

## PRAGMATIC AWARENESS OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN A GENDER-SEGREGATED SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study investigates how Saudi male and Saudi female learners studying English at a Saudi University judge native and non-native complimenting expressions. In this study, it was hypothesized that Saudi male and female learners of English would differ in their judgments of native and non-native complimenting expressions in English as they are exposed to different norms and have different channels of interaction in English, and that Saudi male students would be better in their judgments due to the structure of the society which would give them more opportunities to interact with native speakers. 36 male and 55 female students participated, and a ten-item pragmatic judgment test, which was originally developed and used by Bulut and Özkan (2005), was also used for this study. The results showed that Saudi female learners had a better perception of the native speaker complimenting expressions compared to Saudi male learners, and had stronger correlations with native speaker judgments for judging non-native complimenting expressions. This shows that both channels of education have their own contextual features which need further exploration.

**Key Words:** pragmatic awareness, speech acts, gender, compliments

## CİNSİYET AYRIMINA DAYALI BİR TOPLUMDA BİR YABANCI DİLİN KULLANIMBİLİMSEL FARKINDALIĞI

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı bir Suud üniversitesinde İngilizce eğitimi alan Suudlu kız ve erkek öğrencilerin anadili İngilizce olan ve olmayan konuşmacılar tarafından kullanılan iltifat sözeylemlerini nasıl değerlendirdiklerini araştırmaktır. Çalışmanın başlangıcında kız ve erkek öğrencilerin birbirinden tamamen farklı ortamlarda ve koşullarda eğitim aldıklarından dolayı kullanımbilimsel farkındalık açısından farklılık gösterecekleri, ve toplumun yapısından dolayı erkek öğrencilerin ana dili İngilizce olan konuşmacılarla daha rahat iletişim kurabilme olanağına sahip oldukları gerçeğinden yola çıkılarak erkek öğrencilerin kız öğrencilere göre daha yüksek seviyede kullanımbilimsel farkındalığa sahip olacakları varsayılmıştır. 36 erkek ve 55 kız öğrencinin katıldığı bu çalışmada veri toplama aracı olarak daha önce Bulut ve Özkan (2005) tarafından geliştirilmiş ve kullanılmış olan on maddelik bir kullanımbilim değerlendirme testi kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar Suudlu kız

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öğrencilerin daha yüksek seviyede bir kullanımbilimsel farkındalığa sahip olduklarını ve anadili İngilizce olmayan konuşmacıların ürettikleri iltifat sözeylemi ifadelerini değerlendirmede Suudlu kız öğrenciler ile anadili İngilizce olan değerlendirmeciler arasında daha güçlü bağıntılar olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu sonuç, her iki eğitim kanalının da araştırılması gereken kendine özgü bağlamsal özelliklerinin olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** kullanımbilimsel farkındalık, sözeylemler, cinsiyet, iltifat sözeylemi

## **1. Introduction**

It has been frequently reported that even advanced level non-native speakers have problems with comprehending and producing appropriate language, and pragmatics, compared to other aspects, is a new field in second language acquisition research. Bardovi-Harlig (1992) describes pragmatic competence as “the ability of language users to match sentences with contexts in which they are appropriate” (p. 28), and it can no longer be considered as “extra or ornamental, like the icing on the cake” (Kasper, 1997, p. 2) because the studies conducted for the last 20 years have proven that native speakers and learners do not always match in comprehending and producing contextually appropriate language (Schauer, 2006), and such mismatch may lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983).

Thus, there have been many attempts to contribute to the development and measurement of pragmatic comprehension and production. In most of these attempts, pragmatic “awareness” seems to be considered as the initial step. According to Schmit’s (1993) noticing hypothesis, “awareness” has two stages. In the first stage pragmatic strategies have to be noticed, which means “registering the occurrence of some event”, and in the second stage these strategies should be understood, and this “implies recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern” (p. 26).

Studies examining pragmatic awareness have focused on various speech acts such as advice (Hinkel, 1997; Matsumura, 2001, 2003), requests (Carrell & Konneker, 1981; Kitao, 1990; Suh, 1999; Tanaka & Kawade, 1982; Walters, 1979), requests and apologies (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985), suggestions (Koike, 1996), comparison of pragmatic and grammatical awareness for a set of speech acts including apologies, refusals, requests and suggestions (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgoda & Röver, 2001; Schauer, 2006) and compliments (Bulut and Özkan, 2005).

Hinkel (1997) compared American native speakers of English and Taiwanese Chinese speakers in their perception of advice-giving in English using both DCT and Multiple Choice (MC) data. She found that both in DCT and MC data the groups differed significantly in their appropriacy perceptions. American participants preferred significantly fewer direct or hedged advice options compared to Chinese learners in responding to MC questionnaire while significantly more

American participants preferred direct and hedged advice in their DCT responses. Matsumura (2001) investigated university-level Japanese students' perceptions of social status in offering advice comparing the development of Japanese exchange students' pragmatic competence in Canada with that of Japanese students in Japan. He used a 12-item MCQ and examined Japanese students' pragmatic development by comparing the approximation of their preferences for advice type to native speakers' preferences. The results showed that the students who lived and studied abroad had a better perception of social status in giving advice. In a follow-up study, Mastumura (2003) investigated the effect of proficiency and amount of exposure to target language. He used the same MCQ from his 2001 study and a 20-item 'amount of exposure' questionnaire. Using a Structural Equation Modelling, he found that amount of exposure was more effective than levels of proficiency and that amount of exposure was partly determined by levels of proficiency, but the strongest indicator of pragmatic development was the pragmatic competence itself.

One of the earlier studies which focused on politeness in requests was conducted by Carrell and Konneker (1981). They compared American native speakers of English and a group of adult intermediate and advanced level ESL students. The participants were asked to rank the eight requesting strategies from the most to the least polite for each of the four situations. There was a high correlation between the native and non-native speaker rankings, but non-native speakers had more politeness distinctions than the native speakers, which the researchers claimed to be a consequence of ESL learners' over-sensitivity to form/meaning distinctions. Kitao (1990) also used a questionnaire and asked American native speakers of English, Japanese ESL learners in the US and Japanese EFL learners in Japan to rank requesting expressions from very rude to very polite on a 10-level scale. The results showed that there was no significant difference between all three groups, but the ESL learners perceived the requesting expressions more polite than the EFL learners in general.

Tanaka and Kawade (1982) compared native speakers of English and advanced level ESL learners for their perception of the varying degrees of politeness in requesting expressions. They used a rank-order procedure for a set of twelve sentences. They found a high correlation between native speakers and the advanced level ESL learners in their ranking of the requesting expressions from the most to the least polite. Similar to Carrell and Konneker (1981), they also found that nonnative participants were more sensitive to politeness distinctions in English. Suh (1999) used an MCQ which was adopted from Tanaka and Kawade (1982) to compare the preferences of American native speakers of English and Korean ESL learners in 12 requesting situations. The findings showed that there were many similarities between two groups, but in situations where requester-requestee relationship was close, the Korean learners were not able to identify the politeness strategies used by the American native speakers of English.

Walters (1979) compared male and female native and non-native speakers of English, and male and female Puerto Rican speakers of Spanish using the paired comparisons method for 14 requesting strategies in English and Spanish. The findings showed high correlations between males and females for native and non-native speakers of English. Native speaker females made a greater distinction between polite and impolite forms. Also, both male and female non-native groups reflected more the native speaker female perceptions of politeness. In contrast with English data, Puerto Rican males and females did not show any significant correlation in their perception of the politeness strategies in Spanish requests.

Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) focused on a target language different from English and compared native and non-native speakers of Hebrew for their judgments of requests and apologies in their native and target languages. They used a judgment test which included 8 situations of requests and apologies each with six expressions. The participants were asked to rate the expressions as the most, more or less or not appropriate. They included three groups of learners of Hebrew with different lengths of stay in Israel and found that level of approximation to the native norms depended on the length of stay. A second study which focused on a language different from English was conducted by Koike (1996). She investigated the pragmatic competence of American learners of Spanish from three different levels of proficiency. The participants watched seven scenarios and were asked to respond appropriately to the speaker in each scenario, identify the type of speech act and describe the speaker's mood. The results showed that about half of the advanced level students and about 60 to 75% of the first and second year students misunderstood the intent of the speech act. So, advanced students were much more competent in understanding the true intent of the speech acts.

Three studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgoda & Röver, 2001; Schauer, 2006) compared ESL and EFL learners for their judgment of grammatical errors and pragmatic infelicities. All three studies used the same instrument which included a videotape with 20 scenarios. The participants watched the video scenarios and were asked to evaluate the severity of the accuracy and appropriateness problems through a questionnaire. The speech acts included in these studies were apologies, refusals, requests, and suggestions. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) compared Hungarian EFL learners and ESL learners in the United States. They found that ESL learners in the United States recognized a higher number of pragmatic infelicities than grammatical errors while the EFL learners in Hungary displayed an inverse order. They also investigated the effect of proficiency and length of stay and found that high-proficiency EFL learners had higher levels of perception of both grammatical and pragmatic items than the lower level EFL learners while the ESL group had higher scores for the pragmatic items than the grammatical items. The length of stay was also found to be an influential variable in the sense that the participants who stayed longer in the United States assigned higher severity scores to the pragmatic items.

Niezgoda and Röver (2001) and Schauer (2006) replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study and found conflicting results. Niezgoda and Röver (2001) compared English-major Czech EFL learners and ESL learners from a language school in Hawai'i. In contrast to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's findings, their EFL learners had higher error identification and severity rating for both grammatical and pragmatic items than the ESL learners. However, the within-group comparisons showed that ESL learners recognized more pragmatic infelicities than grammatical errors, and this is in agreement with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's results. Schauer (2006) also replicated the same study with German ESL learners in Great Britain and German EFL learners in Germany. In addition to the 20 video scenarios, she also interviewed the participants to have "insights into their decision-making rationales" (p. 287). The results of her study were in agreement with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's, and showed that German ESL learners were better at identifying the pragmatic infelicities and that length of stay affected their level of pragmatic awareness.

Bulut and Özkan (2005) compared Turkish EFL learners' and teachers' pragmatic awareness to American native speakers' for the speech act of complimenting. They developed and used a 10-item pragmatic judgment test and conducted between-group and within-group comparisons. The comparison of participants from level 1, 2, 3, 4 and EFL teachers showed that one-year distance did not make any significant changes, but two-year and more distance between the levels was consistently significant in the participants' perception of appropriateness. The native speaker group and the EFL groups were also compared and it was found that even advanced level Turkish EFL learners were significantly different from the American native speakers of English in their perception of appropriateness of complimenting expressions.

The speech act of compliments is the focus of this study for two reasons. First, it "may function beyond its own scope of complimenting itself such as strengthening or even replacing other speech acts like apologies, thanks and greetings, opening conversations and softening the effects of criticism" (Wolfson, 1983, p. 89), and, thus, it may be more challenging and distinguishing. Second, it is one of the most commonly studied speech acts in English, and we have very detailed analyses and descriptions of it from various English-speaking speech communities (see Golato, 2002 for a detailed list). A number of production-oriented studies have also investigated compliments and compliment responses comparing English with other languages, focusing on a language different from English, or comparing native and non-native speaker production for compliments or responding to compliments (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Billmyer, 1990; Chen, 1993; Enssaif, 2005; Farghal and Al-Khatib, 2001, Farghal and Haggan, 2006; Golato, 2002, Herbert, 1997, Jaworski, 1995; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001, Nelson et al., 1996; Ruhi and Doğan, 2001, Ruhi, 2006 among others).

As Saudi society is gender-segregated, there are cultural limitations for interaction between males and females at many levels of social life. Tertiary education is not exempt from this, and male and female students study on different campuses and are taught by professors of their gender only. It has been reported that men and women employ different levels of politeness (Holmes, 1986), use different communication norms (Tannen, 1990), and that all-men and all-women groups use different patterns of interaction (Coates, 1986). According to Turjoman (2005), such differences may be reflected even more in a gender-segregated society. Thus, it was hypothesized that Saudi male and female learners of English would differ in their judgments of native and non-native complimenting expressions in English as they are exposed to different norms and have different channels of interaction in English, and that Saudi male students would be better in their judgments as the male-dominant structure of the society would give them more opportunities to interact with others. To my knowledge, there is no study which compares the production or perception-oriented speech act behavior of Saudi male and Saudi female EFL learners. The following research questions were constructed to realize the aims of this study:

1. How do Saudi male and Saudi female EFL learners compare with regard to their judgment of the native speaker complimenting expressions for their appropriateness?
2. How do Saudi male and Saudi female EFL learners compare with American native speakers of English with regard to their ranking the non-native speaker complimenting expressions for their appropriateness?

## **2. Method**

### ***Participants***

Two groups of English-major students and a group of American native speakers of English participated in this study. The first group consisted of 36 male students from the English Department of a Saudi university. When they took part in this study they were Level 5 students, that is, they were in the first semester of the third year of their university education. Also, they were not repeating any courses from previous years and did not spend more than a month abroad. The second group of participants were 55 female students who were following exactly the same curriculum and studying the same material on the female campus of the same university with female professors only. As I was not able to have direct access to the students, a female M.A. student collected data from them. Based on the personal information section of the instrument, I made sure that they did not repeat any courses or spend more than a month abroad. There was only one student who had lived in an English speaking environment for 15 years and she was eliminated from the study. The third group of participants were 28 undergraduate and graduate students studying in various departments of Indiana University Bloomington,

Indiana, U.S.A. They were all native speakers of American English and the data which were collected from them were used for a previous study conducted by Bulut and Özkan (2005).

### ***Instrument***

A pragmatic judgment test which was originally developed and used by Bulut and Özkan (2005) was also used for this study. The test included 10 complimenting situations with one native speaker and four non-native speaker complimenting expressions for each. The four non-native speaker expressions were ranked from the least to the most appropriate by the native speaker participant group in the previous study mentioned above. A group of Saudi male and female professors from the English Department were also asked to judge the test for its cross-cultural validity. They all agreed that all the situations were valid for the Saudi context as there was no cross-gender interaction except for the family situations (Situations 3 and 10). According to Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985), "... by using a judgment test of speech act behavior, one can compare preferences for linguistic realizations of native speakers and nonnative speakers who are on various points of the native approximation continuum" (p. 305).

### ***Procedure***

The pragmatic judgment test was previously constructed based on the non-native speaker complimenting expressions collected from non-native speakers of English and the complimenting expressions produced by the American native speaker participants (Bulut and Özkan, 2005). After the test was cross-culturally validated for the Saudi context, it was administered to the male students by the researcher himself, but the help of a female M.A. student who worked as a lecturer in the female section had to be asked for. In their ranking the complimenting expressions, Saudi participants were expected to rank the native speaker complimenting expression as the most appropriate for each situation because the native speaker group did not rank any of the non-native complimenting expressions as the most appropriate in their judgments, that is, none of the complimenting expressions received a 5 on a five-point Likert scale in the previous study. The students were asked to ignore the grammatical errors in the complimenting expressions as much as possible. While selecting the native speaker complimenting expressions, we made use of the common forms mentioned in studies conducted on compliments in English (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1986; Holmes and Brown, 1987; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Manes, 1983; Pomerantz, 1978; Wolfson and Manes, 1980; Wolfson, 1983).

After the data were collected from the Saudi male and female participants, they were tallied and the mean scores were calculated for each complimenting expression listed under the situations and were ranked from the least to the most appropriate (1-5) for each situation. The American native speaker data which were

originally collected and used by Bulut and Özkan (2005) were also used in this study to compare the Saudi male and female rankings with a native speaker group in addition to comparing them with each other. In comparing the Saudi male and female participants' perceptions of the native speaker complimenting expressions, independent samples t-test was used to see if there was a significant difference between the two groups. Spearman Rank-Order Correlations were also used to see if the rankings of complimenting expressions were significantly correlated. The ranking data were presented in three Tables (2, 3 and 4) only for practical purposes based on the classification of compliments in previous research as compliments for possessions, skills/performance and appearance (Holmes and Brown, 1987). However, there were no situations in the pragmatic judgment test that fell in "personality/friendship" category according to Holmes' classification.

### 3. Results and Discussion

In order to find an answer to the first research question, Saudi male and Saudi female participants' correct responses with regard to identifying the native speaker complimenting expressions were tallied for each situation and the mean and SD were calculated for their overall perception.

**Table 1**  
Comparison of Male-Female Students' Overall Scores for the Perception of Native Speaker Complimenting Expressions

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Male	36	4.25/10	1.73
Female	55	5.93/10	2.45

The number of Saudi male students who participated in this study was 36, and their mean score for detecting the native speaker complimenting expression for the ten situations included in this study was 4.25. On the other hand, 55 Saudi female students who participated in this study had a mean score of 5.93 for the same ten situations. They had a higher mean score than the Saudi male students. However, the female students were found to be less homogenous in their answers for detecting the native speaker complimenting expression as the SD was higher for the female group (2.45 vs. 1.73). Levene's Test for Equality of Variances showed that these two groups had equal variances ( $p < .071$ ). In order to see whether the difference between the male and female students' mean scores was significant, an independent samples *t*-test was run, and the result was found to be significant at  $p < .01$  level ( $t = 3.56$ ,  $df = 89$ ), that is, the Saudi female students who participated in this study had a significantly better perception of the English native speakers' complimenting expressions than their male counterparts.

In order to answer the second research question, the ten situations are divided into three groups and the results are presented in three tables. Table 2 presents means and rankings for possession-related situations (1, 2 and 8), Table 3 presents means and rankings for skill-related situations (3, 4, 5 and 6), and Table 4 presents physical appearance-related situations (7 and 10).

**Table 2**

Comparison of Male-Female Students' Ranking of Complimenting Expressions with Native Speakers' Ranking for Possession-Related Situations

Sit.	Native Speaker Mean/Ranking	Female Mean/Ranking	Male Mean/Ranking
1	2.00-2	2.23-1	2.88-3
	4.10-4	2.75-2	2.50-2
	3.55-3	3.35-4	3.33-4
	1.25-1	3.30-3	3.94-5
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.42-5</b>	<b>2.33-1</b>
2	2.07-2	3.28-5	3.80-5
	3.46-4	2.91-2	2.88-3
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.03-3</b>	<b>2.47-2</b>
	1.14-1	2.57-1	2.38-1
8	3.00-3	3.26-4	3.44-4
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.89-5</b>	<b>3.36-4</b>
	2.32-2	3.30-4	3.25-3
	3.00-3	2.62-2	2.75-2
	1.78-1	2.28-1	2.22-1
9	4.53-4	2.89-3	3.41-5
	1.39-1	2.46-1	3.13-4
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.51-5</b>	<b>3.61-5</b>
	2.03-2	2.60-2	2.27-1
	3.64-3	2.96-3	2.83-2
	4.53-4	3.48-4	3.13-3

The pragmatic judgment test included 4 situations related to complimenting possessions. The first one was Situation 1, and in this situation one female university student was complimenting another female student on her new jacket. The native speaker complimenting expression "Your jacket is beautiful. Is it new?" was ranked to be the most appropriate by the Saudi female students while the same expression was ranked to be the least appropriate by the Saudi male students. For this situation, Rho (Spearman Rank-Order Correlation) was -.90 between native speakers' ranking and Saudi male students' ranking, and this was significant at  $p < .05$  level. Compared to native speakers', Saudi male students' ranking was almost completely reverse. No significant correlation was found between native speakers and Saudi female students or between Saudi female and male students.

The second situation related to complimenting possessions was Situation 2, and in this situation one female roommate was complimenting another female roommate on her ring and necklace. The native speaker expression “How nice! Your ring matches your necklace” was ranked to be the second most appropriate expression by the male and third by the female students. For this situation, the rankings by male and female students were found to be significantly correlated ( $\rho = .90$ ) at  $p < .05$  level.

The third situation related to complimenting possessions was Situation 8, and “I really like your sweater” was the native speaker complimenting expression for the situation where a female friend complimented another female friend in the school cafeteria. Even though female students ranked the native speaker complimenting expression as the fifth – the most appropriate- and the male students ranked it as the fourth, none of the rankings were found to be significantly correlated with the ranking by the native speaker group.

Situation 9 was the last possession-related one, and in this situation one female neighbor was complimenting another female neighbor on her tablecloth. “This is a beautiful tablecloth” was the native speaker complimenting expression which was ranked to be the most appropriate by both male and female groups. However, due to the ranking of the nonnative speaker complimenting expressions, the correlation between native speaker ranking and Saudi male student ranking was not significant while Saudi female group had exactly the same ranking with the native speaker group, and, thus, the correlation between them was significant at  $p < .01$  level ( $\rho = 1.0$ ). Out of four situations related to complimenting for possession, the rankings were found to be significantly correlated in one situation (negative) between native speakers and Saudi male students (Situation 1), in one situation between Saudi male and female students (Situation 2), and in one situation between native speakers and Saudi female students (Situation 9).

**Table 3**

Comparison of Male-Female Students' Ranking of Complimenting Expressions with Native Speakers' Ranking for Skill-Related Situations

Sit.	Native Speaker Mean/Ranking	Female Mean/Ranking	Male Mean/Ranking
3	2.14-2	2.81-3	3.05-4
	2.78-3	2.80-2	3.08-5
	1.28-1	2.32-1	3.02-3
	3.25-4	3.23-4	3.00-1
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.87-5</b>	<b>2.86-1</b>
4	3.14-3	3.07-3	2.66-2
	1.32-1	2.35-1	2.63-1
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.57-5</b>	<b>3.36-5</b>
	2.00-2	2.60-2	3.25-4
	3.92-4	3.46-4	3.08-3
5	2.07-2	2.69-2	2.16-1
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.76-5</b>	<b>3.00-3</b>
	4.50-4	2.89-3	2.80-2
	1.25-1	2.64-1	3.69-5
	3.03-3	3.03-4	3.33-4
6	1.46-1	2.78-1	2.77-2
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>2.83-3</b>	<b>2.44-1</b>
	3.96-3	3.14-4	3.08-3
	4.28-4	3.53-5	3.52-5
	2.39-2	2.82-2	3.16-4

Table 3 includes the mean scores and rankings for skill-related complimenting expressions for four situations. In Situation 3, in which a mother complimented her son on the good grade he got in his math exam, the native speaker complimenting expression was "Good job! I'm proud of you! You always work hard and I know I don't have to worry about you", and this was ranked to be the fifth – the most appropriate- by female students while the male mean score showed that it was the least appropriate expression for the male group. The correlation between native speaker group ranking and female group ranking was found to be significant at  $p < .05$  level ( $\rho = .90$ ).

The second skill-related situation was Situation 4, and in this situation a female student complimented another one on her high grade in an exam. The native speaker complimenting expression was "I don't believe it! That's great. Congratulations." which was ranked to be the fifth – the most appropriate- by both male and female groups. However, it was only the female group's ranking of the complimenting expressions from the least to the most appropriate that had a significant correlation with the native speakers' ranking. Their rankings were identical, and the correlation between these two groups was significant at  $p < .01$  level ( $\rho = 1.0$ ).

Situation 5 which included the compliment of a female neighbor on the way her neighbor decorated her house was the next skill-related situation. “I really like what you have done with your house” was the native speaker expression, and this was ranked to be the third by male and fifth by female groups. The correlation between native speaker ranking and female group ranking was found to be significant at  $p < .05$  level ( $\rho = .90$ ).

The last skill-related situation was 6, and “You played a great match today” was the native speaker expression used by a young male to compliment his friend on the other’s performance in the soccer match. For this expression, the mean score by female group was higher than the mean score by the male group. Male group ranked this expression as the least appropriate while female group ranked it as the third most appropriate complimenting expression in this situation. None of the rankings were significantly correlated for this situation. Out of four skill-related situations, the rankings by native speakers and Saudi female students were found to be significantly correlated in three of the situations (Situation 3, 4 and 5).

**Table 4**  
Comparison of Male-Female Students’ Ranking of Complimenting Expressions with Native Speakers’ Ranking for Physical Appearance-Related Situations

Sit.	Native Speaker Mean/Ranking	Female Mean/Ranking	Male Mean/Ranking
7	1.42-1	2.44-1	2.52-2
	3.21-3	3.53-5	3.72-5
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.12-3</b>	<b>3.11-3</b>
	4.78-4	3.28-4	3.44-4
10	2.07-2	2.64-2	2.19-1
	<b>N.S.-5</b>	<b>3.64-5</b>	<b>3.63-5</b>
	1.71-1	2.03-1	2.50-1
	3.03-3	3.19-3	2.80-2
	2.03-2	2.78-2	3.02-3
	4.53-4	3.28-4	3.03-4

Table 4 presents the rankings of physical appearance-related situations. As being the first, Situation 7 included the compliment of a female colleague on her female friend’s new hair style. The native speaker expression was “Your hair looks great”, and it was ranked to be the third most appropriate complimenting expression by both Saudi male and female students. While the correlations between native speaker group and the others were not significant, the correlation between Saudi male and Saudi female groups was significant at  $p < .05$  level ( $\rho = .90$ ). Situation 10 was the other physical appearance-related situation which included the compliment of a son on his mother’s look, and the native speaker complimenting expression was “Mom, you look very pretty today”. Both Saudi male and Saudi

female groups had the highest rank for the native speaker expression, and as can be seen in Table 4 they all had very similar rankings for all the expressions. However, while the correlation between native speaker ranking and Saudi female ranking was 1.00 (significant at  $p<.01$  level), the correlations between native speaker ranking and Saudi Male ranking, and between Saudi male ranking and Saudi female ranking were significant at  $p<.05$  level ( $\rho=.90$ ).

**Table 5**

Overall Correlation (Rho) Results for the Ranking of Complimenting Expressions by Native Speakers of English, Saudi Female and Saudi Male Students

Sit.	Groups	Correlation
1	Native-Saudi Male	-.90*
2	Saudi Female-Saudi Male	.90*
3	Native-Saudi Female	.90*
4	Native-Saudi Female	1.00**
5	Native-Saudi Female	.90*
6	No Significant Correlations	
7	Saudi Female-Saudi Male	.90*
8	No Significant Correlations	
9	Native-Saudi Female	1.00**
10	Native- Saudi Female	1.00**
	Native-Saudi Male	.90*
	Saudi Female-Saudi Male	.90*

\* Significant at  $p<.05$  level, \*\*Significant at  $p<.01$  level

Table 5 presents the summary of the Spearman Rank-order correlations for the ten situations. The mean scores of the American native speakers of English, Saudi male learners of English and Saudi female learners of English were ranked from the least (1) to the most (5) appropriate complimenting expression for the given situations. It was found that American native speakers of English and Saudi female learners of English had identical rankings for three of the situations (Situation 4, 9 and 10) and, thus, were significantly correlated at  $p<.01$  level ( $\rho=1.0$ ). In addition, Spearman Rank-order correlations were significant at  $p<.05$  level for two more of the situations (Situation 3 and 5) between American native speakers of English and Saudi female learners.

However, none of the Saudi male rankings was identical with American native speaker rankings, but in one situation (Situation 1) there was a significant but negative correlation at  $p<.05$  level between the two groups, that is, they had reverse rankings. Only in one situation American native speakers of English and Saudi male learners had a significant correlation at  $p<.05$  level (Situation 10). For two of the situations (Situation 6 and 8) no similar patterns were observed among the groups, and, thus, there were no significant correlations. In three situations

(Situations 2, 7 and 10) Saudi male and female learners had significantly correlated rankings.

The first research question asked how Saudi male and Saudi female EFL learners compared with regard to their judgment of the native speaker complimenting expressions for their appropriateness, and the results showed that Saudi female English-major university students had a significantly better perception of native speaker complimenting expressions than the Saudi male English-major students. Even though the pragmatic judgment test which was originally developed and used by Bulut and Özkan (2005) was also used for this study, the orientations of these two studies were different. Thus, the results of these two studies cannot be compared as Bulut and Özkan (2005) focused on the students' level of proficiency in Turkish EFL context.

The second research question asked how Saudi male and Saudi female learners and American native speakers of English compared with regard to their ranking the non-native speaker complimenting expressions for their appropriateness, and the results showed that Saudi female learners' rankings were significantly correlated with the native speakers' rankings in five situations whereas Saudi male and native speaker rankings were correlated positively only in one situation. In three situations Saudi male and Saudi female learners had significant correlations at  $p < .05$  level. To my knowledge, the only study which has been reported to have included gender as a variable for "awareness" was conducted by Walters (1979). He found high correlations between both male and female native and non-native speakers of English in their perceptions of politeness in requests. In this study, it was only the Saudi female learners who reflected more the native speaker perceptions contrary to my earlier expectations due to gender-segregated system in the society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study is unique in the sense that it compares male and female learners of English in a gender-segregated society. However, it has its limitations in various aspects. First of all, the participants all come from one university in Saudi Arabia and may not be representative of all the English-major Saudi male and female students. In selecting the students, the only criterion was the semester they were attending, and no standardized language proficiency test scores were used. As no random selection was possible, student groups were intact groups. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the Saudi male and female learners of English who participated in this study seem to have their own dynamics, and a further study may explore these dynamics both in perception and production of speech acts.

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