compliment sentences. At the first phase, the frequency of the macro- and micro-functions as well as the percentages was identified. Each compliment sentence was assigned a function (Explicit, Implicit, or Opt-out) and the number of different functions in each group was considered as the total frequency of data in that group. For instance, the sentence, *That haircut suits you so much. I love it* has two complimentary sentences that should be assigned a function. The first sentence is **E**xplanation (That haircut *suits you* so much) and the second sentence is **A**miration (I *love* it). Therefore, there are two implicit compliments. The rest of the data were coded as such. In the second phase, Pearson Chi-square test was utilized to find out the significance of differences with regard to the two groups of participants.

**Table 2.** The Coding System Employed to Analyse Compliment Speech Act

Macro Level	Micro Level	Examples
<i>Explicit</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Your handbag is so <i>pretty</i>.</li> </ul>
<i>Implicit</i>	Admiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I d like to <i>learn</i> how to do it from you.</li> </ul>
	Assumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You <i>must have spent</i> a lot of time preparing for it.</li> </ul>
	Contrast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I like playing piano as well, <i>but I don't have that talent</i>.</li> </ul>
	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ All the hard work <i>paid off</i>.</li> </ul>
	Explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You were <i>not nervous</i> at all.</li> </ul>
	Joke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There must be a lot of men who <i>have a crush on you</i>.</li> </ul>
	Request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Could you <i>teach me</i> how to make a presentation?</li> </ul>
	Want Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I would <i>like to buy one</i> as well.</li> </ul>
	Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Thank you</i>.</li> </ul>
	Reciprocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I will <i>compensate</i>.</li> </ul>
	Positive Non-verbal Comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ☺</li> </ul>
	No Acknowledgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ (No compliment)</li> </ul>
<i>Opt-Out</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Is this</i> a new mobile phone? (does not have any complimentary meaning)</li> </ul>

## 4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the data are analysed according to gender distribution, topics, and the common adjectives observed in compliment sentences. The frequency distribution of data as well as the percentages is provided. To find out significance of differences, Chi-square test is utilized wherever applicable.

### 4.1. Compliment Functions Based on Gender

The classification of compliment functions into three main generic categories (Explicit, Implicit, Opt-out) based on gender differences is provided in Table 3. Findings revealed that explicit function is the most common type of compliments by both Iranian learners and English speakers. The most frequent macro function among Iranian EFL learners is related to explicit compliments ( $f=333$ ). Iranian female EFL learners, however, provided more compliments than men with regard to total frequency (335 cases vs. 323 cases). Male EFL learners are inclined to use explicit compliments more frequently (53%) than female learners (49%). For female learners, the most common macro function is related to explicit compliments ( $f=163$ ) and the least used function is opt-out ( $f=25$ ) as was the case with male learners use of opt-outs. The analysis of data by Chi-square showed that gender and macro functions are independent of each other among Iranian EFL learners compliments ( $\chi^2=3.256$ ,  $sig.=.196$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Therefore, it can be interpreted that gender does not have an important role in the distribution of compliments among Iranian EFL learners. Gender has not been proved to be a source of pragmatic variation among Iranian male and female EFL learners.

**Table 3.** Compliment Functions based on Gender Differences Observed between EFL learners and Native English Speakers

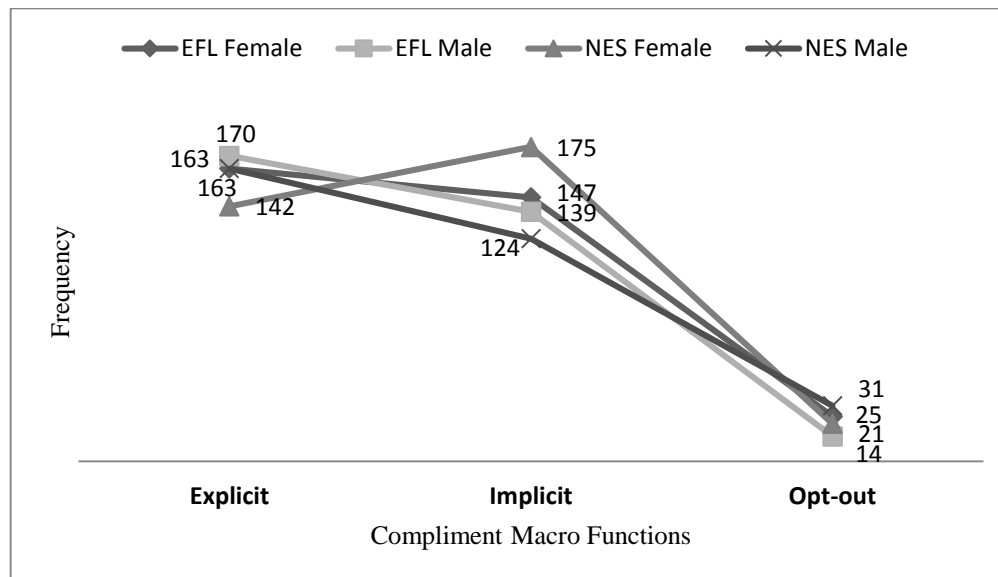
Macro Functions	Micro Functions	Observed Frequency			
		EFL Learners		English Speakers	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
<i>Explicit</i>		163	170	142	163
	Subtotal (%)	(49%)	(53%)	(42%)	(51%)
<i>Implicit</i>	Admiration	22	20	56	21
	Assumption	3	8	5	3
	Contrast	3	5	4	4
	Evaluation	0	0	0	0
	Explanation	38	29	24	27
	Joke	7	3	6	4
	Request	3	1	0	5
	Want Statement	8	5	7	1
	Appreciation	34	26	50	40
	Reciprocation	6	4	5	5
	Positive Non-Verbal Comment	4	7	2	1
	No Acknowledgment	19	11	16	13
	Subtotal (%)		147	139	175
		(44%)	(43%)	(52%)	(39%)
<i>Opt-Out</i>		25	14	21	31
	Subtotal (%)	(7%)	(4%)	(6%)	(9%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>335</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>318</b>

Female learners provided more positive non-verbal comments in their compliments than male learners. It was expected to observe the reverse trend since women were believed to have a more conservative role in the Iranian culture. Thus, the results of Holmes's (1988) study are reinforced regarding the fact that women have positive attitude to compliments. Iranian female learners also provided more opt-outs and fewer acknowledgements in giving compliments in comparison to Iranian male learners.

Like Iranian learners, the most frequent compliment function produced by native English speakers is related to explicit category. English speaking men used explicit compliments (51%) more than female English speakers (42%). Although explicit compliments were dominantly used by male English speakers (51%), female English speakers used implicit compliments more commonly (52%).

The results of Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 11.469$ , sig. = .003,  $p < .05$ ) revealed that gender has a significant effect on the differences observed in macro functions among native English speakers compliments. Gender has a significant role in the distribution of compliments among English speakers. Therefore, the second hypothesis of this study is rejected. There is a significant difference between compliment functions produced by male and female native English speakers.

To answer the first question of this study, as summarized in Table 3 and Figure 1, the dominant macro function for both Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers is explicit compliments, except for female native speakers. That is to say, just female native speakers were more inclined to use compliments implicitly but other groups employed an explicit strategy dominantly. Overall, female native English speakers also uttered more compliments than other participants ( $f = 338$ ). In this case, the results are in line with the argument put forward by Wolfson (1984) and Holmes (1988). They proposed that English speaking women give and receive the compliments more than men. Moreover, Holmes mentioned that women use compliments to each other significantly more often than they do to men or men do to each other (p. 462).



**Figure 1.** Compliment macro functions and gender distribution between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers (NES)

To find out the significant of differences between Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers with regard to functions and origin (being an Iranian EFL learner or an English speaker), the Chi-square test revealed a value of .185 which is non-significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.372, p < .05$ ). Therefore, being Iranian or English (in the case of our data), does not have a pivotal role in the variances observed between these two groups with regard to compliment functions. In other words, both groups had similar viewpoints about using different functions while complimenting.

In providing compliments, both native speakers and Iranian EFL learners provided some comments which described their cultural norms and values and the way these conventions would affect the complimenting patterns. In one situation, for instance, a participant from New Zealand mentioned the following comment to compliment a driver for his skillful driving:

(1) I would not compliment. I can't really answer this one because I feel a cultural obstruction with mention such things to servicemen. I'm not too sure why.

An Iranian female learner provided the following comment for complimenting a taxi driver:

(2) I would give no compliment. I don't want to start a conversation with a taxi driver, especially admiration. I had bad experiences.

In complimenting a fellow in the bus, another Iranian female learner mentioned:

(3) No answer. I think there is no need to admire a person that I don't know.

In Iranian culture, women would rarely compliment a stranger because of cultural stereotypes; it may be regarded as inappropriate desires in some circumstances. Thus, many women avoid sharing a compliment with a stranger (a taxi driver can be a stranger). Eight out of 15 cases in which Iranian female learners avoided to provide a compliment, were related to complimenting a taxi driver.

#### 4.2. Compliment Functions Based on Topic

Compliment functions have been analysed with regard to the four main topics of compliments (Appearance, Possession, Performance/Skill, Personality). Table 4 shows the distribution of functions based on topics performed by Iranian EFL learners.

As shown in Table 4, Iranian EFL learners favored explicit compliments for every topic except for personality in which the implicit compliments (64%) overweigh other functions. Compliments about appearance (66%) appeared most frequently among Iranian EFL learners. Table 4 represents the distribution of compliments based on topics provided by native English speakers.

**Table 4.** Iranian EFL Learners Compliments Distribution based on Various Topics

Macro Functions	Micro Functions Topics	Observed Frequency			
		Appearance	Possession	Performance/Skill	Personality
<i>Explicit</i>		<b>110</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>57</b>
	Subtotal (%)	(66%)	(51%)	(50%)	(34%)
<i>Implicit</i>	Admiration	3	9	7	23
	Assumption	0	2	5	4
	Contrast	0	0	8	0
	Evaluation	0	0	0	0
	Explanation	33	18	10	6
	Joke	10	17	1	2
	Request	0	1	1	2
	Want Statement	2	5	6	0
	Appreciation	0	3	14	43
	Reciprocation	0	0	0	10
	Positive Non-Verbal Comment	3	4	2	2
	No Acknowledgment	0	2	15	13
	Subtotal (%)	<b>51</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>105</b>
		(31%)	(35%)	(45%)	(64%)
<i>Opt-Out</i>		<b>5</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>
	Subtotal (%)	(3%)	(14%)	(5%)	(2%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>166</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>165</b>

As related to native English speakers, the same pattern was observed as Iranian EFL learners though with different frequencies. According to Table 4, for compliments on appearance, possession, and performance, the most used function is explicit. However, for personality, it was implicit function (75%) which was used most frequently by native English

speakers. For possession and personality, participants provided more compliments than other topics ( $f= 172$ ).

To answer the second question of this study, for appearance, both Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers provided explicit compliments more than other functions (although Iranian EFL learners compliments outweigh English speakers ones). For possession, native English speakers used more explicit compliments than Iranian EFL learners. Regarding performance, Iranian learners produced more explicit compliments than native English speakers. Finally, for personality, explicit function was the most dominant type of compliment. Iranian learners produced more explicit compliment than English speakers. Figure 2 shows the differences between compliment functions produced by native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to topics.

**Table 5.** Native English Speakers Compliments Distribution based on Various Topics

Macro Functions	Micro Functions	Topics	Observed Frequency			
			Appearance	Possession	Performance/Skill	Personality
<i>Explicit</i>			82	97	84	42
		Subtotal (%)	(49%)	(57%)	(58%)	(24%)
<i>Implicit</i>	Admiration		43	21	7	6
	Assumption		0	0	2	6
	Contrast		0	1	6	1
	Evaluation		0	0	0	0
	Explanation		26	13	5	7
	Joke		1	3	5	1
	Request		0	1	2	2
	Want Statement		0	4	4	0
	Appreciation		0	0	13	77
	Reciprocation		0	0	0	10
	Positive Non-Verbal		0	0	1	2
	No Acknowledgment		0	2	11	16
		Subtotal (%)	(42%)	(26%)	(4%)	(75%)
<i>Opt-Out</i>			14	30	6	2
		Subtotal (%)	(9%)	(17%)	(4%)	(1%)
		<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>172</b>

As manifested by Figure 2, direct compliments such as the following were observed more frequently in situations related to appearance:

- 4 (a) You look great.
- (b) You look nice today.

Likewise, for possession, Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers used mostly explicit compliments but the latter group showed a higher tendency to use explicit compliments. Compliments such as the following are among the most common ones:

5 (a) What a nice phone you have got.

(b) That s an awesome jacket.

For performance, most of the English speakers and Iranian EFL learners also provide explicit compliments but for the former group the observed frequency was higher. In this situation, the following compliments are observed as the stereotype:

6 (a) You have got a pretty handwriting.

(b) You are really good driver.

For personality, however, both native English speakers and Iranian EFL learners provided the most compliments implicitly although native speakers used more implicit compliments such as the following:

7 (a) Thanks for your help (Admiration).

(b) If you have a gust, let me know to help you (Reciprocation).

(c) It s crazy that we can get on so well after only just meeting (Explanation).

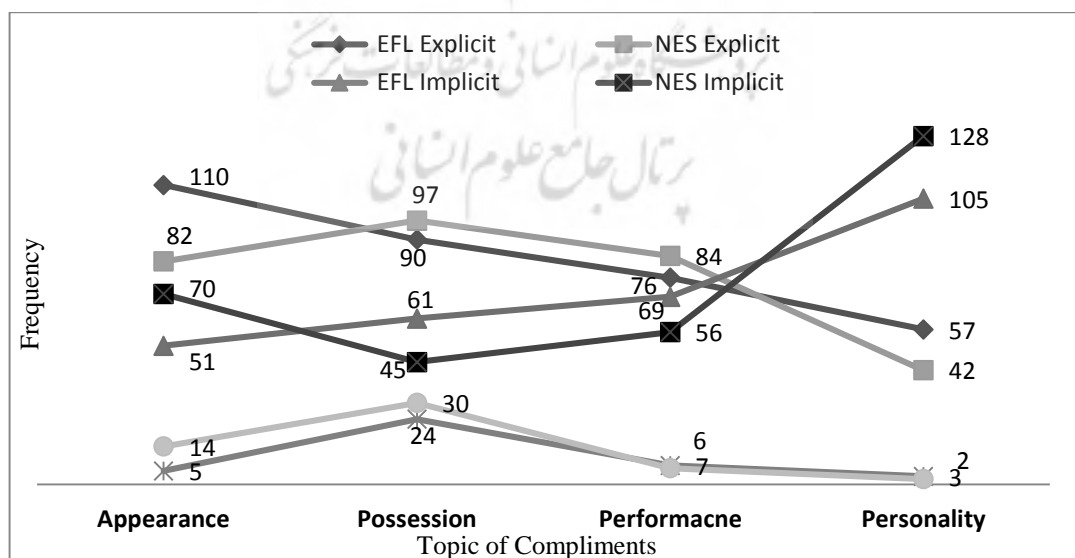
(d) Wanna grab dinner on me (Joke).

Opt-out compliments, in which there is no complimentary force, were mostly observed in scenarios about possession. In this situation, Iranian EFL learners used opt-outs in 24 cases while native English speakers employed this macro function in 30 cases. Therefore, it is rare that one could see compliments such as the following among Iranian EFL learners or native speakers compliments:

8 (a) Is it a new brand?

(b) How did you end up being able to write like that?

(c) New style!



**Figure 2.** Distribution of compliments between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers (NES) based on Topics

### 4.3. Common Adjectives in Compliments

Compliment sentences were also investigated to find out the common positive adjectives. The type of adjectives and the frequency of each were analyzed. In Table 6, the adjectives are categorized according to gender of the participants. The superscript figures manifest the sequence of the most three frequent adjectives. It should be mentioned that the number of positive adjectives used in the corpus was virtually unlimited but Table 6 shows the most common ones observed in the data. Other adjectives such as sweet, elegant, graceful, fresh, interesting, chic, cute, modern, trendy, fantabulous, skilled, dexterous, smashing, approachable, fabulous, attractive, wondrous, easy-going, social, super, expert, smooth, clear, talented, splendid, pleasing, girly, magnificent, generous, fine, dandy, radiant, and helpful were used only once or twice and were not included in the table.

To address the third question of this study, for Iranian EFL learners, the most common adjective which was observed in females compliments was *nice* (f= 38). Likewise, for male learners, *nice* was the most observed adjective (f= 41). English speakers manifested the same pattern too. For both male and female native English speakers, *nice* was the adjective with the most observed frequency.

According to Table 6, Iranian EFL learners employ more varied positive adjectives in their compliments than native speakers. This knowledge is useful to recognize how compliments in English speaking countries are regarded as formulaic. Most English speakers used a common set of adjectives in their compliments and *nice*, *good*, *great*, and *cool*, among others, are mostly observed in their compliments. Iranian EFL learners, however, used *nice*, *good*, *great*, *beautiful*, and *kind* more than other adjectives.

With respect to positive adjectives, Figure 3 demonstrates that *nice* is the most used adjective to show the positive semantic load. The results endorse Wolfson (1984) who mentioned that *nice* is the most commonly used adjective in American English (23 per cent).

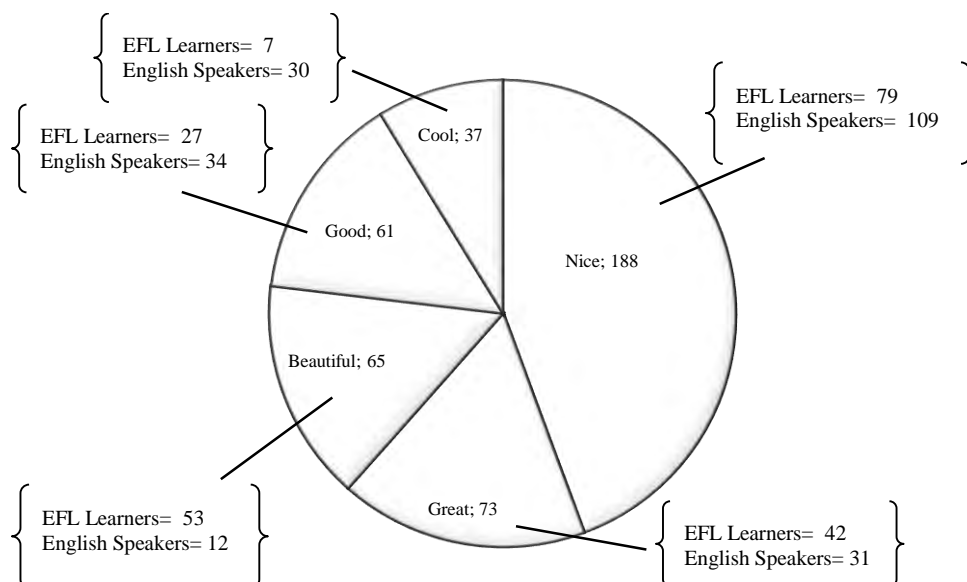
Regarding the most five common adjectives, as shown in Figure 3, among Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers, *nice* was used with the most observed frequency. Iranian EFL learners used *beautiful* with a frequency of 53 but native speakers used *good* in their compliments in 34 cases. *Great* is ranked the third in both groups of participants. Iranian EFL learners used *good* with a frequency of 27 and native speakers used *cool* with a frequency of 30. Finally, the least observed adjective among Iranian EFL learners was *cool* while native English speakers used *beautiful* in their compliments in 12 cases.



**Table 6.** Frequency of Common Adjectives Observed between Iranian EFL Learners and Native English Speakers compliments

Adjective Type	Iranian EFL Learners		Native English Speakers	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Nice	38 <sup>1</sup>	41 <sup>1</sup>	50 <sup>1</sup>	59 <sup>1</sup>
Good	16	11	18 <sup>3</sup>	16 <sup>2</sup>
Pretty	1	6	6	0
Great	20 <sup>3</sup>	22 <sup>2</sup>	21 <sup>2</sup>	10
Beautiful	37 <sup>2</sup>	16 <sup>3</sup>	7	5
Awesome	0	1	2	4
Lovely	5	3	6	3
Gorgeous	2	5	1	3
Handsome	3	2	0	0
Fantastic	5	2	1	1
Amazing	3	1	1	1
Perfect	5	2	0	0
Cool	3	4	16	14 <sup>3</sup>
Neat	1	0	8	4
Smart	3	1	1	2
Kind	10	9	0	2
Friendly	4	2	2	1
Sociable	1	4	0	0
Understanding	1	2	4	0
Fashionable	3	3	0	0
Skillful	4	4	0	1
Stylish	2	2	0	1
Excellent	1	0	1	2
Impressive	0	1	0	3
Sweet	0	0	0	5
Wonderful	2	2	4	0
Trendy	1	1	1	1
Cute	1	2	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>139</b>

In current study, *great* outweighed other common adjectives after *nice*. However, in Wolfson (1984) study, *good* was used more often after *nice* (20 per cent). The sequence of common five adjectives according to frequency as revealed by Wolfson is *nice*, *good*, *beautiful*, *pretty*, and *great*. However, the results of this study revealed that participants used *cool* in their sentences very often which was not included in the list of common adjectives proposed by Wolfson. *Pretty* was observed rarely in the adjectives of current study and it was not used commonly by Iranian learners or native speakers. *Cool*, however, was largely utilized by English speakers rather than Iranian EFL learners. In addition, *cool* was observed mostly in compliments about possession.



**Figure 3.** Total frequency of the five most common adjectives observed between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers – compliments

Despite the availability of a wide range of vocabulary to show positive evaluation, in majority of the compliments used in this study, a restricted set of adjectives and other semantic formulas was used. Regularity was observed only in some of the adjectives and verbs. Therefore, *adjectival compliments* such as the following were observed numerously in the data:

- 9 (a) That s a nice gadget you have got.  
 (b) You look beautiful today.

Although many of the compliments in this study were of adjectival type, some of the compliments were comprised of a *verb* to manifest the positive semantic load. This type of compliments was rare with comparison to adjectival type. The most common verbs used in the compliments were *like* and *love*:

- 10 (a) I like your outfit.  
 (b) I love what you re wearing today.

*Adverbs*, likewise, were applied to manifest the positive semantic load in compliment sentences. For instance, *well* was observed sporadically in the compliments:

- 11 (a) Wow! You drive really well!  
 (b) You are a well-educated man.

*Intensifiers* are semantic elements which are used typically in compliments. The most common intensifiers are, *inter alia*, *really*, *very*, *such*, and *so*

- 12 (a) You are so sympathetic.  
 (b) I really like your new hair-cut.

Finally, *deictic expressions* are another common feature of compliment sentences. In effect, demonstratives and second person pronouns are among the most observed deixis in this study:

13 (a) This new hairstyle looks so good on you.

(b) That is some nice handwriting you have there.

The above analysis showed how Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers produced compliments with regard to positive adjectives. Gender differences were also investigated and the Chi-square test showed that gender has a significant role in the native English compliments but not among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, there is a significant difference between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers in producing compliments with regard to gender. Origin, being an Iranian or an English speaker, also plays an important role in the distribution of compliment utterances. Compliment functions, however, do not have a significant effect on the compliment variation.

## 5. Conclusion

The result of this study demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the way Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers produced compliments with regard to functions. In other words, there were more similarities rather than differences between these two groups of participants as was observed in complimenting functions. It was revealed that both male participants in the two groups complimented explicitly. Iranian female learners were also more inclined to compliment directly but female native speakers used compliments more implicitly. Generally speaking, Iranian EFL learners provided more explicit compliments ( $f= 333$ ) than native speakers ( $f= 305$ ). Native speakers were more inclined to use compliments implicitly ( $f= 299$ ) than Iranian EFL learners ( $f= 286$ ). The results endorse Brown and Levinson's (1987, p. 248) argument that indirect speech acts are highly conventionalized in English means that in most circumstances using an indirect speech act implicates that S is trying to respect H's negative face. Iranian EFL learners used less opt-outs than native English speakers. One justification for the dominance of explicit compliments among Iranian EFL learners with comparison to native speakers is that Persian culture highly respects the positive face of people (positive face is the desire to be appreciated and liked). Any attempt is made by Iranian EFL learners to show that the compliment is understood and welcomed perfectly to avoid *positive impoliteness* (Culpeper, 1996), as positive impoliteness would breach the roles of an individual's positive face. One way to ensure the recognition of individuals' positive face, as is the case with giving

compliments, is to resort to direct and unambiguous compliments. Similar findings are provided by Behnam and Amizadeh (2011). They proposed that compliments are made and responded to more often in Persian than in English. They further assigned this pervasive use of compliments to the role of *taarof* in Persian culture.

Regarding topics of compliments, a similar pattern was observed between native speakers and Iranian learners. Both of the groups, performed explicitly in all of the topics except personality. Iranian EFL learners and native speakers used implicit compliments in topics related to personality. Moreover, as related to adjectives, although both groups used a variety of adjectives, *nice* was observed with the highest frequency in participants compliments. As a difference, Iranian learners used *beautiful* and *great* as the second and third most frequent adjective respectively but for English speakers, *good* and *great* were the second and the third adjective with the most observed frequency in compliment sentences (refer to Figure 3). For native speakers, the results are consistent with Wolfson and Manes (1980) which suggested that *good*, *nice*, and *great* are most frequently used in American compliments.

Therefore, to clarify the general question of the study, results suggested that the approximative system of advanced Iranian EFL learners is more inclined towards the L2 norms rather than being interfered by first language structure. One possibility may be the influence of media on learners. Thus, it may be possible that Iranian learners have picked up target language norms (in this case English) and integrated them to their sentences.

This paper suggests that advanced Iranian EFL learners, rather than generating creative appraisals, resort to a set of precoded formulas to provide compliments. Findings reject Wolfson (1981) argument that Iranian speakers would include ritualized expressions and proverbs in their compliments. Wolfson's findings may hold true for native Persian speakers but for the Iranian EFL learners it did not turn up to be true. In other words, Iranian EFL learners are influenced by the appropriateness phenomenon. They try to include themselves in the inner circle of native English speakers by adhering to the pragmatic norms of the target language. One way to reach this goal is to provide formulaic expressions in different situations. The results of this study also reinforce Knapp et al. (1984) ideas that about 89 percent of American English compliments are direct (or explicit). Briefly, complimenting in Iranian EFL learners discourse is influenced by two factors: (a) to maintain a positive face and (b) to respect a culturally valued norm of being polite. Complimenting in native English speakers is not affected by emotion; the following comments, which are provided by some native speakers, endorse this argument:

- 14 (a) I know that from a perspective of stereotypes, in general, people from the UK are less friendly to strangers, despite being a more collective society than the USA (Male from the United Kingdom).
- (b) We don't tend to say things like 'you were so kind and sympathetic'. Not sure why. I guess many Americans don't say emotional things like that to most people. We might say 'That was so nice of you' (Female from the United States).
- (c) I can say with confidence, my circle of friends in New Zealand use compliments sparingly among one another. With the males around me - I suppose similar things are true across other cultures - they show compliments, less with words, than with gestures of brotherhood (Male from New Zealand).

In this study, an attempt was made to include every possible detail that was related to compliment speech act. It is important to say, however, that the participants of this study (regarding Iranian EFL learners) were university students. The ordinary people may have different complimenting patterns. Thus, care must be taken to generalize the findings to overall population of Iran.

There are some areas of compliment speech at which have not been covered in this study and can be regarded as the possible limitations. Compliment response patterns of Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers have not been analysed in this study and it would be a good idea should to investigate whether there is any particular pattern observed in their responses. Moreover, distance and social status were excluded from this study. Likewise, use of other data collection methods rather than a DCT, would provide important results regarding the nature of compliments. Therefore, more studies should be done to fill the possible gaps and limitations that still exist in the vast literature of compliment speech act.

The implications of the study are related to four areas. Firstly, researchers can benefit from the results presented in this article to compare and contrast compliment speech acts in other cultures to find out whether there is a universal pattern applicable to all cultures and languages. The second implication is related to material developers. It is possible to prepare educational materials to improve learners pragmatic competence. Studies like this can provide authentic materials regarding the proper use of sentences in context. Teachers can also benefit from the results of this study. Teachers relying on the results of this study, could opt for providing authentic input and real language use for the learners. Most of the advanced learners are grammatically competent and know many vocabularies but when it comes to pragmatic competence, most of them will be challenged. Finally, the results of this study can be useful for the learners who need to know how they can perform specific speech acts such

as compliments. Results suggested that people with different cultures perform particular speech acts in various ways. Hence, being aware of these differences can help learners to communicate more properly.

### Acknowledgement

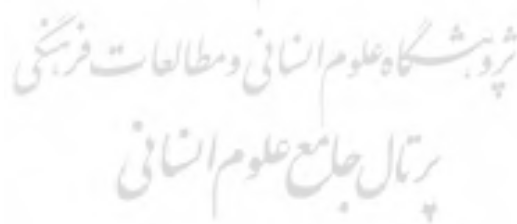
The authors would like to extend their gratitude to Dr. Abolaji Mustapha (Lagos State University), Dr. Parisa Niloofar (Bojnord University), and the two anonymous reviewers for providing invaluable feedback on the earlier drafts of this paper.

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## Appendix A



## The DCT used to gather Complimenting patterns of Iranian EFL Learners and Native English Speakers

**Directions:** In the spaces provided, please write down the most appropriate English compliment(s) you are likely to use in such circumstances. You can also use interjections and emoticons. Please answer as naturally as possible, and try to write the answers as you feel you would say in the situation.

**Please, do not begin your sentences with “I would say...”. Just type a suitable compliment such as, as a pattern, “wow, you have a great car!” and something like this.**

1. Assume that you meet a colleague who is beautifully dressed and seems chic today. How would you show your admiration through the use of a compliment?

.....

2. If you are particularly impressed with your classmate s handwriting, how would you compliment him/her on this skill?

.....

3. Your neighbour shows good behaviour in helping you to clean the house. How would you compliment him/her?

.....

4. One of your colleagues/classmates has bought a brand new phone. How would you compliment your friend on that possession?

.....

5. In a dinner party, you notice that one of your relatives has had his/her hair cut. S/he looks great with this new hair style. How do you compliment him/her?

.....

6. You get a taxi to take you to the university/work. The driver passes other cars on a busy street very smoothly and overtakes them. How do you show your admiration of the driver s ability?

.....

7. As you are on the bus waiting for it to move, you strike up a conversation with a person sitting next to you. The person is so understanding and approachable. How would you admire these characteristic of that person?

.....

8. Your friend comes to class/work with a new jacket. It looks fashionable to you. How do you compliment her/him?

.....

### Appendix B

#### A Synopsis of Comments provided by the English Speakers of this Study

1. Why don't you see how the responses for a compliment changes as depending on the situation, from who is giving the compliment to you, to where or when that person decides to tell you the compliment. I think you'd find the results to be very intriguing (Female from the United States).
2. In my mind, answering this quiz involved both girls and guys, so I wrote more generally. But with my mates, I'd simply say, Good man/cunt. (Cunt, though derogatory in other places, in NZ it is thrown about to recognise a peer's remarkable action) (Male from New Zealand).
3. I'm not the best at giving or receiving compliments so I'm not sure how accurate these answers are, but they are close to a logical expression of mine, assuming the social dynamics didn't cause me to be flustered and say little to nothing in most situations. But I should work on giving compliments more often, so I appreciate taking the time to think about how to give others more compliments and receive them graciously (Male from the United States).
4. I understand the point of your questions - but there's a lot of situations where I simply wouldn't comment or respond - it's not really something that happens in my day-to-day life (Female from Australia).
5. I live in Georgia, USA. I am a Southerner; we talk differently than people from the North. Just something to keep in mind (Female from the United States).
6. It is very rare for me to compliment people. I had to imagine most situations. I hope this works for you. I can't say my response is typical of any American, there are many different accents to the English language here (Male from the United States).
7. Complimenting varies greatly depending on the personal experiences, confidence level and social position of both parties (Female from the United States).
8. I feel embarrassed at compliments about my figure and clothes though ones about my abilities I don't mind. Most of the time I give a compliment back or change the topic to talk about the other person as I feel more comfortable that way. I rarely talk to strangers and unless it is them asking for directions or something similar I am not good at keeping the conversation going, even within a group. Fake compliments I ignore completely and try get out of giver's way/sight (Female from the United Kingdom).
9. It's fine for a worker to compliment a boss, but there is of course due respect that needs to be shown to a boss. Likewise it's OK for a boss to compliment a worker, but they need to be careful not to be overbearing. Of course in the work place compliments that border on flirting or sexual advances are frowned upon. More so for those in authority. I think the same rules apply to teachers and students. For two friends though I suppose it doesn't really matter. Friends can compliment each other as they please, but it makes sense that old or well-connected friends have a more open avenue to compliment each other. While new friends, being less familiar with each other, would be more reserved (Male from Australia).
10. Complimenting varies greatly depending on the personal experiences, confidence level and social position of both parties (Female from the United States).