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The speech act of compliment in student–teacher interaction: A case study of Emirati university students' attitudes

Tanju DEVECI ✉, Jessica MIDRAJ ✉ and Wael Samir EL-SOKKARY

Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE
✉tanjudeveci@yahoo.com

Abstract
For effective communication, interlocutors must be cognizant of lingua-cultural aspects in context-dependent situations. Among others, they include culturally and linguistically diverse university settings where students are tempted to complain about grades to teachers and request grade changes. To reduce the negative impact of these speech acts, students may resort to compliments whose utilization varies from culture to culture. This study investigated the attitudes of 146 undergraduate Emirati students towards complimenting an instructor from a different lingua-cultural background before negotiating a grade at a university in the United Arab Emirates that uses English as the medium of instruction. Data were collected using a survey and a discourse completion task. Results show that 49% of the respondents thought that it would be appropriate to use a compliment prior to a complaint about a grade or a request for regrading. Students primarily complimented their teacher's teaching skills and effort in teaching. The syntactic structures of their compliments mainly included You+V+NP (You+Verb+Noun Phrase). Results highlight the significance of considering interlocutors' lingua-cultural backgrounds and the potential impacts of an ulterior motive behind a compliment in deciding whether or not to produce one. If it is used, topics (i.e., what is complimented upon) to include in the compliment must be chosen delicately, considering the cross-cultural nature of the context and social status of the interlocutors.
Key words: *attitude, compliment, compliment topics, Emirati speakers of English, student-teacher interaction*

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Речевой акт «комплимент» в коммуникации между студентом и преподавателем в университетах ОАЭ

Т. ДЕВЕЧИ ✉, Д. МИДРАЖ, В.С. ЭЛЬ-СОККАРИ

Университет Халифа, Абу-Даби, ОАЭ
✉tanjudeveci@yahoo.com

Аннотация
Эффективная коммуникация требует осмысления лингвокультурных аспектов ситуаций, зависящих от контекста. К ним относятся культурно и лингвистически обусловленные ситуации, в которых студенты хотят высказать преподавателю недовольство оценкой и попросить ее исправить. Чтобы снизить негативное воздействие таких речевых актов, студенты могут прибегать к комплиментам, использование которых имеет культурную специфику. В данном исследовании рассматривается отношение 146 студентов бакалавриата университетов ОАЭ к использованию комплиментов перед обсуждением оценки с преподавателем из другой лингвокультуры, когда языком преподавания является английский. Данные были собраны на основе опроса и задания на завершение дискурса. Полученные результаты показывают, что 49% студентов считают полезным использование комплимента перед обсуждением оценки и просьбой о ее изменении. Студенты прежде всего высказывали похвалу умению преподавать и усилиям преподавателя. Синтаксическая структура комплимента по большей части была представлена формулой You+V+NP. Результаты подчеркивают значимость учета лингвокультурных особенностей собеседника и потенциального воздействия скрытых мотивов при принятии решения об использовании комплимента, а также выбора темы с учетом кросс-культурных особенностей ситуации и социального статуса собеседников.
Ключевые слова: отношение, комплимент, тема комплимента, англоговорящие коммуниканты в ОАЭ, взаимодействие между студентом и преподавателем

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1. Introduction

Language is perhaps *the* key tool that allows us to sustain our individual and societal well-being. Yet this vital tool appears to have become so familiar that many of us take it for granted (Bloomfield 2005). This is despite our societies having become more complex than ever, mainly due to increased global mobility, thus requiring us to use language(s) more mindfully.

Considering the English language to be "the dominant language in science" (Gordin 2015), many educational institutions across the globe adopted English as the medium of instruction (EMI). So much so that many primary and secondary schools in the Gulf, where the current study was undertaken, prepare students for EMI at the tertiary level. Over the years, the number of national and international colleges in the region where English is the medium of instruction has risen exponentially. However, there has been much discussion about 'which English' to

adopt. This has caused the institutions to use 'a variety of Englishes', a move supporting the notion of 'English as an international language' prompted by arguments against the native English speaker authority as the sole norm provider (Rose & Galloway 2019).

Yet, in contexts where people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact, communication challenges can easily occur. Communication will be more effective if individuals increase their awareness of linguistic (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, phonology, discourse) and pragmatic features (i.e., functions, variations, interactional skills, cultural framework) of the language used for communication and the lingua-cultural backgrounds of the speakers. Communication competence requires speakers to be mindful of how members of their speech communities use language to accomplish their communication purposes (Hymes 1972). That is, a person's competence in a language depends on his/her "knowledge and ability in ways that are both grammatical and socially appropriate" (Bauman & Sherzer 1975: 108). Resonating with this is sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain 1980), an important feature of which is speech acts. Their effective use is essential for successful communication in intercultural contexts (Iliadi & Larina 2017) such as the UAE. Sociolinguistic competence also requires communicators to refrain from producing a speech act when it is considered to be inappropriate. One such speech act, the utilization of which varies largely across cultures and contexts, is compliment.

There is a dearth of studies about speech acts produced by Emirati speakers of English. This is particularly the case in university settings where students' effective engagement in conversations with faculty plays a crucial role in students' successful communication and overall well-being at university. The description of students' attitude towards the complimenting speech act is also important for faculty whose awareness of the students' cultural and linguistic characteristics pertaining to the use of the compliment speech act will help acquire greater tolerance for seemingly 'unconventional' and 'inappropriate' communicative exchanges. Furthermore, it will help identify areas in which students may need support to develop their skills in English as an international language used to communicate with faculty (and students) from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The findings from previous studies with an almost identical body of students also provided the impetus for this study. For example, in one study investigating students' utilization of the complaint speech act, Deveci (2015) found that students faced challenges presenting their case to their teachers for a grade they believed was too low. The students' overall interaction with faculty was evaluated as 'inappropriate.' Similarly, Deveci and Hmida (2017) found Emirati students' use of the request speech act with teachers caused intercultural tensions. Informative as the results of these studies were, further research is needed to understand better Emirati students' attitudes towards the use of speech acts. Although the compliment speech act helps speakers save face, particularly when they need to produce a complaint or a request, it may also lead interlocutors to lose face. Therefore, it is

important to identify students' attitudes towards complimenting a teacher when they negotiate a grade, an act they frequently perform that may put both parties in an awkward situation. Accordingly, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Would Emirati university students feel comfortable enough to speak to their teacher, known to be approachable, about a grade they earned which they think is too low? Why (not)?
2. Do Emirati university students using English think making a compliment to their teacher is appropriate before mentioning the reason for their visit? Why (not)?
3. What are the topics of the compliment speech act sets produced by the students?
4. What are the syntactic structures of the compliments produced by the students?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Speech acts

According to Austin (1962), when we utter a sentence, we perform an action; by saying something, we do something. One of the three kinds of 'acts' Austin identified is 'illocutionary acts'. Examples include stating, warning, requesting, criticizing, and promising. Based on Austin's writing on illocutionary acts, Searle (1965: 62) developed the notion of 'speech acts', which he defines as "the production of the sentence token under certain conditions … and the minimal unit of linguistic communication."

A study of the meaning of sentences is similar to a study of speech acts in that "every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts)" (Searle 1969: 18). What lies at the heart of speech acts, therefore, is *meaning*. It is the intention that carries meaning in the utterance. Context, too, plays a key role; a particular utterance has a particular meaning under certain conditions (Searle 2002).

While some argue that there are some universal pragmatic principles by which speech acts operate (Austin 1962, Brown & Levinson 1978), many studies illustrate culture-specific features (e.g., Deveci & Midraj 2021, Haugh & Chang 2019, Malyuga & McCarthy 2021, Wierzbicka 2003). Such differing views of speech acts have resulted in much research indicating that cultural aspects play a role. Scholars including Iliadi and Larina (2017) state that a speech act can be a cultural act before a linguistic one. Likewise, Gass (1996) notes that people from different cultures may realize speech acts in diverse ways, which likely causes communication challenges. Wolfson (1989: 180), too, observes, "the repertoire of speech acts for each culture is differently organized."

The foregoing analysis of language use points to the importance of pragmatic and linguistic competence. There is a close link between the two; studies on language learners indicate that pragmatic competence increases in tandem with

linguistic competence (Bardovi-Harlig 2012). For example, increased language proficiency positively affects students' utilization of the request speech act by providing an explanation (Rose 2000). However, other researchers found evidence that learners with high proficiency in a university setting might still suffer from pragmatic failure when attempting to utilize certain speech acts (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). This suggests that linguistic competence may not necessarily predict pragmatic competence. What is necessary for communication to be effective is 'pragmalinguistic competence', which is "the range of linguistic expressions by which language users perform speech acts" (Irague 1996: 53). Research conducted in different contexts has revealed that there may not be a direct link between language proficiency and pragmalinguistic competence. Therefore, learners' awareness of the latter should be enhanced (Takahashi 2005, Yuanmin & Gailin 2017).

2.1 Speech act of compliment

A compliment "explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes 1988a: 446). This indicates that the compliment speech act is "typically produced to make the addressee feel good by saying something nice to him/her, in this way possibly satisfying the addressee's expectations rather than expressing a position judgment for a referential or informative reason" (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 75). An example of an explicit (direct) compliment is, "You look great today." An example of an implicit (indirect) compliment is as follows (Holmes 1988b: 486):

> Context: *Recipient's old school friend is visiting and comments on one of the children's manners.*
> Complimenter: *What a polite child!*
> Recipient: *Thank you. We do our best.*

In this case, the compliment indirectly attributes good parenting to the addressee.

Whether a compliment is made directly or indirectly may depend on the context and cultural norms. For instance, Dilek (2020) found that Turkish learners of English tended to use a greater number of indirect compliment strategies during student-student interactions. Chinese speakers, too, have been noted to utilize indirect compliments in daily interactions (Babkina 2020), especially through comparisons that involve likening a person to someone or something the speaker expects the hearer to admire. Boyle (2000) cautions that if the hearer does not recognize the comparison or if he/she is displeased with it, the attempt to constitute a compliment may fail. This could easily occur in conversations between people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds.

While a compliment can oil the wheels of social relations, it also has the potential to threaten a) the hearer's face if he/she feels imposed upon, and b) the complimenter's face if the hearer rejects his/her attempt to establish a closer relationship (Holmes 1988a). These often occur when the compliment is produced with an ulterior motive rather than in a pure spirit of niceness. When perceived as insincere, a compliment can result in "feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, threatened, or under considerable obligation" (Turner & Edgley 1974: 25). A compliment can also threaten the hearer's face if he/she disagrees with the complimenter by violating the maxim of agreement (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2008). Similarly, denying a compliment means 'talking against oneself', which damages the hearer's positive face (self-image) (Brown & Levinson 1987). The hearer's obligation to compliment the interlocutor back can also threaten the hearer's face.

Compliments can also be used as an external modification device to support one's use of the request speech act, which is named as 'a sweetener' (Dendenne 2014). A sweetener may help save the complimenter's face; yet, the complimentee will likely be distressed by the complimenter's ulterior motive. The imposition caused by the compliment may make it harder for the complimentee to decline the request, which also threatens his/her face.

The act of compliment itself is culture and context-dependent. For example, compliments in Western cultures may not be common (Wolfson & Manes 1980). In fact, complimenting in certain situations may be considered inappropriate and, therefore, may not be positively valued. Anecdotal evidence, for example, indicates that a student compliment given to an instructor just before an examination can put the instructor in an awkward situation. On the other hand, the Islamic traditions in Saudi Arabia require politeness, increasing the likelihood of compliments (Alqarni 2020). Yet, without careful consideration of contextual and cultural factors, arbitrary use of compliments is likely to result in interlocutors' feeling of discomfort and failure of communication goals.

Similarly, regarding compliment topics (i.e., what the hearer is complimented upon), there appear to be significant differences between cultures. The Japanese, for instance, tend to avoid personal compliments; however, they may compliment one's residence on formal occasions (Mizutani & Mizutani 1987). The Japanese have also been noted to compliment abilities and achievement (Kim, n.d.). Likewise, the Chinese have been shown to generally compliment performance, whereas Westerners have been found to compliment personal appearance, ability, and possessions (Cheng 2003). In Korea, there is more tendency towards compliments on personality traits (Baek 1998). Similarly, Egyptian Arabic speakers were found to compliment on personality traits (Nelson, El Bakary & Al Batal 1996). We also observe that Emirati students sometimes pay compliments to their teachers. When and how they do this often lead teachers, who typically come from lingua-cultural backgrounds different from those of the students, to question their students' ulterior motive, the influence of their cultural orientation and the linguistic devices they choose to employ. Together, these indicate that awareness of lingua-

cultural norms is essential for effective communication across cultures, especially when a person needs to decide whether the compliment speech act is appropriate and, if so, which topics to select or avoid.

The compliment speech act tends to have a restricted syntactic structure and pre-coded lexical items, making them fairly easy to identify. Knapp et al. (cited in Mustapha 2012) describe a compliment as a simple subject-object structured linguistic unit said directly to another person that assesses the person's qualities, actions, or possessions, and it typically does not occur during the final stages of an exchange.

In their study of compliments produced in American English by native speakers, Manes and Wolfson (1981: 121) identified the syntactic features presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. **Syntactic Patterns of Compliments**

	Syntactic pattern	%	Example
1	NP is/looks (really) ADJ	53.6	Your hair looks nice.
2	I (really) like/love NP	16.1	I love your hair.
3	PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	14.9	This was really a great meal.
4	You V (a) (really) ADJ NP	3.3	You did a good job.
5	You V (NP) (really) ADV	2.7	You really handled that situation well.
6	You have (a) (really) ADJ NP	2.4	You have such beautiful hair.
7	What (a) ADJ NP!	1.6	What a great idea!
8	ADJ NP!	1.6	Nice game!
9	Isn't NP ADJ!	1	Isn't it pretty?
10	*others*	2.8	

The first three patterns accounted for most of the syntactic features. Other researchers, too, found that these syntactic patterns were the most frequent, although the second and third patterns had reverse orders (Strubel-Burgdorf 2018, Rose 2001). Manes and Wolfson (1981) also note that 96% of the compliments included positive adjectives and verbs. Some of the verbs, however, were not "inherently positive but … when used in the correct context, usually with an intensifier such as *really,* [they] function as compliments" (Manes & Wolfson 1981: 118).

Various academic correspondence manuals and guides implicitly endorse using the pattern You+V+N, which is hearer-oriented. For instance, in their recommendations on composing a thank you note, YourDictionary (2018) lists some examples of starting a note. Among the 15 examples provided, ten start with the pronouns 'you' and 'your' while others often use the object pronoun 'you' and 'your'. Similarly, Ceville (2019) recommends expressing gratitude to a professor by providing a specific example of when his/her teaching style helped. A sentence starter for this may be "Your lecture on… ," which exemplifies a hearer-oriented compliment.

2.2. Negotiation of a grade

As "a particular type of social interaction that is assumed to be the most significant for human 'struggle for survival' in every society" (Sugawara 2009: 94), negotiation can serve as a tool for helping the speaker perform an illocutionary act in the form of a directive – one that aims at having the hearer do an action to the benefit of the speaker (Austin 1962). The speaker can use various speech acts (e.g., request, complaint, compliment) during a negotiation. Since the speaker cannot reach his/her goal by himself/herself, he/she needs the other party, which renders a negotiation an intertwined process (Schoop 2021); therefore, choosing particular speech acts depends on multiple factors including interlocutors' social statuses and socio-cultural norms. Also, a good negotiator should be empathic and communicate clearly, appropriately, and convincingly (Ibid), which helps the negotiator meet necessary felicity conditions (Austin 1962).

In the case of students negotiating grades with a teacher, the challenge may be more formidable, especially if the negotiation takes place between parties from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. Students in our context resort to a range of strategies including using particular speech acts. Previous research showed that a lack of socio-cultural pragmatic competence results in students' use of improper speech acts such as complaint and criticism (Deveci 2015). They often employ speech acts that may be appropriate in their culture but *not* in the culture of their teacher, like compliments. As discussed above, compliments may threaten the teacher's face when he/she realizes that the student is using them to achieve the desired effect. Even if the compliment were considered a positive move, the wrong choice of compliment topic might produce negative feelings in the teacher who is unaware of the student's lingua-cultural tendencies.

3. Methods

3.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted in the UAE, where the English language has a prominent role. Arabic is the national language of the country; however, due to the diverse profile of the population in the country (88.6% being non-nationals) (Gulfmigration.org), the English language is often utilized for general communication (with speakers with different L1s), work and educational purposes. UAE residents typically communicate with people from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, K12 schools give prominence to teaching English to prepare students for successful communication in daily life and for EMI at the tertiary level.

The EMI university where the current study was conducted hosts faculty from various nations with western, Middle Eastern, and Asian backgrounds, while the students are mainly from the UAE. The College of Arts and Sciences, where the authors teach, offers numerous undergraduate courses to provide analytical contexts to the science and engineering-oriented programs. One such course is Introduction

to Linguistics, which aims to develop students' knowledge of micro-linguistics (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics), linking these to aspects of macro-linguistics. Students are also taught different ways of data collection for analyzing linguistic data.

One hundred forty-six Emirati students registered in three researchers' sections completed the pre-lesson activity as part of an instructional activity focusing on data collection and analysis. Of these students, 115 were female and 31 were male. The students' ages ranged from 19 to 25 with a mean age of 22. Eighty-five students were seniors, 36 were juniors, and 25 were sophomores.

The students were proficient speakers of English; prior to their university studies, they had attained sufficient scores in international examinations including TOEFL or IELTS. Furthermore, the various courses they took before Introduction to Linguistics is also expected to have enhanced their language skills. Also, due to their socio-economic status, many participants sometimes travelled internationally, which required them to use English for communication purposes with people from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds.

The university, as an institutional academic domain, attests to particular hierarchies that establish the norms for student-teacher interaction, which directly affect the language used during such exchanges. In required first-year English classes at the university, students are guided on how to communicate with people of different hierarchies, particularly with their teachers. Similarly, the faculty handbook provides instruction on communication norms at the university and in the region. Therefore, a reciprocal relationship is expected between students' and faculty's verbal strategies. In addition, faculty are expected to adopt an open-door policy, encouraging students to seek their support when necessary and share feelings and thoughts more easily. Students often take this as an opportunity to visit their teachers to negotiate their grades.

3.2. Data collection tool and analysis

Prior to input sessions on speech acts, students completed an instructor-designed activity comprised of two parts:

A. Demographics: This section collected demographic data such as gender, age, and academic level.

B. The compliment speech act: This section included three sub-sections.

1. To identify if the students would feel comfortable initiating a discussion about a grade disagreement with a welcoming teacher and their particular reasoning, subsection one asked the following:

Imagine you have just received a grade for an assignment you have completed for your *English* class[1]. You are disappointed with your grade and think you deserve

[1] Since the faculty teaching English were non-locals (mainly from western cultures), this suggested the students should imagine they were to talk to an instructor from a different lingua-cultural background from theirs.

a better grade. Your teacher is welcoming and easy to talk to. Would you feel comfortable enough to go and speak to your professor about your grade? Why or Why not?

2. To ascertain students' feelings about making a compliment to a teacher before stating their primary purpose of visit, subsection two asked the students to imagine they *had decided* to talk to their teacher about their grades, and they were now in his/her office. Then, students were asked if, after an initial greeting, complimenting their teacher would be a good way to continue the conversation *before* mentioning the actual reason for their visit. Also, they were asked to explain their reasons.

3. To identify the topics and the syntactic patterns of the compliment speech act produced by the students, the third subsection asked students to complete the discourse completion task (DCT): Now, imagine you have greeted your instructor, and you are speaking to him/her. Write the exact words you would use to compliment him/her.

We obtained data only using a survey and DCT as the task was an in-class pre-lesson activity for which we gained IRB approval retroactively. Although DCTs do not collect naturally occurring data that may often be the ideal, it may not be practical or possible for researchers to collect such data for empirical studies. DCTs are useful when researchers need data that might be difficult to negotiate in real-life situations (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1992), as was the case in the current study. In fact, the Emirati context in which we conducted this study does not allow researchers to record people's voices without permission. Even with prior permission, such data would still *not* be considered authentic. It is also important to note that DCTs allow researchers to collect "a [relatively] large amount of data quickly, [to] create an initial classification of semantic formulas, and [to] ascertain the structure" (Beebe & Cumming cited in Cohen 1996: 394).

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and averages were used to analyze the relevant data like demographics and student tendencies (i.e., complimenting & non-complimenting). Qualitative analysis was also adopted to study the students' explanations of the reasons why they would (not) be comfortable talking to the teacher about their grade (Part B subpart 1) and why (not) they would use a compliment (Part B subpart 2). A similar approach was adopted to identify the topics of the compliments produced by the students.

In identifying the compliments, special attention was paid to the credits attributed to the teacher including possession, skills, etc. (Holmes 1988a). In doing so, no distinction was made between explicit and implicit compliments. Note that 41 students (35 females, six males) did not produce a compliment; therefore, 105 responses to the DCT were analyzed in the data set[2]. The syntactic analysis of

[2] Note that 75 students said it was not a good idea to start with a compliment, yet 105 students' DTRs had a compliment. This may be due to the social desirability bias (SDB), i.e., respondents' tendency to give socially desirable responses instead of responses that reflect their true feelings (Grimm 2010), which we consider to be a limitation of the data-collection method adopted in the

the compliment speech act was conducted using the scheme by Manes and Wolfson (1981), keeping in mind structures that might be exclusive to the data set in the current study. Qualitative data were first analyzed by the first and second authors separately to ensure inter-coder reliability. We then held a meeting where we discussed the few divergences until agreements were reached.

4. Results

The first research question asked if students would feel comfortable enough to speak to their English teacher about a grade they earned which they thought was too low. They were asked to explain their reasons. Most students (91%) stated they would feel comfortable. The most common reason was the teacher's welcoming nature (f=120, 60.3%[3]). This, the students often explained, put them at ease about engaging in a dialogue with their teacher. Convinced that they put so much effort into the assignment and deserved a better grade, many students (f=47, 23.6%) felt justified to engage in the conversation. Some (f=5, 2.5%) noted that visiting the teacher would give them the chance to explain their ideas, which the teacher may not have understood. Among the other reasons were the students' willingness to learn from their mistakes (f=15, 7.5%), the possibility of the teacher making a mistake with grading or entering the grade (f=6, 3%), and the students' worry that the grade would affect their GPAs (f=6, 3%).

However, 9% of the students indicated they would not feel comfortable speaking to their teacher about their grades. Five students stated they trusted the teacher's grading. In the words of a student, "The teacher should have a reason to give this grade." Four others said they were too shy to speak up, while others felt unable to explain the issue.

The second research question asked if students thought complimenting their teacher would be appropriate before mentioning the reason for their visit. Results showed that slightly more than half of the students (f=75, 51%) believed making a compliment would *not* be proper. Analysis of the students' responses revealed a variety of themes. Of the 82 responses, 22 (26.8%[4]) were related to the compliment being irrelevant to the task. Sample statements related to this theme include:

(1) *I'm in his office to discuss, not to compliment.*
(2) *He does not need my opinion on him.*

Fifteen of the responses (18.3%) indicated a compliment would be insincere.

(3) *[It is] similar to buttering up.*
(4) [The teacher] *might think compliment is not truthful.*

current study. Also, perhaps another likely reason is the way the question was asked in the DCT as described in Sub 3: "Write the exact words you would use to compliment him/her."

[3] Percentages were calculated from the total number of reasons (119) as some students stated more than one reason.

[4] Percentages were calculated from the total number of reasons (82) as some students stated more than one reason.

This was followed by a compliment being unprofessional, which occurred 12 times (14.6%).

(5) *Relationships with teachers should be kept professional.*

Ten responses (12.2%) indicated that another greeting would be sufficient. For instance, a student stated she would start with small talk. Themes with fewer respondents included that a compliment might be misunderstood by the teacher (f = 7, 8.5%), while inappropriacy and impoliteness were each stated five times (6.1%). Among the other reasons given were "It is not my style" (4.9%), "It shows I want something" (1.2%), and "It might make it more difficult to solve the issue" (1.2%).

On the other hand, almost half of the students (f=71, 49%) thought complimenting the teacher before making their case about their grades would be a good idea. The students often referred to a compliment's role in reducing the potential tension created by the upcoming complaint or the request for the teacher's reconsideration of the grade (88%). Sample responses include, "[The compliment] would relaxed [sic] the tension before we enter the serious conversation," and "Good starts lead to good ends." Another reason given by nine students was related to politeness. Students said things like, "It is an easy way to be kind and spread positivity," "I always start with good words not only because I want something but also I should respect for any one in front me," and "[The compliment] will put a smile on my teacher's face." For three other students, a compliment was a sign of appreciation for the teacher's willingness to see them.

The third research question concerned the topics of the students' compliment speech act sets. A total of 105 participant responses to the DCT were analyzed. Table 2 displays the topics to which students referred.

Table 2. **Topics in Student Compliments**

Topics	Total	
	Absolute Frequency (n)	**Relative frequency (%)***
Skills	60	33.1
Effort	47	26
Character/Attitude	28	15.5
Overall course	22	12.2
Appearance	16	8.8
Positive impact	8	4.4
Total	*181*	*100*

*Percentages are calculated from the total number of topics in compliments as some students referred to more than one topic.

Data analysis revealed the compliments focused on six distinct topics. The most prevalent was that of *skills*, which accounted for 33.1% of 181 responses. Among the skills the teacher was complimented on include his/her motivating students, considering student levels, designing creative lessons, and delivering engaging presentations. Another rather frequent topic was complimenting the instructor on his/her *effort*, which occurred 47 times (26%). Sample student

responses include, “You did your best to help [us],” and “You put so much effort in teaching us and making us future scientists.”

Less frequent areas of compliment include the teacher’s *character*/*attitude* and the *overall course.* The former occurred 28 times (15.5%), and fairness was one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of the teacher: "You are fair in grading," and "You always treat students fairly." Among other characteristics were the teacher’s fondness of his/her subject, understanding nature, respect and kindness towards students, and patience with students. Compliments on the overall course, on the other hand, occurred 22 times (12.2%). Example student statements include, “I enjoyed this course. It was amazing” and “Your course is my favorite.”

The least prevalent compliment topics include *appearance* (8.8%) and *positive impact* (4.4%). The students complimented on the teacher’s mood (e.g., happy), clothes (e.g., tie, dress), hairstyle, and beauty in general. On the other hand, eight of the compliments were related to the *positive impact* on the students themselves. The students made statements indicating that they were inspired, their life had become easier thanks to the course, and they had learned things about life.

The final research question aimed to identify the syntactic structures of the compliments produced by the students. Results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. **Syntactic Structures in Student Compliments**

Syntactic structures		**f***	**%***	**f****	**%****
	+ V + NP	27	15.3		
	+ be +ADJ +N	19	10.7	62	35
You	+ be +ADJ	10	5.6		
	+ look + ADJ	6	3.4		
	+ enjoy/love/like + N/NP	28	15.8		
I	+ V + N/NP	20	11.3	59	33.3
	+ be + ADJ	11	6.2		
	+ be + ADJ	11	6.2		
It	+ V +N/NP	4	2.3	17	9.6
	+ V + ADJ	2	1.1		
V (Thank)	+ you +PP	13	7.3	13	7.3
Your + noun	+ be + ADJ	12	6.8	12	6.8
-	ADJ + N	3	1.7	3	1.7
PRO	+ be +ADJ +N/NP	3	1.7	3	1.7
Other		8	4.5	8	4.5
	Total	*177*	*100*	*177*	*100*

*Within the sub-category; ** Out of the total number of compliments (177)

According to Table 3, the most frequently occurring syntactic structure was S+V+ADJ (35%). Within this category, You+V+NP was the most frequent. This points to the students' tendency to be hearer-oriented with their compliments.

(6) *You've made a positive difference in my life.*
(7) *You have a unique style.*

This was followed by You+be+ADJ (+N):

(8) *You are the best.*
(9) *You are a great teacher.*

Infrequent as it was, You+look+ADJ was also used six times:

(10) *You look very beautiful today.*

There were also speaker-oriented compliments (33.3%). A large portion of these included the verbs *enjoy*, *love*, and *like*:

(11) *I enjoy your classes.*
(12) *I love how fond you are of the subject.*

The students' compliments used the verb *to be* as well (6.2%):

(13) *I am so excited in your classes.*
(14) *I am a lucky student to be a part of your class.*

Also, the I-oriented compliments included a variety of other verbs such a *feel*, *appreciate*, and *find* (11.3%):

(15) *I appreciate the way you teach.*
(16) *I've learned a lot from you.*
(17) *I find you the best professor in the university.*

Significantly less frequent were It-oriented syntactic structures (9.6%). Many of these were it+be+ADJ(+N):

(18) *It is an interesting course.*
(19) *It is a nice perfume you are wearing*.

The students also utilized the performed verb *thank* in their compliments (7.3%). The syntactic structure for it was V+you+PP:

(20) *Thank you for your efforts in teaching the course in an interesting way.*

A similar number of compliments included Your+N+be+ADJ (6.8%):

(21) *Your presentations are very engaging*.

The demonstrative pronouns *that* and *this* were used. These included the syntactic structure of PRO+be+ADJ+N/NP (1.7%).

(22) *That is a really nice tie you have on.*

A final category included other syntactical structures such as questions:

(23) *What is your secret?*
(24) *Why [don't] other teachers learn from you?*

There was also a saying:

(25) *As they say, "Great teachers don't just teach you; they change you!*

Also note the use of an Arabic phrase:

(26) *Elhamdulillah [الحَمْد لله] [Thank God] that you are my teacher.*

5. Discussion

Results showed that over 90% of the students reported being at ease discussing a grading issue with their teacher. This result is likely because of the commiserating nature of the teacher depicted in the task. Indeed, there is evidence from previous research indicating teachers' concern for and acceptance of students creates a positive rapport and encourages positive feelings in students (Kachur et al. cited in Becker 2012), thus supporting students' interaction with the teacher. Similarly, Sabir (2015) found that teachers' welcoming attitude and communication with students in a gentle manner helped establish a good student-teacher relationship. This naturally prevents student anxiety when interacting with the teacher. Important to note, too, is that a few students would not be comfortable in this situation, generally pointing to the trust in the teacher's grading. It is possible that the archetype instructor in the students' mind had established clear grading criteria, and while the students thought that the grading might be low, they trusted the instructor's unbiased application of the rubric. It is also possible that these students come from a more authoritarian educational background, discouraging them from questioning teacher judgment. Many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures have been noted to believe in the notion of 'teacher dignity' according to which students ought to be humble and respect their teachers' authority and conform to their rules and guidance (Li & Du 2013), including respecting their grading. Otherwise, students may come across impolite. Another concern mentioned by the students was that they did not want to risk being misjudged by the instructor. As mentioned above, these point to speech acts' potential to be a cultural act before they are a linguistic one (Iliadi & Larina 2017).

Fifty-one percent of the students believed making a compliment to their teacher would *not* be acceptable before mentioning their reason for their visit commonly stating that it was irrelevant, not sincere and unprofessional. Some students also indicated their worry that they might be misunderstood by the teacher. Taken together, these reasons indicate the students' striving to save face, which is supported by Earley's observation (1997: 62) that "we [do not] always interact for social gain, but the style of interaction is typically regulated by varying degrees of an affiliation motive and a desire for self-definition." Similarly, Larina (2015: 205) observes that "direct communication is socially acceptable and in some situations

even preferred." The students in the current study, too, were likely apprehensive about paying a compliment to their teacher to avoid a false self-definition, which may have caused them to prefer direct communication.

Kuzio (2014) states that the relationship between the speaker and the hearer affects the compliment behavior significantly and that the speaker's social status determines his/her language use. Kuzio (2014: 131) also notes that "people of different social status show a discrepancy in their strategies, …and frequency of complimenting." Similarly, Sifianou (1992) notes that a higher-status interlocutor's complimenting a lower-status interlocutor is considered appropriate while the other way around is usually inappropriate. Also, the students in the current study might have abstained from paying a compliment to their teacher due to the high-power distance orientation of the Emirati culture where, according to our observations, a compliment addressed to someone of a higher-status might be face-threatening. On the other hand, in low power distance cultures like the USA, people tend to "demonstrate greater comfort with interacting across social distance," leading to "their more frequent complimenting of those of higher status" (Yue cited in Meier 2010: 84). It has also been noted that in collectivist cultures where high-power distance relationships are common, people tend *not* to use compliments as frequently as they do in individualist cultures where low-power distance is common (Berry & Triandis 2004).

On the other hand, 49% of the students felt a compliment before making a complaint or a request would be appropriate, generally explaining that this would reduce the tension associated with the subsequent complaint/request speech act. This finding may support Dendenne's (2014) observation regarding compliments serving as a sweetener to reduce the impact of a face-threatening act such as a request. Yet, the students' explanations for their responses also reveal their ulterior motive behind their compliments. Although previous research shows that insincere flattery (compliment) still works in some situations (Chan & Sengupta 2010), the teacher's recognition of insincerity (or a hidden agenda) could in fact cause embarrassment, discomfort, and suspicion (Turner & Edgley 1974). The imposition placed upon the teacher to reply to the forthcoming complaint or the request can threaten his/her face. In the case of a teacher from a western culture, for instance, the situation could cause the student to leave a negative impression on the hearer, which is quite contrary to some of the students' expectations that the compliment would leave a good impression on the teacher, which would then increase his/her chances of being listened to. This lends credence to Wolfson and Mane's (1980) argument that complimenting in certain situations may be inappropriate and therefore discouraged. It is, however, also important to note some of the students' remarks that compliments in their culture are a sign of politeness and appreciation for the teacher's willingness to listen to them. It is possible that such an orientation of the students was influenced by their Islamic background, increasing the likelihood of compliments (Alqarni 2020) even in situations involving an interlocutor from a different culture. This, once again, underscores the cultural foundations of speech acts as opposed to their linguistic ones (Iliadi & Larina 2017)

and illustrates the kind of misunderstandings that can occur in compliment exchanges in cross-cultural setting (Holmes & Brown 1987).

All the compliments produced by the students were direct, and the two most common topics of the compliments were those related to skills and effort. This finding is similar to results of previous studies conducted on compliments used by 'native" speakers of English (e.g., Manes & Wolfson 1980, Knapp, Hopper & Bell 1984). Wallwork (2016) suggests that university students can motivate their teachers to comply with their requests if they appreciate their skills by paying them a compliment. Important to note, however, is that past research found that appearance and/or possessions were more commonly complimented on than skills and efforts in everyday exchanges (Wolfson 1983). Although these compliments were also identified in our study, their frequency was rather low. The power-distance between the complimenter and the complimentee naturally affects the topics of the compliment speech act set. The face-threatening nature of the compliment speech act, just like any other, requires the speaker to consider factors including social distance and degree of power, which in turn affects his/her strategy choices in performing the act (Brown & Levinson 1978). Earlier research showed, for instance, that appearance-related compliments to a higher-status person were rare (Wolfson 1989). In support of this, Linnell (2009) also warns students newly admitted to universities not to compliment the outfit of a teacher who is a higher-status person.

Results revealed that the most frequent syntactic structure of the students' compliments produced You+V+NP – a clear indication of the students' tendency towards hearer-orientedness with their compliments. Manes and Wolfson (1981) also found that this syntactic feature in American English compliments was frequently used. In our study, its frequent occurrence is likely due to the power-distance between the hearer and speaker, which required placing the addressee and his/her attributes in the focus. That is, the focus was the teacher's skills and efforts in teaching. Also, the students' exposure to the types of academic correspondence manuals and guides mentioned earlier (e.g., YourDictonary 2018, Ceville 2019) and other similar types of instructional materials likely have an effect on their preference for particular syntactic structures over others. It is also possible that the students in the current study produced sentences of such syntactic structures on a subconscious level.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

Considering the argument that "as daily interaction – professional, public, mediated, or otherwise – in an ever more globalized world requires finely developed intercultural skills, pragmatic competence and cultural fluency, having a deeper insight into the intricate relationship between language, communication and (ethnic) identity is of critical importance" (Larina, Ozyumenko & Kurtes 2017: 109), this study investigated the compliment speech act in hypothetical communicative exchanges between 146 Arabic-speaking Emirati students and their university professor in an EMI educational setting.

Our findings shed light on the role culture and intercultural communication play in explaining certain types of linguistic behavior. Results clearly indicate that student-teacher communication involving participants from varying backgrounds is impacted by multiple dimensions including linguistic and cultural ones (Iliadi & Larina 2017). We found that the students had mixed attitudes towards using the compliment speech act for an ulterior motive, indicating the use of the compliment speech act in a university setting with people from different lingua-cultural background may cause strains, possibly affecting students' pragmatic and linguistic competences, which leads us to question whether increased language proficiency alone always predicts success in communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). This further points to Wolfson and Mane's (1980) observation that complimenting in a certain situation, such as the one in the current study, may be not be preferable. Yet in the case of the likely uncomfortable and face-threatening situation of a teacher receiving a compliment before a complaint or request, communicators' diverse lingua-cultural characteristics in their EMI setting must be considered and tolerance should be fostered. This is particularly important when scholars' argument that speech acts are not always comparable across cultures (Gass 1996, Wolfson 1989, Wierzbicka 2003) is considered. Faculty awareness of the students' cultural and linguistic characteristics related to the use of this speech act, in particular, and others, in general, may help lead to more tolerance and preparedness for dealing with seemingly 'inappropriate' communicative interactions more effectively. Moreover, it would be beneficial for students to learn about aspects to consider when interacting with professors, especially those from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to ensure acceptable, appropriate, and productive communicative exchanges. This will contribute to students' developing negotiation skills by helping them communicate appropriately and emphatically (Schoop 2021).

Our findings reemphasize the importance of understanding that cultural values are embedded in language and that it makes sense to explain speech acts in the context of specific cultural values. Recent research indeed revealed that "knowledge of cultural values, key words and cultural scripts enables us to observe the systematic interconnectedness of language, culture, cognition and communication, and to see the logic of culture-specific modes of linguistic interaction" (Larina 2020: 436). Therefore, people engaging in communitive exchanges with others from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds may need to be more open to cross-cultural differences so as not to jump to erroneous conclusions about people who behave or use speech acts differently, hence developing better intercultural communication.

While our findings provide insight into an under-investigated area, using a DCT has its limitations as it is not a natural exchange. Therefore, it would be helpful to investigate student/instructor communication in a natural setting or with different instructor qualities. This could provide deeper insights into speech acts in an academic setting. Moreover, it would be useful to investigate gender differences in the use of speech acts, including female student to female instructor, female student

to male instructor, male student to female instructor, and male student to male instructor. Also, future studies could investigate the extent to which students employ indirect compliments in exchanges with teachers.

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Bionotes:

Tanju DEVECI is Associate Professor of English in the English Department of Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He taught English for academic purposes at Bilkent and Sabanci Universities in Turkey. Since 2012, he has been teaching English and communication skills at Khalifa University. He has published research and teaching articles on a variety of topics including andragogy, learning styles and pragmatics.
e-mail: tanjudeveci@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5905-9793

Jessica MIDRAJ, Ph.D., is a faculty member in the English Department at Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. She has extensive experience as an instructor, mentor, teacher-trainer, researcher, and administrator. Her research interests include applied linguistics, quality assurance, student and teacher self-efficacy, language issues in STEM education, as well as curriculum and assessment.
e-mail: jmidraj@outlook.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9575-538X

Wael Samir EL-SOKKARY
Wael EL-SOKKARY is a Lecturer of English in the English Department of Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He has been teaching English and related courses since 1992. Since 2006, he has been teaching English, Engineering Design and Linguistics at Khalifa University. His research interests include applied linguistics, language acquisition and engineering education.
e-mail: welsokkary@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3445-7143

Сведения об авторах:
Танджу ДЕВЕЧИ – доцент кафедры английского языка Университета Халифа в Абу-Даби, ОАЭ. Преподавал английский язык для академических целей в Билкентском университете и Университете Сабанджи в Турции. С 2012 года обучает студентов Университета Халифа английскому языку и коммуникативным навыкам. Опубликовал ряд статей по широкому кругу проблем, включающих андрагогику, стили преподавания и прагматику.
e-mail: tanjudeveci@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5905-9793

Джессика МИДРАЖ имеет степень PhD, преподает на кафедре английского языка Университета Халифа, Абу-Даби, ОАЭ. Имеет большой опыт педагогической, научной и административной работы. Ее научные интересы включают прикладную лингвистику, обеспечение качества преподавания, эффективность взаимодействия между преподавателем и студентом, языковые аспекты обучения науке, технологии, инженерии и математике, разработку программ и оценочных средств.
e-mail: jmidraj@outlook.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9575-538X

Ваэль Самир ЭЛЬ-СОККАРИ – старший преподаватель кафедры английского языка Университета Халифа в Абу-Даби, ОАЭ. С 1992 г. преподает английский язык и связанные с ним курсы. В Университете Халифа работает с 2006 года, ведет курсы английского языка, инженерного проектирования и лингвистики. Его научные интересы включают прикладную лингвистику, усвоение языка и инженерное образование.
e-mail: welsokkary@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3445-7143