

Compliment Responses of Male and Female Students at Senior High School in Medan

Respon Terhadap Pujian pada Siswa Laki-Laki dan Perempuan di Sekolah Menengah Atas di Medan

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Abstract

This study examines how Indonesian senior high school students respond to compliments in English within an EFL context, with a focus on gender differences and sociocultural influences. Data were collected from 30 eleventh-grade students (15 males and 15 females) using a Discourse Completion Test covering four domains: appearance, ability, personality, and possessions. Responses were analyzed using Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses. The results show that agreement strategies overwhelmingly dominate (over 86%), with comment acceptance and appreciation tokens as the most frequent forms. Gender differences were evident but limited: female students tended to use more elaborated and interpersonal responses, while male students more often employed deflective strategies such as comment history and questioning. The use of religious expressions to reassign praise reflects the influence of local cultural values. These findings suggest that while existing frameworks remain useful, they require contextual adaptation. The study highlights the importance of integrating pragmatic competence into EFL instruction to enhance learners' intercultural communication skills.

Key words: *compliment responses; gender differences; Indonesian EFL learners; speech acts*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana siswa sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia merespons pujian dalam bahasa Inggris dalam konteks EFL, dengan fokus pada perbedaan gender dan pengaruh sosial budaya. Data dikumpulkan dari 30 siswa kelas XI (15 laki-laki dan 15 perempuan) menggunakan Discourse Completion Test yang mencakup empat domain: penampilan, kemampuan, kepribadian, dan kepemilikan. Data dianalisis menggunakan taksonomi respons pujian dari Herbert. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi persetujuan sangat dominan (lebih dari 86%), dengan penerimaan komentar dan ungkapan terima kasih sebagai bentuk yang paling sering digunakan. Perbedaan gender ditemukan namun tidak terlalu signifikan: siswa perempuan cenderung menggunakan respons yang lebih elaboratif dan interpersonal, sedangkan siswa laki-laki lebih sering menggunakan strategi pengalihan seperti riwayat komentar dan pertanyaan. Penggunaan ekspresi religius untuk mengalihkan pujian menunjukkan pengaruh nilai budaya lokal. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kerangka teori yang ada perlu disesuaikan secara kontekstual. Secara pedagogis, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengajaran kompetensi pragmatik dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: *respons pujian; perbedaan gender; pembelajar bahasa asing Indonesia; tindakan tutur*

INTRODUCTION

Complimenting and responding to compliments constitute fundamental speech acts that play a central role in managing interpersonal relationships, negotiating face, and maintaining social harmony. As expressions of positive evaluation, compliments function not only to convey approval but also to establish solidarity and reinforce social bonds (Holmes 2015). However, responding to compliments presents a well-documented pragmatic dilemma: recipients are expected to acknowledge the compliment while simultaneously avoiding self-praise. This tension, described by Pomerantz (1978) as the coexistence of agreement and modesty constraints, makes compliment responses a particularly rich domain for examining how language use is shaped by cultural norms and social expectations.

To account for this complexity, Herbert (1990; 1998) proposed a widely adopted taxonomy of compliment responses, categorizing them into three primary types: agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretations. Agreement strategies include forms such as appreciation tokens (e.g., “thank you”) and comment acceptance, while non-agreement strategies involve responses such as disagreement or scaling down the compliment. The third category encompasses responses that reinterpret the compliment, for instance as a request. Although this framework has been influential in pragmatics research, it was developed primarily within Western cultural contexts, where norms of politeness and self-presentation may differ significantly from those in other societies.

Subsequent research in cross-cultural pragmatics has demonstrated that compliment responses are highly sensitive to cultural values and social norms. While agreement strategies are commonly observed across languages, their frequency and realization vary considerably. In many Western contexts, direct acceptance of compliments is considered appropriate and efficient. In contrast, speakers in collectivist cultures often mitigate acceptance through strategies that downplay personal achievement or redirect praise, thereby aligning with cultural expectations of modesty and humility (Chen 1993; Holmes 2015). More recent studies (Al-Shboul et al., 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2021) further highlight the role of sociocultural factors such as social hierarchy, power relations, and religious beliefs in shaping compliment behavior. These findings suggest that pragmatic norms are not universal but deeply embedded in local cultural frameworks, raising important questions about the applicability of Western-derived models to diverse linguistic settings.

Gender has also been identified as an important variable influencing compliment behavior. Research suggests that women tend to use compliments more frequently to build solidarity, whereas men may interpret them as potentially face-threatening (Holmes 2015). In terms of responses, women are often found to favor more elaborated and supportive strategies, while men are more likely to employ deflective or minimizing responses. However, findings on gender differences are not consistent across studies, indicating that such patterns are shaped not only by gender but also by the sociocultural context in which interaction occurs. This variability underscores the need to investigate gendered pragmatic behavior within specific cultural and educational settings rather than assuming universal tendencies.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the ability to respond appropriately to compliments presents an additional challenge. Learners must develop not only grammatical competence but also pragmatic competence that aligns with target language norms. When learners transfer culturally specific norms from their first language into English interactions, pragmatic failure may occur, leading to misunderstanding or unintended impoliteness. This issue is particularly salient in Indonesian contexts, where communicative practices are strongly influenced by values of modesty, indirectness, and, in many cases, religious expressions that attribute success to external or divine sources. While such practices are socially appropriate within the local context, they may not always correspond to expectations in English-speaking environments.

Despite a growing body of research on compliment responses, studies focusing on Indonesian EFL learners remain relatively limited, especially at the senior high school level. Existing research often concentrates on university students or applies established theoretical frameworks without critically examining their cultural applicability. Moreover, previous studies frequently rely on naturalistic or interview-based data, which may limit systematic comparison across different semantic domains of compliments, such as appearance, ability, personality, and possessions. At the same time, the role of gender in shaping compliment responses within Indonesian EFL contexts has not been sufficiently explored, and findings from other cultural settings cannot be readily generalized.

Taken together, these gaps highlight the need for empirical research that (1) examines the applicability of established compliment response frameworks in non-Western EFL contexts, (2) investigates gender-based patterns within a culturally specific setting, and (3) provides domain-sensitive analysis using controlled elicitation methods. Addressing these needs, the present study investigates compliment responses produced by male and female Indonesian senior high school students.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of compliment response strategies are employed by male and female students?
2. How are these strategies linguistically realized across different compliment domains?
3. What gender-based differences can be identified in the use of these strategies?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics by providing empirical evidence from a relatively under-researched population and by evaluating

the extent to which existing theoretical frameworks adequately capture culturally embedded communicative practices. In addition, the findings offer pedagogical insights for English language teaching, emphasizing the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness into instruction to enhance learners' communicative competence in intercultural contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design with qualitative support to examine the types and realizations of compliment responses produced by Indonesian EFL learners. Quantitative analysis was used to identify the distribution and frequency of response strategies, while qualitative analysis was conducted to illustrate how these strategies were linguistically realized in context. This mixed approach allows for both systematic comparison and deeper interpretation of pragmatic behavior.

The participants were 30 eleventh-grade students (15 males and 15 females) enrolled in an "Inglanfor" (Informatics Advanced English) class at a public senior high school in Medan, Indonesia. The students were aged between 16 and 17 years and had relatively similar levels of exposure to English through the school curriculum. A convenience sampling technique was employed, as all students in the class were included in the study. While this approach ensured accessibility and homogeneity of participants, it may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond similar educational contexts.

The main instrument was a written open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of four situational prompts. Each prompt described a brief scenario in which the participant received a compliment on one of four domains: physical appearance, personality, ability/achievement, and possessions. For example, in the appearance scenario, students read a short description of a classmate complimenting their outfit and were asked to write down what they would say in response in English. The scenarios were adapted from previous studies on compliment responses (Herbert 1990; Han 1992) and slightly modified to fit the Indonesian senior high school context. The content of the DCT was reviewed by two lecturers in applied linguistics to ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness.

The DCT was administered during regular English class time. After the teacher's permission was obtained, the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the task in Indonesian, clarified the instructions, and emphasized that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers. Students completed the four scenarios individually in written form within 20–30 minutes, without consultation with peers or dictionaries, and then returned their responses directly to the researcher.

All written responses from the DCT were first typed and organized by participant and scenario. Each response was then coded according to Herbert's (1990; 1998) taxonomy of compliment responses, which distinguishes three main types (agreement, non-agreement, other interpretation) and several subcategories (appreciation token, comment acceptance, scale down, return). One researcher performed the initial coding, and a second coder independently coded 30% of the data. Interrater agreement reached 0.87 (Cohen's kappa), indicating acceptable reliability. After coding, the frequencies and percentages of each response type were calculated separately for male and female students. Representative examples were selected to illustrate each category in the Findings section.

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school principal and the English teacher. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be used only for research purposes and reported anonymously without revealing their names or personal details.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

A total of 360 compliment responses were collected through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), consisting of 180 responses from male students and 180 responses from female students. All responses were categorized according to Herbert's (1990, 1998) taxonomy, which includes three major types of compliment responses (Agreement, Non-agreement, Other Interpretation) and twelve subtypes. The distribution of these categories is presented below.

1. Types of the Compliment Responses

The compliments were coded by referring to the categories according to Herbert's Taxonomy of Compliment Responses, which consists of 3 types. There are 3 main types namely; Agreement, No

Agreement and Other Interpretation. The response types among the students that reply to the compliment of 4 situations.

Table 1. The Types of Compliment Response Male and Female Students

No.	Response Strategies	Male		Female	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)
1.	Agreement	157	87.2	155	86.1
2.	Non-Agreement	17	9.5	20	11.1
3.	Other Interpretation	6	3.3	5	2.8
	Total	180	100	180	100

As shown in Table 1, both male and female students predominantly employed agreement strategies in responding to compliments (87.2% for males and 86.1% for females). Non-agreement strategies were used much less frequently (9.5% for males and 11.1% for females), while other interpretation strategies were rare in both groups (3.3% for males and 2.8% for females). The number of findings shows how this type of involvement is used by compliment responses male and female students at senior high school in Medan. The highest types of compliment responses indicate that the study participant recognizes the compliment notwithstanding they don't say "yes" explicitly or convey it by body language. The "accept" category arises when the recipient of the compliment is elated by it. This style is characterized by the recipient smiling, expressing gratitude, or complimenting the complementor.

2. The realizations of compliment responses used by male and female students at Senior High School in Medan

Based on the types of compliment responses of male and female students at SMA Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan. The realization of the compliment responses the categorize into three primary types; agreement, non-agreement and other interpretation and 12 realizations of compliment responses. The compliments were coded by referring to the categories which consists of 12 categories. The type of Agreement has 2 major classifications namely; I. Acceptance with the categories of 1) Appreciation Token, 2) Comment Acceptance and 3) Praise Upgrade; II. Non-Acceptance with the categories of 1) Comment History, 2) Reassignment 3) Return. Types of non-agreement classifications namely; 1) scale down, 2) question, 3) non-acceptance: a. Disagreement, b. Qualification; 4) No Acknowledgement. And type of Other Interpretation with classification of Request. Female students utilized non-agreement strategies slightly more often than males (11.1% vs. 9.5%), whereas male students showed a marginally higher preference for agreement and other interpretation strategies.

Table 2. The Realizations of Compliment Response Male and Female Students

Response Strategies		Male		Female	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)
A.	Agreement				
I.	Acceptance				
1.	Appreciation Token	43	23.9	49	27.2
2.	Comment Acceptance	65	36.1	65	36.1
3.	Praise Upgrade	11	6.1	8	4.4
II.	Non-Acceptance				
1.	Comment History	16	8.9	7	3.9
2.	Reassignment	8	4.4	5	2.8
3.	Return.	14	7.8	21	11.7
B.	Non-Agreement				
1.	Scale down	10	5.6	18	10
2.	Question	4	2.2	-	-
3.	Non-acceptance:				
a.	Disagreement	1	0.6	-	-
b.	Qualification	2	1.1	2	1.1
4.	No Acknowledgement.	-	-	-	-
C.	Other Interpretation				
1.	Request.	6	3.3	5	2.8
	TOTAL	180	100	180	100

A. Appreciation Token

Female > Male. Appreciation tokens consist of brief expressions of gratitude such as “thank you.” In this study, female students utilized this strategy more frequently, producing 49 tokens (27.2%) compared to the 43 tokens (23.9%) produced by male students. While both genders relied on this straightforward acceptance strategy, females tended to be more interpersonally oriented by extending their appreciation with additional terms of endearment, such as “dear.”

B. Comment Acceptance

Male = Female. This strategy is used to acknowledge the compliment while simultaneously weakening its force through a pertinent remark. Interestingly, both male and female students opted for this strategy equally, with each group producing 65 utterances (36.1%). This finding deviates from previous research suggesting men use comment acceptance more frequently to avoid self-praise; in this study, both genders showed an equal preference for providing additional grateful expressions like “I really appreciate it.”

C. Praise Upgrade

Male > Female. Praise upgrade involves the recipient accepting the compliment and then “lifting” it further from their own perspective, often using humor to mitigate immodesty. Male students employed this strategy more often, with 11 instances (6.1%), compared to 8 instances (4.4%) from female students. The pattern generally involves an addresser’s praise being accepted and then raised by the recipient to suggest the original compliment’s impact was actually inadequate.

D. Comment History

Male > Female. This strategy impersonalizes the compliment by providing background information or technical details about the object being praised. Male students chose this significantly more often than females, recording 16 utterances (8.9%) against the females’ 7 utterances (3.9%). By shifting the focus to the history of the object—such as how long a suit has been in the closet—males successfully transfer the emphasis away from themselves.

E. Reassignment

Male > Female. Reassignment occurs when the recipient redirects the credit for the compliment to a third party or a divine entity, often based on religious affiliation. Male students utilized this more frequently (4.4%) than female students (2.8%). Responses often included phrases like “Alhamdulillah” or “by Allah’s permission,” effectively shifting the praise from the individual’s skill to a higher power or external factor.

F. Return

Female > Male. The return strategy involves the recipient reciprocating the act by paying a compliment back to the original speaker. This was more common among female students, who produced 21 utterances (11.7%) compared to the males’ 14 utterances (7.8%). This pattern typically involves mirroring the specific adjectives used by the addresser, such as “cool” or “great,” to maintain social harmony.

G. Scale Down

Male > Female. Scale-down responses aim to mitigate the force of a compliment by pointing out personal limitations or minimizing the attribute being praised. This strategy was more prominent in male responses, where they would simultaneously accept the praise but downplay their competence (e.g., “It’s impossible for me to do everything”). This reflects a cultural preference for modesty and the avoidance of self-praise.

H. Question

Only Male. The question strategy occurs when the recipient responds with a query that requests repetition or expansion, often as a way to doubt the authenticity of the compliment. In this study, only male students utilized this strategy, accounting for 4 utterances (2.2%). Females did not use this strategy at all, avoiding the use of ambiguous responses like “Really?” or “Masa sih?” in favor of more direct acceptance.

I. Disagreement

Only Male. Disagreement involves the recipient directly asserting that the praise is undue or incorrect. This strategy was found exclusively among male students, albeit at a low frequency of 0.6%. Female students were found to not use this strategy at all, as they tended to prioritize courtesy and would combine other strategies like comment acceptance rather than offering a direct “no” or “tidak.”

J. Qualification

Male = Female. Qualification occurs when the recipient accepts the complimentary force but qualifies it with a “but” or “yet” to highlight a drawback. This was one of the least common strategies, with both male and female students producing an equal number of utterances—2 instances each (1.1%). Both genders used this specifically when discussing technology, such as acknowledging a laptop's speed while noting it still has flaws.

K. No Acknowledgment

Zero Instances. This strategy, where the recipient provides no response to the compliment, was not found in this study for either gender. This is likely due to the social distance between the participants; the researchers suggest that no-acknowledgment typically only occurs between parties who have a much more intimate or close connection.

L. Request

Male > Female. In this subtype, the recipient interprets the compliment as a request for the object being praised rather than a simple commendation. Male students applied this strategy 6 times (3.3%), slightly more than the female students, who used it 5 times (2.8%). This usually results in the recipient offering to share or lend the item, such as an iPad or a laptop, to the person who gave the compliment.

Overall, the results show that:

1. Agreement strategies overwhelmingly dominated the responses of both male and female students.
2. Comment Acceptance and Appreciation Token were the most frequently used subtypes.
3. Gender differences were present but subtle, with females using more elaborated acceptance strategies (e.g., Return, Appreciation Token) and males producing more deflective or questioning responses (e.g., Comment History, Question, Disagreement).
4. Several subtypes (e.g., No Acknowledgement) did not appear at all in the dataset.

These findings provide a descriptive foundation for the subsequent discussion of pragmatic patterns and gendered tendencies in Indonesian EFL contexts.

DISCUSSION

The overwhelming preference for agreement strategies among both male and female students (over 86% of all responses) can be interpreted as evidence of a strong cultural orientation toward maintaining harmony and positive face in Indonesian interaction. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, accepting a compliment often with an added mitigating comment. It allows students to acknowledge the speaker's positive evaluation while simultaneously displaying modesty, a value that is highly emphasized in collectivist cultures such as Indonesia.

Agreement strategy is selected by most of the students which is aligning with Herbert study (1998) for senior high school students also use agreement as their compliment responses. Under the agreement strategies, the most responses used in the present study are Comment acceptance and appreciation token, or what is known as the 'textbook' responses. This is perhaps the safest way to respond to a compliment and to avoid self-praise. Hence, the hearer has observed the second principle of compliment by Pomerantz which is avoiding self-praise. Appreciation Token is used more by senior high school students as it is the simplest way of responding and also similarly found and used by most German and Italian based on the research done by Ravetto (2012) and believed to be prescriptively correct answer to a compliment (Herbert 1986; 1990).

The dominance of agreement strategies in this study echoes Herbert's (1990) findings that acceptance is a frequent response type in English-speaking contexts, but the proportions here are even higher (over 86% in both genders compared to around 60–70% in Herbert's data). This suggests that Indonesian EFL learners may be even more inclined to overtly accept compliments than native English speakers, possibly due to local norms that equate refusal with rudeness. At the same time, the frequent use of comment acceptance rather than bare “thank you” responses extends the pattern

observed by Sudarwati and Menipuspika (2006), indicating that Indonesian speakers often feel obliged to elaborate their gratitude to avoid appearing arrogant.

It shows that rather than giving a simple "thank you", specifically, female students are more considerate to add some more comment acceptance expressions to show more appreciation towards the situation. This is one of the combination strategies found in this present study. It can be either expressed in greetings such as "*Sangat menghargainya*" (really appreciate it). It might be related to Indonesian culture in answering more words in order to show how indebted they are towards the speaker compliments.

Holmes (2015) asserts that women generally both offer and receive more praises than men, utilizing them to foster solidarity, while males are more likely to perceive compliments as face-threatening behaviors. When it comes to the topics of compliment, there are some differences found from different gender. Compliments are generally recognized as multifunctional speech acts, with the following description from Holmes (2015) outlining their purposes as noted by various analysts: 1) To convey solidarity to convey good assessment, adoration, appreciation, or commendation. 3). to articulate envy or longing for the listener's goods 4). as verbal abuse. These functions may, nonetheless, intersect in specific settings. Chen (1993) stated that acceptance is the most commonly used strategy, with research showing agreement rates above 85% for both genders. However, the excessive percentages in this study are different. This near-absolute compliance reflects a collective need to appear humble and not arrogant, a value much more emphasized than in many individualistic Western cultures.

Regarding compliment response agreement, the results of this study indicate that 36.1% of male and female students used comment acceptance, outnumbering token appreciation. This contrasts with the findings of Herbert's (1990) study in the United States, which placed token appreciation as the most dominant strategy. This shift suggests that students tend not to be satisfied with a simple thank you. Instead, they prefer to use comment acceptance to mitigate the power of praise or provide comments that weaken it, an important mechanism for maintaining cultural humility while still accepting praise. The research indicated that the distinct conversational roles of men and women are manifested in the varying methods employed by each gender in both giving and reacting to compliments. Generally, women offer compliments more frequently than men.

Several responses explicitly invoke religious expressions such as "Alhamdulillah", which shift the source of the praised ability or possession to God. This reassignment strategy is not only consistent with Herbert's category but also reflects Islamic modesty norms prevalent among Indonesian students, where personal success is framed as granted by divine will. Similarly, the frequent use of address terms like "beb" or "dear" in female responses serves to personalize the interaction and reinforce closeness, which may be interpreted as a gendered way of embedding solidarity within the act of accepting praise.

The presence of strategies such as comment history and scale-down responses, particularly among male students, further illustrates the complexity of managing face in compliment interactions. By shifting the focus away from the self or minimizing the praised attribute, speakers are able to navigate the tension between accepting praise and maintaining modesty. However, the relatively low frequency of outright disagreement and the absence of no-acknowledgment responses suggest that overt rejection of compliments is generally dispreferred in this context. This contrasts with findings from some other cultures where disagreement or silence may serve as acceptable strategies, reinforcing the importance of cultural norms in shaping pragmatic choices.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings raise important considerations for English language teaching. The strong reliance on agreement strategies, particularly formulaic expressions, suggests that learners may have a limited repertoire of pragmatic options. While these strategies are generally appropriate, overreliance on them may reduce communicative flexibility in intercultural interactions. Moreover, certain culturally specific responses—such as religious reassignment—may not be easily interpreted by interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, language instruction should incorporate explicit teaching of pragmatic variation, enabling learners to select contextually appropriate responses across different communicative settings.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute to broader theoretical discussions in cross-cultural pragmatics by demonstrating that compliment response behavior is shaped by the interaction of cultural values, gender norms, and contextual factors. While Herbert's taxonomy remains a valuable analytical tool, the present study suggests that it should be applied with sensitivity to local contexts and, where necessary, supplemented with culturally informed categories. Future research could build

on these findings by examining naturally occurring spoken interactions, expanding the participant pool, and exploring additional variables such as social distance and power relations.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that both male and female students overwhelmingly favored agreement strategies in responding to compliments, with more than 86% of all responses falling into this category. This pattern, combined with the frequent use of comment acceptance and appreciation tokens, indicates a strong preference for openly acknowledging praise while simultaneously maintaining modesty through additional comments. These findings suggest that Indonesian senior high school students orient to compliments as opportunities to preserve harmony and positive face in interaction, rather than as face-threatening acts.

Compared to previous studies in Western contexts, the very high proportion of acceptance responses found here suggests that Indonesian EFL learners may be even more inclined to accept compliments explicitly, reflecting local norms that value overt gratitude and relational harmony. By focusing on senior high school students in Medan, the study provides context-specific evidence of how gendered patterns of compliment responses emerge in a collectivist, religiously oriented educational environment.

The realizations of complement responses were notable differences in the specific realizations or sub-strategies of compliment responses between male and female students. Under the agreement strategy, comment acceptance and appreciation token was the most frequent strategy for both genders. This strategy involves acknowledging the compliment while adding a pertinent remark, often to weaken the complementary force. Female students employed a complete form of thanking compared to male students whose appreciation token were written in a short form of thanking. Generally, female students offer compliments more frequently than male students.

Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for explicit instruction on a wider range of pragmatically appropriate compliment responses in English, so that students can flexibly choose between accepting, mitigating, or deflecting compliments in intercultural communication. Given that the data were drawn from written DCT tasks in a single school, future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample and incorporate naturally occurring spoken interactions to capture a broader spectrum of compliment behavior.

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