

## **Production of apologies in English: Variation by L2 proficiency and apology situations**

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### **Abstract**

Production of speech acts and the strategies akin to their production by foreign language learners are key to understanding the development of interlanguage pragmatics. The speech act of apology has received great attention in interlanguage pragmatic studies due to its frequent use in spoken communication and its pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic variations across languages and cultures. This study aimed to determine what strategies are used by EFL learners in the Iranian context to produce the speech act of apology. Data for the study were elicited through a written discourse completion task from two groups of lower- and higher-proficiency learners studying English at a language center.

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Consistent with many previous findings, the results revealed that when apologizing all participants considerably preferred “direct apology strategy” to other strategies. By contrast, the indirect strategies of “offering promise of forbearance” and “expressing concern for the hearer” were used the least frequently. The findings did not substantiate any meaningful effect on the appropriateness of EFL learners’ apologies in terms of their proficiency. This study suggests that (1) there is a gap between L2 learners’ linguistic development and their pragmatic development, (2) incidental exposure to speech acts is not sufficient for pragmatic development, and (3) there is a need to increase EFL learners’ pragmatic awareness.

**Keywords:** apology, discourse completion task, interlanguage pragmatics, language proficiency, pragmatic competence

## 1. Introduction

The study of ILP has provided insights into the issues confronted by second language learners in acquiring the ability to use language to accomplish social goals. A lot of studies have been conducted on interlanguage pragmatics (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka, 1991; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; González-Lloret, 2008; House, 2008; House & Kasper, 1987; Kondo, 2008; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005). Many studies have focused on cross-cultural perception and comprehension of illocutionary force, cross-cultural pragmatic success and failure, the impact of contextual factors on the selection of semantic formulas, the role of instruction, and learner variables such as language proficiency and gender (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Koike, 1996; Maeshiba et al., 1996; Solar & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Takahashi, 1996; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Trosborg, 1987; Wierzbicka, 2008). Findings show that different cultures have different conventions for appropriate language use. Therefore, for applied linguists, especially for those concerned with L2 learning and teaching, the cross-cultural research on pragmatics is insightful

because it can contribute greatly to a better understanding of the conventions of language use in different languages and cultures.

In addition to cultural difference, some research shows that even proficient EFL learners may fail in their pragmatics appropriateness (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). As the purpose of this study was the speech act of apology, the nature of speech act studies and the relevant studies of apology, particularly those focusing on variations caused by cultures, speech act situations, and proficiency level, will be reviewed below.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Interlanguage Pragmatics and the Study of Speech Acts**

While not directly using the term “pragmatic competence,” Hymes (1972) was one of the first scholars to point out that Chomsky’s notion of competence did not consider the sociolinguistic rules. He believed that, by making a distinction between competence and performance, we might lose sight of sociolinguistic rules. Hymes (1972) asserted that, in the absence of rules of language use, rules of grammar would be useless. In his view, the ability to communicate in a language requires something more than grammar knowledge. He introduced the notion of communicative competence to subsume the two rules. Thus, he redefined this notion to include not only grammatical accuracy but also social appropriateness.

Later, Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) suggested that there was more to competence than just the ability to produce grammatically acceptable and correct sentences. The concept of communicative competence, according to them, includes not only linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Like Hymes’ classification, theirs does not subsume any separate component named pragmatic competence.

It is in Bachman’ (1990) model that pragmatic competence emerges as one of the two components, along with organizational competence, constituting the construct of language competence. Embracing the two components of illocutionary competence and

sociolinguistic competence, it came to assume a salient status in the model of communicative language ability.

In the last two decades, researchers have considered the acquisition of pragmatic competence in its own right and assigned a place for the interlanguage pragmatics in SLA studies (Kasper & Roever, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Schauer, 2009; Yamashita, 2008). The burgeoning interest in interlanguage pragmatics reflects the enormous developments in theoretical and empirical study of interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The main mission of interlanguage pragmatics has been the exploration of acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence by non-native speakers, particularly focusing on the comprehension and production of target language speech acts, conversational structure, and conversational implicature (Alcon & Martinez-Flor, 2008). This acquisition is concerned with two types of competencies, pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, the division initially proposed by Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983).

## **2.2 Research on the Speech Act of Apology**

As a frequently used speech act, apology can be viewed as a face-saving act. Based on different functions of the apology act, the broad definition of apology can be "an speech act addressed to the hearer's face-needs and intended to remedy an offence for which the apologizer takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between the apologizer and the hearer" (Holmes, 1989, p. 169). Olshtain and Cohen (1983) maintained that apologies are called for when social norms have been violated because apologies have the effect of paying off a debt.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) believe that there are three preconditions for the speech act of apology to take place:

1. The apologizer did a violation or abstained from doing a violation (is about to do it).
2. A violation is perceived by the apologizer only, by the hearer only, or by a third party as a breach of a social norm.
3. A violation is perceived by at least one of the parties involved as offending, harming, or affecting the hearer in some way.

Trosborg (1995) simplified these preconditions as follows:

1. There are two participants: an apologizer and a recipient of the apology. When a person has done something wrong or failed to do the right thing that has offended the hearer, and for which she/he can be held responsible, she/he as the offender needs to apologize.
2. As far as the functions of apology are concerned, apologies are expressive illocutionary the goal of which is maintaining harmony between speaker and hearer (Leech, 1983), i.e. it can be considered as a remedial act.

Bergman and Kasper (1993, p. 82) defined apology as "compensatory action to an offence in the doing of which speaker was causally involved and which is costly to the hearer." With respect to English, they distinguished ritualistic and substantive apologies: With the formula *excuse me*, ritualistic apologies are used to signal private space invasion or damage to any personal right or feelings. Substantive apologies can use various formulas as *I am sorry*, *I apologize*, *please accept my apology* and are usually followed by an explicit assumption of responsibility.

Apologies are among the most extensively examined speech acts both in terms of native speaker and non-native speaker performance (Fraser, 1981; Trosborg, 1987, 1995). There have been a variety of studies investigating the functions, formulas, and preconditions of apology (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981, 1993; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani, 2010; Holmes, 1989; Linnell, Porter, Stone, & Wan-Lai, 1992; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Meier, 1998; Nakai, 1999; Nakata, 1989; Nonaka, 2000; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Rojo, 2005; Trosborg, 1987). These studies have provided a good description of apology features. As a result, L2 apology research has almost become a subarea of cross-cultural pragmatics. Most of the empirical studies that investigated L2 apology strategies have tended to focus on how the understanding of offensive acts differs in different cultures (Olshtain, 1983). A second line of research has investigated how the

choice of apology strategies is influenced by learner factors, such as proficiency levels, and context factors. The findings related to these two lines are described below.

One of the early studies on English apology was conducted by Borkin and Reinhart (1978). They investigated the use of two apology formulas, *excuse me* and *I am sorry*, which are used very frequently and have very similar functions. Based on the extensive observation of these two formulas, they proposed some generalizations about their distribution. They found that though both can be used as remedies in what Goffman (1971) calls "remedial interchanges," they actually have different apologizing affects and their distribution is governed by some social generalization.

Cohen and his colleagues conducted a number of studies on apology. Cohen and Olshtain (1981) investigated apologies produced by Hebrew speaking learners of English. Results of their study demonstrated that Hebrew speakers of English used the same semantic formulas as English native speakers. In Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) report, there were deviations in certain aspects of the L2 results from the target language norms, and in other situation the L2 performances were more like those of target language speakers than those of the L1 speakers. In such a case, it was concluded that L2 speakers were successful in acquiring the target language pragmatics and at the same time avoiding negative transfer from their L1.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) analyzed responses provided by 200 native informants and 200 non-native informants of English, French, Danish, Hebrew, and Russian to an eight-item discourse completion test in which apology was elicited to investigate cross-cultural speech act realization patterns in relation to different contextual factors like social status and social distance. Results of this study demonstrated that, though the typology of the speech acts of apology appeared to be universal, the conceptualization of it varied to a great extent across cultures and languages.

In Trosborg's (1987) study, which dealt with the realization patterns, 12 English native speakers, 12 Danish native speakers, and 36 Danish learners of English at 3 levels of proficiency in English

participated in 12 role-play situations. Results showed that, compared with the performance of English native speakers, Danish learners indeed transferred sociopragmatic strategies of apology from Danish to English.

Olshtain (1989), in a study which was part of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization project, investigated apology strategies used by speakers of Hebrew, Australian English, Canadian French, and German and concluded that different languages realized apologies in a very similar way when there were similarities in social factors, contextual factors, and the level of offence.

In addition, in the study comparing politeness strategies used by native English-speaking American and 10 female Spanish learners in an English language role-play situations, García (1989) found that cultural differences were manifested not only in preferences for local strategies choices, but also in global approaches to the speech event, such as choosing between a differences style and solidarity style.

Barnlund and Yoshioka (1990) examined apology strategies using a questionnaire method in which a respondent has to choose one out of 12 remedial strategies ranging from the most indirect to the most direct. They found that American respondents preferred "explanation," while the Japanese chose "offer of repair" more frequently. The Americans tended to use a wide variety of strategies without much sensitivity toward the social status of the offender, while the Japanese used a wider variety of apology strategies adapting those responses to the status of the offender. There was another interesting difference between Americans and Japanese respondents. The Americans had a tendency to think that the relationship with the addressee remains the same or becomes better after an apology is made. In contrast, the Japanese felt that the social relationship remains the same or become worse.

Bergman and Kasper (1993) investigated cross-cultural perceptions of offence content and apology strategy used by comparing discourse completion test data and scaled-responses questionnaire data provided by 423 Thai learners of English and 30 native speakers of American English. Findings showed that both English native speakers and non-native speakers selected different

apology strategies according to the contextual factors of offence situations.

Yang (2002) studied how the context-external factors and sociolinguistic variations such as social status, social distance, and formal and private relationships influenced the choice of apology strategies by the Korean learners of English. He came to the conclusion that apology strategies employed by Korean learners of English differed from those performed by native speakers of English due to a different perception of the contextual factors in similar situations. Korean speakers of English tended to transfer their native cultural understanding of the contextual factors, which affected their choice of apology strategies in English. The study provided no explanations of why the learners of English had difficulty in recognizing and employing the English specified contextual factors.

Nakai (1999) reports on the results of an apology questionnaire administered in the Japanese context. Focusing on the use of three expressions in English, "I'm sorry," "excuse me," and "thank you," he found there was no agreement among the participants as to when to use these expressions in the situations provided. Nakai suggests a few stages to instruct apologies in English. First, learners' awareness should be raised by administering a questionnaire to collect data and to make them conscious of various realization patterns of apologies in L1 and L2. Second, learners should receive input about the universal and language-specific aspects of apologies. Third, learners should do role plays among themselves and with native speakers. Finally, learners' attention should be directed toward the pragmalinguistic side of apologies: the language options such as "I'm sorry" and "excuse me."

Nonaka (2000) investigated some features of Japanese and American cross-cultural differences in making apologies in the typical and atypical interactional situations in the two cultures. Based on the findings, she ranks Americans logic high and feelings low and Japanese vice versa. She explains the results by arguing that the Japanese say "I'm sorry" to manifest consideration to the interlocutor's feelings even if the speaker is not logically at fault for the problem. Americans, according to Nonaka, do not tend to

apologize merely to show consideration for others if they are not responsible for the problematic situation.

Cohen and Shively (2007) conducted a study to explore the effect of a curricular intervention on the acquisition of two speech acts, including apologies, by 86 study-abroad students who spent one semester abroad in a Spanish- or a French-speaking country. The intervention phase of their study constituted a brief face-to-face orientation to learning speech acts, a self-study guidebook including strategies for learning speech acts, and electronic journaling by the students. The findings showed the students' improvement in making apologies over the course of one semester. They found that fewer study-abroad students than native speakers intensified their apologies. The findings also indicated nonnative speakers' unawareness of the relevant sociopragmatic norms.

In a most recent study, Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani (2010) examined the impact of explicit teaching of apology among Iranian EFL learners. The findings revealed the explicit teaching group's significant improvement in the acquisition of apology. Calculating and comparing the frequency of the occurrence of intensifiers of apologetic exchanges, the researchers showed the impact of explicit apology strategy instruction on the learners' appropriate use of intensifiers.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

Research on speech acts has been conducted in a variety of cultures and languages, while little attention has been paid to this issue among Iranian EFL learners. In addition, most studies of speech acts have focused on performance on a speech act as a whole without addressing variations in speech act strategy use across situations, particularly with respect to situational variations created by such variables as power, gender, and distance. Therefore, aiming to provide a better understanding of how Iranian EFL learners perform speech acts, this paper investigated the speech act of apology by Iranian EFL learners who were at the intermediate and advanced levels. The reason why apologizing was chosen to be investigated in this study was that this speech act is considered to

play an important role in communication because it softens the threat to face and aims to maintain social harmony (Edmondson, 1981; Holmes, 1990) and hence is necessary for successful cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, one of the important issues in cross-cultural pragmatic is the effect of foreign language proficiency on pragmatic development (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Trosborg, 1995). As a result, the second purpose of the study was to examine the effect of target language proficiency on Iranian EFL learners' production of apology. To pursue these two purposes, the following questions were addressed:

1. What strategies do Iranian EFL learners at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels use to make apologies across situations?
2. Does EFL learners' language proficiency affect their production of apologies?

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Participants**

There were a total of 65 Iranian EFL learners, both male and female, from two different language levels at a language center: advanced (N=34) and intermediate (N=31). The two levels were considered intermediate and advanced based on the level system at the language center which was founded on the number of instructional terms and textbooks. The advanced-level participants had already studied English as a foreign language for 15 terms, each constituting 40 hours of instruction. The participants from the intermediate level had an experience of studying English for 9 terms. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 40 and none of them had studied English abroad.

### **4.2 Instrumentation**

There are various methods of data elicitation for interlanguage pragmatic production, such as discourse completion task (DCT),

role-play, and natural observation (Ahn, 2003; Brown, 2001; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1993; Ellis, 1994; Sasaki, 1998). In the present study, the data related to the production of apology were elicited through DCT. The reason why DCT was used is that it is considered as an effective instrumentation in that it enables researchers to (a) gather a large amount of data in a short period of time, (b) create an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategic that will likely occur in natural speech, and (c) gather a consistent body of data with the contextual factors well controlled. The questionnaire consisted of 4 situations eliciting apology production in different contexts varying in power relationship and familiarity of interlocutors with each other. At the beginning of the questionnaire, there were questions about participants' background such as age, mother tongue, experience of being in an English language community, and gender.

### **4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

To collect the data, the participants were given a brief explanation about the purpose of the study. Then, they were asked to provide background information. Next, they were asked to complete the DCT-based questionnaire by writing down what they would say in each situation.

To analyze the data, Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) coding system was adopted in order to find the apology strategies used by the participants. According to their system, when a speaker confronts a situation in which the hearer's rights have been violated, two things may happen: (a) the speaker can deny the necessity of apologizing, or (b) the speaker can accept the responsibility for violation and apologize. In the latter case, there are a variety of apology strategies that speaker can choose. Olshtain and Cohen's coding system of apology strategies, which is based on the categories provided by Fraser (1981) and Trosborg (1987), encompasses the following strategies:

1. Opting out
2. Evasing

3. Acknowledging responsibility
4. Providing explanation
5. Direct apology
6. Expressing concern for hearer
7. Offering promise of forbearance
8. Offering repair and compensation

After determining the type of apology strategies, the researchers analyzed the data to determine the frequency of the strategies the participants used.

Next, the collected responses to the questionnaires were rated by 2 native speakers of English on a 3-point Likert scale (inappropriate=1, somehow appropriate=2, appropriate=3) to arrive at the average scores of participants at the two proficiency levels. The rating results were utilized to investigate the relationship between the participants' English proficiency and their success in apology production and to measure the differences between the two groups' apology production through the application of a *t*-test.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 Apology Strategies Realization across Situations and Proficiency Levels**

The first research question concerned the type of apology strategies used by Persian EFL learners. Table 1 demonstrates the number of eight main strategies adopted by the participants. Among the strategies, Strategy 5, "expressing concern for hearer," and strategy 6, "promise for forbearance," were used less frequently than the other strategies. By contrast, when apologizing, most participants preferred to use "direct apology" (Strategy 4) more than the other strategies. The second strategy most frequently used was Strategy 7, concerned with offering repair/compensation.

**Table 1:** Frequency of apology strategies for all situations used by the EFL learners

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Str.0 Opting out	3	%2.54
Str.1 Evasive strategy	5	%4.32
Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility	24	%20.34
Str.3 Provide explanation	5	%4.23
Str.4 Direct apology	50	%42.37
Str.5 Express concern	2	%1.69
Str.6 Promise for forbearance	2	%1.69
Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation	27	%22.88
Total	118	%100

To gain a better picture of variation in apology strategy use according to variation in apology situations, strategy use for each situation was analyzed. Situation 1 depicted apology use for a rather formal situation in which the respondents were supposed to apologize to somebody of a higher status and the opposite gender. The situation was as follows:

### **Situation 1**

*You have borrowed a book from your male boss, but your nephew tore a couple of pages. You tried to find the same one at bookstores but you could not. You know that the book was very important to your boss and feel very sorry about it. How do you apologize?*

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of five main strategies adopted by Iranian EFL learners (Str. 0, 1, 2, 4, 7). Among the mentioned strategies, Strategy 4 “direct apology” (frequency=61,

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percentage=%48.41) was used more than others. Strategy 1 “opting out” (frequency=1, percentage=%0.79) was used less frequently than other strategies while apologizing.

**Table 2:** Frequency of apology strategies for Situation 1 used by the EFL learners

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Str.0 Opting out	1	%0.79
Str.1 Evasive strategy	10	%7.93
Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility	29	%23.02
Str.4 Direct apology	61	%48.41
Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation	25	%19.84
Total	126	%100

Examples below illustrate intermediate and advanced learners' use of apology strategies for Situation 1:

### Intermediate Learners: Situation 1

*Str.1: Evasive strategy*

- **My nephew tor your book.** Please excuse me.

*Str.2: Acknowledge responsibility*

- Please excuse me sir for my mistake. **I am very sad for this event.**

*Str.4: Direct apology*

- **I am very sorry.** I tried to find the same one but I could not.

*Str.7: Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am so sorry sir, my careless nephew tore it. **I tried to find new one but unfortunately I could not.**

## Advanced Learners: Situation 1

### *Str.0: Opting out*

- I should return your book safety but this time I could not do this, I tried to bought for you and this work does not have any profit for me.

### *Str.1: Evasive strategy*

- I am sorry to say that **my nephew tore a couple of pages from your book**. I tried to find the same one but I could not. I apologize to you.

### *Str.2: Acknowledge responsibility*

- I am so sorry, **it was my fault**.

### *Str.4: Direct apology*

- **I am awfully sorry sir**. This is my fault and I could not find any counterpart.

### *Str.7 Offer repair/compensation*

- I know it was important to you but really I am sad & sorry about it. **I will try to find another for you**.

## Situation 2:

*You are a professor. You arrive 20 minutes late to an appointment with your female student. How do you apologize?*

Table 3 lists the frequency and percentage of apology strategies used by the participants in Situation 2. In this situation, all eight apology strategies were used by the participants. Strategy 7, “offer repair/compensation” (frequency=1, percentage=%1.01), was the last strategy the participants chose to use to apologize and Strategy 4, “direct apology” (frequency=51, percentage=%51.51), was the most favored strategy. Unlike Situation 1, Situation 2 required a person in the higher position to apologize to one in a lower position. This resulted in the fewer instances of the compensation strategy and, by contrast, an increase in the use of the opting out strategy. These findings show that power relationship has a great influence on the choice of apology strategies. However, the high use of direct apologies in this situation is further evidence of social norm observation and/or EFL learners’ pragmalinguistic deficiency.

**Table 3:** Frequency of apology strategies for Situation 2 used by the EFL learners

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Str.0 Opting out	3	%3.03
Str.1 Evasive strategy	6	%6.06
Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility	18	%18.18
Str.3 Provide explanation	13	%13.13
Str.4 Direct apology	51	%51.51
Str.5 Express concern	2	%2.02
Str.6 Promise for forbearance	5	%5.05
Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation	1	%1.01
Total	99	%100

Examples below illustrate intermediate and advanced learners' use of apology strategies for Situation 2:

### Intermediate Learners: Situation 2

#### *Str.0 Opting out*

- I do not apologize.

#### *Str.1 Evasive strategy*

- I am usually on time but **sometimes it happens to punctual guys.**

#### *Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- Excuse me, **I could not arrive sooner.**

#### *Str.3 Provide explanation*

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- I am sorry, **the traffic was very bad and I arrive 20 minutes late.**

*Str.4 Direct apology*

- Hello, **sorry for coming late.**

*Str.5 Express concern*

- I am sorry. **I hope you are not very anxious.**

*Str.6 Promise for forbearance*

- Excuse me, I know I am late, but this happen. **I try not to repeat it again.**

## Advanced Learners: Situation 2

*Str.0 Opting out*

- Keeping silent

*Str.1 Evasive strategy*

- **20 minutes is not important as it worth apology.** But I am sorry, anyhow.

*Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- Excuse me, **I could not arrive sooner.**

*Str.3 Provide explanation*

- Sorry, miss.....**I trapped in bad traffic.**

*Str.4 Direct apology*

- **Sorry to be late.** I stuck in traffic jam.

*Str.5 Express concern*

- **I hope you are not get bored by my lateness at the traffics.**

*Str.6 Promise for forbearance*

- Pardon my friend. **I hope to be on time since now.**

*Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am ashamed. **I will make up for you.**

## Situation 3:

*You borrowed your uncle's car. When you were backing out of the parking place, you accidentally bumped into a tree and made dent on the side of the car. You feel terrible about it. How do you apologize?*

Table 4 reveals that among the eight main apology strategies, the participants adopted all of them in Situation 3. Among the used

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strategies, strategy 6, “promise for forbearance” (frequency=1, percentage=%0.83), was the least employed strategy and Strategy 4, “direct apology” (frequency=61, percentage=%48.41), was used most frequently by the participants. Unlike Situations 1-2, Strategy 6, “offer repair/compensation,” was employed very frequently by the participants. This suggests that, along with power and distance, the nature of the wrong act requiring an apology affects the type of apology strategy used. In situation 3, a car had been damaged and hence offering compensation seemed to be a very appropriate apology strategy.

**Table 4:** Frequency of apology strategies for Situation 3 used by the EFL learners

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Str.0 Opting out	6	%4.92
Str.1 Evasive strategy	3	%2.46
Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility	29	%23.77
Str.3 Provide explanation	5	%4.1
Str.4 Direct apology	45	%36.88
Str.5 Express concern	2	%1.64
Str.6 Promise for forbearance	1	%0.83
Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation	31	%25.41
Total	122	%100

The following examples illustrate intermediate and advanced learners' use of apology strategies for Situation 3:

### Intermediate Learners: Situation 3

#### *Str.0 Opting out*

- **It is not my fault.** Your car is too old.

#### *Str.1 Evasive strategy*

- It is not my fault. **Your car is too old.**

#### *Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- Excuse me; **It's an unlike accident.**

#### *Str.3 Provide explanation*

- Excuse me, **I did not see the huge tree** but I know an expert mechanic to repair.

#### *Str.4 Direct apology*

- **I am really sorry.** I will repair your car right today.

#### *Str.5 Express concern*

- **Do not worry.** I will repair it myself.

#### *Str.6 Promise for forbearance*

- Dear my aunt, I had accident with your car. I did not want this happen. **Promise to drive carefully.**

#### *Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am very sorry, it is my fault, **I want to pay all the defense of damage maybe** .Do not be sad any more.

### Advanced Learners: Situation 3

#### *Str.0 Opting out*

- **It was not my fault.** Someone else did it.

#### *Str.1 Evasive strategy*

- It was not my fault. **Your car was too old.**

#### *Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- Sorry uncle, **I was feeling sleepy & should not have driven.** You have every right of punishment.

#### *Str.3 Provide explanation*

- I am very very sorry because of this bad event. **I do not know how this event happened anyway.** I will pay its money.

#### *Str.4 Direct apology*

- **Shame on me.** I am extremely sorry for it.

#### *Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am so sorry. It took place accidentally but **I promise to pay the cost.**

**Situation 4:**

*Your female classmate bought a new digital camera .You asked her to let you try it. However you carelessly drop it and it breaks. How do you apologize?*

The number of apology strategies used in this situation is 5, including Strategies 0, 2, 4, 5, and 7.

As Table 5 demonstrates, among the strategies, Strategy 7, “offer repair/compensation” (frequency=52, percentage=%44.16), was used with high frequency, and Strategy 1, “opting out” (frequency=3, percentage=%2.5), was used the least frequently. In this situation, the wrong act was so clear that a compensation strategy was the most appropriate by many of the participants. Another significance of this finding, coupled with those related to the previous situations, is the proportional relationship between the strategy of offering compensation and that of acknowledging responsibility. In Situation 4, there was a high use of both strategies as the person made a clear mistake which encouraged him/her to take recourse to either or both strategies to apologize. It follows that the clarity of the mistake or wrong doing and the possibility of compensation are at work when an apology needs to be selected.

**Table 5:** Frequency of apology strategies for Situation 4 used by the EFL learners

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Str.0 Opting out	3	%2.5
Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility	18	%15
Str.4 Direct apology	43	%35.83
Str.5 Express concern	4	%3.33
Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation	52	%44.16
Total	120	%100

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Examples below illustrate the intermediate and advanced learners' use of apology strategies for Situation 4:

### Intermediate Learners: Situation 4

*Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- My dear classmate, *say what happened, oh, my God. I do s.th wrong*. I am so sorry. I bought a new one for. I hope you accept my reason.

*Str.4 Direct apology*

- ***I am sorry***, your camera breaks & I will buy a new for you.

*Str.5 Express concern*

- Oh, ***I am so sorry***. Please do not be worry .I will buy on instead of it.

*Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am sorry. ***I will buy you it another one.***

### Advanced Learners: Situation 4

*Str.0 Opting out*

- I do not apologize in this situation.

*Str.2 Acknowledge responsibility*

- Oh, ***I did not want to drop your camera but unfortunately happened.*** I will buy a new one for you, be sure.

*Str.4 Direct apology*

- Oh, ***pardon me.*** Let me have this one &bring you a new one tomorrow.

*Str.5 Express concern*

- I wish I never borrow it but this event must be happen. ***Any way do not worry*** I will buy another the same for you.

*Str.7 Offer repair/ compensation*

- I am deeply sorry. So sorry. ***Tell me the feature of the camera, so I will buy one for you.***

## 5.2. Language Proficiency and Apology Performance

The second research question concerned the relationship between language proficiency and performance on the apology DCT. The

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descriptive statistics in Table 6 depict mean scores of the intermediate and advanced learners in the four apology situations. The average scorings made by two the native speakers of English show that the higher-proficiency students outperformed the lower-proficiency ones ( $M=2.38$  vs.  $M=2.37$ ). The difference, however, was very small. As to the four situations, the advanced group performed better in Situations 1 and 3, while the intermediate group gained a higher mean score in Situation 4. The table shows no difference in performance in Situation 2.

**Table 6:** Descriptive statistics for the performance of intermediate-level and advanced-level learners' performance on the apology DCT

Situation	Language level	Number of participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	Std. Error of Measurement
<i>Sit.1</i>	Intermediate	34	2.25	0.73	0.125
	advanced	31	2.43	0.70	0.126
<i>Sit.2</i>	Intermediate	34	2.32	0.73	0.126
	advanced	31	2.32	0.72	0.130
<i>Sit.3</i>	Intermediate	34	2.19	0.80	0.138
	advanced	31	2.27	0.70	0.126
<i>Sit.4</i>	Intermediate	34	2.63	0.60	0.104
	advanced	31	2.50	0.59	0.106
<i>total</i>	Intermediate	34	2.37	0.33	0.106
	advanced	31	2.38	0.38	0.267

To measure the significance of the differences between the two groups, a *t*-test was run. As Table 7 shows, none of the differences in apology performance was statistically significant. These findings show that language proficiency did not play a significant role in pragmatic performance. It follows that an increase in linguistic competence was not proportional to pragmatic development.

**Table 7:** *t*-test results for the performance of intermediate-level and advanced-level learners' performance on the apology DCT

	Levenes Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Sit.1 Equal variances assumed	.065	.800	-	63	.302	-.1855
Equal variances not assumed			1.040	62.799	.301	-.1855
Sit.2 Equal variances assumed	.001	.972	.005	63	.996	.0009
Equal variances not assumed			.005	62.627	.996	.0009
Sit.3 Equal variances assumed	1.880	.175	-.440	63	.662	-.0830
Equal variances not assumed			-.440	62.893	.660	-.0830
Sit.4 Equal variances assumed	.001	.979	.889	63	.378	.1324
Equal variances not assumed			.880	62.707	.377	.1324
total Equal variances assumed	.090	.765	-.379	63	.706	-.1325
Equal variances not assumed			-.376	62.354	.708	-.1325

## 6. Discussion

The findings related to apology strategy use in this study bear much resemblance to those obtained by Bergman and Kasper (1993), Fraser (1981), and Olshain (1983, 1989) in terms of the choice of apology strategies. Further, consistent with previous studies (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen and Olshain, 1981; Holmes,

1990; Olshtain, 1989; Trosborg, 1987, 1995), the data show that, when apologizing, the participants employed the strategy of "direct apology" much more than the other strategies. Confirming previous studies (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Holmes 1989; Trosborg, 1987, 1995), among the eight apology strategies, the strategies of "promise of forbearance" (Strategy 6) and "expressing concern for hearer" (Strategy 5) were used the least by the learners. These findings confirm the claim that apology formulas are cross-culturally universal (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Trosborg, 1987, 1995).

It seems that direct apologies are favored in the Iranian context for two reasons. The first one might be EFL learners' insufficient pragmalinguistic competence which impedes their use of evasive or compensation strategies. Second, the use of direct strategies may also be rooted in the Iranian sociocultural norms which encourage direct apologies, particularly in case they are to be made to an interlocutor of the opposite gender or a higher social status in terms of age or social position. The very small frequency of opting out highlights the validity of the second reason in that opting out is easy to be realized pragmalinguistically, but is detrimental to social relations.

The findings from this study also shed light on cross-situation variation in strategy use. This variation has two aspects: variation in strategy type and variation in strategy frequency. Variation in strategy type seems to be affected by the nature of apology situation in terms of power and distance in general, as with all speech acts, and the severity of the situation and the damage/offense requiring apologies. As a result, due to power relationship, some of the situations in this study required greater use of certain strategies such as "offering repair/compensation" or "acknowledging responsibility" more than the others. However, the specific nature of apology, in which the degree of offense has an effect comparable with power, can lead to the frequent use of "offering repair" even when there is an equal power relationship between interlocutors; this is manifest in Situation 4 in this study.

Besides variation in strategy type, variation by frequency was observed across situations. It seems that, coupled by the need to use certain strategies in a particular apology situation, some apology situations necessitate a greater or smaller number of strategies in order to maximize the effect of apology and to minimize the possibility that the apology will not be accepted. This is evident, for instance, in the frequent use of “acknowledging responsibility” in Situation 1 and “offer for repair” along with “direct apology” in Situation 4. As the data show, some situations need more frequent use of certain strategies or a combination of strategies to achieve a more effective apology, which in turn can contribute to the avoidance of committing a face-threatening act.

The results of this study do not confirm some of the previous findings that the higher-proficiency learners are more likely to demonstrate native-like pragmatic competence (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1986; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989; Trosborg, 1987). The non-significant effect of proficiency on pragmatic development in this study can be accounted for in many respects. First, the focus of the materials used in the language center was not on the learners’ pragmatic development. The teaching activities were largely devoted to the four language skills and the two components of vocabulary and grammar. It follows that the weight allocated to linguistic competence was far less than the weight given to pragmatic competence. As a result, development in pragmatic competence was not proportional to gains in linguistic competence. The second reason might be due to the washback effect of the language center’s assessment system in which the final exams were limited to multiple-choice questions of listening, vocabulary, grammar, and reading. The negative washback of such exams may work against learners’ motivation for noticing or learning the pragmatic features existing in course books. At the macro-level, the disproportional development of the two competencies may be the result of the EFL learning context which provides minimum opportunity for authentic communication through English and hence minimal need to draw on pragmatic competence to achieve communicative goals, including the production of apologies in various situations.

## 7. Conclusion

This study yields the following major conclusions and implications. First, Iranian EFL learners have rather similar patterns of apology strategy selection and preference order. A close examination of frequency with which the eight main apology strategies were used reveals that, when apologizing, Iranian EFL learners prefer using “direct apology” much more than other strategies. By contrast, among the eight strategies, the strategies of “promise of forbearance” and “expressing concern for hearer” are used less than other strategies. This preference may suggest that direct apology has a cross-cultural realization in that offense or mistake, due to its nature and irrespective of culture, requires direct apology realization. However, the meager use of such strategies as “expressing concern for the hearer” and overuse of “direct apology” may be partly due to L1 cultural norms which do not encourage the frequent use of the former strategy. If so, the data implies that L2 learners need to become aware of the preferred apology strategies of native speakers of English through both exposure and metapragmatic instruction.

Second, the findings show variation in strategy use across situations in terms of strategy type and strategy frequency. This variation stands to reason in view of the fact that apology situations may differ in terms of power relationship between interlocutors, social distance, and the severity of offense or damage. An appropriate use of different apology strategies cannot be achieved without sufficient awareness of the nature of the situation. As a result, textbooks should incorporate conversations in which apologies are made in different situations so that EFL learners can be exposed to the realization of each strategy in an appropriate context.

Finally as far as EFL learners’ apology strategy use is concerned, results show that, with increasing proficiency, EFL learners do not become more native-like in terms of their apology strategies used. This confirms the bulk of research in the literature confirming that pragmatic competence lags behind linguistic competence. It follows that mere exposure to speech acts in ELT course books cannot result in enhanced pragmatic production. As

pragmatic competence may not proceed along with linguistic competence, instructional intervention is needed to facilitate interlanguage pragmatic acquisition.

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