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# Compliment Speech Act Responses of ESL Senior High School Students: Do They Matter?

**Joanne Echalico- Bermillo**
Department of Language Education, Central Mindanao University,
Maramag, Bukidnon, Philippines

**Joan Ciervo- Generoso**
Department of English and Literature, Silliman University,
Dumaguete City, Philippines
Correspondence: Joanne E. Bermillo Email: jebermillo@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Compliment responses are naturally occurring speech acts used to show courtesy, kindness, admiration, praise, opinions, or approval, either orally or through action, and even a combination of both. These CRs are highly tangible in a classroom setting where students often exchange compliments as they freely interact with each other in any situation. Hence, this study analyzed the compliment responses (CRs) of ESL Grade 11 Senior High School students using the adapted Holmes' (1986) Compliment Response Categories on the three macro levels of **accept**, **reject**, and **evade** with their micro-levels. In addition, the study employed the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) postulated by Manes and Wolfson (1981) to elicit students' compliment responses, which proposes the four situational topics of *appearance*, *character*, *ability*, and *possession*. The result showed that 63% of the compliment responses utilized 'accept' strategies, whereas 20% used 'evade' strategies, 6 % used 'reject' strategies, and 11% combined all of the former with any micro-category strategies. Thus, most of the students made more effort to respond to a compliment, that is, to *accept* it.

**Keywords:** compliment speech act responses, ESL, discourse completion task

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## 1. Introduction

The speech act of compliment and corresponding compliment responses are not new concepts in language and sociolinguistics. Numerous studies have already been conducted on the subject across multiple different contexts. Janet Holmes (1986), who conducted a study on compliments in New Zealand, defined the concept of a compliment as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speakers, usually, the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (p. 485). Compliments are considered positive speech acts and contain different aspects, especially on how they are received or responded to. A compliment receiver may respond in one of the following ways: accept the compliment, reject it, or

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evade/mitigate it. However, what determines a person's response is immensely affected by his/her cultural background and knowledge.

As the study of language interconnects with culture, it should not come as a surprise that such information is true. Individuals may react to compliments in a way that suits the sociolinguistic norms of their own culture. Cultural variety implies multiple variations of compliment responses used worldwide. It is due to this knowledge that the study on the speech act of compliment initiates investigations between cultures as "it acts as a window through which we can view what is valued in a particular culture" (Kim, n.d.). However, a question that can be posed is how such a phenomenon may play out when the receiver of a compliment is a learner of the language that is spoken. Take for example, when English is learned as a second language or foreign language (ESL & EFL). A number of studies have based their research on such notion.

In the case of the Philippines, responses to compliments are worth studying because few studies have been conducted in Philippine English. Hence, it is believed that the classroom is the best source for examining compliment responses because each of the students possesses rich resources in terms of languages. Active interactions occur in the classroom setting whenever students receive and respond to compliments in any circumstances. Compliments in the classroom are necessary for maintaining a good relationship with fellow students and reinforcing the desired action. Holmes (1986) reinforces this idea by adding that giving compliments appeared to serve as "solidarity signals, commenting on friendships, alternating demands, smoothing ruffled feathers and bridging gaps created by possible offense." Manes & Wolfson (1981) supported the idea and stated that compliments serve as "social lubricants" that build or keep relationships.

Students' responses to compliments have their own structure and functions that need to be understood and appreciated by both the complimenter and the complimentee. Unexpectedly, some students are uncomfortable when complimented, and often they get advice to say, "thank you" or "I appreciate it" or persuade themselves that they deserve the compliment. These are some few things observed by a classroom teacher whose students do not know how to respond to compliments. As mentioned earlier, various studies have already been conducted abroad, but there are few research studies available on Filipino speech acts in the Philippines. It is hoped that this study may add to the limited existing literature on compliment responses in the Philippine setting. Hence, this study was carried out to examine the compliment response strategies used by the Grade 11 senior high school students.

## 2. Review of Literature

*Pragmatic transfer of L1 into compliment responses in English*

Pragmatic transfer can be defined as the interaction between old and new knowledge, the former being the first language learned by the individual and the latter being the second language that is being learned. This event occurs when the knowledge and experience that were acquired

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with the first language influences the acquisition and use of the new language being learned (Bou-Franch & Clavel-Arroitia, 2018). Pragmatic transfer within compliment responses manifests when the speaker of the utterance reacts in a way that encompasses the patterns and culture of their L1. Moreover, pragmatic transfer is common in language use and is caused mainly by the speaker's language proficiency and pragmatic competence. In a study conducted to observe differences in compliment responses between native speakers of American English, native speakers of Thai, high-proficiency Thai EFL learners, and low-proficiency Thai EFL learners (Phoocharoensil, 2012), the relationship between the two language responses and the occurrence of pragmatic transfer were evidently shown. As observed, Thais are similar to Americans in compliment responses as acceptance was the main choice of response. However, Thais still tend to use the denial strategy more than Americans do due to their cultural norm of valuing humility. This concept was transferred extensively into Thai EFL learners' English responses with low language proficiency. They were found to depend on the L1 pragmatic norms when responding to compliments in English. On the other hand, the high-proficiency Thai EFL learners exhibited compliment responses and patterns that resembled those of the native speakers of American English.

Another case conducted by Bahçelerli and Sucuoğlu (2015) also depicted pragmatic transfer of L1 into the L2 as the study was based on such concept. Observing the compliment responses of native Turkish ELT students and non-native Turkish ELT students in North Cyprus, the participants were given six different complimenting scenarios to which they had to respond. The research findings reported that their cultural knowledge indeed heavily influenced the non-native speakers' compliment responses. Much of their responses were translated from formulaic Turkish expressions, which in some cases did not suit the compliment that was given in English. Non-native speakers also tended not to accept compliments without justification compared to the native speakers, who did so with no trouble. The pragmatic transfer was most evident within scenarios where a compliment was given to something that the respondent owned. For example, in the fifth scenario, the object was a clock hanging on the wall of the respondent's house. In the sixth scenario, it was a new shirt respondent was supposedly wearing. While both participant groups responded with acceptance, the native speakers only replied in short answers. The non-native speakers, on the other hand, responded by adding more comments and explanations to the acceptance strategy. This added response resulted from cultural knowledge interference, since responding in such a way was expected in the non-native speakers' own culture.

*Cross-cultural studies on compliment responses*

A study conducted by Mohajernia and Solimani (2013) observed the differences in compliment responses between thirty Australian native English speakers and thirty proficient Iranian speakers of English, driven by socio-cultural patterns. The participants were given situations in which a compliment was given. Their responses would reveal the response strategy used (e.g., You have used a perfume you have bought recently. Your friend: *That smells wonderful!*). The results depicted were quite different, as the Iranian participants seemed to use mitigating responses compared to the Australian participants, who used both responses of mitigation and acceptance highly.

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Cheng's study (2011) compared the compliment responses between native English speakers and Chinese L2 speakers. Three different groups were observed: Chinese EFL speakers, Chinese ESL speakers, and native English speakers. In this study, having collected data through naturalistic role-play and retrospective interviews, it was learned that the Chinese participants mostly chose to agree with compliments given to them, accepting them to show appreciation, and continued to offer more comments on the subject of the compliment. The difference in the latter between the Chinese and Americans lay within the willingness to provide more comments about the cost of the item when it came to possessional compliments, as this is common and proper to do within the Chinese culture. This notion contrasts greatly with American culture. One other notable aspect of this study is that Chinese L2 learners, especially EFL learners, had difficulty mastering different compliment response strategies. This was seen through their responses when it came to compliments on personality, as the most common responses from the Chinese L2 learners would be to ignore the compliment or giggle at it.

Utilizing the same group of native English speakers from Cheng's research, the study of Alimohammadi, Rasekh, and Shahsavari (2014) compared compliment responses between native English speakers and Iranian EFL speakers. This study showcased how Iranians generally used evasion-type response strategies or a combination of multiple strategies more than Americans would. In addition, the latter tended to use more of the acceptance response strategy. It was also found that Iranians were inclined to offer further comments to continue a conversation related to the compliment.

In another study (Istifci, 2017), compliment responses were observed and compared between Turkish EFL learners, Chinese EFL learners, and native English speakers. The method utilized for the data gathering was similar to the study of Mohajernia and Solimani, that is, by giving of situational questions that would reveal the type of response strategy the individual used. The data gathering results displayed how both EFL learners accepted compliments more than evade or reject them and their responses were actually more original than English compliment responses. However, what is interesting about this case is the implementation of their cultural norms in some of the responses. While accepting was the overall most used strategy by both Chinese and Turkish EFL learners, a significant part of the research revealed that they also used the evading strategy more than English speakers did. This came as a result of culture influencing the usage and learning of a language. The Chinese are known to "prefer evade strategies when receiving compliments for character and possession..." Turkish people value being seen as modest and humble. These cultural norms can also explain why the EFL learners' accepting responses were more original than native English speakers. For example, the Turkish responses and strategies resembled those of native Turkish speakers.

Moreover, Holmes (1994), Holmes and Brown (1987) noted that there is difference between New Zealand English and American English in compliments and compliment responses. They reported that New Zealand English speakers feel that Americans pay far too many compliments and assume that their compliments are not sincere. Herbert (1986), Herbert (1989), and Herbert and Straight (1989) highlighted the difference between American English and South African English in terms of frequency of compliments and the range of compliment response types. American English speakers tend to give more compliments and are also more likely to reject compliments frequently than South African speakers, whereas African English speakers give less compliments but accept most of the compliments that they receive.

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*Compliment Response Researches in the Philippines*

While cultural studies have already been made on compliments and compliment responses within the Philippine context, there is still a large amount of data that needs to be collected and observed. In the meantime, the studies that have been conducted show sufficient evidence of how compliment responses are approached in the country. One of the studies on this aspect is that of Bautista (1988) who got her data from the scripts of seven most popular Filipino radio-dramas that ran for 30 minutes each in 1977-1978. She found out that responses to the compliments were meant to express praise. Bautista views the patterns of speaking or high quality of sources of "Linguistic and social rules that underlie the communicative competence of speakers in a speech community." (p.215). On the other hand, Zhang (2013) conducted a study among thirty Philippine English speakers who had all received most of their education in English and had been formally taking English as a language course for more than ten years. The study observed the compliments and compliment response strategies commonly used in language and culture. The study results revealed that, much like Americans, the participants tended to accept compliments the most, taking up about 60% of the data gathered. However, in a deeper analysis, the accepting strategies most used were acceptance token, return, and explanation, and the least commonly used response strategies were all related to the rejecting response.

In another study comparing Filipino and Thai responses to compliments with English as the medium of communication (Boonkongsaen, 2011), the notion that Filipinos tend to accept compliments was further proven. Similar to the results found in Zhang's study, Filipinos navigated more to using appreciation token, agreeing utterance, returning the compliment, and a combination of appreciation and returning. Another interesting fact that this study provided is that none of the Filipino participants rejected compliments while nearly 7% of the Thai participants did so. While rejecting type responses were generally the least used among the two participants, it is fascinating that Filipinos showed no numbers in this at all. This may be due to the different views on rejecting compliments in each culture.

Further studies were conducted based on gender as a factor in responding to compliments. Morales (2012) gathered thirty Filipino L2 learner participants to observe the differences in compliment responses among the genders. While the results displayed how both parties almost equally used appreciation token and returning the compliment when responding to compliments given to them, showing a preference for a more direct response, there were still differences in their most-used indirect responses. Filipino males continued the conversation with informative comments relating to the topic of compliment while Filipino females managed to evade the compliment and shift the conversation.

Another study focused on the compliment responses of Filipino college-level male and female L2 learner students while also offering some insights into compliment responses in general regardless of gender (Mascuñana et al., 2018). The study results showed that out of 101 Filipino college students (54 males, 47 female), the most used compliment response was once again that of acceptance, followed by a combination. Looking into the differences in gender responses, while both groups scored highly in acceptance responses, some differences noted were: "females used combination more than males... males tended to reject a compliment more

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than females, and males evade compliments more than females." Overall, the seemingly prevailing response type of Filipinos is to accept the compliment that is given, quite similar to the response choice of Americans.

## 3. Methods

The study used a descriptive research design. Soliven (2001) cited by Navarro and Santos (2011) specified that this quantitative descriptive research approach is used to describe facts and characteristics of a given population. The participants involved twenty randomly selected Grade 11 students enrolled in Oral Communication at Silliman University, Dumaguete City.

Furthermore, this research adapted a questionnaire on Discourse Completion Test (DCT) from Manes and Wolfson (1981). Varghese and Billmyer (1996) cited by Ogiermann (2018) posited that the advantages of using DCTs in pragmatics studies are well known, and DCT surpasses all others in ease of use. In addition, Beebe and Cummings (1996) suggested that DCTs provide the opportunity to gather a large corpus of data on a wide range of difficult-to observe speech behaviors in a short time. The questionnaire constituted four generally accepted compliment-giving situations – possession, ability, appearance, and character. It consisted of eight separate paragraphs describing various real-life situations. The participants were asked to express their response(s) to each described situation in the provided blank space after each paragraph. The situations were about events that typically occur in the participants' everyday lives in academic situations. Choosing academic situations rather than others highlights the importance of saving one's face in these situations, especially in the classroom setting.

After the participants had filled out the questionnaires, 156 compliment responses were analyzed and coded using Holmes' (1986) Compliment Response Categories (see Figure 1). Afterwards, the data were analyzed statistically, using frequency and percentage values.

**Figure 1**. Holmes' Compliment Response (CR) Categories

| Macro level CRs | Micro level CRs | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Accept | Appreciation token | "Thanks", "Thank you", "Cheers", "Yes", "Good" |
| | Agreeing utterance | "I know", "I am glad you think so", "I did realize I did that well", Yeah, I really like it" |
| | Downgrading/qualifying | "It's nothing", "It was no problem", I enjoyed doing it", "I hope it was ok", "I still only use it to call people", "It's not bad" |
| | Return compliment | "You're not too bad yourself", "Your child was an angel", "I'm sure you will be great", "Yours was good too" |
| | Disagreeing utterance | "Nah, I don't think so", I thought I did it badly", |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Reject | | "Nah, it's nothing special", "It's not", "Don't say so" |
| | Question accuracy | "Why?", "Is it right?", "Really?" |
| | Challenge sincerity | "Stop lying", "Don't lie", "Don't joke about it", "You must be kidding", "Don't, come on" |
| Evade | Shift credit | "That's what friends are for", "You're polite," "No worries", "My pleasure" |
| | Informative comment | "It wasn't hard", "You can get it from [store name]", "It's really cheap" |
| | Request reassurance | "Really?" |

## 4. Findings

Table 1 shows the responses to compliments on the three macro-levels of *accept*, *reject*, and *evade***.**

**Table 1.** Compliment Responses of the Students

| Micro-Level Responses to Compliments | | **F** | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Accept** | Appreciation Token | 26 | 17 |
| | Agreeing Utterance | 17 | 11 |
| | Qualifying/Downgrading | 9 | 6 |
| | Return Compliment | 33 | 21 |
| | Combination/Modification | 14 | 9 |
| **Sub-total** | | **99** | **63** |
| **Reject** | Disagreeing Utterance | 9 | 6 |
| | Question Accuracy | 1 | 1 |
| | Challenge Sincerity | 0 | 0 |
| | Combination/Modification | 0 | 0 |
| | Non-verbal | 0 | 0 |
| **Sub-total** | | **10** | **6** |
| **Evade** | Shift Credit | 16 | 10 |
| | Informative Comment | 13 | 9 |
| | Request for Reassurance | 0 | 0 |
| | Combination/Modification | 1 | 1 |
| | Non-verbal | 0 | 0 |
| **Sub-total** | | **30** | **20** |
| **Combination** | | **17** | **11** |
| **Non-verbal** | | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | | **156** | **100** |

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This table shows the frequency counts and percentage of the types of compliment responses made by the participants. A total of 156 corpora were collected to constitute the *accept*, *reject*, and *evade* responses. It can be seen here that *accept* has the frequency count of 99 or 63% of the total responses, with the micro-level counts of 21% for *return compliment* and 17 % for *appreciation token*, respectively. The findings show that the usage of accept compliments strongly indicates the Filipino students' unique way of responding to compliments; either they accept them or return them out of politeness. Some students also used downgrading possibly to regain humility and eliminate the mix of awkwardness and embarrassment that compliments sometimes bring, especially compliments coming from strangers. The data set also provides counter-evidence to studies in which Asian speakers of other languages generally reject compliments and where native speakers of English straightforwardly accept compliments.

Moreover, data show that the most common strategy used by the students to respond to compliments is the *return compliment* which falls under the *accept* category of the macro level followed by *appreciation token* as compliment response and with *reject* accounting for the least among the macro levels. Such findings run counter to Mojica's (2002) observation that Filipino college students used more non-acceptance and non-agreement strategies in response to compliments and that Filipino students are more likely to be constrained by modesty maxim. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the target language in Mojica's study was Filipino, the national language in the Philippines; it might be the case that the Philippine English learners were able to learn the rule of thumb in responding to compliments, that is, to accept them when receiving compliments. However, the findings of this research are more likely similar to those of Mascuñana et al. (2018), with *accept* ranking as first, followed by *evade* and *reject*, respectively.

In the present study, the macro-level of *evade* ranked second with 20% of the total responses. It can be observed that *shift credit* got the highest responses with 10%. Although some students say something like "My pleasure" to assure others that their work gave them no hassle; maybe this is out of politeness or culture. *Informative comments* had 9%, denoting that some students felt the need to inform others on how to acquire an object or reach others' level hoping to cheer them up or encourage them to do better in future situations.

The macro-level with the lowest number of responses was *reject*, with only 6%. It only garnered two micro levels: "disagreeing" and "question accuracy," at 6%, and 1%, respectively. The data reveal that some students do not know how to accept a compliment, so they just reject it.

However, in the micro-level under *accept*, many combination/modification categories were added to incorporate data that did not apply to Holmes' (1986) model. It was observed that students combined or modified their responses as shown in evidences listed below, where students combined any two or three of the micro-categories of *appreciation token, agreeing utterance, qualifying/downgrading*, and r*eturn the compliment*, and/or modified their responses with *advice, suggestion, offer* or *other modification strategies.* The results imply that the Filipino culture of humility or shyness is evident in how to react to compliments. Most Filipinos are not used to getting compliments, the same way that some rarely give compliments to each other.

The following are some illustrative examples:

**Combination:**

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**Appreciation token "Thank you" and qualifying utterance.**

*Thank you. I just wanted to help you that you will not fail. [That's] what friends are for. Hehe.*

**Appreciation token and return compliment**

*Thanks bro! By the way, you don't need this, you're f**king attractive!*

**Qualifying utterance and return compliment**

*You're welcome. I like your child and she is good. I love baby.*

A**greeing utterance, qualifying utterance, and return compliment**

*It's my pleasure, I really love kids and your child is an amazing kid. You both raised him so well. Kudos for that!*

*No problem. I can always be of help. And thanks to this kiddo; he saved me from a day of boredom.*

**Modification:**

**Appreciation token modified by an advice**

*Thank you! Study well and you can be what I am someday.*

**Appreciation token modified by a suggestion**

*Thank you, much appreciated it, you can buy one also.*

**Agreeing utterance modified by an advice**

*You are always welcome. Here is your child.* Never let him loose again.

**Appreciation token modified by an offer**

*Thank you, want to try it on?*

*Yeah thanks, would you like to borrow?*

**Appreciation token modified by a joke**

*Thanks. Welcome to the dark side, (on wearing sunglasses)*

**Agreeing utterance modified by a joke**

*Yes, yes. I acquired it from an advanced race living inside the interior of the earth (on wearing sunglasses)*

**Agreeing utterance modified by an offer**

*You're welcome. You can call me anytime you need help, so long as I am available.*

*You're welcome! I also had fun with him myself I'd be happy to look after him/her next time.*

*No problem. If you need help you can text me or just call me and I'll be there to help you.*

*But if only if I don't have work to do.*

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## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

There are indicators that Filipino Senior High students do not possess the earlier generation's timidity as reflected in the use of acceptance and return compliment types of responses to compliments. In addition, their use of such types of responses indicates their desire to maintain social balance with their respective interlocutors. Moreover, students should learn how to give and accept compliments to establish and preserve camaraderie and solidarity among peers. In a more profound sense, teachers may also consider teaching the pragmatics of language to raise pragmatic awareness. Pragmatic awareness includes teaching the students how, when and whom to give socially appropriate compliments in a specific context to avoid miscommunication.

Future researchers may consider or explore alternatives in methodology like using the students' L1 in answering the discourse responses to have a more naturalized response. Also, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) may be included in the research method to identify the reasons or arrive at an in-depth analysis on the basis of their responses. It must be remembered that relying solely on the written responses delimits the prosodic features of the language, which can be crucial in the interpretation of the answers. Moreover, researchers may increase the number of participants and conduct comparative/contrastive studies along this line to establish their differences across cultures putting significant consideration on the factors for variations of compliment responses and variations in interpreting the responses.

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