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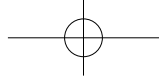
October, 2015

# Developing Chinese Complimenting in a Study Abroad Program

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# Developing Chinese Complimenting in a Study Abroad Program

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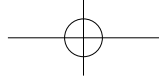
## *Abstract*

This article reports on an empirical study investigating what and how two college-level American learners of Mandarin Chinese developed their own understanding of the Chinese complimenting speech act while participating in a 7-week intensive language study abroad program. A case study approach was adopted with a focus on participants' self-reflection data supplemented with the researcher's observation data to unpack each participant's pragmatic developmental process throughout the program. Guided by sociocultural theory, the study uncovered the dynamic, complex and highly individualized developmental process each participant experienced. The findings revealed that Chinese people's special treatment of the two American students provided more constraints than opportunities for them to acquire Chinese complimenting. However, the learners' own motivation and approaches to learning also significantly shaped their learning process and outcomes. Pedagogical suggestions for Chinese pragmatic development in study abroad contexts are provided.

***Key words: L2 Pragmatic Development; Study Abroad; Mandarin Chinese Complimenting; American College-level Learners of Chinese***

## Introduction

Since the call in the 1990s for more research on interlanguage pragmatic development (e.g., Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996), a growing number of empirical studies and discussions on interlanguage pragmatic development have been published (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, 2009; Barron, 2003, 2007; Chang, 2010, 2011; Cohen & Shively, 2007; DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hassall, 2006; Kasper & Rose, 2002;



Matsumura, 2007; Ohta, 2002; Rose, 2000, 2009; Sabate i Dalmau & Curell i Gotor, 2007; Schauer, 2007, 2009; Shardakova, 2005; Taguchi, 2011, 2012; Winke & Teng, 2010). A large number of the studies specifically focus on pragmatic development in study abroad contexts, a very complex learning setting. Generally, research in this line investigates foreign language learners' pragmatic developmental patterns in short- and long-term study abroad programs and explores the contextual and individual factors affecting learners' development. In contrast to the expanding research on learners of English as a second language (ESL) and of other foreign languages, Chinese as a second language (CSL) learners' pragmatic development while studying abroad is still an area that is rarely investigated.

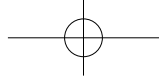
This paper reports on a qualitative study that investigated from a sociocultural theoretical (SCT) perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) two American learners' development of one important Chinese speech act, complimenting, in a seven-week summer intensive language program in China. This study focuses on the complimenting speech act because it is one of the most vital forms of politeness in Chinese culture. The norms involved in Chinese complimenting are problematic for North American learners of Mandarin Chinese because of the great differences in the politeness norms between the two cultures (Kasper & Zhang, 1995; Yu, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2011). The strategies for conducting socially appropriate compliment-related conversations in Chinese are of practical interest to both educators and students of Mandarin Chinese. The findings of this study provide a better understanding of CSL learners' pragmatic development within the context of studying abroad and, more generally, contribute to the field of interlanguage pragmatic development.

## Literature Review

Due to the limited number of research studies on CSL pragmatic development, this study draws on a larger body of theories and existing research on speech act development in study abroad contexts for theoretical and empirical guidance. This section provides a review of relevant theories and empirical studies on speech act learning in study abroad contexts as well as on compliment giving in both Mandarin Chinese and American English.

### Learning Speech Acts in Study Abroad Contexts

The contextual impact of studying abroad on L2 learners' development of communicative competence has been widely investigated (e.g., DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Kinginger, 2008, 2009; Schauer, 2009; Taguchi, 2008). In particular, an increasing number of empirical studies have been conducted to unpack L2 learners' development of speech acts in different study abroad programs or sojourns of various lengths in the target cultures. The speech acts that have been investigated include advice-offering (e.g., Matsumura, 2007), apologies (e.g., Cohen & Shively, 2007; Shardakova, 2005; Warga & Schölmberger, 2007), complimenting (e.g., Hoffman-Hicks, 2000; Yu, 2011), compliment responding (e.g., Jin,



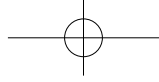
2012), greetings (e.g., DuFon, 2000; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000), leave-taking (e.g., Hassel, 2006; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000), refusal (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007), and requests (e.g., Churchill, 2003; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Schauer, 2007, 2009). Both L2 learners' comprehension and production of speech acts have been investigated to various extents in these studies.

In terms of comprehension, the findings of the existing research show that learners may first fail to notice or misinterpret the illocutional functions of certain pragmatic utterances and only understand their literal meaning, and then develop a more accurate understanding of their contextual meanings (Churchill & DuFon, 2006). Regarding production, some speech acts seem easier to develop than others due to the cognitive complexity involved as well as the exposure learners have in a L2-speaking setting (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000). Generally, learners increase their use of formulaic pragmatic expressions while decreasing their use of non-native-like ones during the developmental process (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007; Schauer, 2007, 2009). On the other hand, learners can develop more awareness of the sociocultural contexts in which different variations of the speech acts should be used (e.g., Barron, 2003; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000; Jin, 2012; Matsumura, 2007; Schauer, 2009; Winke & Teng, 2010).

Although research findings in general show positive results regarding learners' development of speech acts in study abroad contexts, other findings also indicate L2 learners may retain certain non-native-like behaviors and in some cases, may even intentionally shift away from standard L2 norms. This is largely due to either their failure to notice the L2 norms (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000; Warga & Schölmberger, 2007), L1 transfer (e.g., Schauer, 2007, 2009; Yu, 2011), or their stance on adopting the L2 norms which involves identity reconfiguration (e.g., DuFon, 2000; Hoffman-Hicks, 2000; Jin, 2012; Matsumura, 2007; Shardakova, 2005). In addition, how the local residents accept the L2 learners also affects the quantity and quality of the input the L2 learners are exposed to within a study abroad context (Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). For example, the local residents may not consider the L2 learner as a potential member of the local community, thus provide too much foreigner or tourist talk (e.g., Hassel, 2006; Kinginger, 2008; Siegal, 1996).

The existing research shows that learning speech acts while studying abroad is a complex and dynamic process that is shaped by the interplay between the external contexts and learners' own backgrounds. Methodologically, L2 pragmatic development in study abroad contexts has been widely investigated using both quantitative and ethnographical methods including field observations and interviews. Highlighting the complexity of study abroad contexts and the diversity of L2 learners' social and individual backgrounds, researchers (e.g., Kinginger, 2008, 2009; Taguchi, 2011) have called for more in-depth qualitative analysis of the highly individualized learning process in study abroad contexts. In this regard, theoretical constructs from SCT (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) are particularly conducive to understanding the complexity and dynamics of this process.

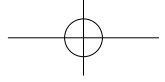
From a SCT perspective, language is not perceived solely as a means of communication but also as a psychological tool that constantly mediates human higher-order cognitive functions, such as organizing, planning, and conceptualizing. Language development originates in human social interaction. It is constantly mediated by the



semiotic symbols (i.e., language in spoken and written form) we use. In other words, it is initiated in the interpsychological sphere (i.e., the social interaction with other social beings through language) and then internalized through intentional imitation in the intrapsychological sphere, the brain. Optimally, the process of internalization occurs in the zone of proximal development, a co-constructed activity in which learners can move from assisted performance to independent performance. This is primarily co-conducted with another person, such as peer, an experienced teacher, or a native speaker. Proposing an ecological-semiotic approach to L2 learning, van Lier (2004) further stresses the consequentialness of “the accessibility of social, cultural, and historical symbolicity” (p.71) to learners who are not members of a host culture. In other words, the linguistic, social, and cultural resources afforded in the environment are instrumental to L2 learning. Neo-Vygotskian researchers (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004) further emphasize that language learners are not passive learners. Rather, they are active agents making a variety of decisions throughout the learning process, such as choosing what to learn, with whom to collaborate, and how to participate in certain activities according to their personal, historical, social, and cultural experiences. Through this active operation of agency in language learning, language learners manage to participate in the symbolically mediated world of the other culture while (re)configuring selves (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Given the unpredictability of the resources available in a study abroad context and L2 learners’ individual differences, the concepts of semiotic mediation and agency are particularly useful to delineate a clearer picture of L2 learners’ developmental process when learning various speech acts.

### **Complimenting in Mandarin Chinese and American English**

Despite the relatively scarce research on complimenting in the field of interlanguage pragmatics development, complimenting as a social behavior has been extensively studied in various related fields such as sociolinguistics (e.g., Herbert, 1986, 1990; Pomerantz, 1984), pragmatics (e.g., Chen & Yang, 2010; Holmes, 1986; Wolfson, 1983; Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999, 2004, 2011), and cross-cultural communication (e.g., Golato, 2005). Holmes defines complimenting as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristics, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1986, p.485). Although complimenting is generally perceived as a speech act that expresses positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987), researchers (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 2003; Wolfson, 1983; Yu, 1999, 2003, 2004) have discovered that complimenting could constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs) in different cultures. In the field of SLA, L2 pragmatics researchers (e.g., Hinkel, 1996; Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996) have come to a general understanding that L2 learners may naturally resort to their L1 pragmatic repertoires when they are required to perform speech acts in unfamiliar L2 contexts or not follow the L2 norms even if they know how native speakers perform certain speech acts. It is worth examining the literature on complimenting in both Mandarin Chinese and American English in order to understand whether and in what ways American learners of Chinese may adopt the complimenting norms used by native

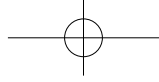


speakers of Mandarin Chinese.

English and Chinese are probably the two most frequently studied languages within the research on complimenting (Chen & Yang, 2010). The research findings present a complex understanding of how English and Chinese speakers perform complimenting in various social contexts, especially after taking into consideration the social distance (i.e., power and prestige) as well as gender and age differences between the complimenter and the complementee. Based on the studies on complimenting in the mainland of China (e.g., Chen, 1993; Fong, 1998; Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999, 2004, 2011) and those in the U.S. (e.g., Herbert, 1986, 1990; Pomerantz, 1984; Wolfson, 1983), more differences than similarities exist in the complimenting speech act, particularly direct complimenting, that are observed generally in both cultures. Table 1 shows that the differences particularly lie in the speech act's primary functions, topics, social contexts, linguistic formulas, and frequency manifested in direct compliments in each language. Researchers (e.g., Chen & Yang, 2010; Yu, 2004, 2011) have also cautioned that these patterns are observed in general social interactions. There exist individuals violating the general speech act rules for intentional or unintentional reasons.

**Table 1.** *Complimenting in Mandarin Chinese vs. American English*

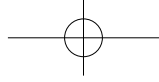
Aspects	Mandarin Chinese	American English
Primary Functions	to offer praise	social lubricant, offer solidity; replace other speech acts: greetings, apologies, appreciation, or to soften criticism and open a conversation
Topics (listed by the frequency of their use)	1) performances and skills 2) possessions 3) appearance	1) appearance and possessions 2) accomplishments and skills
Social Contexts	Between acquaintances, but seldom among close friends and family; Compliments on strangers are given more indirectly.	Given informally among family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers
Major Linguistic Formulas (listed by the frequency of their use)	1) (Subject +) Verb + Compliment (e.g., 打得真好! [(You) really played well!]) 2) Subject + Adj. (e.g., 这件衣服真漂亮 [This blouse is really pretty]) 3) Subject+Verb+Noun (e.g., 你真有两下子 [You really have some know-how])	1) Subject is/looks +Adj. (e.g., Your shoes are so pretty!) 2) I like /love+ noun (e.g., I like your shirt!) 3) That is a +noun (e.g., That's a very nice dress.) ● more variety of and strong adjectives (e.g., gorgeous, marvelous) ● Limited number of and mild rather than strong adjectives (e.g., 好[good], 不错 [Not bad])
Frequency	Low	High



Cross-cultural pragmatics researchers (e.g., Chen, 1993; Fong, 1998; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Yu, 1999, 2011) claim that the divergences between Chinese and American English pragmatics are rooted in the different social and political philosophies of the two cultures. Chinese speech acts usually embody the traditional feudal hierarchy and the order-following Confucian philosophy. The hierarchy even exists among peers. As a result, compliments in Chinese society are often employed to offer positive assessment of something related to the addressee (Kasper & Zhang, 1995; Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999, 2011). Thus, people of a lower status in the social hierarchy (e.g., younger, less experienced or with less power, sometimes women) are conventionally not expected to evaluate, even positively, a superior. However, some people of lower status sometimes may deliberately break the rules to please a superior by complimenting him or her. Consequently, frequent compliments, particularly those from people of lower status may be considered as having ulterior motives (Ye, 1995). Some compliments, such as cross-gender compliments on appearance, may even run the risk of bringing the accusation of harassment. In addition, strangers who are outside of the hierarchy are usually considered out-group members (Pan, 2000), and thus generally not offered compliments. In general, due to its hierarchical indications, complimenting is relatively less socially salient, compared with other speech acts. By contrast, speech acts in the U.S. usually reflect the egalitarian stance which sanctions individualism and social equality (Hall, 1995). Complimenting is thus considered to be an unmarked speech act that primarily functions to establish and reinforce solidarity among various social members, even strangers. It is often frequently employed in various social contexts to achieve the goal (Holmes, 2003; Wolfson, 1983). The pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences inherent in Chinese and American English complimenting speech acts stipulate a challenging situation for American learners to develop knowledge and skills of Chinese complimenting (Kasper & Zhang, 1995). Winke and Teng (2010) thus propose to provide explicit instruction for American learners to understand Chinese pragmatics. Jin's (2012) study also shows that study abroad contexts do not always offer instrumental resources to develop compliment responding strategies due to their out-group membership but learners' active execution of agency can facilitate their learning.

In all, a thorough review of the previous empirical studies shows that learning speech acts in study abroad contexts has been well researched in many languages whereas there is a scarcity of research on CSL pragmatic development. In recent years, there have been a growing number of American students learning Mandarin Chinese (Asia Society, 2010) and many of them study abroad in China. Due to the linguistic and cultural gap between American and Chinese pragmatics, there is an urgent need for more research investigating how American learners develop Chinese pragmatic competence when studying abroad. The current study was conducted to fill this gap and contribute a better understanding of how American college-level students acquire Chinese complimenting in study abroad contexts. SCT constructs will be adopted to analyze the developmental process.





## Method

### Study Context

Hall (1995) states that human interaction is a complex process involving the social and historical factors inscribed within the language, the social identity each individual brings, and the particular social contexts in which all factors interact. Documenting each student's production of compliments in various real-life interactions is beyond the scope of the current study. In order to delineate the American students' developmental process of Chinese complimenting within a study abroad context, this study focused on the students' self-reported reflections in conjunction with the researcher's weekly interviews with each participant as well as on-site observation data. Two major research questions were investigated in this study:

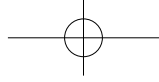
1. What do American learners of Chinese acquire about the Mandarin Chinese complimenting speech act in a study abroad program?
2. How do American learners of Chinese acquire complimenting strategies while studying abroad?

The study was conducted in summer 2010 during an 8-week intensive language program including seven weeks of intensive formal language instruction in Shanghai and one week of travel in Beijing. The program was organized by a private Midwestern university in the U.S. and hosted by a prestigious university in Shanghai, China. Students enrolled in this program were required to have studied Chinese language for at least one year before going abroad. Additionally, students were also required to take a cultural preparation course (a total of 21 hours of class contact time) to establish a basic understanding of modern Chinese cultural norms. Every student was also taught a few simple phrases in the local Shanghai dialect, such as "good morning," "thank you," "good bye" and so on. During the academic section in Shanghai, students took morning classes with a professor, afternoon practicum with a graduate assistant, and then met with their individual language tutors who were also graduate students from the host university for one hour from Monday to Thursday. Every Friday morning was a testing session. Beyond meeting with their tutors, students had minimum contact with their professors and teaching assistants outside of class. Throughout the academic section of the program, all students stayed in a hotel located within a Shanghai commercial district. Commuting between the hotel and campus provided the students with extra exposure to the local community. They went shopping, purchased food, and pursued leisure activities after classes. In addition, because the 2010 Shanghai World Expo was underway during the study abroad program, the participants were also exposed to a great number of Chinese tourists who traveled from regions for the event.

### Participants

As part of a larger study, the current study only focused on two of the 12 students enrolled in the program, Siding and Diwen (pseudonyms), in order to conduct in-depth analysis of





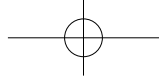
each case. These two participants were chosen because they represented two typical groups of American college-level students in a Chinese study abroad context: Caucasians and heritage learners. All of the data were collected while the 2 participants were enrolled in the intensive language program. The researcher was the faculty director of the study abroad program but was not involved in any on-site teaching. Participants' involvement in the project did not affect their grades in the language classes during the study abroad program.

### Data Collection

A case study approach (Berg, 2004; Stake, 1995) was employed in the study. It enabled the researcher to formulate a thorough understanding of each participant's learning process which was situated in specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. After the IRB approval was obtained from the researcher's home institution prior to the study abroad trip, participants were recruited and informed of what they were expected to do for this study during the program. Research (e.g., Kinginger, 2008, 2009) on L2 development in study abroad shows that a L2 learner may decide against speaking like a native of the target language even if they have the competence to do so. Data obtained through observations, therefore, may not be able to show whether learners have indeed developed certain pragmatic proficiency. Due to this limitation of observations and the logistic difficulty in collecting authentic production data, the current study relied on interview transcripts and participants' weekly reflective blogs as primary data sources. Data from observations were used as secondary data to triangulate and supplement the primary data. Four data collection methods were employed.

First, a pre-study survey was administered prior to participants' involvement in the study abroad program. The survey helped solicit information about each participant's gender, age, prior experience learning Chinese, prior exposure to Chinese culture, prior knowledge and skills about complimenting (such as how and why Chinese people give compliments), and the reasons behind their participation in the study abroad program, particularly their motivation to be acculturated in China. Information collected from the survey helped the researcher understand each participant's social, cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds that could influence their pragmatic development in this program.

Second, a weekly formal, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, which focused on assisting their recollection of the complimenting knowledge and skills they acquired and how these were acquired each week. All interviews were conducted in English on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening after participants' study at school. These were conducted either in each participant's hotel room or in a quiet place within the hotel. Each interview lasted 20 to 45 minutes, depending on each participant's weekly experience and the amount of information they could remember. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by a native English speaker with high proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. A total of 6 interviews for each participant were conducted throughout the study abroad program. Each week, a corresponding set of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions was asked of each participant. In general, participants were asked to reflect on what new complimenting knowledge and skills they acquired in the past week, the situations in which they gained these skills, how they



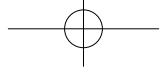
perceived certain complimenting social behaviors, and, if they learned something new, how it affected their existing knowledge base. Additional individualized questions were asked, based on each participant's unique experience and perception of their pragmatic learning, such as why a participant thought the compliments they received from Chinese people were insincere.

Third, data was collected from each participant's weekly reflective blog entry. Each student in the program was required to keep a weekly reflective blog on the class website and reflect upon both their linguistic and cultural learning throughout the program. Pertinent information concerning their complimenting acquisition process was gleaned from their respective weekly blog entries (consent was given by each participant). This supplemented and triangulated the data about their complimenting learning experiences from the interviews.

Fourth, the researcher's observations and reflective journals were employed to provide a direct account of each participant's complimenting speech act in organic social settings, such as classrooms and restaurants. This further triangulated data collected through other sources. Each Tuesday, the researcher conducted roughly 2 to 3 hours of formal classroom observations to evaluate student-instructor interactions. Occasional classroom observations were also conducted on other weekdays. During the classroom observations, the researcher took notes on the scenarios in which each participant exchanged compliments with or explicitly acquired compliments from their classmates, instructor and/or the teaching assistant. Observations during group outings and field trips were more incidental. The researcher kept a daily reflective journal to record each participant's complimenting learning and behavior as observed both in a formal classroom setting and an informal setting outside the classroom.

### Data Analysis

The information collected from the pre-study survey, as summarized in Table 2, facilitated the subsequent analysis of data from the interview transcripts, participants' reflective blogs and the researcher's reflective journals. Each participant was considered as one case. Constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and matrix display (Miles & Huberman, 1995) were employed to organize and decipher data from each case. Coding themes on complimenting from literature review such as functions, topics, linguistic formulas were also incorporated during the data analysis. Discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994) was conducted to decipher the various social cultural factors that possibly shaped each compliment conversation in which the participants engaged. The unit of analysis in each case was the complimenting episode, either a participant-reflected or researcher-observed compliment conversation in which a participant was directly engaged or a situation that triggered complimenting learning, such as a conversation with an advanced-level Chinese language learner during the study abroad program. Specifically, discourse analysis was used to analyze how various social variables, such as gender, age, power relations, and social distance, might have influenced the complimenting conversations between native speakers of Chinese and each participant. This provided triangulating information illustrating how pragmatic development occurred.



## Findings

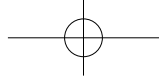
As shown in Table 2, both Siding and Diwen were in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-year class and had only formally learned Chinese language for one year prior to the program. Although they had different ethnic and family background, they shared similar proficiency in Chinese language and both had minimal knowledge about the Chinese complimenting speech act at the beginning of the program. They only differed slightly in their purposes of participating in the program. This section will delineate what each participant acquired about Chinese complimenting and how they did it during the SA program. In-depth analysis and discussion are provided in the Discussion section.

**Table 2.** *Participants' Background*

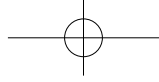
	Siding	Diwen
Gender	Male	Male
Age	21	20
Ethnicity	Caucasian	50% Caucasian & 50% Asian
Current Language Level	2 <sup>nd</sup> -year Chinese class	2 <sup>nd</sup> -year Chinese class
Prior language and culture exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• College-level classroom instruction in the U.S.</li><li>• Never traveled to China</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• College-level classroom instruction in the U.S.</li><li>• Potty language and culture exposure from mom</li><li>• Never traveled to China</li></ul>
Prior knowledge about Chinese complimenting	To make people feel good, to start a conversation, e.g., 你真漂亮 [You are really pretty], 我喜欢你的鞋子 [I like your shoes]	To make people feel good, to start a conversation e.g., 你说中文说得真好 [You speak Chinese really well], 你很帅 [You are very handsome]
Purpose in the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To improve language proficiency</li><li>• To understand Chinese society in general, to blend in</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To improve language proficiency</li><li>• To understand the culture as part of heritage</li><li>• To be a successful businessman</li></ul>

### What Did the Participants Develop in the Study Abroad Program?

Despite the similar background prior to the program, the development data documented in Table 3 shows that Siding and Diwen developed divergent understandings in terms of Chinese complements' functions, topics, linguistic formulas, and even mode (e.g., directness, frequency, sincerity) during the seven weeks in the SA program.

**Table 3. Complimenting Development Matrix**

	Week	Siding	Diwen
1	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Make people feel good</li><li>● Encourage foreigners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Make people feel good</li><li>● Start a conversation</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Appearance: height, hair, facial features</li><li>● Language skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Performance</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	Sub+Adj.	Verb+Complement
	Mode (directness, frequency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● More indirect comments</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Seldom compliment</li></ul>
2	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Open up a conversation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Open up a conversation</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Appearance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Language skills</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>
	Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Direct comments, frequent</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Rarely</li></ul>
	Alternative Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Saying “thank you” in Shanghaiese</li></ul>
3	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Encourage foreigners to speak more Chinese</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Open up a conversation</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Language skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Performances</li><li>● Food</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Verb.+Complement.</li><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>
	Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Direct comments, frequent</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Rarely</li></ul>
4	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Give face, make people feel good</li><li>● Greeting</li><li>● “thank you,” in response to a favor</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Acknowledge achievement (mean it)</li><li>● Make people feel good</li><li>● Encourage foreigners to speak more Chinese</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Appearance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Language</li><li>● Intelligence (academic achievements)</li><li>● Food, skills</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>	Same as Week 3
	Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Too much, Not sincere</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Seldom compliment, very reserved</li></ul>
	Alternative Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Speaking Chinese as a compliment to Chinese</li></ul>	
5	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Encourage foreigners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Acknowledge achievements</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Compliments not always welcomed</li><li>● Not always language</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Encourage foreigners</li><li>● Open up a conversation</li><li>● Performances, skills</li><li>● Same as Week 4</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Same as Week 4</li></ul>
	Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Too much</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Rarely given</li></ul>
6	Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Greet to foreigners</li><li>● Open up a conversation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Appreciation to foreigners</li><li>● Encouragement to self</li></ul>
	Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Appearance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Language skills</li></ul>
	Linguistic formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Sub+Adj.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Verb +Complement</li><li>● Sub + Adj.</li></ul>
	Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Too much, not sincere</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Not as much as in the U.S. sincere</li></ul>



The data show that both Siding and Diwen experienced two transitional phases of development but their developmental phases were completely distinct. Siding experienced a confusing phase followed by an indifferent phase in terms of acquiring the functions and contexts of the Chinese complimenting speech act during his study abroad time. His knowledge of linguistic structures in Chinese compliments remained rudimentary.

Weeks 1 to 4 was a confusing phase for Siding due to the conflicting compliment-related experiences he had in direct conversations with native speakers of Chinese. During this period, he was constantly showered with various compliments even including those on his Chinese language skills from native speakers of Chinese he encountered everyday. He constantly felt flattered so he perceived Chinese compliments as have functions similar to those in American culture. However, when he gave similar compliments back to Chinese people, he often received conflicting reactions, which confused him constantly. For example, in Week 2, the researcher observed that Siding was confused by the reaction he received when he tried to use the same strategy with his Chinese graduate teaching assistant during one class:

Observation Excerpt 1:

(After learning the sentence structure 比 [is compared to], Siding decides to use the structure on his graduate teaching assistant)

Siding: 你比别的中国女孩漂亮 [You are prettier than other Chinese girls].

TA (a young woman in her early 20s): (her face turns red, looks away, and continues her teaching)

Siding noticed the awkwardness his compliment caused and later confessed that, “I feel really confused. I don’t know if I should compliment on women’s appearance in China” (interview with Siding, 7/1/2010).

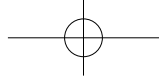
From Weeks 4 to 7, Siding transitioned into an indifferent phase when he showed less interest in engaging in compliment conversations and even developed a cynical attitude toward Chinese complimenting. Starting in Week 4, he noticed that compliments on his appearance were used constantly by Chinese people as a means to strike up conversations or to express gratitude for a favor in lieu of “thank you.” Instead of carrying out a friendly conversation with the complimenter as he did in the first three weeks, Siding decided, “I am very busy with my study here. Sometimes when I am not studying, I want to have my own time so I don’t pay much attention to those compliments now” (interview with Siding on 7/25/2010). This was observed by the researcher as shown in Observation Excerpt 2:

Observation Excerpt 2:

(At a tourist site in a city close to Shanghai)

Tourist (an older Chinese man): (He happens to stand next to Siding. When he notices Siding, he sticks out his thumb, exclaiming with a smile) “长得真高 [You are really tall]!”

Siding: (smiles and walks away) “谢谢 [Thank you].” (Researcher’s reflection journal, 7/25/2010)



After being exposed to more Chinese people towards the end of the program, Siding concluded that “Chinese compliments are not as sincere because they were not meant to make people feel good. It is just a way of starting a conversation and kind of getting it going” (interview with Siding on 8/6/2010). He also noted that Chinese compliments tended to focus on physical appearance rather than possession as opposed to what his American friends usually do. In terms of complimenting linguistic formulas learned during the program, Siding reported:

I usually just use the subject + adjective structure whenever I compliment people. Compared to the week I just came to Shanghai, I can use the structure a lot more fluently now. Chinese people very often use this to me too. But maybe my Chinese skill is not that good and I didn’t hear and understand other ways Chinese speakers use to compliment. (interview with Siding on 8/6/2010)

Diwen’s development of Chinese complimenting seems to have taken on a different track. He went through an integrative phase and an analytical phase which led to his relatively native-like understanding of the functions and topics of Chinese complimenting speech act toward the end of the program. However, his knowledge about the linguistic forms of compliments did not improve tremendously although he became more alert to native speakers’ use of linguistic forms.

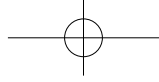
In Weeks 1 to 3, Diwen was a keen observer and an active user of Chinese complimenting speech acts with a strong interest to blend into the Chinese society. Different from other students in the program who tended to stick with the group, he spent all of outside-classroom time exploring alone various places in Shanghai where his mom’s families used to live. In his solo adventures, he experienced and developed a unique understanding of Chinese compliments as shown in Table 3.

In Weeks 4 to 7, Diwen entered an analytical phase based on his enriched experience with direct compliments from Chinese people and developed a keen understanding about how this speech act may be used among Chinese people and between native Chinese and foreigners. For example, in Week 4, he observed that Chinese people only gave compliments on outstanding achievements and compliments were always meant to acknowledge something deserving the recognition, not as in the U.S. “I think I need to work a lot harder to earn a compliment here. Chinese people really look at what you can do” (interview with Diwen on 7/21/2010). He started receiving compliments on his spoken Chinese this week when he made impressive progress with his pronunciation. The following observation excerpt illustrates his experience with compliments on his language skills, and his responses showed that he rightly recognized those comments as compliments to him:

Observation Excerpt 3:

(Following Diwen’s answer to a question during a morning class)

Professor (a middle-aged Chinese man): “苏棣文，你的发音很清楚 [Diwen, your pronunciation is very clear].”



Diwen: (waving his right hand and smiling) “哪里哪里 [No, no].” (Researcher’s reflective journal, 7/8/2010)

“哪里哪里 [No, no]” is the standard form of compliment responding the participants learned from the textbook. Thus, it shows Diwen perceived the comment as a compliment.

In Week 5, Diwen gained new insights about Chinese complimenting based on his discussion with a young Chinese man on the functions of Chinese compliments, “Compliments on skills could be taken as a huge motivator for greater efforts among Chinese because Chinese people always want to do better” (interview with Diwen on 7/28/2010). In the last two weeks of the program, Diwen came to the understanding that:

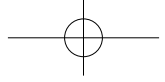
I have talked to many Chinese lately, mainly on the streets or in bars. Chinese people’s compliment on foreigners’ language skills are actually meant to show appreciation for foreigners’ efforts to learn their culture and as a return for their respect for Chinese culture. Between themselves, I think it is not frequently given unless you are really good at something. Many people use very simple structures when they compliment. I heard a lot of 说得不错 [speak well]” (interview with Diwen on 8/13/2010).

Overall, the data show that compared to their pre-program knowledge base, both Siding and Diwen developed more awareness of how to interpret and give compliments in certain contexts, such as the compliments Chinese people give only to foreigners and the common linguistic formulas used by native Chinese. However, they developed divergent understandings of complimenting functions, topics, social contexts, as well as frequency and sincerity. Compared to Siding, Diwen developed a deeper understanding about how compliments are exchanged among Chinese people and between native Chinese and foreigners.

### **How Did the Participants Develop Their Understanding of Chinese Complimenting?**

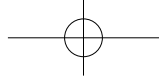
The learning occasions, as shown in Table 4, experienced by Siding and Diwen in conjunction with their developmental patterns (Table 3) illustrate that the developmental approaches the two participants took respectively shared both similarities and divergences. In terms of similarities, the vast majority of the direct compliment interactions Siding and Diwen were engaged in occurred in natural settings and involved unfamiliar native speakers rather than their professor, teaching assistant, or tutors. Thus, primarily based on their direct interactions with unfamiliar Chinese native speakers, Siding and Diwen observed and constantly refined their understanding of the norms of using this speech act in a Chinese-speaking environment. For example, Siding reshaped his understanding of Chinese compliments’ function. Diwen reshaped his view about Chinese complimenting functions, topics, and common linguistic formulas.



**Table 4. Complimenting Learning Occasions**

		Siding	Diwen
Week 1	Teacher/TA		
	tutor		
	strangers	√(tourists, pedestrians)+	√(cab drivers, street vendors)-
Week 2	Teacher/TA	√(TA)-	√+
	tutor	√-	
	strangers	√(street vendors, tourists)+	√(street vendors)+&-
Week 3	Teacher/TA		
	tutor	√+	
	strangers	√(street vendors, tourists)+	√(pedestrians, street vendors)-
Week 4	Teacher/TA		
	tutor		
	strangers	√(tourists, pedestrians)+	√(street vendors)-
Week 5	Teacher/TA		
	tutor		
	strangers	√(local residents)+	√(street vendors)-
Week 7	Teacher/TA		
	tutor		
	strangers	√(street vendors)+	√(street vendors)-
TA: teaching assistant			
√: the compliment occurs			
+: the compliment is received by the participant			
-: the compliment is given by the participant			

The differences were manifested in the external resources accessible to and approaches employed by each participant to deepen their respective understanding. First, Siding received an excessive number of compliments mainly on his physical appearance and language skills throughout the study abroad program, which became his primary resource in learning the Chinese complimenting speech act. By contrast, Diwen received a very limited number of compliments, particularly at the beginning of the study abroad program. None of the compliments focused on his physical appearance. To compensate for this lack of input, he constantly gave compliments and assessed the appropriateness by observing native speakers' reactions, and this constituted his authentic learning resource. The second difference lies in the additional resources the participants actively consulted during the program, which also reflected their divergent attitudes toward learning about this speech act. Siding never reported about consulting an expert or additional resources to understand the speech act. After discovering Chinese people complimented him for various other purposes rather than just making him feel good, Siding deemed Chinese



people as insincere complimenters, thus became very indifferent to this speech act and lost interest in discovering more. By contrast, Diwen reported using some readings about Chinese culture and etiquette to gauge his complimenting behaviors throughout the program. As early as in Week 2, when asked how he had learned about certain functions of Chinese complimenting, Diwen confessed, “I read quite a few books about Chinese culture and etiquette on the flight here and whenever I have time now. It helps me understand my life here” (interview with Diwen on 7/14/2010).

In sum, as most language learners do, both Siding and Diwen heavily relied on their personal experiences in the target language environment to understand the Chinese complimenting speech act. However, they diverged in terms of additional resources they sought to supplement their exploration of this speech act.

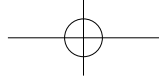
## Discussion

Consistent with previous studies’ (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007; Kinginger, 2008; Matsumura, 2007; Schauer, 2009) findings, the findings in the current study show that both participants developed certain competence in Chinese complimenting. However, the findings also reveal that each participant developed a distinct understanding about the Chinese complimenting speech act through a heterogeneous developmental process during the 7-week program. This comes despite the fact that both participants underwent similar formal language instruction both in the U.S. and the study abroad program and had similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this section, the researcher will interpret the heterogeneity and complexity of the learning process by using the conceptual framework from sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

### Semiotic Mediation

As demonstrated by the findings, the unfamiliar cultural environment made every motivated study abroad student a natural observer and imitator of various speech acts, including the complimenting speech act. The quantity and quality of semiotic, social, and cultural resources (van Lier, 2004) to which they were exposed were constantly shaped by the people with whom they interacted and the social contexts in which these interactions took place. Eventually, their understanding of and skills in the Chinese complimenting speech act were largely shaped or mediated by these circumstances.

Complimenting is a relatively marked speech act in Mandarin Chinese, different from the speech act in American English (e.g., Fong, 1998; Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999, 2011). And it is usually used among acquaintances rather than strangers (Pan, 2000). However, out of curiosity, unfamiliar Chinese natives with various age, gender, and social backgrounds constantly used this speech act to start conversations with Siding from the first day he arrived to Shanghai. This is similar to the case reported in Siegal’s (1996) study. This might have been accelerated by the fact that the 2010 Shanghai World Expo attracted millions of native Chinese who might have rarely encountered foreign-looking people before and thus were eager to converse with foreigners. The excessive compliments Siding

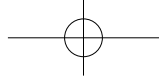


received provided him with extra linguistic input, which, as the findings show, helped him identify and imitate common linguistic forms Chinese people use. However, the foreigner treatments (e.g., Kinginger, 2009; Siegal, 1996) afforded misleading rather than helpful resources for learning the Chinese complimenting speech act.

First, the excessive and direct compliments on his physical appearance caused Siding's erroneous understanding that compliments are given in the Chinese society as frequently as in American English and Chinese compliments primarily focus on appearance. Second, due to many Chinese tourists' eagerness to converse with a foreigner, Siding was frequently given compliments replacing other speech acts such as greetings, conversation-opener, encouragement, and appreciation. This misled him to believe that conventional Chinese compliments embody these functions regardless of the social distance between the compliment giver and the receiver. This explained why he decided to compliment an elderly man on his English-speaking attempt. Third, frequent and random compliments from strangers also obscured the information about the social contexts where Chinese compliments conventionally occur. This was reflected in Siding's attempt to compliment his teaching assistant on her appearance during a class. Another pitfall coming with the foreigner treatments lies in Chinese native speakers' tolerance toward the participants' non-native-like complimenting behaviors. Diwen reported that all the Chinese compliments he gave were well received despite the fact that some linguistic forms he used were non-native-like and that compliments are rarely given by native Chinese in such social contexts.

By the same token, the lack of misleading complimenting resources could afford a more positive learning context. In contrast to Siding, Diwen received fewer foreigner treatments in terms of the compliments he received. Due to his lack of foreigner looks, Diwen attracted less excessive attention and thus received relatively scarce compliments on his appearance. Many of the compliments he received centered around his Chinese language skills, particularly in the later phase of the study abroad program when his speaking ability was impressively improved. The lack of received compliments did put Diwen at a disadvantageous position in terms of exposure to the speech act used by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. However, this also sanctioned him from misleading foreigner treatments and afforded him with relatively more authentic complimenting-related resources. As a result, Diwen did not develop the misinformed understanding of the primary functions and topics about Chinese compliments as Siding did.

Siding and Diwen's experiences show an interesting picture of semiotic resources study abroad students may encounter in China. Shaped by students' individual attributes such as their unique physical features or their lack of these, they may receive rampant or limited foreigner treatments. Some treatments they receive do not represent the politeness norms in conventional Chinese-speaking social settings. Thus, they may be mediated inappropriately by these semiotic resources. On the other hand, consistent with previous studies' (e.g., Barron, 2003, 2007; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Warga & Schölmlberger, 2007) findings that study abroad students often failed to notice L2 pragmatic norms, the findings in the current study also show that Siding had a hard time understanding and using more complimenting linguistic formulas due to his limited language proficiency. Thus,



the rampant foreigner treatments exacerbated by his lower linguistic skills intertwiningly created obstacles for Siding to develop more native-like complimenting pragmatics despite his active reflection on his personal experience (Hall, 1995; Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002). By contrast, Diwen received much less foreigner treatments. This constituted a facilitative role in his development of more authentic Chinese complimenting pragmatics.

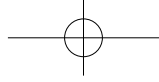
### **Agency and Internalization**

From a SCT perspective, language learners have their own intentions, affect, and histories in the language learning process (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Siding and Diwen's divergent understandings about the Chinese complimenting speech act were also stipulated by their distinct execution of agency to internalize the speech act. As shown in the findings, the two of them differed in the primary resources they adopted when processing the primary functions, topics, social contexts, and linguistic formula of the speech act.

Siding primarily relied on his direct social interactions with native speakers of Chinese to understand the Chinese complimenting speech act. As discussed earlier, the amount of compliments he received from the native speakers was heavily influenced by his foreigner identity and greatly outnumbered the compliments he gave. Despite his desire to be like native speakers of Chinese, he became annoyed by the excessive "insincere" compliments he received every day and decided to focus on his formal language study. So he hardly reported any attempt to consult either an expert or readings to understand the speech act and to analyze his own experiences such as his confusing experience with compliment topics and functions. Misleading personal experience compounded with minimal understanding of the deeper Chinese philosophical underpinnings behind such a complex speech act did little service to Siding's development of an appropriate understanding of within-group Chinese politeness norms.

Since the beginning of the program, Diwen expressed strong interest in reconnecting with his mother's culture and hoped to blend into the culture by using Chinese like a native speaker. Both before and during the program, his extensive reading about Chinese culture as well as his relentless efforts to initiate compliment conversations with the local residents led him to develop an impressive understanding of and skills in Chinese complimenting, as reported in the findings. In particular, because of his readings about Chinese culture and the underlying philosophy, he understood from the beginning of the program that some compliments were mainly treatments Chinese people gave to foreigners and thus avoided misunderstanding certain compliment functions as Siding did. By reading on the side and discussing explicitly with native speakers about this speech act, he also constantly reflected on how Chinese people perceive complimenting functions differently than American people. This learning process demands a high level of agency (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), which was lacking in Siding's case.

The social, cultural, and linguistic resources provided in the social contexts and learners' agency are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are constantly shaping and shaped by each other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004). As shown in the findings, Diwen's tireless efforts to improve his Chinese gradually yielded an enormous amount of compliments on his language skills, particularly in the last few weeks of the program. This



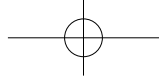
deepened his understanding about the complimenting speech act, such as the primary function of Chinese compliments and the common complimenting linguistic formulas. It may be arguable that Diwen's execution of agency was a process of identity reconstruction (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) due to the short length of the program. However, it is reasonable to predict that Diwen may develop native-like knowledge and behaviors and may be more ready to eventually reconstruct his identity if he studies abroad in China for a longer time.

In sum, sole reliance on personal experience which very possibly entails rampant foreigner treatments may yield misleading understandings and even frustration of the politeness norms in the target culture, particularly those embodied with drastically different and hidden social and political philosophies. For American learners of Mandarin Chinese, a deeper understanding of Chinese social, cultural, and historical underpinnings is instrumental, particularly in the learning of marked speech acts (Kasper & Zhang, 1995; Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002). This is consistent with Winke and Teng's (2010) findings that explicit instruction on Chinese culture assisted American learners' pragmatic development. Therefore, it can be proposed that both diverse social interactions and explicit learning of Chinese cultural and philosophical underpinnings may enable learners' better access to various sociocultural and semiotic resources (van Lier, 2004) needed for pragmatic development. Authentic interaction with native speakers enables learners to experiment with their social roles in the target culture (Shardocova, 2005) and be exposed to authentic linguistic input. A deeper understanding of the cultural and philosophical underpinnings equips them with necessary knowledge to cope with foreigner treatments while reconfiguring their own identities (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Neither is indispensable in learners' pragmatic development.

## Conclusion

This study employed a case study approach to investigating two American university-level learners' developmental process of the Chinese complimenting speech act during a seven-week study abroad program in the mainland of China. Through detailed documentation and analysis of each participant's self-reflection as well as the researcher's on-site observations, the researcher discovered that each participant acquired a different understanding of the complimenting speech act in a distinct way. From a SCT theoretical perspective, this study reveals that the CSL learners' pragmatic development within a study abroad context is a complex, dynamic, and highly individualized process. Chinese people's special treatment of foreign people could provide more constraints than opportunities for American learners to acquire Chinese complimenting. However, learners' own motivation and approaches to learning could also significantly shape their learning process and results.

Since this study only focused on two Chinese language learners in a study abroad context, the findings only provide a preliminary account of the heterogeneity and complexity of English-speaking adult learners' development of Chinese complimenting, particularly direct complimenting. By using ethnographical methods to directly document



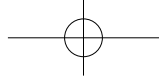
each participant's developmental patterns over an 8-week study abroad program, it provides a further understanding of how a study abroad program, particularly the incidental learning outside a formal classroom, can impact learners' interlanguage pragmatic development. As research on CSL pragmatic development is still scarce, the findings of the current study contribute to the field by revealing how native Chinese people's complimenting interactions with Westerners shape beginning-level CSL learners' pragmatic development.

This study is by no means intended to provide a comprehensive investigation of the complimenting development process that is applicable to every learner of Chinese during a study abroad program. This is due to the adoption of a case study approach which only focused on two participants. Additionally, this study mainly focuses on what CSL learners can understand rather than what they actually produce in different social setting during a study abroad program due to the research methods chosen in the study. The impact of learners' language proficiency on their development is also moderately discussed. Many other issues involved in complimenting development in a study abroad context have not been touched upon in the current study. These issues include: how learners' personality and attitude towards giving compliments in his/her native culture impact their complimenting development and how the age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status of Chinese native speakers influence their complimenting behaviors during interactions with American students. In addition, the current study focused on direct complimenting. Indirect compliment, non-compliment, and non-response behaviors involved in the Chinese complimenting speech act were not investigated. Future studies may be conducted to study these issues in more detail and on a broader scale. More studies are also needed to investigate how various social issues influence CSL learners' actual production in compliment-related conversations over a longer span of time.

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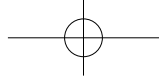
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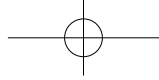


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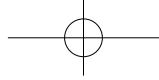


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