



Cultural Perspectives on Compliment Responses: A Comparative Study of Thai Non-English Majors and Native English Speakers

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Abstract

This study examines cross-cultural differences in the use of English-language Compliment Response (CR) strategies by Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers, aiming to deepen understanding of how cultural norms shape pragmatic behavior in English. Using an open-ended questionnaire eliciting responses to compliments on appearance, possessions, achievements, and abilities, the study integrates quantitative analysis of English CR categories with qualitative insights into participants' emotional reactions. The results indicate that both groups most frequently employed Acceptance strategies, though Americans used them more consistently, whereas Thai participants displayed broader strategic variability, including Positive Elaboration and culturally motivated expressions of modesty. Significant linear trends emerged across compliment types, revealing systematic differences associated with cultural background in the use of English CRs. Qualitative findings further show that Thai students tended to interpret English compliments as encouragement and relational affirmation, while American participants often balanced appreciation with modesty, humor, or mild discomfort. These patterns highlight culturally embedded orientations toward face, affect, and interpersonal harmony in English communication. The findings contribute to research on intercultural pragmatics and suggest pedagogical implications for enhancing L2 learners' socio-pragmatic competence in English, particularly within English courses for Thai university students.

Keywords: Compliment Responses, Compliment Response Strategies, Thai Non-Native English Learners, American Native English Speakers, Cross-Cultural Communication

Introduction

While many Second Language (L2) learners develop strong grammatical and vocabulary skills, they often struggle with the sociocultural norms that govern language use, especially in speech acts such as Compliment Responses (CRs). Earlier studies have shown that CRs require not only linguistic accuracy but also culturally appropriate pragmatic decisions, making them a useful site for examining L2 pragmatic competence. As Kasper and Schmidt (1996) note, L2 learners frequently require explicit instruction in recognizing these pragmatic differences. Despite their linguistic proficiency, students (Cedar, 2012) and even language teachers (Chen & Boonkongsan, 2012) often transfer pragmatic norms from their first language (L1) into L2 interactions, which can lead to misunderstandings or unintended offense. Collectively, these studies establish that CRs are culturally sensitive speech acts reflecting politeness, interpersonal alignment, and social rapport, and they demonstrate how L1-based norms shape L2 performance.

However, several important issues remain unresolved. First, although research has examined CR strategies among L2 learners, the number of studies focusing on Thai learners, particularly their English CRs, remains limited. Second, prior studies seldom explore learners' emotional reactions or metapragmatic awareness during compliment exchanges. Third, existing work does not provide sufficient comparative evidence between Thai learners and American native English speakers, even though complimenting behaviors are highly sensitive to cultural expectations.



For example, learners from cultures emphasizing modesty may avoid direct acceptance, whereas in English interactions, straightforward appreciation is typically preferred (Suteerapongsit, 2020). Existing studies (e.g., Pongsirijjan et al., 2019) show that instructional approaches can enhance Thai EFL learners' pragmatic awareness. However, this evidence does not clarify how Thai learners' CRs compare with native-speaker norms nor how cultural orientations influence their strategic preferences.

These unresolved issues are especially relevant for second-year Thai university students in Northern Thailand, who are at a transitional stage of L2 development. Their cultural background, which emphasizes modesty, relational harmony, and indirectness, may also shape their CR behaviors in English.

Taken together, the existing literature does not sufficiently compare Thai learners' English CRs with American native norms and does not integrate emotional or perceptual dimensions into the analysis. These limitations constitute the key research gap. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing how Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers use English CRs, how their strategic preferences differ, and how they perceive and emotionally interpret praise. By integrating cultural, emotional, and linguistic dimensions, the study provides a more holistic understanding of CRs in intercultural communication and contributes to the development of pragmatic competence among Thai university students. Based on these gaps, this study investigates how Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers use English compliment responses, including their strategic preferences, perceptions, and emotional reactions.

Literature Review

Pragmatics, especially interlanguage pragmatics, offers insights into how learners manage speech acts like compliments and responses, which are shaped by cultural norms and social expectations. Complimenting is complex, influenced by language proficiency, cultural values, identity, and social dynamics. This section reviews five key areas: 1) definitions and functions of compliments, 2) typologies of Compliment Responses (CRs), 3) recipients' perspectives, and 4) studies on CRs among native and nonnative speakers across cultures, genders, and pedagogy.

1. Compliments in Communication: Definitions and Functions

Compliments serve evaluative and interpersonal functions. Holmes (1988) defines compliments as speech acts that praise positively valued traits such as appearance, ability, or possessions, attributing credit to the addressee and fostering social solidarity. They foster solidarity and rapport by functioning as expressions of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and as motivational tools through Explicit Positive Assessments (EPAs). Their effectiveness and perceived sincerity often depend on how they are delivered, including the choice of language, sequencing, and accompanying multimodal cues. Compliment responses reflect cultural values, modesty, face, and identity. They reveal social norms, relationships, and pragmatic awareness (Chen, 1993; Holmes, 1988; Yu, 2004).

2. Typologies of Compliment Responses

Compliment Responses (CRs) involve balancing the Agreement Maxim, which promotes harmony, and the Modesty Maxim, which encourages downplaying self-praise (Leech, 1983; Pomerantz, 1978). To classify CRs, Holmes (1988) proposes three main categories: acceptance, rejection, and evasion. Similarly, Herbert (1986; 1990) offers a more detailed framework, dividing CRs into agreement (e.g., "Thank you", elaboration), nonagreement (e.g., deflection, return compliments, downplaying), and other interpretations (e.g., no response, interpreting compliments as requests). Furthermore, Yu (2004) expands this framework by including face-related strategies, such as expressing embarrassment, which highlight cultural variations. Overall, these typologies



demonstrate that CRs are culturally conditioned acts, reflecting social norms of modesty, face, and harmony rather than being mere linguistic choices.

3. Feelings and Perspectives of Compliment Recipients

Understanding Compliment Responses (CRs) involves both affective and cognitive dimensions, encompassing how individuals feel about, interpret, and reflect on compliments. Perspective concerns how compliments are interpreted, which is heavily shaped by cultural norms. Feelings, in contrast, refer to the emotional reactions to compliments, which can range from pride to discomfort, particularly in cultures that emphasize modesty (Leech, 1983). Reflection involves the internal processing of compliments, influenced by one's self-concept and cultural expectations. When considered together, the three dimensions of perspective, feeling, and reflection combine to shape pragmatic competence and highlight important cultural differences in communication (e.g., Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Yu, 2003).

4. Previous Studies Related to CRs Among Native and Nonnative English Speakers: Cross-Cultural, Gender, and Pedagogical Perspectives

Compliment Responses (CRs) are more than simple expressions of politeness. They embody deeply rooted social norms influenced by cultural values, gender roles, and communicative conventions. This literature review synthesizes key findings in CR research by exploring how native and nonnative English speakers engage in complimenting behavior. Special attention is given to Thai EFL learners, a group whose cultural values often contrast sharply with Western norms of interaction. These findings directly inform the comparative aspect of this study by highlighting the sociopragmatic challenges Thai learners face, particularly in balancing L1 norms with L2 expectations when interacting with native English speakers.

4.1 Native English Speakers' CR Patterns

Studies have consistently shown that native English speakers, particularly in the United States, prefer straightforward acceptance of compliments. Expressions like "thank you" are common and reflect a cultural emphasis on positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Herbert (1990) categorized twelve types of American English compliment responses, highlighting a wide repertoire of strategies used to accept, return, or modestly deflect praise. These strategies align with Pomerantz's (1978) concepts of the Agreement Maxim and the Modesty Maxim, illustrating the balancing act between accepting praise and avoiding self-promotion. Besides, Holmes (1986; 1988) and Manes and Wolfson (1981) observed that New Zealand and American English speakers frequently use return compliments or hedging to soften the force of direct praise. Gender-based variations are also notable: women tend to give and receive more compliments and employ a broader range of responses (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988).

Rees-Miller (2011) further demonstrates that in American English, compliment exchanges remain highly sensitive to gendered expectations, with women receiving more appearance-based compliments and men more performance-related praise. Compliments may also generate interactional tension when they conflict with norms of modesty or self-presentation, reinforcing Pomerantz's (1978) "compliment dilemma" in Western discourse. These insights show that even direct acceptance norms among American speakers are accompanied by subtle negotiations of identity and social positioning.

4.2 Non-Native English Speakers' CRs

Nonnative speakers often encounter difficulties in delivering CRs that align with native speaker expectations. These challenges usually arise not from grammatical issues but from pragmatic transfer, which refers



to the influence of L1 norms on L2 use (Chen & Boonkongaen, 2012). Cultures that emphasize humility, such as many Asian societies, often exhibit a preference for compliment rejection or evasion (Chen, 1993; Yu, 2004). Studies show that Indonesian learners, especially Javanese, frequently deflect or downplay compliments due to cultural modesty norms (Cedar & Setiadi, 2016; Nurhijannah, 2021). Thai and Chinese learners typically accept compliments more often but employ mitigation strategies that reflect cultural values of modesty and interpersonal harmony (Cedar & Setiadi, 2016; Chen & Boonkongaen, 2012).

To address these challenges, pedagogical interventions have been proposed. Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) found that Iranian learners who received explicit instruction in complimenting strategies were more capable of producing socially appropriate responses. Similarly, Isaee and Barjesteh (2024) demonstrated that explicit instruction was significantly more effective than implicit learning in developing pragmatic competence. With the rise of digital tools and virtual exchanges, learners now have more opportunities to engage in authentic interaction and refine their CR strategies. These findings directly inform the comparative aspect of this study by highlighting the sociopragmatic challenges Thai learners face, particularly in balancing L1 norms with L2 expectations when interacting with native English speakers.

Furthermore, because of the advanced technology in this era, recent research highlights how AI-assisted and digital communication environments contribute to EFL learners' development of compliment responses. Virtual exchanges provide authentic interaction that supports the emergence of more native-like syntactic patterns (Loranc & Brett, 2022). Computer-mediated communication paired with data-driven instruction increases the appropriateness and variety of CRs with sustained effects (Zhang, 2021). Multimodal digital cues such as emojis, audio, and video significantly shape perceptions of sincerity and politeness (Xie, 2025), while gendered differences in online platforms reveal distinct digital politeness strategies when responding to compliments (Laabidi et al., 2025).

In addition, recent instructional research shows that both consciousness-raising and corpus-based approaches can substantially improve EFL learners' use of appropriate compliment responses, reducing negative L1 transfer and supporting more target-like pragmatic behavior (Alsuhaibani, 2022). Learners in these studies also reported positive perceptions of pragmatic instruction, viewing it as necessary for avoiding miscommunication and enhancing real-world communicative confidence.

4.3 Compliment Responses in Thai Culture

Thai EFL learners often feel uncomfortable directly accepting compliments in English, opting instead to minimize or redirect praise in line with cultural expectations (Cedar, 2012; 2006). For instructional efforts, studies such as those documented by Pongsirijan et al. (2019) have shown that applying Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with pragmatic awareness activities can significantly improve CR usage among Thai learners. In classroom settings, students often adopt hybrid strategies by thanking the speaker while downplaying the compliment, in an effort to balance English politeness norms with cultural values of humility. Their attitudes toward native English-speaking teachers also influence their pragmatic choices, reflecting a dynamic negotiation of identity and communicative norms.

Research also shows that Thai learners' compliment responses are shaped by sociocultural expectations of modesty and relational harmony. Suteerapongsit (2020) found clear gender-based patterns in which females tended to use more deflection or modesty strategies, while males more frequently accepted compliments on ability.



Similarly, Boonyasit (2005) reported that Thai speakers across gender groups: male, female, and effeminate male, often downplayed compliments to avoid appearing boastful and to maintain smooth social relations.

Together, these findings highlight that Thai learners' CR behavior is shaped by cultural values that prioritize humility, social harmony, and indirectness. These preferences differ considerably from those of American native English speakers, who generally favor more direct acceptance.

4.4 Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Differences

CR behavior is highly variable across cultures. In Chinese, downplaying compliments is common to avoid appearing arrogant (Chen, 1993), while German speakers often interpret compliments literally, treating them as evaluations rather than social lubricants (Golato, 2005). In contrast, American speakers view compliment acceptance as a normative act within social interaction. These cultural differences may result in pragmatic failure when L2 learners inadvertently transfer their L1 pragmatic norms into L2 contexts (Altakhaineh et al., 2024; Yu, 2004). For instance, while modesty-oriented cultures prioritize humility, Western norms often interpret evasion or rejection as awkward or ungrateful. Understanding these cross-cultural differences supports the central aim of this research: to investigate how Thai students and native English speakers navigate compliment exchanges through culturally preferred norms. These interactions can result in either pragmatic mismatches or successful adaptation, depending on the speakers' awareness and flexibility.

In summary, the research clearly shows that compliment responses are complex, culturally embedded acts that require both linguistic and sociocultural competence. Native English speakers tend to use direct acceptance strategies, whereas nonnative speakers, especially those from cultures that emphasize humility, often respond with deflection or rejection strategies. Gender, social norms, and cultural expectations all contribute to CR variation. Explicit pragmatic instruction, especially within culturally aware frameworks, is crucial for helping L2 learners navigate these norms effectively. This understanding is essential for promoting communicative competence and reducing intercultural misunderstanding in diverse language learning contexts.

Research Objective

The objectives of this study are to analyze and compare how Thai non-English major undergraduates and American native English speakers use English Compliment Response (CR) strategies and to examine their perspectives and emotional perceptions when receiving compliments. The study also aims to identify underlying cultural themes that shape these behaviors.

Research Questions

This study aimed at addressing the following questions:

1. How do Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers differ in their use of English Compliment Response (CR) strategies across compliment types?
2. In what ways do Thai and American participants differ in their perspectives and emotional reactions toward receiving compliments in English?
3. What cultural themes emerge from the qualitative analysis of how Thai and American participants interpret and respond to compliments?



Methods and Materials

The methodology of this study consisted of four components: 1) Participants, 2) Instrumentation, 3) Data Collection, and 4) Data Analysis. The section has been reorganized to clarify the study's mixed-methods design and to explain how the quantitative and qualitative components jointly address the research questions.

1. Participants

The participants consisted of two groups: 171 second-year non-English major students from a university in Northern Thailand and 32 American native English-speaking adults. Although the sample sizes are unequal, the Thai cohort reflects the full population of second-year students enrolled in the relevant general education course during the data collection period. The smaller American sample reflects recruitment constraints and may limit the generalizability of native-speaker comparisons. However, recruitment from multiple locations helped increase diversity. This imbalance is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. The American sample, while smaller, was recruited from multiple locations to obtain a diverse range of native-speaker English responses. The imbalance is acknowledged as a limitation and is discussed further in the recommendation section.

Demographic information, including age range, gender distribution, and linguistic background, was collected to enhance representativeness; however, only variables relevant to CR behavior were analyzed. Thai participants were predominantly 18–20 years old, whereas American participants were adults aged 22–55. This difference reflects practical constraints but still offers meaningful contrast in terms of L1 cultural norms and English CR use.

Second-year students were selected because they are at a transitional stage of L2 pragmatic development: they have completed basic English courses but still show noticeable challenges in socio-pragmatic areas, including responding to English compliments. The Northern Thai context is also relevant; the region is associated with cultural norms emphasizing politeness, modesty, and relational harmony, which may influence English CRs differently from norms found in other Thai regions.

2. Instrumentation

The questionnaire was adapted from McGee (2019) and consisted of three parts. Additional steps were taken to ensure linguistic and cultural equivalence. Items were written in English, with supporting Thai explanations to ensure comprehension without influencing response patterns. A translation-back-translation procedure was used to confirm accuracy, and two experts in pragmatics and cross-cultural communication reviewed the instrument for content validity.

Part I collected demographic data. Part II contained situational prompts eliciting CRs and emotional reactions. Part III asked participants to produce English CRs and reflect on their feelings. A pilot study using 30 comparable students produced a reliability coefficient of 0.86. Beyond reliability, validity was strengthened through expert review, alignment with theoretical CR categories, and consideration of cultural appropriateness.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected online using Google Forms. Online administration was chosen for practical accessibility, but the mode of delivery may limit the spontaneity and authenticity of naturally occurring CRs. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged. Although data collection occurred during a course, participation was strictly voluntary. The instructor of the course was not involved in data handling, and the researchers ensured full anonymity to avoid perceived coercion. Ethical approval was obtained under IRB No. P2-0247/2568, and informed consent was secured before participation.



4. Data Analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses. This explicit mixed-methods approach enables triangulation: quantitative frequency patterns identify broad cross-cultural trends, while qualitative interpretations reveal emotional and pragmatic nuances.

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

CRs were categorized using the Chiang and Pochtrager (1993) framework, with additional categories refined by Cedar (2006, 2012). These categories were selected because they allow clear comparison between native and non-native English CR types and align with previous cross-cultural pragmatics studies. Chi-square tests and descriptive statistics were used. The chi-square test was chosen because CR categories and emotional responses are nominal variables. This test enables examination of whether L1 background predicts CR distribution, directly addressing the study's first and second research questions.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative component analyzed participants' written explanations of feelings and perspectives. Coding categories were first developed inductively from the data, then compared with established frameworks in intercultural pragmatics. Three trained raters independently coded all qualitative entries. Inter-rater reliability, calculated using Cohen's kappa, reached .82, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. This qualitative data supports the third and fourth research questions by revealing cultural motivations, emotional interpretations, and L2 pragmatic reasoning underlying CR choices.

Results

A total of 171 Thai second-year non-English majors participated in the study, representing Economics (33.92%), Political Science (33.33%), Applied Thai Traditional Medicine (21.05%), and Microbiology (11.70%). The results are organized according to the study objectives.

Research Question 1: Differences in CR Strategies

This section examines how Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers differed in their use of Compliment Response (CR) strategies across compliment types, and whether these differences were statistically significant.

Table 1 Compliment response strategies: A percentage-based comparison between Thai non-English majors and American native speakers

	Appearance		Possession		Achievement		Ability		Overall	
	TH	AM	TH	AM	TH	AM	TH	AM	TH	AM
Acceptance	47.23	60.78	39.57	72.09	52.65	56.36	30.63	4.00	41.59	55.28
Positive elaboration	16.61	19.61	26.02	13.95	21.19	21.82	32.41	40.00	24.69	24.12
Neutral response	6.84	0.00	3.52	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.81	2.00	3.86	0.5
Negative elaboration	0.98	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.00	0.29	0.00
Denial	0.65	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.66	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.51	0.00
Combined response	18.89	19.61	25.20	13.95	21.52	1.82	25.06	24.00	22.94	20.1
Really	5.54	0.00	3.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.56	0.00	3.42	0.00
Not understanding	3.26	0.00	2.44	0.00	2.98	0.00	2.28	0.00	2.69	0.00
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100		



Both groups primarily used Acceptance strategies, though American participants relied on them more frequently. According to Table 1, Americans used Acceptance in 55.28% of responses, compared to 41.59% among Thai participants. This pattern reflects the American preference for direct appreciation consistent with positive-politeness norms. American English generally values clear acknowledgement of praise as a marker of openness and interpersonal engagement.

Thai participants distributed their responses more evenly across categories, including Positive Elaboration (24.69%), Combined strategies (22.94%), and Neutral Response (3.86%). In addition, Thai participants also produced minor strategy types, such as “Really” (3.42%) and “Not Understanding” (2.69%), which did not appear in the American data. Although these categories represent small proportions, their presence suggests occasional moments of uncertainty or affective engagement during compliment exchanges, which may be influenced by L1 pragmatic norms.

Statistical analysis further confirmed that the two groups differed significantly in their overall CR patterns. As reported in Table 2, the overall Pearson Chi-Square test yielded a significant result, $\chi^2(168) = 224.00$, $p = .003$, and the Linear-by-Linear Association was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 27.41$, $p < .001$, indicating systematic group-level differences in CR selection.

Table 2 Chi-square results for overall differences in compliment response categories across all compliment types between Thai non-English majors and American native speakers

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	224.000(a)	168	.003
Likelihood ratio	91.190	168	1.000
Linear-by-Linear association	27.413	1	.000
N of valid cases	32		

Additionally, Table 3 shows that significant differences emerged within each compliment type: Appearance ($\chi^2(1) = 6.867$, $p = .009$), Possession ($\chi^2(1) = 5.232$, $p = .022$), Achievement ($\chi^2(1) = 6.978$, $p = .008$), and Ability ($\chi^2(1) = 6.841$, $p = .009$). These consistent differences across all compliment types indicate that cultural norms shape CR choices regardless of the compliment domain.

Table 3 Chi-square results for differences in compliment response categories by compliment type between Thai non-English majors and American native speakers

Type of Compliments	χ^2	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	$\chi^2(1)$	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Appearance	16.000(a)	14	.313	6.867	1	.009*
Possession	16.000(a)	12	.191	5.232	1	.022*
Achievement	16.000(a)	10	.100	6.978	1	.008*
Ability	32.000(a)	28	.275	6.841	1	.009*

Overall, Thai participants favored more elaborated, relationally oriented strategies, consistent with cultural values of modesty, affective expression, and interpersonal harmony, whereas American participants preferred direct, concise acceptance responses, aligning with conversational straightforwardness and individual acknowledgment.

Research Question 2: Perspectives on Compliment Responses

Thai and American participants demonstrated distinct perspectives toward receiving and responding to compliments in English. As shown in Table 4, Thai participants generally perceived compliments as expressions of encouragement, relational closeness, or social support, whereas American participants tended to interpret



compliments as straightforward acknowledgments of ability, effort, or appearance. This aligns with English-speaking cultural norms that prioritize clarity of intent and individual achievement.

Thai participants rated compliments as socially meaningful and relationally oriented, and many expressed that compliments made them feel appreciated or motivated. In contrast, American participants viewed compliments as a routine part of interaction and were more likely to consider them casual or situational rather than deeply relational. These differences indicate distinct cultural orientations, with Thai respondents adopting a relational and affect-laden interpretation of compliments, while American respondents tend toward a more informational and evaluative interpretation.

Table 4 Perspectives on compliment responses between Thai non-English majors and American native speakers

Perspectives	Appearance		Possession		Achievement		Ability	
	TH	AM	TH	AM	TH	AM	TH	AM
Positive reactions	162	26	153	29	163	27	161	31
Modesty or Deflecting the compliment	4	0	5	0	0	4	6	1
Returning the compliment	0	0	6	0	6	0	0	0
Feeling awkward or Embarrassed	1	4	3	2	3	3	3	0
Suspicion or Discomfort	0	3	3	0	1	0	0	0
Combined	0	3	1	0	2	0	1	1
Total	168	36	171	31	175	34	171	33

Statistical analysis revealed significant group differences in several perspective categories. As indicated in Table 5, Thai participants scored higher on items related to relational warmth, politeness, and social bonding, whereas Americans scored higher on items emphasizing directness, self-expression, and individual acknowledgement. These findings support culturally patterned interpretations of compliments consistent with collectivist vs. individualist discourse norms.

Furthermore, Thai participants were more likely to report that receiving compliments made them feel obligated to respond politely or modestly, whereas American participants reported fewer such social expectations. This difference reflects the cultural weight of modesty and facework in Thai communication, compared to the more autonomy-oriented norms of American English.

Overall, the findings show that Thai and American participants not only differ in the strategies they use but also in how they conceptualize the meaning and function of compliments. These culturally shaped perceptions are crucial for understanding how the two groups navigate compliment exchanges and why pragmatic mismatches may occur in intercultural communication.

Table 5 Perspectives on compliment responses between Thai non-English majors and American native speakers

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	113.000(a)	80	.009
Likelihood ratio	48.181	80	.998
Linear-by-Linear association	22.332	1	.000
N of valid cases	24		



Research Question 3: Qualitative Themes in Compliment Responses

The qualitative analysis revealed distinct cross-cultural patterns in how Thai non-English majors and American native speakers interpreted and emotionally responded to compliments across four scenarios (weight loss, coat, academic achievement, and baking skills). Four major themes emerged.

Theme 1: Balancing Appreciation and Modesty

Native Speakers (NSs) frequently combined appreciation with modesty or mild discomfort. For instance, in the weight-loss compliment scenario, NSs responded with comments such as *“Good but awkward”* or *“It makes me feel like I looked bad before”*. Some NSs also used humor-tinged modesty, such as *“Good? I guess”*, reflecting their tendency to soften praise with light self-effacement. Such responses illustrate the American tendency to acknowledge praise while mitigating potential embarrassment, demonstrating a culturally patterned balance between sincerity and modesty. Thai participants, however, were more likely to accept the compliment directly and add a forward-looking or motivational comment: *“Thanks, I’ll try harder”*. This reflects collectivist values emphasizing self-improvement and positive relational alignment. Similarly, when complimented on baking skills, NSs maintained modesty (e.g., *“I’m not that good”*), whereas Thai learners often expressed pride and relational motivation, such as *“I’ll make it again for my friends”*.

Theme 2: Emotional Framing and Social Sensitivity

Both groups experienced positive emotions such as happiness and pride, but the emotional nuances differed. NSs frequently expressed ambivalence, especially with appearance-related compliments, describing mixed emotions such as *“Good but awkward”* or *“It makes me feel like I looked bad before”*. This reflects concerns about social comparison and self-image in appearance-based interactions.

Thai participants tended to interpret compliments more straightforwardly and positively: *“I feel proud of myself”*, *“I feel happy and encouraged to lose weight”*, *“I feel very happy like my attempt was successful”*, and *“I feel so happy because it’s my efforts and someone saw it”*. While some Thai learners reported mild embarrassment, most responses emphasized encouragement and relational positivity.

Several responses also highlighted feelings of being noticed or appreciated, such as *“I’m glad because I feel I’m getting noticed”*, *“I’m glad you appreciate me”*, and *“I’m so glad people appreciate it”*. Compliments often served as motivation: *“It’s the motivation for me to keep doing it”*, and *“I feel encouraged to continue to lose weight”*. A small number of learners expressed mixed or uncertain feelings, for example, *“I worry that my current weight makes me look better or worse”*.

Overall, Thai learners framed compliments as emotionally uplifting and motivating, emphasizing confidence, appreciation, and social recognition.

Theme 3: Relational Orientation vs. Individual Recognition

Compliments on coats and clothing produced strong contrasts. NSs often used humor or detachment, such as *“It’s just a coat”*, signaling a distancing strategy to avoid overemphasizing material appearance. Thai learners, however, frequently emphasized relational reciprocity: *“Your coat is beautiful”*. These reciprocal gestures reflect collectivist norms prioritizing interpersonal harmony and social bonding.

For academic achievements, NSs expressed pride mixed with peer-related awareness, e.g., *“I’d feel proud but awkward if others didn’t do well”*, indicating sensitivity to fairness and social comparison. Thai participants framed academic compliments as shared accomplishments and relational experiences. Many expressed simple pride, such as *“I feel proud of myself”*, *“I’m so proud and happy to hear that”*, and *“I feel very proud”*. Others highlighted



appreciation from peers or teachers, including *“I’m glad my friends appreciated and encouraged me”*, *“It’s nice to have people appreciate my successful efforts”*, and *“I feel good when someone appreciated my achievement”*. Several learners emphasized group effort and collective recognition, saying *“We have to congratulate Alex as well”*, *“It felt great that he saw our efforts”*, and *“I feel so good because I’m the one in the group who got A”*.

Together, these patterns show that NSs framed achievement with individual recognition moderated by social comparison, whereas Thai learners consistently interpreted compliments through relational gratitude, group affiliation, and shared success.

Theme 4: Cultural Scripts and Pragmatic Transfer

Thai participants often responded using cultural scripts grounded in modesty and relational humility. Rather than centering praise on themselves, they frequently redirected credit or framed their achievements as shared efforts. For example, several learners responded with comments such as *“I feel proud of myself, but I feel like I have to try harder”*, *“I enjoy baking”*, and *“I’m so happy that my friends enjoy eating it”*. Others emphasized relational appreciation: *“It’s nice to be commented that cupcakes are delicious”*, *“I feel encouraged that everyone appreciates my baking”*, and *“Glad my friend complimented my baking”*. These responses show a tendency to connect compliments with improvement, effort, and social contribution, reflecting Thai cultural norms of modesty and relational harmony.

NSs followed culturally typical direct-acceptance scripts, sometimes softened with humor: *“Good? I guess”*, *“Thanks—I appreciate it”*, or *“It’s just a coat”*. Their responses often reflected individual recognition and pragmatic awareness of how to balance sincerity with modesty.

Linguistically, Thai learners tended to use simpler, repetitive emotional vocabulary, such as *“I feel proud”*, *“Very happy”*, *“I can’t stop smiling”*, *“I feel encouraged to practice and keep going”*, or *“I feel like I want to improve my skills more”*. These responses often connected emotion to effort or future goals, whereas NSs displayed greater variation in structure, hedging, and humor, reflecting broader pragmatic socialization.

In conclusion, these patterns show that Thai learners oriented their responses toward motivation, humility, and relational harmony, while NSs navigated compliments through pragmatic layering, balancing sincerity, modesty, and social dynamics. These qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative findings and highlight how cultural values and pragmatic norms shape both the interpretation and emotional experience of compliments.

Conclusion

This study shows that Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers differ systematically in how they interpret and respond to compliments in English. Thai learners tended to use elaborative and relationally oriented strategies, viewing compliments as encouragement and social harmony, whereas American participants favored concise acceptance and often balanced appreciation with modesty or mild discomfort. These patterns reflect broader cultural orientations, collectivist relational norms for Thai learners and individualistic, direct norms for American speakers.

The findings address the research objectives by 1) identifying culturally influenced differences in CR strategies, 2) showing how perspectives and emotional reactions vary across groups, and 3) revealing qualitative themes that illustrate how cultural values and pragmatic expectations shape responses. Together, these results contribute to intercultural pragmatics by highlighting how Thai learners’ cultural scripts, affective orientations, and linguistic resources influence their English compliment behaviors. More broadly, the study demonstrates how culturally



grounded pragmatic practices shape interactional meanings in cross-cultural communication, offering insight into how learners navigate English use across cultural boundaries.

Pedagogically, the study suggests that pragmatic instruction should focus on raising learners' awareness of cultural interpretations of compliments, supporting authentic communication rather than enforcing native-speaker norms. Future research could compare gender and proficiency groups, incorporate authentic spoken data, or include additional English-speaking populations to broaden the comparative scope.

Discussion

This study examined how Thai non-English majors and American native English speakers respond to compliments in English, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to reveal culturally patterned differences. In this section, the findings are interpreted through politeness theory, sociocultural norms, and pragmatic transfer to explain why these patterns emerged.

1. Cultural Interpretation of Compliment Response Strategies

Both groups most frequently used Acceptance strategies, supporting universal politeness tendencies of maintaining positive face (Pomerantz, 1978; Holmes, 1988). Americans, however, used Acceptance significantly more often, consistent with U.S. cultural norms favoring sincerity, direct acknowledgment, and positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This pattern aligns with prior work showing that American speakers often combine acceptance with hedging or humor to balance sincerity with modest self-presentation (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Rees-Miller, 2011).

Thai participants, in contrast, employed more diverse and elaborative responses, including Positive Elaboration, Modified Acceptance, and minimization strategies. These elaborated or softened responses reflect Thai cultural norms of humility, relational harmony, and avoidance of overt self-boasting (Boonyasit, 2005; Phoocharoensil, 2012; Suteerapongsit, 2020).

These culturally grounded differences support Objective 1 by showing that strategy choices are shaped by shared norms of face, modesty, and interpersonal balance.

2. Comparison with Prior Studies and Theoretical Implications

Several findings extend and refine previous research. For instance, Thai participants' preference for elaboration and hedging aligns with studies showing Asian learners tend to avoid direct acceptance to express modesty (Chen, 1993; Yu, 2004). However, in contrast to past claims that Thai speakers frequently reject compliments, the current study found substantial Acceptance rates, suggesting possible shifts in contemporary Thai communication or increased exposure to English-mediated interaction.

American speakers' discomfort in appearance-related contexts, such as responding "*It makes me feel like I looked bad before*", reinforces Pomerantz's (1978) "compliment dilemma" and aligns with Rees-Miller (2011), who notes that Western modesty norms still influence self-presentation even when positive politeness norms favor direct acceptance. This pattern supports Herbert's (1990) observation that Americans often soften acceptance to maintain sincerity without appearing boastful.

Thai learners' forward-looking or motivational expressions (e.g., "*I will improve myself*") reflect pragmatic transfer of L1 norms into L2 contexts (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996), similar to patterns observed in other Asian EFL populations.



Together, these findings demonstrate convergence with and meaningful deviations from prior research, highlighting the complexity of cross-cultural pragmatic behavior.

3. Emotional Responses and Sociopragmatic Sensitivity

Qualitative data revealed notable differences in emotional framing. Americans frequently expressed mixed feelings: ambivalence, awkwardness, or self-consciousness, especially when receiving appearance or achievement compliments. These reactions align with Western cultural scripts in which compliments function not only as social support but also as evaluative acts that may challenge norms of modesty (Golato, 2005; Rees-Miller, 2011).

Thai participants, however, viewed compliments more positively and relationally, often describing them as encouragement, support, or motivation. This pattern aligns with prior research showing that Thai learners orient toward harmony, relational support, and hybrid strategies that balance gratitude with modesty (McGee, 2019; Pongsirijan et al., 2019).

These emotional distinctions support Objective 2 by demonstrating that affective responses are culturally patterned and linked to shared norms of identity, politeness, and social alignment.

Research Limitations and Recommendations

Research Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to students enrolled in the same curriculum, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The unequal number of Thai NNSs and American NSs also presents a limitation, as the smaller native-speaker sample may restrict the strength of cross-group comparisons despite efforts to recruit from multiple locations. Additionally, the study primarily employed a quantitative approach with only four open-ended questions, which may not have yielded sufficiently in-depth insights. It is also important to note that the study did not focus on participants' sociolinguistic factors like gender or age.

Pedagogical and Pragmatic Implications

These findings carry important implications for second language pedagogy. As noted by Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) and Isae and Barjesteh (2024), explicit instruction in CR strategies helps learners develop pragmatic competence and mitigate cross-cultural misunderstandings. Given the observed divergence in strategy use and emotional interpretation, instructional approaches should incorporate cultural awareness training alongside linguistic practice.

In practical terms, teachers can integrate short activities such as comparing authentic compliment dialogues from different cultures, analyzing short video clips that illustrate CRs, or having learners practice multiple response options through role-plays or dialogue completion tasks. Activities that require learners to notice, reflect on, and discuss culturally appropriate responses, such as journaling about real-life compliment encounters or evaluating sample CRs from online interactions, can further support their development of socio-pragmatic awareness.

Furthermore, the data affirm that CRs are not merely formulaic utterances but complex, culturally embedded acts that reflect deeper values of face, identity, and social role. Educators must thus move beyond grammatical correctness to foster socio-pragmatic competence, equipping learners with the interpretive tools to understand and perform culturally appropriate CRs in diverse contexts.

The quantitative findings of this study reinforce the theoretical and empirical insights outlined in the literature. Thai non-English majors and American native speakers exhibit distinct patterns in both the forms and perceptions



of compliment responses. These differences are statistically significant and culturally meaningful, revealing how pragmatics operates not only at the level of language use but also in emotional and cognitive interpretation. Grounded in well-established frameworks, the findings affirm that compliment responses function as a window into broader cultural communicative norms and highlight the need for pragmatically informed language instruction.

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