
Pragmatic Variation: Compliment Responses of Malaysian Chinese Undergraduates in Two Academic Majors

Ying Qi Wu*

University of Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study investigates compliment responses (CRs) produced by Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies. The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which academic major influences compliment responses of participants from two major groups. The data of this study were collected from thirty Malaysian Chinese undergraduate students (15 in each major group) in one public university in Malaysia. The data were collected by role-play scenarios consisting of 4 situations (appearance, character, ability, and possession) which were then accompanied by a questionnaire. The results show that there are no marked differences between the two academic major groups in the choices of their CRs strategies. Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' CRs may be greatly influenced by their English proficiency, politeness, and Chinese culture. They tended to use Acceptance strategy at macro level. At micro level, both academic groups preferred Appreciation strategy which is under the macro strategy of Acceptance. On the contrary, Rejection was the least preferred CRs strategy.

ARTICLE INFO

Paper type:

Research Article

Received: 13 June 2019

Revised: 19 September 2019

Accepted: 20 September 2019

Keywords:

- Pragmatic variation
 - Academic major
 - Compliment-response strategies
 - Malaysian-Chinese undergraduate
 - Speech act
-

1. Introduction

Pragmatics mainly deals with the phenomenon of language use in human communication, especially the relationship between expressions and specific contexts as well as situations in which the languages are used (Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014). One of the main issues in pragmatic studies is how people produce and understand various speech acts (Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014). Many empirical studies (Cheng, 2011; David & Kuang, 2005; Tang & Zhang, 2009) in the fields of speech acts reached agreement that speech acts are performed quite differently in different cultural circumstances. Previous studies indicate that speech acts vary from each other when they are examined with regards to different social environments although cultural universality exists (Holmes, 1988).

Compliment responses are listed as one of the most investigated speech acts in pragmatic studies (Chen & Yang, 2010). Holmes (1986:485) defined compliment as “a speech act that explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speakers, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, personality, ability) which has a positive value both for the speaker and the hearer”. Compliments are regarded as a structural adjacency pair since they are typically followed by compliment responses (CRs). Compliment responses reveal intricate features as they are defined as a type of multifunctional and ubiquitous speech act (Yu, 1999). CRs reveal the regulations of language application in a specific speech community, additionally they reflect the values of the speakers and the social community (Yuan, 2002). Namely, there is a strong

E-mail Address: 956791312@qq.com (Ying Qi Wu)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.14710/parole.v9i2.67-79>

relationship between CRs and the corresponding language, society as well as culture so that they function as reflecting pragmatic awareness, social values and cultural norms of the entire social contexts where the speakers are involved.

Compliments generally refer to saying something positive to make the addressees feel good, more than just satisfying the addressee's expectation. The main function of compliments is to take care of the positive face of others and therefore consolidate solidarity among communicators (Holmes, 1988). Nevertheless, compliments may be considered as a face threat to other's negative face. Cheng (2011), one of the leading researchers who have studied compliment responses from sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives, claimed that the receivers of compliments face two contradictory constraints, namely they are "concurrently relevant but not concurrently satisfiable". She further asserted a conflicting condition for compliment recipients that they tended to agree with the complimenters by acceptance whereas avoid self-praise.

Investigations on compliment responses have been one of the most intriguing topics in linguistics in the last three decades. A great number of studies have been conducted since the early 1970s to investigate compliment behaviors in foreign countries by various subfields of linguistics such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics (Chen & Yang, 2010; Cheng, 2009).

Primary studies on compliment responses concentrate on distinct varieties of English (Herbert, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1983). These pioneering studies show that native English speakers such as Americans and New Zealanders tend to use *acceptance* as responses to compliments. However, *disagreement* is not preferred. Although the acceptance is most used in English speaking communities, the extent of preference is different (Herbert, 1989). As shown by the contrastive studies among English speakers from different nationalities, Arabic and South African English are more likely to accept compliments and less likely to reject them than American English (Herbert, 1989). Previous CRs studies conducted on Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Malay, and Thai show that speakers tend to reject compliments (Cheng, 2009). In recent years, CRs studies conducted in English as second language or foreign language have attracted much academic attention (Cheng, 2009; Cheng, 2011; Lee, 2015; Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014; Thevendiraraj, 2006; etc.). These studies discover that non-native English speakers are more likely to accept compliments.

Chinese is possibly the second most investigated speaker community in compliment responses which is next to different speaking groups of English (Chen, 1993; Chen & Yang, 2010; Tang & Zhang, 2009; Yu, 2003; Yuan 2002; etc.). Chen (1993) organized a comparative study of CRs between college undergraduates of Xi'an Chinese and American. The study shows that Chinese participants apply *rejecting* strategy up to 95.7%, compared to accepting compliments at 1.03%. On the other hand, the strategies of *deflecting* or *evading* take up 3.41% of the total data. The study shows that Chinese college students would like to apply more rejections when responding to compliments by denigrating the objects that are complimented. Recent investigations on CRs by Tang & Zhang (2009), Chen & Yang (2010) and Cheng (2011) have found out that Chinese college students prefer to accept most compliments followed by *Deflecting/Evading* strategy and the last preferred response type is *Rejecting*. In terms of the CRs corresponding to specific compliment topics, Chinese participants tend to accept compliments on appearance and ability while evade them on character and possession. Meanwhile, more combination patterns such as *Evade + Accept* and *Reject + Accept* are used by the Chinese participants as their CRs. The similarity identified between Tang & Zhang and Chen & Yang's studies is that Western culture not only influenced the CRs of Chinese in Xi'an but also Chinese from other areas.

The responses to compliments may be classified in terms of distinct criteria, for instance, culture specifications, politeness behaviors, gender variations. (Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014). Thevendiraraj (2006) analyzed her Malaysian Tamil data on CRs by discussing participants' academic qualification. All her participants are classified as bachelor degree and master degree. The study shows that more females with bachelor degree accept compliments than their male counterparts while male deflect and reject far more than the females. It reveals that educational background has influenced the CRs of Malaysian Tamil speakers. With regards to educational context, the agreement is reached that focusing on one of the disciplines of social arts and sciences can promote the productivity of the whole society. This is the cornerstone of developing division of social science and science in higher education (Song, 2018). In specific, the study of Song (2018) reveals that long-term training in majors of social science and science affects the structure of students' brain network to some extent, which will lead to differences in the way the students perceive the world and perform cognitive behaviors. Being inspired by Song (2018), the current researcher proposes that there is a hypothesis that speakers in different academic majors may also behave distinctively in their pragmatic expressions.

In the past years, investigations into CRs have been numerous from various subfields (Chen & Yang, 2010). Moreover, there is no well-known study of CRs investigating variations among speakers from different academic majors. Thus, this study is an attempt to fulfill this under-investigated research gap by examining compliment responses produced by Malaysian Chinese undergraduates from different academic majors in English context through role play scenarios. The main objective of this study is to find out whether there are distinctions or similarities of CRs among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in different academic majors, further to determine the extent to which academic majors may influence compliment responses of the students.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Instrument of Data Collection

The data in the research were mainly collected by using a series of role play scenarios (see Appendix A) adapted from Discourse Completion Task (DCT) of Tang & Zhang (2009). It is generally accepted that the role play enables researchers to elicit more real-life data in pragmatic studies (Cheng, 2011; Tang & Zhang, 2009). There were four situations in the present role plays with topics on appearance (situation 1), character (situation 2), ability (situation 3) and possession (situation 4) (Cheng, 2011; Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014; Tang & Zhang, 2009). With regards to the variables that may influence CRs, based on the previous study of Wu (2017), 80% of the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates admitted that familiarity or social distance were two factors taken into consideration when they responded to compliments from others. However, other affecting factors (e.g. social power, gender difference) have been minimally mentioned by them. Wolfson (1989) showed that compliments are mostly given between speakers who are usually friends rather than strangers. It is common for speech behavior being more frequent and more elaborated between ordinary friends and acquaintances. Familiar friends and lecturers are recommended by the participants in the previous study of Wu (2017) prior to the present study. Consequently, each participant needed to respond orally to the compliments from familiar roles in the present role play scenarios.

Questionnaire was also employed as an instrument to collect data. The questionnaire enables the researcher to gather a large range of valid data in pragmatic investigations (Tran, 2006). Five questions were designed (Appendix B) in which the first four (Question 1-4) were replicated from Thevendiraraj (2006) because both studies acquire in-depth insights of the compliment respondents. Besides, this questionnaire was also employed to testify the reliability of the present research.

2.2 Participants

Thirty Malaysian Chinese undergraduates were invited as participants from a local Malaysian university. All the participants were introduced by friends of the researcher. Previous studies have shown that a data corpus of thirty participants is sufficient for investigating speech acts where a method of DCT is applied (Cheng, 2011; Shahsavari, Alimohammadi, & Rasekh, 2014; Thevendiraraj, 2006). The profile of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Based on the website of *Studyinmalayisa.com*, which is the online Malaysia's premier education resource guidance with a good reputation and academic reliability since 1998 (*Studyinmalayisa.com*, 2017), participants from different academic majors could be generally divided into two groups, Arts & Social Science studies (ASS) and Science & Technology Studies (STS) (see Table 1). Each group includes 15 Malaysian Chinese undergraduates. The present research was carried out in English, all the participants were at least ranked as modest users of English (Band 3) which was shown by their scores of Malaysian University English Test (MUET). According to *Malaysian Examinations Council* (2015:10), the modest users of English refer to those with fairly fluent and appropriate use of English language; although there maybe grammatical errors, they can achieve a fair understanding of language and context and grasp a fair ability to function in the English. With higher scores of MUET (e.g. Band 4, 5 and 6), the students are identified as higher proficient users of English.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

No	Age	Arts & Social Science	MUET	No	Age	Science & Technology	MUET
1	20	Spanish	5	1	19	Geography	3

2	20	Spanish	3	2	21	Chemistry	5
3	23	Korean Studies	3	3	21	Electrical Engineering	5
4	22	Korean studies	4	4	22	Mechanical Engineering	5
5	20	Japanese	4	5	22	Computer Science	4
6	23	Music	3	6	22	Engineering	5
7	20	French	4	7	23	Chemistry	3
8	21	History	5	8	21	Mechanical Engineering	4
9	20	Italian	6	9	20	Physics	5
10	21	Asian studies	5	10	23	Mechanical Engineering	4
11	24	Chinese	4	11	24	Engineering	5
12	22	Chinese	3	12	24	Chemistry	3
13	23	Chinese	3	13	23	Physics	5
14	24	Education	4	14	21	Computer Science	5
15	23	Literature	5	15	22	Statistics	4

MUET: Malaysia University English Test

2.3 Procedure of Data Collection

In order to elicit more naturalistic responses in the role plays, one friend of the researcher who was majoring in Master of Linguistics in the University of Malaya had been invited to play as the complimenter. The role plays were conducted in a meeting room in the main library of the university and only the researcher and the participants were allowed to be there when the role-play was going on. Before it started, the participants were asked to provide personal information and the explanation of the role play was given by the researcher. At the beginning of each role play, the situation would be given to the participant who would receive a compliment. The participant then responded orally to the compliment. The researcher being a non-participating observer, was seated at a distance from the participants who were role playing. Each role play based on one situation lasted about 1 minute and the overall duration of the role play was around 6 minutes.

The entire process of the role play was audio-recorded. When it was over, participants needed to answer questionnaires (Question 1-4) individually based on their performance in the role plays and daily experience. During the data analysis, the Questions 5 and further inquiry were given to the participants to trace more insights. All the data collected in the role plays were transcribed by adapting the transcription model of Thevendiraraj (2006) who used Jefferson's (1972) analytical framework to examine compliment responses of Malaysian speakers.

2.4 Data Analysis

Cheng's (2011) categorization of CRs strategies was used to classify the various CRs strategies among Malaysian Chinese ASS (Arts & Social Science) and STS (Science & Technology Studies) students. As shown in Table 2, 3 macro-level CRs are categorised which are further subdivided into 11 micro-level strategies. In order to intensify accuracy of the analysis, the researcher and an academic supervisor jointly coded the data transcription firstly. Then the data from the questionnaires was transcribed descriptively.

Table 2. CRs Categories of Cheng (2011:2207)

Macro level	Micro level	Example
	Appreciation	Thank you very much.
	Agreeing	Yeah, I really like it.
	Downgrading	It's nothing.

Acceptance	Qualifying	I love doing it.
	Returning	Yours is nice too.
	Non-idiomatic	I am very happy.
	Credit-shifting	My pleasure.
	Commenting	I like red color.
Evasion	Reassuring	Are you kidding?
	Offering	You can use mine if you like.
		No response
	Ignoring/Giggling	Shifting to another topic Giggling/Smiling
Combination	Acceptance + Evasion	
	E.g. Appreciation + Credit-shifting	
	E.g. Thank you so much. It is a gift from my brother.	

3. Results and Discussion

In total, there were 120 responses to compliments which were further categorized into three macro-level CRs strategies: *Acceptance*, *Evasion* and *Combination*. Based on the framework of Cheng (2011), the responses were classified into 199 micro-level CRs strategies. This section presents the findings of the CRs produced by the participants in two sections: (1) general patterns of CRs; and (2) CRs strategies corresponding to four situations.

3.1 The General Patterns of CRs Strategies

The CRs at macro level produced by participants in ASS (Arts & Social Science) and STS (Science & Technology Studies) are presented in Table 3. Two groups show a different preference of CRs at macro level. The STS group preferred the order of *Acceptance*, *Combination* and *Evasion*; however, ASS group preferred *Combination*, *Acceptance* and *Evasion*. It shows that Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in two major backgrounds have distinct trend of CRs at macro patterns. Nevertheless, there was no single use of *Rejection* in the present study which means that Malaysian Chinese undergraduates avoided rejecting the praises from others in a direct way.

Table 3. The General CRs at Macro Level

Macro-level CRs	ASS		STS	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	25	41.7%	35	58.3%
Evasion	8	13.3%	7	11.7%
Combination	27	45.0%	18	30.0%
Total	60	100%	60	100%

Both the ASS and STS groups frequently used *Combination* strategies. For ASS group, among all the *Combination* CRs as shown in Table 4, 66.7% patterns belong to *Acceptance + Evasion* (e.g. *Thank you. (Smiling)*). This is followed by *Evasion + Acceptance combination* strategy (e.g. *Ah..(Giggling). Thank you*) which totals up to 33.3%. Therefore, Malaysian undergraduates from Arts & Social Science studies tended to accept the compliments first and then added *Evasion* expressions to avoid being conceited. The ASS and STS generally employed the same expression of *Combination: Acceptance + Evasion* and *Evade + Acceptance*. Among all the *Combination* types, *Appreciation* and *Giggling/Smiling* are the most frequently combined as CRs (56% of total *Combination* CRs). Examples are shown by ‘*Thank you. (Smiling)*’ (*Acceptance + Evasion*); ‘*Ah..(Giggling). Thank you*’ (*Evade + Acceptance*).

Table 4. The CRs of Combination

CRs of Combination	ASS		STS	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance + Evasion	18	66.7%	12	66.7%
Evasion + Acceptance	9	33.3%	5	27.8%
Evasion + Rejection + Acceptance	0	0%	1	5.5%
Total	27	100%	18	100%

There was only one response of *Combination* including *Rejection* which was used by the STS group (e.g. *Oh is it? I don't think so. But anyway thank you*). This *Rejection* was used after *Evasion*. This is in line with the common sense that if one accepts something then she/he will not reject it. Comparatively speaking, two groups showed a similar preference to *Acceptance + Evasion*. Participants in the ASS group showed a stronger preference of *Evasion + Acceptance* (33.3%) than STS group (27.8%). However, participants in both groups tended to use same *Acceptance + Evasion* (66.7%). According to the further inquiry, the participants explained that they considered the compliments as positive comments so that they needed to show politeness by accepting them at first. Moreover, the consideration of being modest and English proficiency have also affected their CRs (which will be shown in following sections), therefore, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates also used some *Evasion* strategies after accepting the compliments to keep modest or make up for the lack of English proficiency.

In terms of the CRs strategies of *Combination* at micro level, it is found that there were 45 *Combination* CRs of total in this study and it has been classified into 32 types such as '*Appreciation + Smiling; Commenting + Appreciation; Commenting + Offering*, etc.'. However, each type of *Combination* was less used with the frequency of 1 or 2. Therefore, this study merely analyses CRs of *Combination* at macro level, when it is going to each sub-situation, the CRs at micro level are analysed.

Table 5 shows the general CRs strategies used at micro level. An obvious trend is that the most preferred response strategy in both two groups was *Appreciation* (e.g. *Thank you; Thanks; Yeah*), in which participants from STS showed a stronger preference than ASS. The second most preferred pattern was *Giggling/Smiling* which is a non-verbal expression. Participants in the ASS group used more *Giggling/Smiling* as responses than their counterparts in STS. Other CRs patterns shown in Table 5 were not largely used and there was no significant variation among these CRs strategies between two groups. One-point worthy of mention is that the CRs strategy of *Ignoring* was not found in the present study, in other words, all the participants tended to respond to compliments. *Ignoring* is a language phenomenon in communication and in some cases it is referred as silence. Al-Harashseh (2012: 247) claimed that silence is regarded as a multifaceted and complicated linguistic behavior as its connotation is highly related with specific socio-cultural context. Silence functions as marking the boundaries of speech but also risks of being disrespectful to the interlocutors, especially the conversation is exchanged between two persons. Therefore, the non-preference of *Ignoring* of the participants may be regarded as a manner to achieve politeness effect.

Table 5. The General CRs at Micro Level

Macro-level CRs		ASS		STS	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	Appreciation	47	45.2%	49	51.6%
	Agreeing	2	1.9%	3	3.2%
	Downgrading	3	2.9%	2	2.1%
	Qualifying	7	6.7%	7	7.4%
	Returning	2	1.9%	2	2.1%
Evasion	Credit-shift	4	3.8%	2	2.1%
	Commenting	9	8.7%	10	10.5%
	Reassuring	6	5.8%	3	3.2%
	Offering	1	1.0%	1	1.1%
	Smiling/ Giggling	22	21.2%	15	15.8%
	Topic-shifting	1	1.0%	0	0%

Rejection	0	0%	1	1.1%
Total	104	100%	95	100%

In terms of the content of the responses, all participants used idiomatic English (e.g. *Thank you / You are welcome / Really?*) which is commonly used in daily communication and easily understood by the researcher and the academic supervisor. Therefore, there were no CRs classified as *Non-idiomatic* in the present research. An idiom is linguistically defined as a fixed expression which is frequently used in a figurative sense and realizes arbitrary implications. In other words, an idiomatic expression makes its meanings by coincidence and is understood by the community members within shared physical environment (Thyab, 2016). In modern English education, more than teaching learners to memorize expressions in minds, the idiomatic expressions are preferably taught in a systems-based approach in the world, which enables English learning more effective (Thyab, 2016). As early as 19th century, the British Government has introduced English as a medium of teaching instruction in Malaysia. From then on, the English language has been importantly used in many phases and gradually serves as a second language in Malaysia. In 1960, English was officially designated as a medium of education in the schools. In 1970s, the structural syllabus has been implemented with a purpose to advocate the use of the structural situational approach to English teaching (Foo & Richards, 2004). Besides, after the independence in the 1970s, the mass media greatly promoted the popularity of English in Malaysia as English is widely used in national radio, television networks, newspapers and so forth, meanwhile, the functions of English cover several domains in Malaysia (Hanapiah, 2004: 107-108). Both the teaching and learning system as well as social environment increase the possibility that the university students in Malaysia grasp a good proficiency of English thus they can efficiently use it to comply with the trend of internationalization (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). This is also accounted by the MUET results of the participants which proves the Malaysian undergraduates generally grasp a good English proficiency so that the idiomatic expressions are naturally and commonly used in their daily English communication.

3.2 The CRs Strategies Corresponding to Situation

3.2.1 CRs for Appearance

Table 6 presents CRs to appearance, participants in two groups all used *Appreciation*, *Returning* and *Giggling/Smiling*. Participants in the ASS group also applied strategies of *Commenting*, *Reassuring* and *Topic-shifting* which were never used by participants from the STS group. As a consequence, participants in ASS tended to apply more diverse responses to compliments on appearance. Both groups preferred *Appreciation* and *Giggling/Smiling*, while the participants employed other patterns infrequently. All the two most preferred CRs patterns, namely *Appreciation* and *Giggling/Smiling* were more frequently used by participants in STS than their counterparts in ASS. Examples of CRs for appearance are shown in Table 7.

Table 6. The Micro-level CRs to Appearance

Macro-level CRs		ASS		STS	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	Appreciation	16	55.2%	14	66.7%
	Returning	2	6.9%	1	4.8%
Evasion	Commenting	1	3.4%	0	0%
	Reassuring	2	6.9%	0	0%
	Smiling/Giggling	7	24.1%	6	28.5%
	Topic-shifting	1	3.4%	0	0%
Total		29	100%	21	100%

Table 7. Examples of Micro-level CRs Strategies to Appearance

<i>Appreciation:</i>	<i>Oh thank you.</i>
<i>Returning:</i>	<i>Wow thank you. You look pretty nice too. Where did you get this shirt from?</i>
<i>Commenting:</i>	<i>Ah thank you. (Smiling). I actually prepared this like two hours.</i>
<i>Reassuring:</i>	<i>Oh Really? Thank you.</i>
<i>Topic-shifting:</i>	<i>Wow thank you. You look pretty nice too. Where did you get this shirt from?</i>

Based on the further inquiry, some participants in ASS explained that they were a little shy when receiving the compliments on their appearance, however, they did not feel offended by the complimenters. Usually, they would like to accept the compliments but also say something else that is classified as *Evasion* strategies. On the other hand, in the group of STS, most of the participants explained that they wished to be polite to the complimenters since the lecturers were always helpful and caring. For the participants in the STS group, the preference of *Appreciation* and *Smiling/Giggling* was mainly with the purpose of showing gratitude and politeness. Nevertheless, in addition to showing appreciation and politeness, the diverse CRs used by the participants were because of their shyness when hearing about compliments on their out-looking. Among all the *Evasion* strategies used by the ASS participants, *Smiling/Giggling* was the most favored because this strategy functions to conceal shyness.

3.2.2 CRs for Character

In responding to compliments on character, *Appreciation* is the most applied response by two groups (see Table 8). However, the participants in the ASS group used the same amount of *Appreciation* and *Giggling/Smiling* which means that the participants valued both strategies when compliments were paid on their character.

Table 8. The Micro-level CRs to Character

Macro-level CRs		ASS		STS	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	Appreciation	9	37.5%	11	50.0%
	Agreeing	0	0%	1	4.5%
	Downgrading	2	8.3%	2	9.0%
	Qualifying	1	4.2%	0	0%
	Returning	0	0%	1	4.5%
Evasion	Credit-shift	2	8.3%	1	4.5%
	Reassuring	1	4.2%	0	0%
	Smiling/ Giggling	9	37.5%	6	27.0%
Total		24	100%	22	100%

There is a marked variation between the two groups. Participants in STS tended to use more strategies under *Acceptance* such as *Appreciation*, *Agreeing* and *Downgrading* (examples shown in Table 9), while participants in ASS preferred to apply more patterns belonging to *Evasion* such as *Giggling/Smiling*, *Credit-shifting* and *Reassuring*. This indicates that undergraduates in ASS would attach more value on 'self-praise avoidance' than STS group. The large use of *Giggling/Smiling* may be caused by the thinking that helping others is nothing special so that they tried to avoid direct acceptance thus maintain modesty.

As explained by the participants in ASS, they felt happy even a little proud of themselves by helping others. However, for them, the direct acceptance may make them feel not nice since offering help is the basic virtue for human, therefore, they thought it was unnecessary to be complimented on their character in situation 2. Instead of showing acceptance, *Evasion* strategies such as *Smiling/ Giggling* would be better to save each other's faces. This is to account for the preference of *Evasion* strategies in ASS group (50% in ASS while 31.5% in STS). On the contrary, the participants in STS preferred to accept the compliments on their character (68% in STS while 50% in ASS). As claimed by the participants in STS, they did not think much in that situation because it was natural to help those in need and also natural to give responses as appreciation (e.g. *thank you*). It shows that both ASS and STS groups considered offering help as a natural social action that was unnecessary to be paid compliments. In order to keep a harmonious relationship with the complimenters, participants in ASS tended to evade the compliments, however, *Acceptance* was most applied by STS group.

Table 9. Examples of Micro-level CRs Strategies to Character

<i>Appreciation:</i>	<i>En.. thank you.</i>
<i>Agreeing:</i>	<i>Of course la.</i>
<i>Downgrading:</i>	<i>(Smiling). It is nothing.</i>
<i>Qualifying:</i>	<i>Ah..because I was taught that way since I was young.</i>
<i>Returning:</i>	<i>Yeah. Thank you. You too.</i>
<i>Credit-shifting:</i>	<i>Oh ya..that's my en..that's my pleasure.</i>
<i>Reassuring:</i>	<i>Oh Really? Thank you.</i>
<i>Giggling/Smiling:</i>	<i>(Smiling).</i>

3.2.3 CRs for Ability

Table 10 shows that participants in both groups used more *Acceptance* strategies (*Appreciation* and *Qualifying*) than *Evasion* strategies such as *Credit-shifting*, *Reassuring* and *Giggling/Smiling* (examples shown in Table 5). Generally speaking, on the compliment topic of ability, all participants were more likely to accept the praises.

The micro level CRs in this situation with compliments on ability was different from appearance (shown in Table 6) and character (shown in Table 8). In the present situation, the most frequently used CRs strategies in two groups were still *Acceptance* but followed by *Qualifying* rather than *Giggling/Smiling*. *Giggling/Smiling* was the third most popular CRs pattern used by participants from two major groups. With regards to the strategies of *Acceptance*, *Qualifying* and *Giggling/Smiling*, undergraduates in the STS group used more of them than the ASS group. Strategies of *Credit-shifting* and *Reassuring* were only used in the ASS group.

Table 10. The Micro-level CRs to Ability

Macro-level CRs		ASS		STS	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	Appreciation	14	61%	16	72.7%
	Qualifying	4	17.3%	4	18.2%
Evasion	Credit-shift	2	8.5%	0	0%
	Reassuring	1	4.6%	0	0%
	Smiling/Giggling	2	8.5%	2	9.1%
Total		23	100%	22	100%

The obvious finding in this situation is the stronger preference of *Acceptance* on macro level, 78.3% in ASS group and 90.9% in STS group. It indicates that the participants in both groups tended to accept compliments on the ability. Only two CRs types under *Acceptance* were used in accepting the compliments in which *Appreciation* was applied more frequently than compliments on appearance and character. As illustrated by the participants from two groups, they were mostly pleased to hear the compliments on their ability. In situation 3, the participants were complimented for a good presentation, most of the participants explained that a well-done presentation came from their hardworking study and efforts, therefore, compliments on that was the best encouragement for them. They accepted the compliments and were not afraid of being conceited. Compared the use of *Acceptance* and *Evasion*, it is found that the participants in STS accepted compliments more than those in ASS, which may indicate that the participants in ASS would prefer to avoid being conceited than STS.

Table 11. Examples of Micro-level CRs Strategies to Ability

<i>Appreciation:</i>	<i>Thank you very much Dr.</i>
<i>Qualifying:</i>	<i>Thank you Sir. I will work hard for the next time presentation.</i>
<i>Credit-shifting:</i>	<i>Because of your guidance, my English can..get so well.</i>
<i>Reassuring:</i>	<i>Really? Thanks.</i>
<i>Giggling/Smiling:</i>	<i>(Smiling).</i>

3.2.4 CRs for Possession

Table 12 displays that the participants in two groups preferred to use strategies of *Evasion* (*Commenting*, *Reassuring*, *Offering* and *Giggling/Smiling*: 55.2% in STS / 52.5% in ASS) than *Acceptance* (*Appreciation*, *Agreeing*, *Downgrading* and *Qualifying*). This indicates that the participants were likely to deflect the compliments on their personal belongings. As explained by the participants in two major groups, when the compliments were paid to their possessions, it is better to be modest by evading the compliments since showing off personal belongings especially the one with great value is impolite. Therefore, more CRs strategies of *Evasion* were used in this situation.

Table 12. The Micro-level CRs to Possession

Macro-level CRs		ASS		STS	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance	Appreciation	8	30.0%	8	28.0%

	Agreeing	2	7.5%	2	6.8%
	Downgrading	1	2.5%	0	0%
	Qualifying	2	7.5%	3	10.0%
Evasion	Commenting	8	30.0%	10	35.0%
	Reassuring	2	7.5%	3	10.0%
	Offering	0	0%	1	3.4%
	Smiling/Giggling	4	15.0%	1	3.4%
Rejection		0	0%	1	3.4%
Total		27	100%	29	100%

Participants in the ASS used *Appreciation* and *Commenting* as their most preferred CRs with similar preference. Participants in the STS group employed more *Commenting* as CRs which is preceding *Appreciation*. It is worth noticing that participants in STS tended to give more comments on possessions complimented than ASS. Undergraduates in the ASS group still took *Giggling/Smiling* as the third popular strategy which is consistent with compliments on ability (Table 10), however, it was used minimally in the STS group. On the compliment topic of possession, participants in STS applied other types of CRs more frequently than *Giggling/Smiling*, for instance, *Commenting*, *Qualifying*, *Reassuring*, and *Agreeing*.

As stated above, being modest has been taken into consideration in this situation, participants had different reasons when using *Commenting*. Firstly, the participants in ASS interpreted that the complimenters might be interested in the possession (phone in the situation), then they needed to provide more information about it; whereas, the participants in STS elaborated that they themselves were more interested in describing their phones to others, for example the price and functions of the phone, so that they would like to speak more about it. This explanation accounted for the great preference of *Commenting* for the participants in two major groups.

On the whole setting of compliments on possession, only one response of *Rejection* was produced by the STS group which reveals that Malaysian undergraduates showed a strong disfavor of rejecting other's compliments on possession. Strategies of *Returning*, *Credit-shifting* and *Topic-shifting* were not used at all. Examples of CRs to possession are displayed in Table 13.

Table 13. Examples of Micro-level CRs Strategies to Possession

<i>Appreciation:</i>	<i>Thank you.</i>
<i>Agreeing:</i>	<i>Yeah. Sure.</i>
<i>Downgrading:</i>	<i>Really? Oh ok but it is just a smart phone.</i>
<i>Qualifying:</i>	<i>Yeah. That's why I buy it. (Giggling).</i>
<i>Commenting:</i>	<i>Yes. That's the least phone. I bought this last week.</i>
<i>Reassuring:</i>	<i>Really? Thank you.</i>
<i>Offering:</i>	<i>I would like to offer you to look at it also.</i>
<i>Giggling/Smiling:</i>	<i>(Smiling).</i>
<i>Rejection:</i>	<i>Oh is it? I don't think so..But anyway thank you so much.</i>

3.3 Results from the Questionnaires

With reference to the results from the question: How do you feel when you receive compliments? Out of 30 participants, 25 (12 in the ASS group / 13 in the STS group) said that they felt happy, excited and pleased when they were complimented; another 5 participants (3 in the ASS group / 2 in the STS group) mentioned that sometimes they might feel surprised or even embarrassed if they were praised. Therefore, on the whole, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in both ASS and STS did not regard compliments as face-threatening acts; on the contrary, compliments were viewed more as positive comments by them. This is in consistence with their great use of *Acceptance*. Participants from STS have a less feeling of face-threatening when being complimented in communication.

In answering the question: What is your instant response normally to a compliment? 27 participants answered that they would like to respond with 'Thank you' without thinking the extent of truth of the compliments. They explained that as a minority in Malaysia, Malaysian Chinese need to interact with people from other ethnic groups who may have different religions, languages and cultures, therefore they need to build up a harmonious relationship with everyone around them. This is supported by the explanations of CRs on character in which offering help is considered as a natural behavior by participants in two academic groups. It shows that the 'face' in Malaysian Chinese community emphasizes communality and interpersonality. In order to avoid conflicts in daily communication, generally speaking, they tend to agree with others by accepting others' comments. All

participants in the STS group explained that *'Thank you'* should be their instant response to compliments while 12 out of 15 in the ASS group said that. Therefore, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in Science and Technology Studies would attach more positive value on compliments and they were more likely to show gratitude to maintain harmonious relationship with compliment givers.

Among all the CRs strategies in the present study, *Giggling/Smiling*, a unique phenomenon in responding to compliments has been greatly used by participants in both two groups. 12 participants (7 in ASS / 5 in STS) out of 30 explained that 'smiling' should be their instant response to compliments. Based on the further inquiry, there were two explanations for the use of *Giggling/Smiling* as responses. First, 17 participants considered smiling/giggling as a correct etiquette to show politeness in everyday communications. Participants thought it would be rude to break the face of compliment givers if they did not show their happiness of receiving the praises. Hence, smiling/giggling functioned as an indicator of politeness for the participants.

Second, 18 participants explained that they hardly know what should be said to respond in a few conditions. Among the 18 participants who had a difficulty in performing diverse responses, 15 participants got Bands 3 or 4 in Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which indicates that these participants were classified as modest or competent English speakers. Hence, some Malaysian Chinese participants indeed lack a high proficiency of English so that they may apply a number of smiling/giggling in their speech acts to recover the difficulty in making complicated and diverse responses to compliments. In the ASS group, 10 participants reached Bands 3 or 4 in MUET and they stated that English was a preferred language in daily life so they were occasionally lost in some social interactions in English. Their fair proficiency may be proved by the occurrence of mumble (e.g. ah / en) in some cases. There were only 7 participants in STS who obtained Band 3 & 4. Though the CRs in the STS group were more direct and briefer than ASS's CRs, there were fewer mumble expressions in STS. Consequently, it shows that Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in STS may have a better English proficiency than ASS.

3.4 Discussion

At the macro level, participants in the STS group preferred the CRs in order of *Acceptance*, *Combination* and *Evasion*; however, participants in the ASS group followed *Combination*, *Acceptance* and *Evasion*. For the *Combination* strategies in two groups, all the typical type was *Acceptance + Evasion*. Moreover, *Rejection* has been rarely used by both groups. This finding is different from Chen's (1993) and Tang & Zhang's (2009) findings that Chinese university students used more strategies of *Evasion* and *Rejection* than *Acceptance*. However, Tang & Zhang (2009) discovered that *Appreciation* was the preferred way of accepting compliments by American native English speakers, which is in line with Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies. For Malaysian Chinese undergraduates, generally speaking, the most favorite micro-level CRs were *Appreciation* and *Giggling/Smiling* which were elaborated as desired expressions in responding to compliments as well as showing politeness. This is in contract with the traditional Mandarin Chinese culture that speakers regard implicit CRs as desirable (Chen, 1993).

With reference to the CRs on different compliment topics, it is found that Malaysian undergraduates used diverse strategies on different communicative settings. In the overall role play, *Acceptance* was the main trend as compliment responses on the topics of appearance, character and ability; nevertheless, *Evasion* strategies were the main macro pattern when the possession was complimented. This finding concurs with Tang & Zhang (2009) in that *Accept* was the most favored strategy for most compliment topics, moreover, the Chinese preferred *Evasion* strategies when receiving compliments on possession.

Findings from the CRs on various subjects indicated that Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies had a similar preference of CRs. With regards to compliment topics on appearance, undergraduates in both groups used most *Appreciation*, which is consistent with Cheng's (2011) and Tang & Zhang's (2009) studies. There is no big variation of using CRs between two academic groups on the topic of appearance. When the compliments were paid on character, participants in two groups applied most *Appreciation* strategies. However, the strategies of *Credit-shifting* were secondly used. This is different from Chinese participants in Cheng's (2011) and Tang & Zhang's (2009) researches in which Chinese students tended to shift credits when their personality was complimented. In terms of the compliments on ability, *Appreciation* was the first choice for both groups. This is also shown in Cheng's (2011) and Tang & Zhang's (2009) studies. For the last compliment topic on possession, participants in two groups also showed same trend of using *Commenting* and *Appreciation* as the most preferred strategies. Meanwhile, ASS participants gave more *Giggling/Smiling* to their compliment payers.

Appreciation was greatly used as responses to compliments by both two groups. This finding concurs with other studies especially conducted in the past decade (Chen & Yang, 2010; Cheng, 2009; Cheng, 2011; Tang & Zhang, 2009) that participants in English speaking contexts usually consider compliments as a positive speech act more than a face-threatening act to themselves. Therefore, more and more Chinese avoid *Rejection* when responding to compliments as it may be impolite to the compliment givers.

Lastly, it is worth noting that English is defined as a second language in Malaysia. Most of the Malaysian Chinese undergraduates use English to study in public universities. There is a tentative conclusion that their language behavior is affected by English culture rather than traditional Chinese culture, for instance, the participants in this study regarded acceptance of compliments as politeness, especially when they are complimented by appearance and ability. In another word, Malaysian Chinese community emphasizes the face of the communality and interpersonality instead of saving individualistic and self-oriented image. On the other hand, the traditional norm of modesty influences Malaysian Chinese's CRs especially when the compliments given to their possessions.

4. Conclusion

This study has presented an investigation of compliment responses (CRs) of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in English context from two academic study groups, namely Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that the performance of compliment responses is pragmatically varied among different social groups. The findings in this article indicate that Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in Arts & Social Science as well as in Science & Technology Studies preferred to accept the compliments. Nevertheless, there are pragmatic variations (i.e. CRs) between Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies. *Appreciation* was the most favored strategy in both academic groups followed by *Giggling/Smiling*. Nevertheless, on different compliment topics, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in the two major groups showed a similar trend of CRs whereas with certain distinctions.

The CRs of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates are influenced by their English language proficiency and Chinese culture. Generally speaking, the participants' English proficiency is enough to meet their needs in social interactions since the participants all achieved at least Band 3 in the MUET, which means they all grasp a fairly good English proficiency. Consequently, the majority of the participants could employ diverse and idiomatic responses to compliments in different social contexts, which confirms the positive influence of structural situational approach to English teaching syllabus as well as social mass media in language learning. However, the findings in the present research also show that some Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in the two major groups have a relatively lower English proficiency and they could not produce multiple responses to compliments. These students are mostly belonging to the MUET of Band 3 in which their English ability is still under satisfactory level in some aspects (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2015: 10). Therefore, English syllabus designers and teachers are suggested to consider Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' demands of understanding and producing CRs or other speech acts, especially the undergraduates with Band 3 in MUET.

On the whole, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates did not regard receiving compliments as face-threatening acts which means their faces were not threatened by the compliment givers. However, most of them attached great value on collectivism by saving other's face in social interaction. Malaysian Chinese undergraduates are generally governed by the *Acceptance* strategies in responding to compliments. The agreement is frequently paid to compliments especially from familiar people, which reveals that the priority in their compliment responses is maintaining faces of others as well as considering the needs of others. In addition, Malaysian Chinese undergraduates tended to use indirect responses such as giggling/smiling to reduce the face-threatening and show great politeness to the compliment givers. In the two academic groups, the participants in STS were more directly polite by accepting the compliments, however, the participants in ASS group were likely indirect in saving others face by using more *Evasion* strategies such as *Giggling/Smiling*.

The present study sheds a light on Malaysian Chinese undergraduates' compliment responses. It potentially enhances the communication between students from different academic backgrounds of Arts & Social Science and Science & Technology Studies. This study hopefully contributes towards the academic knowledge of pragmatics, in specific the field of compliment responses. The future investigations are recommended to expand data source by applying more naturalistic data collection instruments. Explorations on other speech acts are suggested to be organized with a purpose to perfect the cognition of the pragmatics and language use.

References

- Al-Harashseh, A. (2012). Silence and politeness in Jordanian society. *Arab World English Journal*, 3(3), 246-269.
- Chen, R. (1993). Responding to compliments: A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 20(1), 49-75.
- Chen, R., & Yang, D. (2010). Responding to compliments in Chinese: Has it changed? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(7), 1951-1963.
- Cheng, D. (2011). New insights on compliment responses: A comparison between native English speakers and Chinese L2 speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(8), 2204-2214.
- Cheng, Y. (2009). *A Comparative Study of Compliment Response Strategies in American English and Chinese*. Unpublished master's thesis, Hu Nan University, Hunan, China.
- David, M. K., & Kuang, C. H. (2005). Requests and cultural norms. *Journal of Communication Practices*, 2(1), 95-110.
- Foo, B., & Richards, C. (2004). English in Malaysia. *Regional Language Centre Journal*, 35(2), 229-240.
- Jefferson, G. (1972). Side sequences. In D.N. Sudnow (Eds.), *Studies in social interaction* (pp.294-33). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Hanapiah, M. F. (2004). English language and the language of development: A Malaysian perspective. *Jurnal Kemanusiaan*, 1(2), 106-120.
- Herbert R., & Strait, H. (1989). Compliment-rejection vs. compliment-avoidance. *Language and Communication*, 9(1), 35-47.
- Holmes, J. (1986). Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 28(4), 485-508.
- Holme, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex preferential positive politeness strategies. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2(3), 445-465.
- Lee, C. L. (2015). Compliments and compliment responses of Singapore Chinese university students. *Global Chinese*, 1(1), 169-201.
- Malaysian Examinations Council. (2015). *Regulations, Test Specifications, Test Format and Sample Questions*. Malaysia.
- Shahsavari, S., Alimohammadi, B., & Rasekh, A. (2014). Compliment responses: A comparative study of native English speakers and Iranian L2 speakers. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1744 – 1753.
- Song, L. M. (2018). *The Study on Brain Network Between Science and Arts Students*. Unpublished Master Dissertation, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, China.
- Studyinmalaysia.com. (2017). Retrieved June 25, 2018, from <https://studymalaysia.com/>
- Tang, C. H., & Zhang, G. (2009). A contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Mandarin Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(2), 325-345.
- Thevendiraraj, P. (2006). *Gender variation in compliment responses: A case of the Malaysian Tamil community*. Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Thirusanku, J., & Yunus, M. M. (2014). Status of English in Malaysia. *Asian Social Science*, 10(14), 254-260.
- Thyab, R. A. (2016). The Necessity of idiomatic expressions to English language learners. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7(7), 106-111.
- Tran, G. Q. (2006). *The Nature and Conditions of Pragmatic and Discourse Transfer Investigated through Naturalized Role-play*. Muenchen: Lincom Europa.
- Wolfson, N. (1983). An empirically based analysis of complimenting in American English. In N. W. Judd (Ed.), *Social Linguistics and Language Acquisition* (pp. 82-95). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Wu, Y.Q. (2017). *A study of compliment responses of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates*. Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Malaya, Malaysia.
- Yu, M. C. (1999). *Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Pragmatics: Developing Communicative Competence in A Second Language*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge.
- Yu, M.C. (2003). On the universality of face: Evidence from Chinese compliment response behaviour. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(10-11), 1679-1710.
- Yuan, Y. (2002). Compliments and compliment responses in Kun Ming Chinese. *Pragmatics*, 12(2), 183-226.