

Filipino Language Learners' Micro-Macro Level Responses to Compliments

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate various implications of compliments to responses among Filipino students of Negros Oriental State University, Dumaguete City. Particularly, this study examined compliment responses of NORSU college learners of English as a second language using the critical lens of Holmes (1986) model of compliment responses (CR). The research instrument used in this study is the adapted Discourse Completion Task (DCT) based on the three macro and micro-levels of accept, reject, and evade of designed by Tang and Zhang's (2009). The DCT is composed of four situational topics to elicit compliments: appearance, character, ability, and possession. Descriptive statistics was performed in this study in analyzing the data elicited from the DCT questionnaire. Using a quantitative content analysis to investigate compliment-response discourses, data analysis showed that majority of the compliment responses of accept rather than reject or evade were predominantly recorded. More interestingly, the study further revealed that there was a large number of combination/modification occurred in the data, and therefore, was added as a new category in the current study. This multitude of data about the students accepting compliments and then underplaying its effect shows a strong indication of the Filipino students' idiosyncratic way of responding to compliments.

Keywords: Speech acts, Second language acquisition and learning, Discourse completion task

INTRODUCTION

A compliment is a speech act that... attributes credit to... the person addressed, for some good (appearance, characteristic, possession, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer (Holmes, 1988 cited by Mascuñana, 2014). Compliments have cultural significance. They are "positively affective speech acts" the most obvious function of which is to "oil the social wheels, paying attention to positive face wants and thus increasing or consolidating solidarity between people" (Holmes, 1988). In humanity's daily conversation no matter how brief, concise, or simple it is, participants exchange ideas and opinions out of their observations from surroundings or people, etc. for agreement, rapport, or amity, such interaction that gives meaning and harmony of human existence (Phoocharoensil, 2012).

Wolfson (1983) points out that another function of compliments, aside from "maintaining solidarity between interlocutors by expressing admiration or approval," is to reinforce desired behavior, for example in a classroom situation. Compliments often serve to strengthen or to replace other speech acts such as apologies, thanking, and greetings. Holmes (1988) also noted that compliments may function as face-threatening acts. This implies that the complimenter would like to possess something, whether an object or skill, belonging to the addressee.

In interactions among females and males, Manes and Wolfson found that women appear both to give and

receive compliments much more frequently than men, especially when compliments have to do with apparel and appearance. Holmes explains possible reasons for this finding. Since “compliments express social approval, one expects more of them to be addressed “downwards” as socializing devices, or directed to the socially insecure to build their confidence. The fact that women receive more compliments reflects women’s socially subordinate status (Holmes, 1986).

Furthermore, she asserts that women give and receive compliments more often because compliments serve as an expression of solidarity among women. However, males may not consider compliments the most appropriate way of expressing solidarity; as a result, they may not use compliments as often as women (Holmes, 1986).

Since compliments and responses are preponderantly and positively valued by both the speaker and hearer as far as Filipino culture is concerned, they may crucially be considered as good or effective motivating devices in second language instruction. Teachers may precondition the minds of the students to be interested in second language learning and acquisition as well as to get rid of their language anxieties in class. Drawing from these insights, the researchers were motivated to examine compliment responses of NORSU college learners of English as a second language at both macro and micro levels.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used descriptive statistics to analyze the data elicited from the DCT questionnaire. Thus, frequency counts on the number of occurrences of responses to compliments in the data, and their corresponding percentages were made.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Negros Oriental State University (NORSU), Main Campus I, situated along Kagawasan Avenue, Capitol Area, Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. NORSU is a prominent institution in the region, offering a diverse range of academic programs and serving as a hub for research and development initiatives. Its strategic location in Dumaguete City, widely recognized as a university town, provides students and researchers access to a vibrant academic and cultural environment conducive to learning and innovation.

Research Participants

A total of 20 sophomore education students enrolled in English Specialization class in the first semester of Academic Year 2024-2025 at Negros Oriental State University were the respondents of the study. Since there were 60 students enrolled in the said course, the fish bowl method was used to get the sample size for the number of respondents in this study.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study is the adapted Discourse Completion Task (DCT) designed by Tang and Zhang (2009). The DCT is composed of four situational topics to elicit compliments: appearance, character, ability, and possession. An example situation for appearance is the reference to the addressee’s apparel, hairstyle, etc. Another is a character in which the addressee’s kindness, generosity, helpfulness, patience, etc. are considered. Also, for the situational topic of ability examples include the addressee’s skill or performance, a well-done job or presentation, a well-written essay, or a skillfully played game, and for possession, examples include the addressee’s jewelry, cars, houses, and mobile phones. Specifically, for each situational topic, there were two sample situations provided for them to respond to.

Data Gathering Procedure

The respondents were asked to complete the DCT questionnaires by responding to compliments of the four situational topics which include appearance, possession, personality, and ability. The DCT questionnaires were administered to the 20 students of the English Specialization class. A total of 160 compliment responses were generated in this study. Descriptive statistics was performed in this study in analyzing the data elicited from the DCT questionnaire. Thus, frequency counts on the number of occurrences of responses to compliments in the data, and their corresponding percentages were made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 Participants’ Responses to Compliments

Micro-Level Responses to Compliments		F	%
Accept	Appreciation Token	18	12
	Agreeing Utterance	9	6
	Qualifying/Downgrading	8	5
	Return Compliment	5	5
	Combination/Modification	87	58
	Non-Verbal/No Response	2	1
Sub-total		129	84
Reject	Disagreeing Utterance	4	3
	Question Accuracy	0	0
	Challenge Sincerity	1	1
	Combination/Modification	0	0
	Non-Verbal	0	0
Sub-total		5	4
Evade	Shift Credit	4	3
	Informative Comment	4	3
	Request for Reassurance	1	1
	Combination/Modification	3	2

Non-Verbal	4	3
Sub-total	16	12
Combination	0	0
Non-Verbal	0	0
Total	150	100

Table 1 discloses the 150 responses to compliments on the three **macro**-levels of *accept*, *reject*, and *evade*. *The majority* of the compliment responses of **accept** (129 or 84 %) were recorded in the data in contrast to **reject** (5 or 4 %) and **evade** (16 or 12 %). On the **micro**-levels under accept, a large number of **combination/modification** was perceived in the data (87 or 58 %). To accommodate the occurrence of data that did not correspond precisely to Holmes’ (1986) model, combination/modification as a new category was added in the current study. Some students combined any two or three of the micro-categories of appreciation token, agreeing utterance, qualifying/downgrading and returning the compliment, and/or modifying their responses with advice, suggestion, offer, or other modification strategies. The utilization of the combination/modification category moderates the effect of accepting the compliment which eventually brings about an unassuming effect on the person who receives the compliment. Some illustrative examples follow:

Combination:

- **Appreciation token “Thank you” and qualifying utterance**
 - *Thank you. I’m always there for you as a friend because I believe that a friend in need is a friend indeed.*
- **Appreciation token and return compliment**
 - *Thank you! You look great as well.*
- **Qualifying utterance and return compliment**
 - *You’re welcome and thank you also for the compliment. I don’t have a hard time taking care of your child.*
- **Agreeing utterance, qualifying utterance, and return compliment**
 - *It’s my pleasure. Since then I enjoyed taking care of children. They gave me so much fun. I think because you two are good parents to them. I admire you for that!*

Modification:

- **Appreciation token modified by an advice:**
 - *Thank you. Just always do good in your studies and you can reach your dreams in life, too.*
- **Appreciation token modified by a suggestion:**
 - *Thank you for noticing it. It is available in any store in Dumaguete. You might want to buy one as well.*
- **Agreeing utterance modified by an advice:**
 - *You are always welcome. If I were you, I will also buy one. It is a cool thing to wear this pair of sunglasses.*
- **Appreciation token modified by an offer:**
 - *Thank you. Would you like to use it for a minute or touch it? Try it on!*

- **Appreciation token modified by a joke:**

- *Oh, thanks a million! I feel I belong in another dimension. hehe* (on having new hairstyle)

- **Agreeing utterance modified by a joke:**

- *Yes, it is! Actually, my essays were not written by me but by some supernatural aid out there. (on getting a high grade)*

- **Agreeing utterance modified by an offer:**

- *You're welcome. If you need my help, you know that I'm just a call away!*
- *You're right! If you want, I can go with you to look for another phone like this.*
- *No problem. I'm very willing to help you next time. Just tell me or call my name and I'll be there.*

This data about the students accepting compliments and then underplaying their effect shows a strong indication of the Filipino students' idiosyncratic way of responding to compliments. It also postulates counter-evidence to research that most Asian speakers of other languages often reject compliments than native speakers of English, who are very straightforward when accepting compliments. Thus, the way Filipinos speak the English language can be largely attributed to the combination of internal change and external influences, given the different social, political, and historical backgrounds. At present, English for some Filipinos has been associated with education and intelligence. That explains why most Filipinos educate themselves to learn the language and reinforce it accordingly because aside from English is evident in today's business world, higher education, print and broadcast media, and religious affairs, it has also opened many opportunities that will broaden one's horizons, enrich one's life, and shape one's personal and professional status/career.

However, Yu (2014) disclosed that learners in other Asian settings do not have as much exposure to authentic language input. Zhang and Wang (2012) on Elaboration of Cultivating Learners' English Communicative Competence in China investigated nine (9) senior middle schools in Anhui, China. Their paper puts forward significant findings on Learners' competence in English. Based on the results gathered, students find it hard to communicate both in spoken and written forms when they have to deal with processing information concerning real life.

Fortunately, English in the Philippines has been used as a communication medium for news and information, business, diplomacy, entertainment, and professions despite the existence of the distinctive characteristics of the phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, and stylistic features of written and spoken Philippine English in the multilingual communities in the Philippines. Filipino ESL learners are given enough exposure and opportunities to enhance their English speaking skills.

Mojica (2002) explained that though not everyone understands or speaks English, Filipinos' exposure to the language is so great that those who speak it can communicate quite fluently. He further justified that according to an Educational Testing Services (ETS) ranking based on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores for 2010, the Philippines ranked 35th out of 163 countries worldwide and that the only other Asian countries to score higher than the Philippines were Singapore (ranked 3rd in the world with a score of 98), and India (19th with a score of 92). Chavez emphasized that language success in the Philippines is due to its approach to learning English, not just teaching it.

This makes Filipino learners more communicatively competent in handling language, such as combining or modifying compliment responses. Zhang (2013) on Compliments and compliment responses in Philippine English revealed that Philippine English speakers tend to use explicit compliments plus a bound semantic formula most frequently. Filipinos are more likely to accept compliments, rather than reject them, but part of it is to downplay compliments which is peculiar in the Philippine culture.

From the insights above, it can be said that “when responding to compliments, different patterns are observed by different speakers of different languages” (Pomerantz, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Students’ idiosyncratic responses to compliments are likewise evident in a large number of *combinations/modifications* under *accept* category, a counter indication that students in an interactive classroom, spearheaded and supervised by a resourceful teacher seem spontaneously placed in a cozy and welcoming classroom ambiance that arouses students eagerness in participating compliments and responses activities, such that will not only enhance students’ discourse skills but also develop students’ personality and rapport with one another for impeccable socialization or camaraderie.

Students lose interest in second language lessons dominated as well as domineered by traditional and strict teachers very particular on assignments and exams. As a result, students who are in fear and failure to cope with both the teacher and the lesson are struggling to learn and use English as a second language. Instead of imposing students on classroom norms unfamiliar to them, teachers, sociable and amiable as they are, must equip the students with the readiness to communicate spontaneously from the classroom to the outside community/world as far as meaningful language use is concerned. With the teachers’ assistance and supervision to students in conveying what they wish to communicate in the form of comfortable and wholesome self-expression, provided that there is no enforcement of linguistic formal features as to formulaic expressions, grammar, pronunciation, etc., compliments and responses are useful and effective pedagogical strategies that relieve teachers from the use of traditional and bottom-up approaches in second language teaching, for what indispensably counts most in second language teaching is the students’ learning in the meaningful use of English language for social interaction in various contexts.

The meaningful use of a second language through diverse activities, e.g. compliments and responses, pair and share, dramatic role plays, etc. will not merely give students the opportunity for future lucrative career jobs but also, will pave the students the way to expand their interpersonal relationships and social interaction in everyday life. So long as knowledgeable and competent second language teachers untiringly discern in the language instruction arena, no Filipino or other foreign students is deprived of authentic and holistic second language acquisition and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. ESL educators should design teaching strategies that incorporate interactive activities focusing on the speech acts of compliments and compliment responses, such as role-plays, simulations, and peer feedback exercises, to enhance students' pragmatic competence.
2. Language programs should include practical lessons on responding to compliments using culturally relevant scenarios, allowing students to practice and refine their ability to navigate various compliment-response types, including acceptance, rejection, evasion, and combination/modification.
3. Curriculum developers should integrate pragmatic instruction into ESL courses by creating materials and modules that emphasize speech acts, particularly compliments and their responses, to promote authentic and effective communication in diverse social settings.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they voluntarily agreed to participate with a clear understanding of the study's nature. Moreover, all personal information and responses from participants were kept confidential, and data were coded to protect participant identity.

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