

Giving and Accepting Compliments

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Brief Introduction for the Teacher

Socio-linguists speaking on the subject of politeness point out that there are three phenomena at play when a compliment is paid to someone: the recipient can choose to accept it directly, indirectly, or refuse it (he or she can presumably produce a blend of all three). All these strategies are not ill-intentioned, of course, they are employed by human beings in tricky situations, because dealing with a compliment is a delicate affair.

If you accept it right away, we are told, your response may insinuate superiority:

- John, you are so intelligent.
- I knew it all the time.

If you refuse a compliment, you may upset the giver.

- John, you look great.
- Not at all, I look terrible.

On the other hand, we have the problem of frequency; if someone is lavish with compliments-and never stops giving them, we could ask ourselves if he or she really means it. Americans, for example, are claimed to be particularly fond of complimenting, whereas other nationalities would be perhaps more inclined to avoid what are seen as potentially embarrassing situations. As a result, Americans have been accused of hypocrisy, while, we can suppose, the latter can be accused of being cold-natured. And then again, one can argue that an abundance of complimenting can reflect equality, directness, honesty, spontaneity. It is a no-win situation, but it must be dealt with, because compliments do occur and are paid. It is, I believe, not a vital area of learning a target language, but, if nothing, else, teachers can sensitise their students to an interesting area of interaction, and perhaps generate some fun in the process.

Activity A

Get the students to talk about how they or people in their countries deal with compliments.

Activity B

Get the students to give (and react to) the following unfinished compliments. They can do it in pairs or in small groups. It might be a good idea to split up the students into pairs, and to ask them to write down each other's replies. In this way, each pair can report back to the rest of the class when the chosen compliments have been dealt with. Listening to other students' efforts is good fun. Each pair could also "act out" their mini dialogue. Encourage the students to inject some emotion into the exchanges, that is make sure they use appropriate intonation.

Possible Compliments:

- You look ...
- What a lovely ...
- You speak English ...
- I like your new ...

- Your perm is ...
- Where did you get that (indirect) ...
- You write very well, you should ...
- I admire your ...
- Well done, your work ...
- Congratulations on your ...
- Keep up the good work, ...
- You take after your mother/father, ...

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