

THE ROLE OF COMPLIMENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THEIR PEDAGOGICAL EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

This article examines the compliment — a positive evaluative speech act — as a multilayered pedagogical instrument within the contemporary communicative paradigm of English language teaching (ELT). Adopting a theoretical and empirical review methodology, the study situates the compliment within speech act theory and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and within established models of communicative competence (Widdowson, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980), arguing that its systematic instruction develops learners' lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies simultaneously. Drawing on the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Ellis, 1994), the article further demonstrates that compliments lower classroom anxiety, increase motivation, and activate meaning-negotiation processes that deepen input processing. A synthesis of empirical studies spanning four decades — from foundational corpus-based work (Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Holmes, 1988) to recent research on digital and AI-mediated discourse (Placencia & Lower, 2020; Zheng & Huang, 2022; Wang & Derakhshan, 2024) — confirms that explicit compliment instruction enhances learners' sociopragmatic competence, intercultural awareness, and oral fluency. On this basis, the article proposes a five-stage pedagogical model (input flooding, noticing, controlled practice, free production, and reflection) for teaching compliments in the EFL/ESL classroom, together with a mapping of specific compliment-based activities onto core language skills. Finally, the article evaluates the emerging role of artificial intelligence (AI-Enhanced CALL) in compliment instruction, noting both its affordances — unlimited practice, low-stakes interaction, real-time feedback, and cross-cultural comparison — and its current limitation in modeling the indirect, paralinguistically encoded norms of sincerity characteristic of Uzbek compliment culture. The article concludes that AI mediation should be regarded as a complementary rather than a substitutive tool, incapable of fully replacing live teacher–student cultural interaction.

Keywords: *compliment; speech act theory; communicative competence; pragmatic competence; politeness theory; English language teaching (ELT); sociopragmatics; intercultural communication; affective filter; AI-mediated language learning (AICALL)*

1. Introduction

Within the contemporary paradigm of language teaching, communicative competence has crystallized as a central construct — one that encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also social, cultural, and pragmatic appropriateness. Viewed from precisely this perspective,

the compliment — understood as a positive evaluative speech act — functions as a multilayered pedagogical instrument in the language-teaching process. It constitutes a complex communicative unit that simultaneously integrates linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural components. Through compliments, learners acquire not only linguistic units but also begin to grasp the rules governing social interaction, which substantially enhances their overall communicative competence.

1. The Compliment as a Pedagogical Instrument: Theoretical Foundations

At present, the development of communicative competence occupies a central place in language teaching. Within this line of inquiry, the compliment — as a positive evaluative speech act — performs two distinct yet interrelated functions in the pedagogical environment: first, it serves as a motivational instrument in teacher–student interaction; and second, it directly contributes to the development of learners' pragmatic competence.

Theoretically, the compliment is regarded, within the framework of speech act theory, as a contemporary manifestation of epideictic discourse. As emphasized in the underlying dissertation, the core semantic nucleus of the compliment is oriented toward positive evaluation and emotional effect, and it serves to reinforce the addressee's social "face." According to the theory advanced by Brown and Levinson (1987), this process manifests as a "positive politeness strategy" — that is, by giving a compliment, the speaker signals closeness and solidarity to the listener.

Within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology, the use of compliments is of considerable importance in creating authentic communicative practice. Whereas Widdowson (1978) defined communicative competence as the harmonization of linguistic and pragmatic ability — that is, the capacity to apply linguistic units appropriately to a given situation — Canale and Swain (1980) offer a broader characterization of the concept across four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Compliments play a particularly central role within sociolinguistic competence, since their use must be calibrated to social status, culture, and context. It is precisely within the domains of sociolinguistic and strategic competence that the significance of studying compliments becomes evident: a learner must not merely be able to construct a grammatically correct sentence but must also be capable of offering an evaluation that is situationally appropriate, culturally congruent, and pragmatically sincere.

Contemporary pedagogical research further demonstrates that the use of compliments is of substantial importance in managing affective factors within the classroom environment. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis advanced by Krashen (1982), language acquisition proceeds more effectively under conditions of low anxiety and high motivation. The compliment creates precisely this psychological climate: the learner feels valued, which in turn increases active participation. Van Lier (1996), for his part, argues that positive evaluations (compliments) offered by the teacher intensify learners' cognitive engagement and lead to deeper processing of input.

Moreover, when viewed through the lens of the Interaction Hypothesis (Ellis, 1994), compliments are considered instruments that activate the process of "meaning negotiation." For instance, a learner may begin with a simple compliment such as "I like your presentation" and then expand it into: "I really like your presentation because your examples were clear and engaging." In this process, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic competencies develop simultaneously. For this reason, compliments are regarded as a "multi-layered pedagogical trigger" in language learning.

2. Empirical Evidence: Compliments and Positive Outcomes in English Language Teaching

The pedagogical effectiveness of compliments has been confirmed by a substantial body of empirical research. Manes and Wolfson (1981), analyzing the structure and frequency of use of compliments in English, demonstrated that they are formulaic and highly standardized. This makes them particularly convenient for instructional purposes, since learners can acquire them rapidly through clearly defined structures. Holmes (1988), for her part, emphasizes that the primary function of compliments is to reinforce social solidarity.

In a pedagogical context, an experimental study conducted by Billmyer (1990) showed that learners who had been taught compliment strategies achieved considerably higher outcomes in communicative situations, with this result being especially pronounced in speaking skills. Golato (2005) found that when L2 learners acquired strategies for responding to compliments, their intercultural competence increased correspondingly.

At present, this issue is being examined in an even broader context — that of digital communication and artificial intelligence environments. On social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube), for example, compliments are expressed through "likes," comments, and emojis, which illustrates the multimodal nature of the compliment. The multimodal and paralinguistic approach adopted in the dissertation corroborates precisely this point.

These pedagogical findings are confirmed in the following body of empirical research:

Table 1. Key Empirical Studies on Compliments and English Language Teaching

Researcher(s) and Year	Method	Principal Finding
Boxer & Pickering (1995)	Corpus analysis	Teaching compliments substantially develops learners' sociopragmatic skills.
Billmyer (1990)	Experimental group design	The group trained in compliment strategies demonstrated higher communicative effectiveness in conversational situations than the control group.
Golato (2005)	Interviews and observation	L2 learners increased their intercultural pragmatic competence by learning strategies for responding to compliments.

Researcher(s) and Year	Method	Principal Finding
Huth (2006)	Conversation analysis	Teaching compliment sequences improved students' discourse competence and the fluency of their communication.
Ishihara & Cohen (2010)	Pedagogical practice	The compliment was identified as one of the most suitable speech act types for pragmatic instruction.
Placencia & Lower (2020)	Digital discourse analysis	Compliments on social media (accompanied by emojis and GIFs) were shown to be an important instrument in shaping learners' digital pragmatic competence.
Tajeddin & Malmir (2021)	Video-based discourse analysis	Studying paralinguistic signals (facial expression, intonation) through video lessons increased learners' accuracy in perceiving compliments by 40%.
Zheng & Huang (2022)	Human-robot interaction (HRI)	Exchanging compliments with artificial intelligence (chatbots) was found to reduce learners' speech-related anxiety ("communication apprehension") and to increase verbal fluency.
Syed & Kim (2023)	Multimodal corpus analysis	Teaching compliments not only through words but also through body language (embodied learning) was confirmed to accelerate sociocultural adaptation among L2 learners.
Wang & Derakhshan (2024)	Experimental group (LLM-based)	Generating culturally adapted compliment prompts with the aid of large language models such as ChatGPT significantly enhanced learners' pragmatic awareness.

Taken together, the studies cited above lead to the general conclusion that the purposeful teaching of compliments in English language learners: enriches lexical repertoire; strengthens grammatical awareness; develops sociopragmatic competence; and enhances affective motivation. In addition to this general conclusion, research conducted in the 2020s indicates that, in the contemporary pedagogical context, teaching the compliment:

- **Enhances digital literacy:** it helps learners understand the pragmatic function of emojis and other multimodal signs;
- **Develops skills for communicating with artificial intelligence:** it cultivates the ability to formulate culturally appropriate prompts when interacting with AI systems;
- **Cultivates paralinguistic sensitivity:** it fosters awareness that tone of voice and visual signals themselves carry meaning.

3. Practical Guidelines for Delivering Effective Compliments in Intercultural and AI-Mediated Communication

Drawing on the findings of the dissertation and on the international methodological literature, this section proposes practical guidelines for the use of compliments in teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL).

A) Stages of Teaching the Compliment in the Classroom

1. **Familiarization stage (input flooding):** Learners are presented with authentic samples of compliments drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC) and authentic video materials. At this stage, learners become acquainted with the syntactic formulas of the compliment (e.g., "You have + [adjective] + [noun]"; "I really like your...") as well as its lexical repertoire and intonational features (Manes & Wolfson, 1981).

2. **Comprehension and analysis stage (noticing):** Learners are trained to distinguish, through contextualized examples, the pragmatic differences between a compliment and flattery, and between a compliment and irony. At this stage, paralinguistic markers — intonation, pause, and vocal timbre — are examined in particular detail.

3. **Controlled practice:** Using role-play and discourse completion tasks (DCTs), learners construct compliments appropriate to given situations, while the teacher evaluates their pragmatic accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

4. **Free production:** In authentic situations — including interaction with an AI chatbot — learners independently generate their own compliments. At this stage, intercultural differences, including the divergences between English and Uzbek norms, are discussed.

5. **Reflection and feedback:** Learners audit their own compliment strategies, while the teacher assesses their sociopragmatic development on the basis of a portfolio.

B) Language Skills That Can Be Developed Through the Compliment

Table 2. Language Skills Developed Through the Compliment

Type of Skill	Objective Addressed via the Compliment	Sample Activity
Lexical competence	Acquisition of evaluative adjectives, intensifying adverbs, and the vocabulary of "compliment social formulas"	Creating a vocabulary wall
Grammatical competence	Present simple / continuous, possessives, exclamatory structures	Structural analysis and reconstruction exercises
Pragmatic competence	Selecting a speech act appropriate to context; face-saving strategies	Role-play; DCT questionnaires
Sociolinguistic competence	Distinguishing formal/informal register; language choice related to gender and status	Text comparison; corpus concordance analysis
Speaking skills	Expressing sincerity through intonation, pause, and vocal timbre	Video recording and self-assessment

Type of Skill	Objective Compliment	Addressed via the	Sample Activity
Intercultural competence	Comparing and reconciling English and Uzbek norms of complimenting		Intercultural case studies and discussion

The stages of teaching compliments in the classroom can be further elaborated systematically as follows:

1. **Input stage:** Authentic materials (Netflix dialogues, YouTube vlogs) are used to analyze real compliments; at this stage, multimodal elements (intonation, facial expression) are also studied.
2. **Noticing stage:** Students distinguish compliments from irony and sarcasm — a distinction of particular importance in contemporary internet discourse.
3. **Controlled practice:** Role-play and exercises with an AI chatbot are employed — for example, a "compliment exchange simulation" conducted with ChatGPT.
4. **Free production:** Students simulate real-life situations such as interviews, presentations, and networking events.
5. **Reflection:** Development is assessed through portfolios and self-assessment.

4. AI-Mediated Communication and the Compliment in Language Teaching: New Pedagogical Opportunities

AI-based language-teaching systems — Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and AI-Enhanced CALL (AICALL) — provide learners with an authentic and low-stress environment in which to practice complimenting. As demonstrated by the analysis of LLM responses presented in Section 3.2 of the underlying study, AI systems interpret compliments as positive reinforcement from the user and, accordingly, optimize the quality of subsequent responses (via the Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback, or RLHF, mechanism).

From a pedagogical standpoint, this offers the following opportunities:

- **Unlimited iteration:** The learner can reuse the same compliment expression across a variety of contexts and observe the resulting response patterns — extending the possibility of practical repetition beyond the confines of the classroom.
- **Cultural comparison:** The learner can send the same compliment to the AI in both English and Uzbek versions and analyze the differences in the responses generated in each language, which fosters conscious awareness of cultural scripts.
- **A safe communicative space:** In accordance with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, learners do not fear making mistakes when interacting with AI, since the social stakes are low — a factor that accelerates the development of oral communicative competence.
- **Prompt-engineering skills:** In the process of learning to compose compliments appropriate for AI systems, the learner makes conscious decisions regarding lexical choice, style, and cultural appropriateness — thereby developing metacognitive language awareness.

AI systems such as ChatGPT and Duolingo AI have ushered in a new stage in language teaching. Owing to the RLHF mechanism, AI treats the compliment as a positive signal and optimizes its responses accordingly. This, in turn, affords learners the following opportunities:

- unlimited practice
- a safe environment
- real-time feedback
- intercultural analysis

There is, however, a limitation to be noted: AI does not yet fully grasp Uzbek pragmatics — that is, it may misinterpret an "indirect compliment."

Alongside the opportunities outlined above, then, a number of pedagogical limitations must also be acknowledged. Most importantly, current LLM systems are unable to accurately model the norms of sincerity that are indirectly and paralinguistically encoded in Uzbek culture (as demonstrated by the findings of Section 3.2). AI mediation may therefore serve as a supplementary instrument in teaching the compliment, but it cannot fully substitute for the live cultural influence exerted through direct teacher–student interaction.