Apology Strategies: Appropriateness and Frequency of Use by Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the apology strategies employed by Saudi FEL university students. The researcher examined the appropriateness of participants' apologies, first through analyzing them in terms of Olshtain and Cohen's "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983), then by having native speakers of English to evaluate them for appropriateness on a four-point Likert scale. Results indicated that "illocutionary force indicating device" (e.g., I am sorry) was the most frequently used strategy as it was utilized in 75% of the responses. As for the appropriateness of the apology strategies used by Saudi EFL undergraduate students, 23.4% of the responses to the situations that required apology were inappropriate or strongly inappropriate. Exposure to culturally dense language content was suggested to help EFL learners utilize apologies appropriately.

Keywords: speech acts, apology strategies, communication, cultural awareness

1. Introduction

Effective communication is a cornerstone of language acquisition, and within the realm of "English as a Foreign Language" (EFL) learning, the ability to navigate social interactions is of great importance. One aspect that plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication is the expression of apologies, a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon that varies across different language communities. Situations that require apology are inevitable when interaction takes place between interlocutors. Although apology strategies can have some universal frameworks, the conceptualization and verbalization of these strategies may vary across cultures (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Cohen, 2019). This may lead to misunderstandings in conveying the intended meaning of apology when commutation takes place between interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. Only few studies have been

conducted to examine speech behaviors – including apologies – of people from different cultural backgrounds (Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Wolfson, 1989). There are even fewer studies that investigate apology strategies employed by Arab speakers (Ja'afreh, 2023). The majority of these studies focus either on gender differences or on comparing apology strategies used by Arabic speakers to those used by native speakers of English (Bataineh, & Bataineh, 2006; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008; Hussein & Hammouri, 1998; Kulsawang & Ambele, 2024; Nureddeen, 2008; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2020). Whether the apology strategies used by EFL learners are considered to be appropriate in the second language culture or not, is a question that remains unanswered. Therefore, the current study investigates the apology strategies used by Saudi Arabian EFL students, and then measures the degree to which these strategies can be acceptable by native speakers of English.

2. Literature Review

Language is a complex phenomenon in which interlocutors interact to communicate meaning. Sociolinguists have been trying to investigate how meaning is communicated, which led to the birth of what is known as the speech act theory. This came as a result of the work done by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Austin (1962) makes a distinction between utterances that contain a truth value "constatives" and utterances that have a truth value but perform actions "performatives". Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) further explain utterances in terms of the intended meaning of the speaker by making the distinction between "locution" which refers to the linguistic form of the utterance, "illocution" which reflects the intended meaning of the speaker, and "perlocution" which is the interpreted meaning by the hearer. Hence, the speech act theory tries to draw the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Brown & Eisterhold, 2004; Schoppa, 2022). Speech acts can include different acts such as apologies, requests, compliments, etc. (McKay, 2018; Wolfson, 1989). Miscommunication might occur in communicating different speech acts especially when it comes to language learners because some speech acts are "indirect" as referred to by Searle (1975). An example of an indirect speech act can be the utterance "Can you open the window?" which can be interpreted at the perlocutionary level as a request. A more complicated indirect request would be for example "Isn't it hot down here?" as an indication to a request to open the window. This way the speech act theory can help us to breakdown different actions preformed by speech. However, the speech act theory can be criticized because some utterances can refer to more than one speech act. Moreover, speech has some inherent factors that affect communication, and simply viewing speech as a chain of utterances may lead to loosing some of these factors (Cohen, 2019; Wlofson, 1989). Despite its limitations, the speech act theory proved to be useful in sociolinguistic studies over the last few decades (e.g. Alfghe & Mohammadzadeh, 2021; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Davies, Merrison, & Goddard, 2007; Hong, 2008; Lipson, 1994; Sugimoto, 1997).

Apology can be classified as an expressive speech act which expresses the speaker's state or attitude (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Bowe & Martin, 2007; Culpeper, Mackey, & Taguchi, 2018). Holms (1990) defines an apology as a speech act which is intended to remedy an offence which the apologizer takes responsibility for in order to rebalance social relations between interlocutors. From the above definition, it is clear that apology is a speech act

curried out through interaction between interlocutors. As people are different, their apology strategies may differ as well, however, sociolinguistic literature shows that there are general strategies that interlocutors usually use in conveying apologies. Olshtain and Cohen (1983: 22) provide a general framework for apology strategies which they call the "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" and illustrate that with examples as follows:

1- "Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) (e.g. I'm sorry).

2- Taking on responsibility (e.g. I missed the bus).

3- Explanation of account (e.g. and there was a terrible traffic jam).

4- Offer of repair (e.g. let's make another appointment).

5- Promise of forbearance (e.g. I'll make sure that I'm here on time)".

Trosborg (1987: 150-152) suggests a more detailed explanation of the apology strategies that are likely to be used by an offender, which includes:

1- "Minimizing the degree of offence: either by giving the offence a minor importance or by throwing the blame on someone else.

2- Acknowledgment of responsibility: this can happen through implicit or explicit acknowledgment, expression of lack of intent, expression of self deficiency, expression of embarrassment, or explicit acceptance of the blame.

3- Implicit or explicit explanation or account: this differs from "acknowledgment of responsibility" in that the offender will accept that his/her behavior is undesirable, but trough the blame on another factor (e.g. circumstances).

4- Expression of apology: this can be explicit (e.g. I apologize), through the expression of regret, or through requesting forgiveness (e.g. I am sorry).

5- Offer of repair: this can be either through offering a direct repair or through offering compensation.

6- Promise of forbearance: here the apologizer promises not to repeat the offence again or to improve his or her performance.

7- Expressing concern for hearer: in his part the person being apologized for will express his/her concern in order to calm the other party".

Accepting an apology is an important factor that deserves investigation. This is because different groups or individuals may have different expectations of what can be accepted as an apology for a given situation (Bowe & Martin, 2007; Doan, 2019). As mentioned earlier, although apology strategies may follow a set of universals, there are differences in the ways people conceptualize and verbalize these strategies in different cultures (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021).

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the use of apology strategies. Lipson (1994) conducted a study involving 10 university students from the University of Bologna,

tasked with watching nine half-hour American sitcoms and reconstructing the storyline. Following this, they were given thirty minutes to recreate a specific dialogue excerpt from the sitcoms. Provided with the original dialogue script, they were instructed to craft an imaginary dialogue aligned with the social norms of their culture. Data analysis utilized Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) semantic formulas within the apology speech act set. The findings suggest that the variations between the students' renditions and the original script predominantly stemmed from their interpretations of status, role, and authority. Additionally, distinctions were observed between Italian and English versions, particularly in the employment of apology sub-formulas, with "I'm sorry," as outlined by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), being the most prevalent in English.

Sugimoto (1997) conducted a study to compare the styles and the likelihood of apology between 200 college students from the United States and 181 students from Japan through responding to several interactional situations that require apology. The responses were divided into meaningful segments and coded to be ready for analysis. Sugimoto (1997) reported the following three categories of apology strategies according to their frequency of use:

1- "Primary strategies (frequently used): statement of remorse, accounts, description of damage, and reparation.

2- Secondary strategies: compensation and promise not to repeat the offence.

3- Seldom used strategies: explicit assessment of responsibility, contextualization, self-castigation, and gratitude".

In comparing American and Japanese students, Sugimoto (1997) found out that Japanese students expected an apology to be given in situations more than U.S. students and that Japanese students tended to be more elaborated in their apology when compared to American students.

Bataineh & Bataineh (2006) conducted a study in which they used a 10-item questionnaire based on Sugimoto (1997). One hundred Jordanian male and female students were randomly selected from two Jordanian universities with intermediate or high-intermediate English proficiency level. The data were collected then classified into meaningful segments based on Sugimoto (1997) and coded to be ready for analysis. Bataineh & Bataineh (2006) reported the following findings:

1- Males and females used the main strategies of "statement of remorse, accounts, compensation, promise not to repeat offense, and reparation".

2- Males and females used of non-apologetic strategies including "blaming victim and brushing off the incident as unimportant" to avoid the apology.

3- Male and female participants exhibited differences in the order of the main strategies that they used.

Ogiermann (2008) conducted a study to examine responses to situations that require apology

under semelar contextual conditions by English and Russian males and females. The data collection of this study was based on a questionnaire that required students' responses to ten scenarios, eight of which contained offensive situations, while two served as distracters. The data consisted of a total of 1600 responses elicited under identical contextual conditions from comparable population groups. The average age was 20.4 for the British and 17.9 for the Russian participants. A modified version of Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) "speech act set" of apologizing was used to analyze the data. Results indicate that:

1- There are considerable differences in the apology strategies employed by British and Russian participants.

2- There are great differences between the apology strategies employed by male and female participants.

El-Dakhs (2018) conducted a study that explores how Saudi learners of English express apologies in a foreign language learning setting. It also investigates how factors such as language exposure, gender, distance, and dominance affect the way these learners apologize. To achieve this, a Discourse Completion Test was administered to three groups: (1) 411 Saudi learners of English, (2) 42 native speakers of Saudi Arabic, and (3) 47 native speakers of English. The native speaker groups provided benchmarks for apologetic behavior in both the learners' first (L1) and second (L2) languages. The findings revealed that the Saudi participants tended to use strategies that preserved face for both the speaker and the listener, and that increased exposure to the L2 positively impacted the learners' ability to use language appropriately in apologetic contexts. Gender, distance, and dominance also played roles in shaping apology strategies, although their influence varied.

Elasfar, Mustafa, Pathan, & Imani (2023) undertook a study exploring the pragmatic and linguistic competencies of postgraduate students originating from Arab backgrounds and native English-speaking postgraduates in Malaysian universities. The investigation specifically focused on their methods of making requests and apologies. Utilizing qualitative techniques such as Discourse Completion Tests and conversational analyses, the research aimed to address three primary inquiries regarding pragmatic and linguistic frameworks, gender differentials, and cultural expectations within English-speaking settings. The study involved 95 participants, evenly split by gender, selected from four Malaysian universities during the academic year 2022-2023. Among these, 32 hailed from Arab backgrounds, while 63 were native English speakers. The research revealed notable divergence in response patterns between the two cohorts, emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural norms for effective communication. The results underscored the necessity for learners originating from Arab regions to comprehend the nuances of cultural norms and conventions within English-speaking environments to facilitate proficient communication.

The previously mentioned studies illustrate some of the contributions to the systematic study of apology strategies. A close look at the goals of these studies shows that they either try to differentiate between the apology strategies used by participants from different cultural backgrounds (El-Dakhs, 2018; Elasfar, Mustafa, Pathan, & Imani, 2023; Lipson, 1994; Ogiermann, 2008; Sugimoto, 1997) or draw the distinction in the use of apology strategies

between genders (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Ogiermann,2008). This describes the apology strategies used by different groups; however, it does not provide any indications about the appropriate utilization of apology strategies by foreign language learners. Therefore, the current study tries to fill this gap through investigating the apology strategies used by undergraduate EFL Saudi students, and then investigating the appropriateness of the apology strategies used by these students as evaluated by English language native speakers. These two goals were accomplished though answering the following questions:

1- What are the most common apology strategies used by Saudi EFL learners?

2- To what extent were the apologies of Saudi EFL learners appropriate?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The current study recruited 40 male undergraduate students enrolled in an intensive English language program at a Saudi Arabian government university located in an urban setting. The English language proficiency level of the recruited students ranged from A1 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The proficiency level of the students was measured based on the results of an in-house placement test designed by the intensive English language program's assessment department. The participants were enrolled in the intensive language program as a part of a foundation year program which aims at preparing them to peruse their academic studies in different majors at the host university. The age group of the participants ranged between 18 and 20 years. The responses of the participants were evaluated for appropriateness by five English language instructors at the intensive language program who are native speakers of English. This evaluation was on a four-point Likert scale in which (1) is considered appropriate and (4) is inappropriate. After that the responses were analyzed by the researcher according to Olshtain and Cohen's "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983).

3.2 Materials

The present study used the open-ended questionnaire designed and used by Sugimoto (1997) (see Appendix A). The same instrument was also used by Bataineh & Bataineh (2006) to investigate the apology strategies used by undergraduate Jordanian students. This shows that the instrument can be considered suitable for the age group of the students (i.e., undergraduate) as well as the Arabic cultural background. Evaluating the responses (i.e., appropriateness of the apology strategies) of the participants was based on a four-point Likert scale in which (1) is considered appropriate and (4) is inappropriate (see Appendix B).

3.3 Procedures

The study was conducted through requesting from the participants to respond to the open-ended questionnaire designed and used by Sugimoto (1997). The Questionnaire included some situations that require apology, and the students were asked to respond to each situation. After that, five English language instructors at the intensive language program who are native speakers of English were asked to evaluate the level of appropriateness of each

response. Then, the researcher started coding the data on the basis of Olshtain and Cohen's "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983) to be ready for analysis. Several studies used Olshtain and Cohen's apology "speech act set" as the bases for analyzing the use of apology strategies (e.g. Lipson, 1994 & Ogiermann, 2008). The current study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024.

Ethical measures were followed throughout the data collection and analysis for the current study. All participants have signed a consent form and were informed by the researcher that their participation in the current study is completely voluntary and that choosing not to participate in the study does not affect their relationship with the host institution or the researcher at the time of date collection or in the future. The identity of the participants was protected as each response form was given a code that was used throughout the data analysis process. The data were stored in a password-protected computer for which only the researcher of the current study has access. Finally, all required data collection ethical procedure of the host institution were followed.

4. Results

The current study attempted to answer two research questions in order to achieve its goal. The first question was "**what are the most common apology strategies used by Saudi EFL learners**?". In order to answer this question, the researcher analyzed students' responses to the apology situations in Sugimoto's (1997) questionnaire. The analysis was conducted based on Olshtain and Cohen's "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). The researcher calculated the frequencies of students' use of apology strategies in Olshtain and Cohen's semantic formulas in the apology speech act. Then percentages of using each apology strategy were calculated. The table below shows the percentages of Saudi EFL undergraduate students' use of the apology strategies.

Table 1. Percentages of students' use of apology strategies

Strategies	Percentages
Illocutionary force indicating device (I am sorry)	75%
Taking on responsibility (I missed the bus)	29%
Explanation of account (and there was a terrible traffic jam)	36%
Offer of repair (let's make another appointment)	42%
Promise of forbearance (I'll make sure that I am here in time)	2%

The above table shows that "illocutionary force indicating device" was the most commonly used apology strategy among Saudi EFL undergraduate students. Three quarters of the students included this strategy in their apology, and only 25% of the students did not utilize it in their apology to the situations included in the questionnaire. The second most commonly used apology strategy among the Saudi EFL undergraduate students who participated in the current study was "offer of repair". Forty-two percent of the students utilized this strategy in expressing their apology to the situations included in the questionnaire. "Explanation of account" was not vert common among Saudi EFL undergraduate students who participated in the current study as only 36% of the students utilized this strategy in their apologies. "Taking on responsibility" for the offence was used by 29% of the Saudi EFL undergraduate students who participated in the current study. The least common apology strategy utilized by the Saudi EFL undergraduate students who participated in the current study was "promise of forbearance", which was used by only 2% of the students.

The above percentages show that different apology strategies are more common than other when Saudi EFL undergraduate students expressed their apologies to the situations included in Sugimoto's (1997) questionnaire. However, despite how common each strategy was utilized, it does not indicate the appropriateness of the apology to target situation. Therefore, the second research question investigated in the current study explored the appropriateness of the apology strategies utilized by Saudi EFL undergraduate students as rated by native speakers of English. The second research question was "**To what extent were the apologies of Saudi EFL students appropriate?**". In order to respond this research question, the researcher requested five English language instructors who are native speakers of English to evaluated the responses of the Saudi EFL undergraduate students to the situations included in the questionnaire for appropriateness. This evaluation was on a four-point Likert scale in which (1) is considered appropriate and (4) is inappropriate. Then the percentages of each evaluation category were calculated. The table below shows percentages of the levels of appropriateness of Saudi EFL undergraduate students' responses the situations included in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Percentages of appropriateness of Saudi EFL undergraduate students' responses

Appropriateness level	Percentage
Strongly appropriate	28.9%
Appropriate	47.6%
Inappropriate	18.1%
Strongly inappropriate	5.3%

The table above shows that 76.5% of Saudi EFL undergraduate students' responses to situations included in Sugimoto's (1997) questionnaire were either considered strongly appropriate or appropriate by native speakers of English. However, 18.1% of Saudi EFL undergraduate students' responses were considered inappropriate and 5.3% were considered strongly inappropriate by native speakers of the English Language.

4. Discussion

The results above show that Saudi EFL undergraduate students did not evenly utilize the apology strategies proposed by Olshtain and Cohen's "semantic formulas in the apology speech act set" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). The most utilized strategies were illocutionary force indicating device (e.g., I am sorry), offer of repair (e.g., let's make another appointment), and explanation of account (e.g., there was a terrible traffic jam) all of which are face-saving strategies. This goes in line with the findings of El-Dakhs (2018) which showed that the Saudi participants tended to use strategies that preserved face for both the speaker and the listener.

The least utilized strategies were promise of forbearance (e.g., I'll make sure that I am here in time) and taking on responsibility (e.g., I missed the bus) which both fall under the category of embarrassing and result in losing-face for the speaker. This again aligns with the results reported by El-Dakhs (2018) which indicated that Saudi participants tended to use strategies that preserved face.

The uneven utilization of the apology strategies by Saudi EFL undergraduate students reflects the cultural effect on the speech act of apology. This comes in line with te results of El-Dakhs (2018), Elasfar et. at., (2023), Lipson (1994), Ogiermann (2008), and Sugimoto (1997).

As for the appropriateness of the apology strategies used by Saudi EFL undergraduate students, 23.4% of the responses to the situations that required apology were inappropriate or strongly inappropriate. This leaves only 76.6% of the responses to the situations that required apology either appropriate or strongly appropriate, which means that the social interactions of Saudi EFL undergraduate students in situations that require apology can be negatively affected as a result of their failure to apologize appropriately to their interlocutor in those situations. This can be due to the cultural difference highlighted by Elasfar et. at., (2023), Lipson (1994), Ogiermann (2008), and Sugimoto (1997). It can also be due to the lack of exposure to the target language. This was supported by the findings of El-Dakhs (2018) in which the researcher pointed out that increased exposure to the L2 positively impacted the learners' ability to use language appropriately in contexts that required apologies.

From the discussion above it is evident that cultural differences and lack of exposure to the target language can play a vital role in the type of the apology strategies used and their appropriateness to different situations. Hence, it is suggested that EFL learners are exposed to more culturally dense language content that will help them acquire the appropriate utilizations of apologies as well as other speech acts.

Future research can focus on the effect of culturally dense language exposure on the appropriateness of speech act utilization by EFL learners. Moreover, further investigation

needs to be conducted on the effect of EFL learners' language proficiency level on the appropriateness of utilizing different speech acts.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

The Questionnaire*

Student's code:

Dear participant,

The researcher is conducting a study under the title **"The appropriateness of apology strategies used by Saudi EFL learners"** you are kindly requested to answer the items for this questionnaire carefully and accurately. The researcher assures that the information obtained in the course of this study will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of academic research.

Thank you.

The researcher

I- What is your level at the intensive English language program? ………………………………

II- please respond to the following questions as realistically and honestly as possible.

1- "You borrowed an umbrella from your best friend, and the wind broke it beyond repair. What do you say to him/her?"

………………………………………………………………………………………………

2- "You have made plans to go to a football match with your friends and you asked them to buy you a ticket; you could not make it and you still owe them money for the ticket. What would you say to them?"

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3- "You showed up an hour late for a group trip on spring break. What do you say to the students traveling with you?"

………………………………………………………………………………………………

4- "You have borrowed a classmate's homework, submitted yours and failed to return his/hers. What do you say to him/her?"

………………………………………………………………………………………………

5- "You did not show up for a meeting due to a friend's accident. What do you say to the students who were supposed to meet with you?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

6- "You borrowed a CD from your roommate and did not return it for three weeks. What do you say to him/her?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

7- "You failed to meet a friend at a hotel due to miscommunication. What do you say to him/her?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

8- "You were playing with your friends' computer and erased the important paper s/he had been working on for the past two weeks. What do you say to him/her?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

9- "You borrowed your brother's/sister's tablet and broke it. What do you say to him/her?"

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10- "You cancelled a club meeting and inconvenienced all the members of the club. What do you say to them?"

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11- "You planned with your classmates to see a movie which is shown for the first time. You could not attend the movie as planned. What do you say to your classmates?"

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12- "Your best friend videotaped his/her birthday party on a CD. You borrowed the CD to share it with other friends but did not return it for three months. What do you say to your friend?"

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Thank you again.

*Adapted from:

Sugimoto, Naomi, 1997. A Japan–U.S. comparison of apology styles. *Communication Research. 24*, 349–370.

Appendix B

Evaluating the appropriateness of apology responses

Dear instructor,

The researcher is conducting a study under the title **"The appropriateness of apology strategies used by Saudi EFL learners"** Kindly evaluate the appropriateness of the students' responses (each student at a time) following the scale blow.

Student's code:

Situations	Strongly appropriate	appropriate	Inappropriate	Strongly inappropriate
1." (Umbrella) The wind breaks a borrowed umbrella beyond repair".				
2. "(Concert) Not showing up for a concert but owing money for the ticket".				
3. "(Spring break) Showing up 1 hour late for a group trip".				
4 "(Assignment) Homework borrowed, submitted, but not returned to the owner".				
5. "(Meeting) Not showing up for a meeting due to a friend's accident".				
6. "(Favorite CD) Forgetting to return a CD for 3 weeks".				
7. "(Hotel) Failure to meet a friend due to miscommunication."				

Situations	Strongly appropriate	appropriate	Inappropriate	Strongly inappropriate
8. "(Paper) Accidentally erasing a friend's important paper on a word processor."				
9. "(iPad) Breaking a friend's iPad."				
10. "(Club) Unnecessary inconvenience due to cancellation of a meeting".				
11. "(Movie) Not being ready for a movie previously planned for".				
12. "(Birthday CD) A CD of sentimental value borrowed for more than 3 months".				

Thank you.

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