An Analysis of Student Performance in Understanding and Responding to Short Functional Texts

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Abstract

This study investigates the ability of eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya to respond accurately to short functional texts containing common social expressions in English and to identify which categories are most and least effectively mastered. Five communicative functions were examined: expressing gratitude, apologizing, giving compliments, offering help, and greeting. Using a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected from 42 students through a 20-item dialogue-based multiple-choice test. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to determine the mean, accuracy percentage, standard deviation, and score distribution per category. The results revealed that students achieved an average accuracy of 82.5% (median = 18.5/20), indicating generally good ability, though performance varied considerably. The highest proficiency was observed in giving and responding to compliments (95% accuracy), while acknowledging mistakes showed the lowest performance (79% accuracy), possibly due to cultural norms and limited exposure to authentic usage. Variation in scores was also linked to vocabulary range, interaction experience, and confidence. These findings suggest that English instruction should incorporate culturally sensitive categories, especially those less familiar to students, through authentic conversation, role-play, and interactive technology, with differentiated support for lower-performing learners.

Keywords: *short functional text; social expressions; conversation learning*

Introduction

English language learning at the junior high school level seeks to enhance students' communicative competence, encompassing their skills to understand, respond to, and appropriately use language in different social contexts. A key aspect of this competence is the ability to master short functional texts, which are

brief messages designed to communicate specific social meanings clearly and efficiently. These texts frequently appear as expressions of thanks, apologies, compliments, requests for assistance, or greetings used in daily conversations. Mastering these categories enables students to communicate more naturally, precisely, and suitably across different contexts.

The 2013 curriculum in Indonesia focuses on communication-centered language learning, aiming to help students apply English practically in everyday contexts. Within this framework, brief functional texts act as a strategic resource for enhancing speaking skills via organized yet authentic conversations. Through these activities, students enhance their fluency and accuracy while also learning to choose suitable vocabulary, manage their intonation, and grasp the social norms conveyed through expressions.

Numerous studies indicate that engaging in brief conversations can enhance students' speaking abilities. Nunan (2004) explained that task-based learning and structured dialogues improve learners' fluency and interaction by mimicking real-life communication. Richards (2008) noted that conversation-based speaking activities help build learners' confidence and promote genuine communication. Research by Goh and Burns indicated that conversations structured with scaffolding can enhance short functional text and also improve syntactic accuracy.

However, the implementation of short conversation-based learning is not without challenges. Woodrow (2006) identified a number of obstacles such as anxiety about speaking, limited vocabulary, and minimal opportunities for practice, especially in classes with limited resources. Furthermore, even among children in the same grade level, speaking proficiency varies widely. As suggested by Tomlinson (2014), differentiated learning strategies must be used in this context to account for the students' varied skills.

With the development of technology, several innovations have been implemented to support the learning of speaking skills. Li and Hegelheimer (2013) showed that mobile-assisted learning and speech-recognition-based exercises can create a more interactive and personalized language learning experience. However, while there are numerous studies on short conversations in general, research specifically measuring students' ability to respond to various categories of short functional texts remains limited.

This research gap is crucial to fill because teachers and curriculum developers require precise data on the social expression categories students have mastered and those that need further development. This information will assist in creating more focused learning resources, teaching methods, and assessment tools. Without this information, attempts to enhance students' speaking abilities often lack specificity and do not address actual needs in the field.

Based on initial observations and prior research findings, it seems that students' capacity to respond to different types of short functional texts differs. Some students can respond correctly when showing gratitude or praise, but

struggle more with apologizing or offering assistance. These differences suggest variations in mastery that necessitate additional research to uncover patterns in students' strengths and weaknesses.

This study aims to analyze the ability of eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya to respond to various categories of short functional texts containing common social expressions. In addition, this study also seeks to identify which categories are most mastered and which categories require further learning intervention. To achieve this goal, a validated multiple-choice dialogue-based test instrument is used to measure the accuracy of students' responses in various social situations.

The research questions in this study are: 1) How well can eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya demonstrate their ability to respond correctly to short functional texts with common social expressions in English, as assessed through dialogue-based multiple-choice tasks? 2) Which categories of social expressions in short functional texts are most effectively mastered by students, and which are the least?

This study is theoretically anticipated to advance research on teaching short functional texts within the framework of real-life communication at the junior high school level. Practically, this study's findings will help English teachers craft better learning strategies, develop appropriate materials, and create category-based assessments aimed at addressing students' particular weaknesses.   Thus, the results of this study not only have academic value but also provide direct benefits for classroom learning practices.

Method

This research employs a quantitative descriptive approach to examine student responses to short functional texts across five communicative functions: Complimenting and Responding to Compliments, Offering Help and Accepting Offers, Apologizing and Responding to Apologies, Expressing and Responding to Gratitude, Expressing Appreciation and Encouragement, and Admitting Mistakes. The quantitative descriptive method was selected because it enables researchers to numerically assess students' abilities, detect patterns or trends, and compare outcomes across different categories without altering variables.

The study involved 42 eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya, aged 13 to 14 years, who had been learning English as a foreign language for about three years. The sample was chosen through convenience sampling, based on students' availability and willingness to take part. Students who had been provided with learning materials pertaining to the five categories of short functional texts, which were the focus of the study, met the inclusion criteria. Students who were absent on the day of the test were excluded from the list of participants.

The primary instrument employed was a written test comprising 20 multiple-choice questions aimed at assessing students' comprehension of short

functional texts. Each category of communicative functions included four questions, except for the categories of expressing appreciation and encouragement and admitting mistakes, which had two questions each. Each question required students to select the most suitable answer from multiple choices offered.

Data collection took place during a single 40-minute session in English class. Before the test started, the researcher provided verbal instructions in both English and Indonesian to confirm participants' comprehension. After the test papers were handed out, students completed the exam on their own without consulting dictionaries or seeking help from friends. The test process was overseen collaboratively by the researcher and the English teacher to ensure the validity of the implementation and to address any questions about the procedure. After the time was up, all answer sheets were collected and assessed using the previously established assessment guidelines.

The collected data was then processed using Microsoft Excel. Individual scores for each category of short functional texts were calculated first, then averaged to obtain category scores and overall scores. Next, the percentage values, highest and lowest average scores were calculated to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. The standard deviation values were also analyzed to see the extent of variation in student performance in each category.

To visualize the differences in results between categories, a bar chart was created to show the comparison of student success rates in the five types of short functional texts. This analysis was entirely descriptive statistics, as the purpose of the study was to provide a factual overview of students' current abilities without testing hypotheses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics Result

In response to Research Question 1—how well Grade VIII students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya can respond appropriately to short functional texts with common social expressions in English, assessed through dialogue-based multiple-choice tasks—the descriptive statistics indicate a predominantly high level of performance. The mean score of 15.69 out of 20 (82.5%) suggests that students generally demonstrate a high level of skill in understanding and reacting to social cues like expressing thanks, apologizing, offering assistance, and giving compliments. This indicates that the majority of students are able to understand the communicative purpose of the texts and choose suitable responses based on the context.

Chart 1: Distribution of Student Scores in the Short Functional Text Test
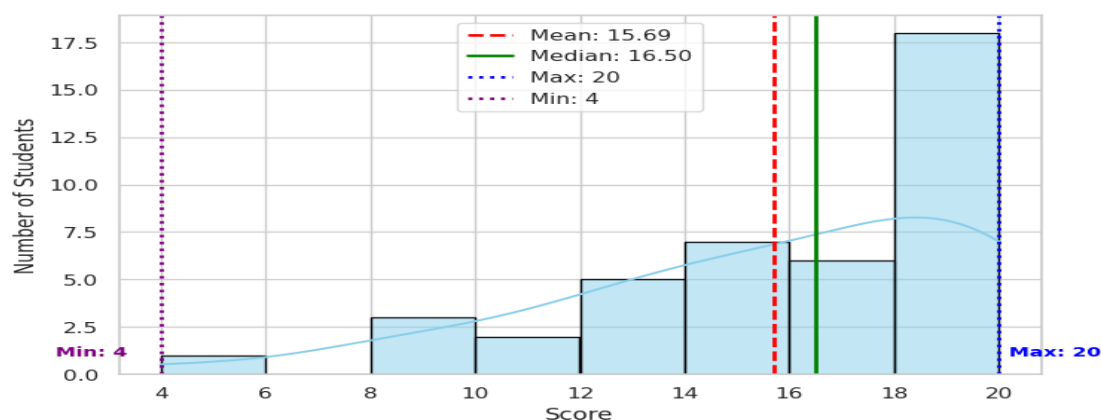
The standard deviation of 4.17 indicates a moderate level of variability in performance, suggesting that although many students performed well, there is still a significant difference between the lowest and highest scores. This variation could be affected by differences in English proficiency, previous experience with authentic English conversations, or confidence in using learned expressions. The score range, which extends from 4 to 20, highlights this variability. The low scores seen in some students suggest potential difficulties in grasping situational cues, including limited vocabulary, challenges in interpreting implied meanings, or unfamiliarity with cultural politeness strategies. On the other hand, multiple perfect scores imply that certain learners found the tasks manageable, demonstrating their mastery of the targeted expressions.

The median score of 16.50, which is significantly higher than the mean, suggests a left-skewed distribution. In practical terms, the majority of students scored above average, but a few low-performing students dragged the mean down.

These findings address the research question by indicating that most Grade VIII students can effectively respond to short functional texts, whereas a smaller group needs specialized support and tailored instruction to meet their individual learning requirements.

Students' Performance Based on The Categories

To further address Research Question 2, which investigates the categories of social expressions in which students perform best and worst, the analysis focused on six essential short functional texts: Complimenting and Responding to Compliments, Offering Help and Accepting Offers, Apologizing and Responding to Apologies, Expressing and Responding to Gratitude, Expressing Appreciation and Encouragement, and Admitting Mistakes. These categories were chosen because

they reflect core elements of everyday social interaction, enabling individuals to build rapport, maintain politeness, and resolve interpersonal challenges. The mean scores, accuracy rates, and variability in performance for each category are summarized in Chart 2 below, highlighting the relative strengths and weaknesses across the group

Chart 2: Students' Performance by Short Functional Text Category
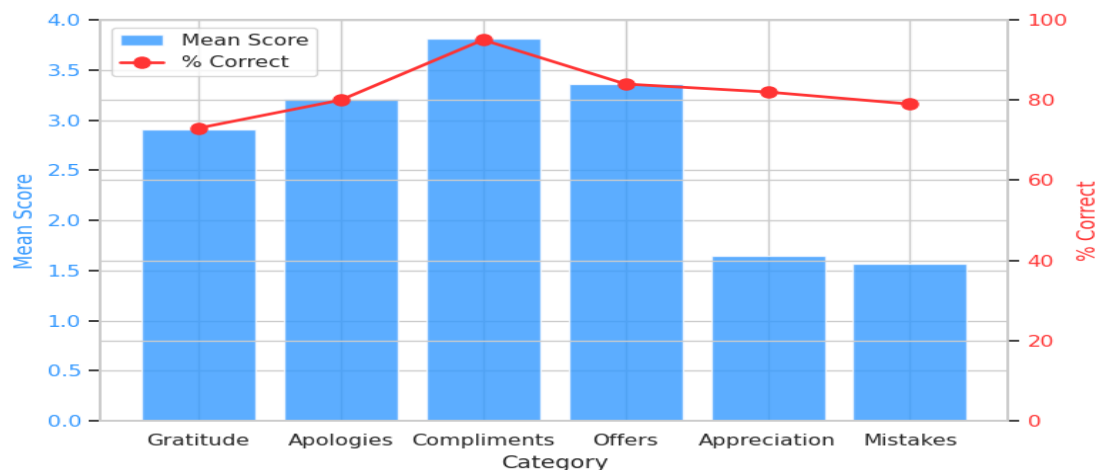
The analysis of mean scores, accuracy percentages, and standard deviations clearly addresses Research Question 2 by identifying both the strongest and weakest performance categories. Students demonstrated the highest proficiency in Complimenting and Responding to Compliments (M = 3.81, 95% correct, SD = 0.50), indicating not only strong mastery but also consistent performance, as reflected in the low standard deviation. In contrast, the lowest performance was observed in Admitting Mistakes (M = 1.57, 79% correct, SD = 0.63), suggesting that this speech act poses greater difficulty and possibly reflects limited exposure or practice in the classroom.

Moderate results were found in Offering Help and Accepting Offers (M = 3.36, 84% correct) and Apologizing and Responding to Apologies (M = 3.21, 80% correct), both of which suggest a generally good level of competence, though with higher variability in the former. Interestingly, Expressing Appreciation and Encouragement recorded a relatively low mean score (M = 1.64) despite a high accuracy rate (82%), which may imply that while students can often respond correctly, their responses may lack full appropriateness or richness expected in authentic interactions.

These findings suggest that familiarity, cultural salience, and contextual practice opportunities strongly influence students' mastery of different categories of social expressions. High performance in giving praise may be due to frequent exposure in everyday conversation, while low performance in acknowledging mistakes may be related to the norms of short functional texts, where direct acknowledgment of mistakes is less common or socially sensitive.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya generally have good abilities in responding to short functional texts containing common social expressions. An average score of 82.5% indicates that most students are able to understand the purpose of communication and choose responses appropriate to the context. These findings are consistent with Nunan (2004), who explains that task-based learning and structured dialogues can improve speaking fluency and interaction skills through simulations of real communication.

However, the variation in ability was quite significant, as seen from the standard deviation and score range. A small number of students obtained low scores, possibly due to limited vocabulary, minimal exposure to authentic English interaction, or difficulty understanding implicit meaning. This is consistent with Woodrow (2006), who showed that speaking anxiety has a significant influence on the oral performance of learners of English as a foreign language.

In terms of categories, students demonstrated the highest proficiency in the skill of giving and responding to compliments, possibly because this category often appears in everyday interactions and has a simple linguistic structure. In contrast, the category of acknowledging mistakes was the weakest, possibly related to cultural norms that rarely encourage direct acknowledgment of mistakes or consider them to be sensitive (Goh & Burns, 2012).

In addition to linguistic factors, these findings also emphasize the importance of cultural competence in language learning. Brown (2014) asserts that short functional texts are influenced by cultural values embedded in communicative behavior. Similarly, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) emphasize that language teaching that integrates cultural awareness can improve the accuracy of language actions.

Research by Kasper and Rose (2002) shows that context-based communication exercises help students master short functional texts that are rarely used. In this context, the integration of interactive learning technologies, as described by Stockwell (2010), can expand students' opportunities to practice, especially in categories that they have not yet mastered.

Therefore, English language learning strategies should integrate a variety of short functional texts, including those that are less familiar or culturally sensitive, through real-life communication scenarios, role-plays, and the use of interactive learning technologies. A differentiated approach should also be implemented to ensure that students with below-average abilities receive adequate learning support so that competency equality can be achieved.

Conclusion

This study concludes that eighth-grade students at MTsN 3 Aceh Barat Daya have a good level of ability in responding to short functional texts, with an average accuracy rate above 80%. Giving and receiving compliments is the category with the best ability, while acknowledging mistakes is the category with the lowest ability. Students' mastery of different social functions was found to be influenced by factors like exposure, familiarity, and cultural norms. According to the findings' pedagogical implications, English teachers should provide more specialized learning interventions for weaker categories, especially for speech acts that are less common or sensitive to cultural differences.

It is anticipated that the application of role-playing techniques, real-world resources, and culture-based learning will enhance students' capacity to react suitably in a range of social situations. In addition, differentiated instruction is also necessary to help students who are performing below average, so that all students can achieve a balanced short functional text.

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