

Compliment Response Strategies Among Undergraduate Students in Malaysia: A Quantitative Study of Pragmatic Competence in Higher Education

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Abstract— *This study investigates compliment response strategies used by undergraduate students in Malaysia, examining how social variables like status relationships affect strategy selection and identifying cross-cultural similarities and differences. Using a Discourse Completion Task questionnaire, data was collected from 150 first-semester undergraduate students at a private university in Perak, Malaysia. Responses were categorized into 11 super strategies and analyzed quantitatively. The findings reveal patterns in how Malaysian students navigate compliment exchanges, with implications for intercultural communication and pragmatic competence in higher education settings. Results indicate a preference for acceptance strategies, but with significant variations based on the status of the compliment giver. This research contributes to the understanding of pragmatic competence in Malaysian higher education and offers insights for language educators and intercultural communication trainers.*

Index Terms—compliment responses, pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, speech acts

I. INTRODUCTION

Compliments and compliment responses play a crucial role in social interactions, reflecting cultural norms and communication styles. These speech acts serve multiple functions, including establishing and maintaining social relationships, expressing admiration or approval, and fostering solidarity between interlocutors (Amar & Amari 2022). The study of compliment responses has gained significant attention in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, as it provides insights into the complex interplay between language, culture, and social dynamics. Previous research has extensively studied compliment behaviour in Western contexts, particularly in English-speaking countries (Czerwionk & Dickerson, 2022). However, less attention has been paid to compliment behaviour in Malaysian society, particularly among university students. This gap is significant, given Malaysia's unique multicultural and multilingual landscape, which presents a rich context for examining how cultural norms, linguistic practices, and ethnic identity influence communication patterns. Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage, shaped by historical, geographical, and social factors, offers a distinctive environment for studying compliment responses. The country's blend of traditional values and modern influences, characterized by respect, harmony, and face preservation, suggests that Malaysian undergraduate students, who stand at the intersection of traditional values and global influences, may exhibit unique patterns in perceiving, giving, and responding to compliments.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to fill the existing research gap by exploring how undergraduate students in Malaysia respond to compliments, considering the influences of cultural norms, linguistic practices, and ethnic identity. Specifically, the study addresses three main research questions:

1. What strategies are used by Malaysian university students when responding to compliments?
2. Does the social variable of status relationships affect the selection of compliment response strategies?
3. What are the cross-cultural similarities and differences as well as intra-cultural or intra-lingual variations among speakers?

By examining these aspects, this study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation regarding intercultural communication, social harmony, and identity negotiation in multicultural settings. The focus on Malaysian undergraduates provides insights into how language, culture, and identity intersect in compliment response behaviours among a young, educated population navigating both traditional values and global influences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory and Compliment Responses

The study of compliment responses is grounded in Speech Act Theory, as developed by Austin (1962) and further elaborated by Searle (1969). This theory posits that language not only conveys information but also performs actions. Compliments and their responses are considered speech acts that perform social functions beyond their literal meaning. Holmes (1988) provided a widely accepted definition of compliments as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer." This definition underscores the social and evaluative nature of compliments, highlighting their role in interpersonal communication. Compliment responses, as a related speech act, have been the subject of numerous studies. Pomerantz (1978) conducted pioneering work in this area, identifying two conflicting constraints that individuals face when responding to compliments: the need to agree with the speaker and the desire to avoid self-praise. This dilemma forms the basis for understanding the various strategies people employ in responding to compliments.

Cultural Variations in Compliment Responses

Research has shown that compliment response strategies can vary significantly across cultures. In Western cultures, particularly in English-speaking countries, accepting compliments is often seen as the preferred response, aligning with politeness norms that value agreement and appreciation (Eslami et al., 2020). For instance, American English speakers have been found to accept compliments more frequently than speakers from other cultural backgrounds (Jakučionytė, 2020). In contrast, some Asian cultures have traditionally emphasized modesty, leading to a higher frequency of compliment rejections or deflections. Yu (2003) found that Mandarin Chinese speakers were more likely to reject compliments compared to American English speakers, attributing this difference to the Chinese cultural value of modesty. Similarly, Japanese speakers have been observed to downplay compliments more frequently than their Western counterparts (Kim et al., 2021). In the Malaysian context, early studies suggested that traditional Malay culture was associated with rejecting or downplaying compliments (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992). This tendency was attributed to cultural values that prioritize modesty and the avoidance of self-praise. However, more recent studies have indicated a shift in compliment response patterns, particularly among younger, urban Malaysians. Shanmuganathan (2003) observed that Malays living in urban areas were more likely to accept compliments by saying "thank you" rather than rejecting them outright. This change was attributed to the influence of Western culture, possibly due to increased exposure through education, media, and globalization. Similarly, Normala (2011) found that Malay speakers showed a greater tendency to appreciate compliments rather than reject them, suggesting a shift in Malaysian compliment culture.

Sociolinguistic Factors Influencing Compliment Responses

Several sociolinguistic factors have been identified as influencing compliment response strategies. Social status plays a significant role in compliment exchanges, as noted by Wolfson (1983) in her study of American middle-class society. She observed that compliments are predominantly exchanged between individuals of similar age and status. In situations where status inequality exists, compliments are more likely to be given by the person in the higher position. This pattern highlights the complex interplay between social hierarchies and linguistic behaviour in compliment exchanges. Gender has also been found to influence compliment behaviour. Studies by Holmes (1988); Lee & McCabe (2021), and Herbert (1990) have shown that women generally give and receive more compliments than men. However, it is important to note that these patterns may vary across cultures, emphasizing the need for culture-specific research in this area. The topic of the compliment itself can significantly affect how it is responded to. Torres et al., (2020), found that compliments on different subjects (such as appearance, ability, or possessions) may elicit different types of responses. This suggests that the content of the compliment interacts with cultural norms and individual preferences to shape the response strategy chosen. The relationship between the interlocutors is another crucial factor in determining compliment response strategies. Zhao and Epley (2021) noted that the degree of familiarity between the compliment giver and receiver can significantly affect how the compliment is responded to. This factor intersects with social status considerations, creating complex dynamics in compliment exchanges. Finally, overarching cultural values play a significant role in shaping compliment response patterns. Yu (2003) emphasized that cultural norms, such as the emphasis on modesty or self-promotion, can greatly influence how individuals respond to compliments. These cultural values provide a framework within which individuals navigate the often-delicate act of responding to praise or positive evaluation. Understanding these various factors and their interactions is crucial for developing a comprehensive view of compliment response behaviours, particularly in multicultural contexts like Malaysia. This multifaceted approach allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the data collected in the present study.

Compliment Responses in Malaysian Context

While research on compliment responses in Malaysia is growing, it remains limited compared to studies in Western contexts. Thevendiraraj (2006) examined gender differences in compliment responses among Malaysian Tamil professionals, finding no significant overall difference between genders but noting that older women tended to reject compliments more than younger women. Siti Yuhaida Anniqah and Tan (2014) studied compliment responses on Twitter among Malaysian celebrities, observing that young people were beginning to accept compliments more readily. This shift was attributed to the influence of Western culture on Malaysian communication patterns. The present study aims to build on this existing research by focusing specifically on undergraduate students in Malaysia. By examining this demographic, the study seeks to provide insights into how younger, educated Malaysians navigate compliment exchanges in the context of their multicultural and rapidly changing society.

III. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research methodology, utilizing a survey approach to collect data on compliment response strategies. Quantitative research methods, as defined by Taherdoost, (2022), involve the systematic exploration of phenomena through the collection of numerical data and subsequent analysis using mathematical techniques, particularly statistical analysis. The choice of a quantitative approach allows for the systematic measurement and comparison of compliment response strategies across different social contexts and demographic groups. This method is particularly suited to addressing the research objectives, as it enables the identification of patterns and trends in compliment response behaviours among a sizable sample of Malaysian undergraduates.

Participants

The study involved 150 first-semester undergraduate students from a private university in Perak, Malaysia. Participants were between 18-19 years old and shared similar educational backgrounds. This demographic was chosen to represent a young, educated population that is likely to be navigating between traditional

Malaysian values and more globalized communication norms. The selection of participants from a single university in Perak limits the generalizability of the findings but provides a focused examination of compliment response strategies within a specific educational context. Future research could expand on this by including participants from multiple institutions across different regions of Malaysia.

Instrument

Data was collected using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire, adapted from the works of Blum-Kulka et al. (1984, 1989) and Chen (1993). The DCT is a widely used instrument in pragmatics research, particularly for studying speech acts across cultures (Alaboudi, 2020). While DCTs have been criticized for not capturing the full complexity of real-life interactions, they offer the advantage of eliciting comparable responses across many participants in controlled scenarios. The questionnaire presented eight scenarios: four depicting situations where the complementor shared equal status (SCE) and four where the complementor held higher status (SCH). These scenarios were carefully crafted to reflect common occurrences within Malaysian society, covering compliments on appearance, possessions, abilities, and achievements. For each scenario, participants were asked to provide multiple possible responses, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of their compliment response repertoire.

Example scenarios included:

SCE: "Your friend sees your new bag and says, 'Wow! It is a nice bag! I want one like that.' You answer:"

SCH: "You've finished giving a presentation in class. Afterward, the professor comes up to you and says, 'Good work! That was remarkable.' You respond:"

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to participants during a designated time slot, with each student given one hour to complete their responses. This time frame was chosen to allow for thoughtful consideration of each scenario while minimizing the potential for overthinking or consulting with others.

Data Analysis

Responses were categorized into 11 super strategies, following an adapted version of Holmes' (1988) framework. These strategies included:

Table 1: Compliment respond strategies

	Strategies
1.	Accepting
2.	Returning
3.	Mitigating
4.	Rejecting/denigrating
5.	Accepting and mitigating
6.	Accepting and returning
7.	Mitigating and returning
8.	Mitigating and rejecting
9.	Accepting and rejecting
10.	Rejecting and returning
11.	Mitigating & accepting & returning

Each strategy, and several sub-strategies were identified to provide a more meticulous analysis of response patterns. The frequency and percentage of each strategy were calculated for both SCE and SCH scenarios, allowing for comparison of response patterns across different social contexts.

IV. RESULTS

Overall Distribution of Compliment Response Strategies Strategies in Equal Status Scenarios (SCE)

Table below displays the distribution of compliment response strategies scenarios where the complementor and recipient were of equal status;

Table 2: Distribution of compliment response strategies (SCE)

	Strategies	Response
1.	Accepting	32%
2.	Returning	28%
3.	Mitigating	24%
4.	Rejecting/denigrating	14%
5.	Accepting and mitigating	17%
6.	Accepting and returning	11%
7.	Mitigating and returning	11%
8.	Mitigating and rejecting	6%
9.	Accepting and rejecting	3%
10.	Rejecting and returning	2%
11.	Mitigating & accepting, returning:	2%

The high percentage of Accepting strategies (32%) indicates a general tendency among Malaysian undergraduates to respond positively to compliments from peers. This aligns with findings from Western contexts (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988) and suggests a possible influence of globalized communication norms on Malaysian students. The relatively high frequency of Returning strategies (28%) in equal status scenarios demonstrates the importance of reciprocity in peer interactions. This reciprocal behaviour may serve to maintain social harmony and strengthen relationships among students.

Strategies in Higher Status Scenarios (SCH).

When responding to compliments from individuals of higher status, such as professors, the distribution of strategies shifted:

Table 3: Distribution of compliment response strategies (SCH)

	Strategies	Response
1.	Accepting	30%
2.	Returning	4%
3.	Mitigating	28%
4.	Rejecting/denigrating	20%
5.	Accepting and mitigating	30%
6.	Accepting and returning	1%
7.	Mitigating and returning	1%
8.	Mitigating and rejecting	12%
9.	Accepting and rejecting	24%
10.	Rejecting and returning	0%
11.	Mitigating & accepting & returning	0%

The persistence of Accepting strategies (30%) in SCH scenarios suggests that Malaysian students generally maintain a positive response to compliments regardless of the complementor's status. However, the significant drop in Returning strategies (from 28% in SCE to 4% in SCH) indicates a reluctance to reciprocate compliments to those of higher status, possibly due to perceived social distance or respect for authority. The statistical analysis aimed to examine the relationship between compliment giver status and response strategy choice, as well as to investigate the differences in the use of each strategy across equal and higher status scenarios. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between compliment giver status and response strategy choice. The results revealed a significant association between these variables, $\chi^2(10, N = 150) = 80.58, p < .001$. This suggests that the choice of response strategy is significantly influenced by the status of the person complimenting. The effect size, as measured by Cramer's V, was 0.519, indicating a large effect size according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. This indicates that the association between compliment giver status and response strategy choice is substantial and worthy of further investigation. To further examine the differences in the use of each strategy across equal and higher status scenarios, confidence intervals for proportions were calculated. The 95% confidence interval for the Accepting strategy in equal status scenarios was (0.255, 0.391), compared to (0.236, 0.369) in higher status

scenarios. The overlapping confidence intervals suggest that the difference in the use of this strategy between the two contexts may not be statistically significant, though further analysis would be needed to confirm this.

Cohen's h is a statistical measure that calculates the effect size of a difference between two groups or contexts. In this case, it is being used to compare the use of the Accepting strategy between "equal status scenarios" (SCE) and "higher status scenarios" (SCH). The value of Cohen's h is 0.043, which indicates a very small effect size. A small effect size means that the difference between the two groups or contexts is not very large or statistically significant. In this case, the difference in the use of the Accepting strategy between SCE and SCH is only minor.

Correlation analysis was also performed to examine the relationships between different strategies. The Pearson correlation analysis results are displayed in a table:

Table 4: The relationships between the different compliment response strategies in both SCE and SCH contexts.

Strategies	Accepting	Returning	Mitigating	Rejecting/Denigrating
Accepting	1.00	0.54**	0.72**	-0.42**
Returning	0.54**	1.00	0.38**	-0.33*
Mitigating	0.72**	0.38**	1.00	-0.65**
Rejecting/Denigrating	-0.42**	-0.33*	-0.65**	1.00

- *: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) **: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The table shows several patterns:

1. Accepting and Returning: There is a moderate positive correlation between these two strategies ($r = 0.54/0.38$). This means that students who respond positively to compliments (Accepting) are also more likely to respond reciprocally (Returning).
2. Accepting and Mitigating: There is a strong positive correlation between these two strategies ($r = 0.72$). This means that students who respond positively to compliments (Accepting) are also more likely to soften or downplay them (Mitigating).
3. Mitigating and Rejecting/Denigrating: There is a strong negative correlation between these two strategies ($r = -0.65$). This means that students who soften or downplay compliments (Mitigating) are less likely to reject or denigrate them.
4. Rejecting/Denigrating: There is a negative correlation with Accepting and Returning, but not as strong as with Mitigating. This suggests that students who reject or denigrate compliments are less likely to respond positively or reciprocally, but not necessarily because they are mitigating the compliment.

Overall, the table suggests that:

- Responding positively to compliments (Accepting) is often associated with responding reciprocally (Returning) and softening or downplaying compliments (Mitigating).
- Rejecting or denigrating compliments is often associated with not responding positively or reciprocally.
- Mitigating compliments is often associated with not rejecting or denigrating them.

These findings suggest that there may be underlying relationships between the different compliment response strategies, particularly in terms of reciprocity, positivity, and mitigation. Overall, the statistical analysis provides evidence that there is a significant relationship between compliment giver status and response strategy choice, and that this relationship is influenced by cultural context and power dynamics. Future research could build on these findings by exploring the ways in which language is used to navigate these dynamics and maintain social harmony. These findings could lead to interesting discussions about which aspects of compliment response are most influenced by social status in Malaysian culture, while also acknowledging that for some strategies, the influence of status might be less pronounced than initially thought.

The relatively small sample size (150 participants) should also be noted as a limitation, as it may affect the precision of some estimates and the power to detect smaller effects.

Impact of Status Relationships on Strategy Selection

The study found that students' compliment response strategies differ significantly based on the status of the compliment giver. When interacting with peers (SCE), students were more likely to accept compliments (32%) and reciprocate with compliments (28%). However, when interacting with those of higher status (SCH), students were more likely to use mitigating strategies (12%) and reject compliments (4%) to maintain modesty and avoid appearing boastful (Wolfson, 1983). The combination of accepting and rejecting strategies also showed a significant increase in SCH scenarios, suggesting a nuanced navigation of politeness when responding to compliments from authority figures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The persistent use of mitigating strategies across both scenarios reflects a cultural tendency to balance acceptance with modesty, a characteristic often associated with Asian communication styles (Yu, 2003).

Cross-Cultural and Intra-cultural Variations

The study's findings reveal both similarities and differences with compliment response patterns observed in other cultural contexts. The high prevalence of accepting strategies in both SCE and SCH scenarios aligns with trends observed in Western cultures (Herbert, 1988; Holmes, 1988). However, the persistent use of mitigating strategies reflects a cultural tendency to balance acceptance with modesty, a characteristic often associated with Asian communication styles (Yu, 2003). This blend of acceptance and mitigation strategies points to a form of cultural hybridity in communication practices, where traditional values coexist with more contemporary, globalized norms. The significant differences in strategy selection between SCE and SCH scenarios highlight the importance of status relationships in Malaysian communication, which is consistent with observations in other Asian cultures (Daikuhara, 1986).

V. IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study therefore extend to several groups of researchers in the areas of language education and intercultural communication, sociolinguists, and businessmen and women operating in the country of Malaysia. This entails the importance of language teachers to include the teaching of compliment response strategies as part of the English language curriculums. Consequently, intercultural communication training programs should incorporate the following findings whose discussion has been provided in this research: the peculiarities of the status-based differences in communication. Information that is produced through this research can also inform policy decisions related to language and education in Malaysia and contributes to the understanding of linguistic practices in Malaysia. In addition, managers of career centres and human resources departments must use them to update the courses and train people for international positions. Altogether, it can be stated that the reported compliment response strategies used by the Malaysian participants of the study reflect the postmodern dynamics of traditional cultural and communication patterns that are in interaction with the globalizing influences of new communication technologies and the role individual self-differences play in Malaysia. In addition, such complexity signifies the dynamic communication context in Malaysia and diverse and complex social environment within which communication takes place.

VI. CONCLUSION

In future, research can enhance the current study by exploring how language is used to manage social relationship and promote social order. Moreover, this research provides direction for the possibility to examine in which aspects of the compliment response the social status plays the most crucial role in Malaysian culture. At the same time, one must admit that it is possible to identify cases in which the influence of social status is not as significant as it was expected to be for definite types of strategies. From these observations, we can draw conclusions regarding the interconnection of traditional values, patterns of global communication and individual reactions of Malaysian students, stressing on the fact of the dynamic process of communication

in the multicultural context of Malaysian society. Due to communication between students with friends from different cultural backgrounds and the exposure to the Malaysian educational system, students are exposed to multiple norms of communication and expectations- hence, experience cultural hybridity. However, observed distinct inter-individual variations in compliment response behaviours also respond to a rather diverse and pluralistic Malaysian context. For this reason, this research underscores the imperative of developing pragmatic competence, especially regarding status-related pragmatic aspects. The implications are that language education and intercultural communication training need to be contextualised and situate to meet the Malaysian students' needs.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

