

Compliments across Gender and Power Relation among Indonesian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the complexities of compliments faced by English as foreign language (EFL) learners. It covers several aspects such as how interpersonal relationships relate to complimenting behaviour. In addition, it examines how the culture of complimenting is relevant with some conditions such as power relation, and gender. The significance of the study is to explore the cultural transfer might appearing in complimenting. The subjects of research in this study are EFL learners at State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Indonesia. It employs ethnographical method to gain the explanation for the phenomenon underlying the complexities in complimenting behaviour. The complexities concern with the interference of culture, the influence of gender and power relation. The finding shows that female learners tend to use more complimenting strategies compared to males. The complimenting expression is also various affected by the relation with the hearers. Some variations occurring in complimenting cover overstatement, mixed language, non-sensical, no compliment and question. The context of Islamic institution also results in specific expression related to power display in complimenting strategies used. However, in EFL context, complimenting becomes an issue as there is lack of authentic English examples in course books and the inefficient instructions English learners receive which particularly expose them to variation in English compliments. Therefore, further studies are needed to develop teaching construct that accommodates the improvement of pragmatic competence particularly in complimenting for politeness awareness which today becomes a significant value.

Keywords: complimenting behaviour, Indonesian EFL learners

Cite as: Indah, R. N. (2017). Compliments across Gender and Power Relation among Indonesian EFL Learners. Arab World English Journal, 8 (2). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no2.9>

Introduction

Compliment is defined as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker. It concerns with some positive value or goodness that can be related to skill, achievement, characteristics, possession in many others (Holmes, 1988). The positive evaluation uses several evaluative adjectives such as nice, beautiful, pretty, good, great, etc. and it also depends on how interpersonal relationships relate to complimenting behaviours. In EFL context, complimenting is also an issue as there is lack of authentic English examples in course books and the inefficient instructions English learners receive which particularly expose them to variation in English compliments.

Complimenting belongs to a culture aspect as it involves one's ability to use appropriate expression for both giving and responding to the attributive credit. In terms of speech act, complimenting is affected by the speaker's native culture as investigated by Kim (2001). The finding shows sociolinguistic transfer phenomenon of the native culture shown by Korean and Japanese college students.

Students might not aware that giving compliments as well as responding compliments have special goal. Sometimes compliments responded by silence or denial may result in unpleasant misunderstanding especially when conversing with native speakers. Therefore, teaching students to compliment as well as to response compliments appropriately is similar to teaching a complex multi-linguistic skill (Creese, 1991). It happens as learning to use language in context should start with the context then learning more on the language. In fact, student with lower proficiency has a limited variation in how to respond compliment compared to those with higher proficiency (Grossi, 2009).

The response to compliment is also various depending on the context and the listener's perception. In everyday conversation mostly the phrase 'thank you' was given in response to a compliment. However, there are several cases in which various responses appear as investigated by Grossi (2009). The response can be related to the function of the expression such as to soften a criticism or make a suggestion, as rejection, or true expressions of admiration on both ability and appearance.

Compliment responses are various related to gender differences. A study on a corpus of 1,063 compliment events shows that male compliments are mostly accepted by female, whereas compliments from women are met with more various types such as mitigate (for instance commenting history, shifting credit, questioning and returning the compliments) , reject, no acknowledgement or request interpretation (such as "I am glad to give it to you as a gift"). These varieties confirm that sex-based differences occur in the function and frequency of compliments as speech acts (Herbert, 1990).

How complex complimenting is understandable as it involves culture. A study conducted by Chen and Rau (2011) examine how American English native speakers perceived differently toward the compliment responses of Chinese speakers. Their study found that the compliment and the responses cover several problems such as improper amount of information, nonsensical exchanges, rudeness, overstatement, no acknowledgment, no answer to the questions, no

compliment, and wrong person/thing complimented. These problems represent violation of Grice's conversational maxims.

Complimenting is complex as it also concerns with power relation. As identified by Adachi (2011), social factor of status strongly contributes to the variation of compliments expressed by university students in Japan. This sociolinguistic study strengthened the proposition that complimenting in the speech community displays power plays.

By referring to the above perspectives on complimenting, it is an interesting fact that complimenting is cultural bound so that conducting studies within different contexts might result in different finding. Thus, this study concerns with complimenting within the context of EFL students of an Islamic university. It is done to see whether the condition such as power relation, cultural background and gender contribute to the complexities of complimenting.

Literature Review

Complimenting in foreign language contexts has been a special concern as it involves several complexities. A number of studies analyzed it in relation with some aspects such as the interference of learner's first language. Kim (2001) found that Korean and Japanese students learning English language tend to adopt their native language compliment form. They did not use the common English complimenting strategies. Similarly, Kuwaiti learners of English also have the interference of their first language in both expression and strategies of complimenting (Alotaibi, 2016).

The learner's first language is also adopted in responding compliment. Falasi (2007) found that Arabic learners of English did not produce target-like compliment responses as they perceive their native norms. Therefore, they still adopt Arabic expression to respond compliment when they communicate in English. Similarly, Sattah and Lah (2008) also found that Iraqi learners also adopted Arabic expression in responding compliments. These studies show that learners have lack of awareness on the different sociolinguistic rules among languages. As found by Zayed (2014) Arabic learners of English in practicing the speech act of complimenting ignored some common forms of English compliments. They used jokes and Arabic transcribed into English rather than using the correct expressions because of the lack of knowledge on English pragmatics.

The knowledge of English pragmatics influenced the practice of complimenting so that high proficiency learners can use target-like compliments response. Meanwhile learners with low proficiency tend to use the pragmatic norms of their native language, for instance using rejecting and downgrading compliment. This fact is found in Thai learners of English by Phoocharoensil (2012). However, when the setting is not in face-to-face interaction, the complimenting strategies can be different. In social media for instance, English learners despite of their proficiency commonly employ acceptance strategy at macro level and appreciation token at micro level. As found by Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) these strategies are used by Iranian learners of English when communicating through social media.

Method

This study involves eighty English department students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim. As ethnographic research, the observation on complimenting is done during the interaction inside and outside of the classroom. Beside observation, another instrument is used namely questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire is given to get the information concerning the student's cultural background. It uses Indonesian language to facilitate the students to express themselves freely. While the semi-structured interview is done in both English and Indonesian language to confirm the finding related to the analysis from the observation and the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

In this research, complimenting is viewed under three conditions namely power relation, cultural background and gender. Each of them is analysed by referring to the complexities of complimenting which also includes the responses to compliments.

Power Relation in Complimenting

In the interaction done in two classes, this study finds the influence of different power in the expression of complimenting. The observation on two writing classes of sophomore and freshmen is done to see the way they give compliment in reviewing the paragraph writing.

Sophomore in doing peer assessment tends to find their friends weakness or error identified in their friend's paragraph writing. They can even mention at least ten errors from their peer's writing without being able to find the strength to be complemented. From a few compliments given, the following is the sample:

I like the transition you use. You have done a good job. (Datum 1)

The writing is informative, very good. (Datum 2)

You have arranged the ideas in good logical order, I like it. (Datum 3)

As seen in the sample, the construction of the compliment consists of the value judgment using the common word 'good' and a short reason such as on the transition, the content and the order. They give general complimenting just like what writing instructors do. This is in contrast with the way they identify the errors made by their peers. They can do it in detail by giving more examples and suggestions for improvement. Complimenting peers is not an easy thing for them. Based on the semi-structured interview, they stated that they learn better from the mistakes not from the compliment. Moreover, they said that finding one's weakness is easier than identifying one's strength. Therefore, it can be inferred that social factor or similar status strongly contributes to the variation of compliments expressed by university students. This finding is similar to the complimenting expression of the university students in Japan as identified by Adachi (2011).

When the students were asked to comment on the writing of their junior, they show different expression. They comment differently on the focus on the writing skill and the content. On writing skill, the following are the sample:

I like your grammatical usage. It is well organized. You have a lot of vocabularies (Datum 4)

I love the way you describe it that creates a vivid expression of what you have seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched (Datum 5)

Your writing is good enough although you're still in the first semester. You have described about your favourite place in simple writing but very detail (Datum 6)

In datum four to six, the value judgment is more various, not only using the common word 'good'. The expression is more detail by giving a clear explanation on the strength of the writing. Similarly, the various expressions are stated in other data below.

I like your writing because you write from the general ideas to specific ones and your grammar is good enough (Datum 7)

I like the way you describe it by giving a good logical order, detail information and completed with a good picture (Datum 8)

I love your way to describe it, you chose beautiful words to create your sentences, it's amazing! (Datum 9)

In datum seven to nine, personal impression is involved by expressing the reviewer's support for the strength on more various elements showing the writing skill. Compared to the first three data referring to their peers, sophomore students show more careful and detail compliments. They were aware of their power display so that they perform their knowledge on writing proficiency through expressing detail compliment. While, in complimenting those of the same level, they did not have the same role to advice on the writing strength.

The compliment of the sophomore also goes to the content of the writing of their juniors as seen in the sample below

Awesome. Your description is full of details that convey your experience to readers. (Datum 10)

I can imagine how amazing that place is and how lovely your memorable moment there. I like the details you add about those beaches. (Datum 11)

Your story is touching, it reminds me when I've been there last year (Datum 12)

In the realization of the compliments, sophomores compliment their junior directly or in unambiguous manner. The direct compliments contain positive connotation that can be in the form of adjective, adverb, verb, etc. (Farenkia, 2011). The finding shows that from the twelve data above 65% belongs to direct compliment with single head act. It means that each utterance contains one compliment. The rest, 35% consists of multiple direct compliments as one utterance involves more than one compliment.

In the above data, the judgment value concerns with various expression such as awesome, amazing, lovely and touching. The elaboration of the compliment related with the content shows their engagement with the text. This fact did not appear in the previous activity where they were reviewing their peer's writing. Again, complimenting complexities is relevant with the power display as the shown by the finding.

From the instrument of open-ended questionnaire, the students show various expression of complimenting. The situation is given in Indonesian language as follow: *Anda adalah tutor bahasa Inggris. Salah satu siswa les anda memakai tas baru. Bagaimana anda memuji siswa tersebut? Anda bisa memilih antara memuji dalam bahasa Inggris atau bahasa Indonesia* (You are an English tutor. A student of your private course has a new bag. How do you say to her? You can express it in English or Indonesian language)

The compliments to one with lower status made by the students are expressed more freely in Indonesian language. Only some students prefer using English. When complimenting to children, students use shorter expression as follow:

That's cool, it fits to all outfit colours (Datum 13)

What a beautiful bag! (Datum 14)

Shorter expression exists when they complimented in English. While, more complexities appear when they complimented in longer expression. This case is also similar when they need to respond the situation as that is to compliment the dish served by a friend's mom.

The situation exploring the power relation is also given in another situation that is to compliment on the Dean's speech. In expressing compliment across different power relation, some complexities occur as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Complimenting strategies across power relation

Strategies	Situation 1 Complimenting lower status	Situation 2 & 3 Complimenting higher status
Overstatement	Well. You have a nice taste. Not everybody have it (datum 15) Your bag is extraordinary, you are energetic and your bag is really helpful in every single activity (datum 16).	<i>Masakan ibu sangat enak sampai mengalahkan kehebatan chef</i> (This dish is perfect, chef's cooking cannot compete it) (datum 19) <i>Orasinya membuat termotivasi, bikin hati berdetak</i> (What a motivating speech, it moves my heart) (datum 25)
Mixed language	-	<i>Ya Allah, ibu sip deh pokoknya, perfect banget masakannya. Masakan oleh ahlinya pasti dapat banget sentuhan rasanya. Ibu terbaik!</i> (Oh Lord, you're an amazing mom, perfect meal. A meal from the expert must be very tasty. Best mom!) (datum 20) <i>Alhamdulillah, ibu masakannya enak sekali, bumbunya sangat meresap.</i> Perhaps, <i>saya boleh minta resepnya untuk saya coba di rumah?</i> (Thank God, your cooking is delicious, perfectly seasoned.

		May I get the receipt to try it at home?) (datum 21)
		<i>Subhanallah, pidato panjenengan sangat memotivasi</i> (Oh my God, your speech is very motivating) (datum 26)
		<i>Masya Allah, orasinya sangat menginspirasi, saya kagum dengan yang ibu sampaikan</i> (My goodness, the speech is very inspiring, I admire its message (datum 27)
Nonsensical	<i>Tasnya bagus sekali, boleh pinjam ga?</i> (What a cool bag, may I borrow it someday?) (datum 17)	<i>Masakannya enak sekali, kalo bukan karena kenyang saya pasti bakal nambah sampai tiga kali</i> (This cooking is very delicious, if I'm not full I can finish three plates) (datum 22)
	<i>Tasnya keren, pasti Bahasa Inggrisnya keren juga donk</i> (Your bag is really cool, surely your English should be cool, too) (datum 18)	
No compliment	-	Keep silent. Just smiling (datum 23)
Question	-	<i>Bisa nambah bu?</i> (May I have it more?) -laughing- (datum 24)

The complexities in complimenting those of lower status result in overstatement and nonsensical expression. Meanwhile, complimenting the higher status gives more various expressions as it also covers mixed language, question and even no compliment.

When the students compliment lower status, they maintain their role so that they try to be understood more by their children. Therefore, they avoid mixed language. However, the elaboration result in the complexities such as difficulty to relate with a more make sense expression (see data 17 & 18) or to avoid exaggeration (see data 15 & 16).

Complimenting those of lower status results in the use of direct multiple head act. As show in data 15 and 16, each utterance consists of more than one compliment. It reflects the freer expression when complimenting lower status hearers. Meanwhile, more complexities occur in complimenting higher status. Having questions to replace complimenting directly or using gesture and smiling becomes the strategies reflecting the difficulties to complement those of higher level. As the context related to the student's background namely Islamic institution, it is not easy to express compliment or comment to older people, to their teacher or to those of higher level. As a result, exaggerate statements are made (see data 19 & 18) and they also use mixed language consisting Bahasa Indonesia, Javanese language, English and Arabic (see data 20, 21, 26 and 27). The common expressions characterizing their Islamic identity involve *Ya Allah*, *Alhamdulillah*, *Subhanallah* and *Masya Allah*. These belong to interjection to open compliment.

The student cultural identity is also shown in the addressing term 'panjenengan' used in datum 26.

The tendency of using first language in complementing or to literally translate the expression from first language denotes the negative transfer as well as pragmatic transfer in both complimenting and responding complements. This case is also found in Asian EFL learners (Alotaibi, 2016; Phoocharoensil, 2012; Varol, 2015), and it characterises EFL preferences in complimenting contexts (Falasi, 2007). Furthermore there is also cultural transfer when complimenting in English as shown in datum 23 and 24. It also occurs in complimenting context of Thai EFL students preferring to have different strategy rather than expressing the compliment directly (Cedar, 2012).

The use of interjection or attention getter to start compliment is also common in French, such as oh my god (Farenkia, 2011). That complimenting across power relation includes complexities as found in this study supports the finding of Chen and Rau (2011). They found that the problems represent violation of Grice's conversational maxims. In this study the violation of the maxim is shown in the strategy of overstatement, nonsensical expression, question and no compliment.

Based on the realization of the complement, the utterances to those of higher status involve some variations. Direct multiple compliments are used in 50% of the data while 35% prefers direct single head compliment. Only 15% uses indirect compliments. That indirect compliment is seldom used is also found in the context of complimenting in Cameroon and Canadian French (Farenkia, 2011).

The different choice of language in complimenting to higher status use of is not related with the language proficiency but it regards to politeness. The students prefer using Bahasa Indonesia which mixed with other language to convey their identity. It shows that there is interaction with the degree of politeness as the pragmatic transferability is not related to the language proficiency as asserted by Takahashi (1996) based on his study to Japanese university students. It refers to similar cultural context of EFL learners in Asia.

Complimenting and Gender

The complexities of complimenting are also related with gender. In the observation on how students of sophomore complimented those of freshmen, male students tend to focus on the writing skill. Meanwhile, female students compliment on both writing skill and the content of the paragraph writing. In average, the length of the compliment of expression of female student is longer than males. However, in terms of the detail of their compliment, both male and female students do not perform significant difference.

The difference related to gender exists in the compliment responses. The freshmen responded the compliment from the sophomore students using four common strategies namely thanking, elaboration, exchange and little refusal. The gender difference is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Compliment responses of male and female students

Strategies	Compliments	Gender
Thanking	I really appreciate your compliment. It's a good thing to know that someone with higher experience commented on my baby step writing (Datum 28)	Female
	I want to thank you for correcting and complimenting my work (Datum 29)	Male
	Thank you, I'm glad that you like my topic (Datum 30)	Female
Elaboration	Thanks, I'm really proud of reading it. However, it is too much because I still can't do it well (Datum 31)	Female
	I feel so helpful with your complement. It think I need more experience till my writing reach a good point from readers (Datum 32)	Male
	Thank you. You have spent your time reading and giving comment to my writing. I hope you can visit the place someday (Datum 33)	Female
	Because you like my writing and the picture, I'll invite you to visit that place (Datum 34)	Male
Exchange	You are very kind. This is the first time I get good appreciation from someone. It helps a lot (Datum 35)	Female
	You say unexpected words, I mean no one gives me compliment on my writing before. Thank you. You are a nice person (Datum 36)	Female
Little refusal	Thank you, although is just a short writing and a little bit boring (Datum 37)	Female

The data show that in responding to compliment the most common strategy is thanking and elaboration. These identify acceptance strategy which is common for Asian complimenting context (Dehkordi & Chalak, 2015). The responses can be various to cover different function. In the study conducted by Grossi (2009), the function of the expression consists of softening a criticism or making a suggestion, as rejection, or true expressions of admiration on both ability and appearance. While in this study, the way to express admiration is shown in elaboration strategies (datum 31 and 33). Admiration indeed becomes an aspect of cultural norms as genuine expression rather than an offer of solidarity. This fact is also found in the complimenting context of Chinese EFL learners (Yu, 2005).

Female students are more creative in varying their response strategies. They used exchange to maintain the two way conversation by complimenting the reviewer as 'very kind' (datum 35) and 'a nice person' (datum (36). The feeling of inferiority is also shown by the little refusal strategy (datum 37). This finding is also similar to the complimenting responses of Iranian students that accept compliment using appreciation token "Thanks" and with a few reject or no acknowledgement (Mohajernia & Solimani, 2013).

The different complexities of complimenting related to gender differences are analysed further through the use of the result of questionnaire. The summary is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Complimenting in daily life

No	Statement	Male (%)	Female (%)
1.	Keen on giving compliment	60	35
2.	Complimenting friends	50	25
3.	Complimenting in bahasa Indonesia	30	60
4.	Complimenting in mother tongue	70	25
5.	Complimenting in English	10	55
6.	Compliment on one's appearance	20	25
7.	Compliment on one's achievement	50	80
8.	Compliment on one's attitude	40	80
9.	Compliment on one's good or possession	20	25
10.	Appreciate being complimented	30	25
11.	Complimented by parents	30	30
12.	Complimented by teachers	20	30
13.	Complimented by peers	10	25
14.	Complimented based on appearance	0	15
15.	Complimented based on achievement	20	20
16.	Complimented based on attitude	10	15
17.	Complimented based on good or possession	10	0
18.	Compliments are made sincere	20	45
19.	Compliments are just conversational feature	10	30
20.	Compliments boost mood	40	80
21.	Keep silent or just smile when complimented	70	40
22.	Exchange complimenting with another	70	75
23.	Refuse or deny compliments	20	30

The culture of complimenting as shown in Table 3 to some extent explains the background for the difference in complexities of complimenting across gender. Male students are superior in giving compliment and complimenting friends. Males tend to use their mother tongue in complimenting. They would really appreciate being complimented. However, they prefer to keep silent or just smile when being complimented.

Female students chose to compliment in Bahasa Indonesia or in English with the purpose to compliment on one's achievement, attitude or sometimes on possession. Females are more complimented by their teachers and peers. They usually got compliment on their appearance or attitude. Yet, more compliment goes to their achievement. In this case, they believe that compliments were given sincerely although sometimes they only function as conversational feature as lip service. Most of the female students assert that compliments boost mood. Sometimes they deny or refuse compliments from other.

In fact, males never being complimented based on appearance, whereas female students stated that they never being complemented on their good or possession. Despite the difference, both male and female students share similar responses on complimenting. They were complimented by their parents and the compliments refer to their achievement. That males and

females have different kinds of consideration of the compliments is not only found in this study but also similar to the EFL context of Iranian students (Khaneshan & Bonyadi, 2016).

Based on the analysis, in the context of writing class of Indonesian learners, both compliment and compliment responses show the on-going construct of linguistic and sociocultural norms related with power relation and gender. Similar to the finding of An, the complexities of complimenting in bilingual context further reflect cultural values and social norms. In the context of bilingual Chinese and English speakers, there are different strategies employed in expressing compliment responses (An, 2013; Chen & Bhoonkongsaen, 2012). While, in this study, the difference strategies also exist in complimenting in different power relation. The students tend to use Bahasa Indonesia to compliment those of different power relation.

Conclusions

This study explores complexities of complimenting across power relation and gender which support the result of previous studies with a more specific context namely Islamic institution. The difference in power affects the strategies as well as the problems occurring. Social factor or similar status strongly contributes to the variation of compliments expressed by university students so that when they complimented more easily to those of lower level. While, in complimenting higher level some problems appear cover overstatement, mixed language, non-sensical, no compliment and question. The context of Islamic institution also results in specific expression related to power display in complimenting strategies used. Pedagogically, the finding of this study implicates the need of pragmatic competence development through several ways in EFL classes.

Related with gender differences, female students tend to use more complimenting strategies compared to males. Females employ thanking, elaboration, exchanges and little refusal. In average, the length of the compliment of expression of female student is longer than males. However, in terms of the detail of their compliment, both male and female students do not perform significant difference. The difference also occurs based on the culture of complimenting in their social life which is also dissimilar between male and female students. In fact, complimenting in English is not for both males and females. However, in EFL context, complimenting becomes an issue as there is lack of authentic English examples in course books and the inefficient instructions English learners receive which particularly expose them to variation in English compliments. Therefore, as the implication, more empirical finding is needed to establish a better teaching construct to accommodate the improvement of pragmatic for politeness awareness which today becomes a significant value.

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