A cross-sectional study of Iranian EFL learners' polite and impolite apologies

Seyyed Hatam Tamimi Sa'd[a] *, Mohammad Mohammadi[b]

[a] Urmia University, Urmia, Iran
[b] Urmia University, Urmia, Iran

Abstract

Successful communication is the joint product of linguistic as well the sociolinguistic competence, with the latter competence denoting appropriateness which is closely associated with politeness. The present study aimed to investigate the politeness strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners in the speech act of apology. Data were collected from 30 EFL learners who responded to a discourse completion task (DCT) which realized the speech act of apology consisted of six situations. Data analysis consisted of three phases. First, to identify the apology strategies and politeness strategies, the study followed Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) taxonomy of apology strategies and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, respectively. Second, 90 apology utterances, comprising 50% of the total number of utterances, were assessed by two native speakers of English on a politeness Likert scale of 1=Polite, 2=Partially Polite and 3=Impolite. Finally, drawing on the native speaker assessment of (im)politeness of the apology utterances, the researchers analyzed the utterances qualitatively in terms of appropriacy and inappropriacy. The results indicated that a) Native speakers rated 27 (30%) apology utterances as polite, 40 (44.5%) as partially polite and 23 (25.5%) as impolite.; b) the most frequent apology strategies were an 'expression of regret', 'an explanation or account of the situation', 'expressing self-deficiency' and 'an offer of repair'; c) there was a significant difference between males and females with regard to their use of politeness strategies in apology; and d) the participants relied on negative and positive politeness strategies when apologizing. In conclusion, Iranian EFL learners were only partially sociolinguistically competent in apology.

1. Introduction

Communication inevitably entails individuals committing wrong deeds and impinging on each other. To compensate for such unfortunate events in social life, interlocutors need to verbally mitigate the threat they have posed others to by apologizing in one way or another. To be polite enough in their apologies, language learners are required to apologize appropriately. That is to say, they need to possess pragmatic competence, or to be more precise, sociolinguistic competence, in order to avoid breakdowns and misunderstandings in communication.

An apology is a speech act that is required when the speaker has committed some behavior that has proved 'costly' to the hearer (Ellis, 2012). As an expressive illocutionary act, an apology is defined as "a speech act addressed to V's face-needs to remedy an offence for which A takes responsibility, and

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*Seyyed Hatam Tamimi Sa'd Tel.: +98-938-595-5035
E-mail address: shtamimi90@gmail.com

thus to restore equilibrium between A and V (where A is the apologist, and V is the victim or person offended" (Holmes 1989, as cited in Jebahi, 2011, p. 649). The speaker should admit responsibility for and employ strategies to demonstrate appropriate apologetic behavior. These apology strategies are summarized in Table 1. Apologies are speaker-oriented and while they save the hearer's face, they threaten the speaker's negative face (Ogiermann, 2009). Ellis (2012) argues that compared to requests, there may not be substantial cross-cultural differences in realizing apologies. According to Ogiermann, apologies attend to the hearer's negative face. Holmes (1989) argues that apologies are inherently polite. The taxonomy of apology strategies, adopted from Olshtain and Cohen (1983, as cited in Ellis, 2012, p. 183) is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Taxonomy of apology strategies

Strategy	Semantic formulas
1 An expression of an apology	
a expression of regret	I'm sorry.
b an offer of apology	I apologize.
c a request for forgiveness	Excuse me.
2 An explanation or account of the situation	The bus was late.
3 An acknowledgement of responsibility	
a accepting the blame	It's my fault.
b expressing self-deficiency	I wasn't thinking.
c recognizing the other person as deserving apology	You are right.
d expressing lack of intent	I didn't mean to.
4 An offer of repair	I'll pay for the broken vase.
5 A promise of forbearance	It won't happen again.

The study set out to shed light on the strategies used by Iranian EFL learners when apologizing. It also investigated the politeness strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in apology when they are confronted with addressees with higher, lower and equal power status. Finally, the extent of pragmatic competence among Iranian EFL learners in the polite performance of apology was gauged.

1.1. Literature review

1.2. Previous research on apology

The line of research on the speech act of apology has been considerably rich and rigorous. The effort to classify the ways interlocutors apologize and request in different languages and cultures into a set of strategies that were able to account for all situations was initiated by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), who pioneered a study known as the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP). The study findings resulted in a classification of the apology and request strategies which have been long used by a large number of researchers. For instance, Scher and Darley (1997), drawing on the CCSARP study, examined the effects of four of the five apology strategies identified by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), concluding that there was a correspondence between different apology strategies and their effects on the hearer. Holmes' (1989) study was an attempt to scrutinize the effect of gender on the realization patterns of apologies among New Zealanders, indicating that there were significant differences in the distribution of apologies with regard to sex. In another study of apologies, Wagner (1999), rejecting the universality of the speech act of apology across cultures

and societies, argued that such factors as the offences that initiate an apology are culture-specific, determined by the norms of the society. Wagner carried out her study using written questionnaires and ethnographic notebook recordings to collect data from two speech communities in Mexico and Spain. The study results revealed differences in the use of apology strategies by males and females. Wagner concluded that the view that the universality of the speech act characterizations of apology is problematic.

The study of 'sorry' as an expression of apology and sympathy in the Pacific community in the creole language of Bislama, which is spoken in Vanuatu, showed that this expression is used more frequently by women than men (Meyerhoof, 1999). Schumann and Ross's (2010) study about the common stereotype that women apologizing more frequently than men lent evidence to this stereotype. Nureddeen (2007) demonstrated that power relationships impacted on the use of a universal trend in utilizing apology strategies. In another study, Alfattah (2010) showed that Yemeni EFL learners assumed that all apologies are required to be accompanied or initiated by a statement of regret. Al-Zumor (2011) stressed the pragmatic transfer in his study of Arab learners' use of apology strategies, observing deviations in the use of apology strategies from those of the native speakers of English. Murad (2012) investigated the way Israeli-Arab EFL students apologized to their university lecturers, finding that the two most frequently used apology strategies were 'expression of apology' and 'acknowledgment of responsibility'. Explicit teaching and its effect on the pragmatic development of EFL learners has also been the focus of attention of some researchers. In another study of 500 apology exchanges occurring in natural settings it was shown that Persian speakers used an expression of apology more frequently than any other strategy (Shariati & Chamani, 2010). In another recent study, the apologetic behavior of 40 undergraduate university students was examined (Tehrani, Rezaei & Dezhara, 2012). The results showed that statement of remorse was the most common strategy and that there were sex differences in the distribution of apologies.

As can be seen from this review of apology research, most studies have focused on the realization patterns of apologies. The ability to apologize in an appropriate way, however, has not been fully investigated.

Apologetic behavior is of obvious significance in social life since avoiding impingement on other individuals' freedom of action is almost impossible, hence the possibility of committing wrong actions towards others and therefore the necessity of mastering polite apologetic behavior. Therefore, EFL learners are required to acquire this aspect of the social life with considerable effort to achieve successful communication.

1.3. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory

Politeness has been defined as "a property associated with an utterance in which, according to the hearer, the speaker has neither exceeded any rights nor failed to fulfill any obligations" (Fraser, 1975 as cited in Hei, David & Kia, 2013, p. 6). In this regard, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory is believed to be the most influential theory developed ever (Lindblom, 2006). According to this theory, individuals are required to adhere to the politeness conventions by minimizing the threat posed by the face-threatening acts (FTAs), like apology, complaint and so forth, to the addressee's or speaker's face, whether negative or positive. Brown and Levinson postulated that all speech acts face-threatening, either to H's or S's face (Terkourafi, 2004). The weightiness (W) of an FTA is assessed by use of a specific formula proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) involving three essential components: power (P), social distance (D) and the rating of the imposition (Rx) (Harris, 2007):

$$Wx = D\ (S, H) + P\ (H, S) + Rx$$

$$(S = speaker,\ H = hearer)$$

In this formula, P refers to the power that the hearer has over the speaker. For instance, necessarily a boss has more power relative to a worker and so does a university professor relative to a student. D relates to the distance that the interlocutors maintain from each other which can range from very high as in two strangers to very low as in two close friends. Rx refers to " the culturally and situationally specified ranking of the imposition entailed by FTAx" (Terkourafi, 2004, p. 119). These factors determine the seriousness or weightiness of an FTA and consequently the level of politeness involved. The more serious an FTA is and the more its weightiness, the higher the level of the linguistic mitigation should be.

Power is one of the three main dimensions that influence the politeness strategy that is chosen by interlocutors. Therefore, it sounds reasonable to maintain that to be pragmatically competent in terms of politeness the EFL learner should possess a full understanding of the dynamics of the power relationships among the interlocutors. Very few studies, Harris added, have attempted to address the relationship between politeness and power. Thus, the present study is motivated by the paucity of research studies in this respect. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is a universal notion and has underlying universals of usage that can be applied to different cultures. They proposed five politeness strategies for dealing with FTAs as shown in Figure 1 below (Vinagre, 2008, p. 1026):
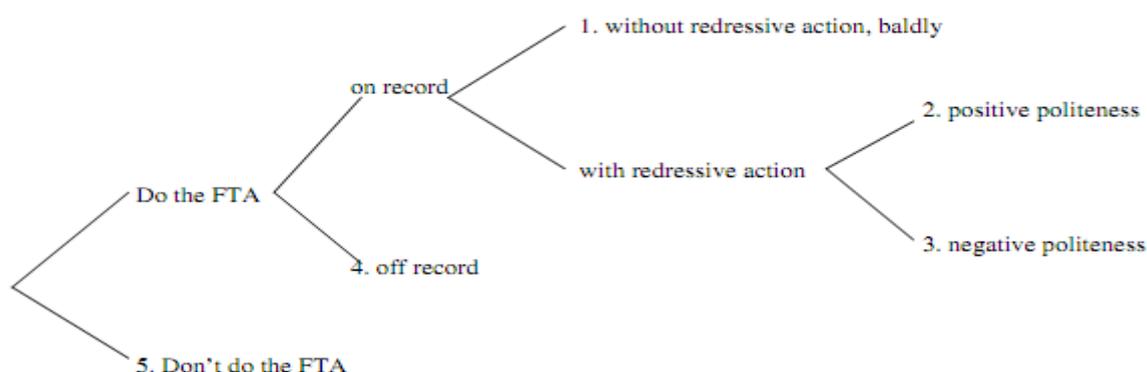

Figure 1. Brown and Levinson's (1987) possible strategies for doing an FTA

It is worth noting that these strategies pose different degrees of risk to S's or H's face as shown in the following figure. (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 12):
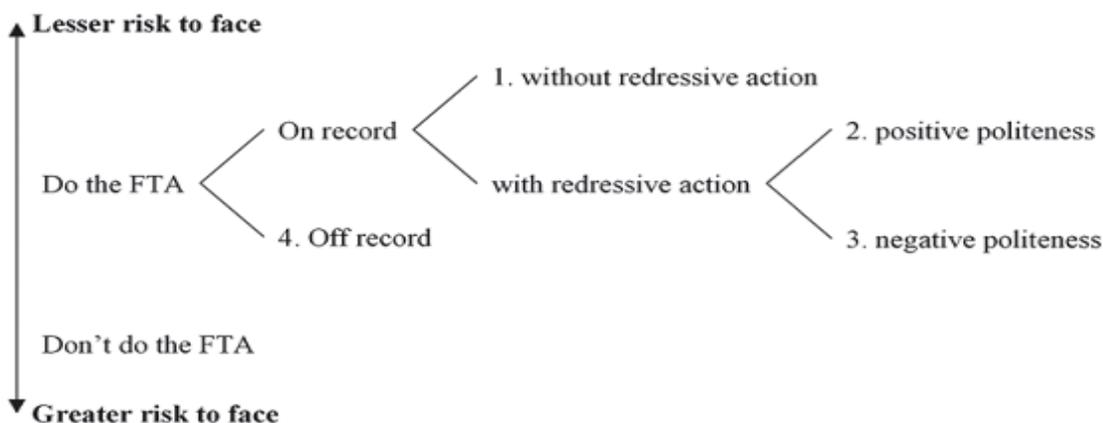
Figure 2. *The degree of risk of politeness strategies*

In a bald on record politeness strategy no mitigating device is used to redress the threat of an FTA and when such redressing devices are used the result is in positive or negative politeness strategies. The former recognizes respect and mutual relation by use of such devices as in-group markers (e. g., honey, darling, etc.) while in the latter type of strategy the speaker admits to the imposition by, say, apologizing (e. g., I'm sorry). Off record politeness utilizes hints, allusions, and so forth, and thus avoids direct FTAs (Hei, David & Kia, 2013). 'Do not do FTA strategy' is when the speaker opts for not doing an FTA altogether because of the face loss involved. In Figure 2 the politeness strategies are numbered according to their amount of face-redress that is necessary for the FTA to sound polite (Ogiermann, 2009). Other things being equal, therefore, the most impolite politeness strategy is bald on record and the most polite is 'Do not do FTA'.

1.4. Research questions

The current study set out to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequent apology strategies used by Iranian EFL learners across gender?

2. Is there any significant difference between males and females in their use of apology strategies?

3. What are the politeness strategies used by Iranian EFL learners across interlocutor power?

4. Is there any significant difference between males and females in their use of politeness strategies in apology?

5. How do native English speakers evaluate Iranian EFL learners' apology utterances on the politeness Likert scale?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 30 graduate students of English, 15 females and 15 males. The participants all majored in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), either students of MA or holders of MA in TEFL, and their age ranged from 23 to 31. Since MA Examination held in Iran includes various parts like grammar, vocabulary, reading and cloze test and the students pass advanced writing course in both BA and MA tertiary levels, so the participants were supposed to have

attained a high level of academic proficiency. Almost all of them comprised of teachers of English in various language institutes, public or private, with various years of teaching experience from 2 to 10 years. Therefore, they were supposed to have been exposed to the English language, and subsequently to the English culture, fully enough to be able to function in the target culture. It is worth mentioning that almost all of the participants came from the same language background with Persian being their first language. It is worth noting that all the participants had declared that they had not received any explicit instruction as to how to apologize in English till the time this study was conducted and that all their information came from implicit learning in high school or university.

2.2. Instrument

The DCT which is used to elicit data for the speech act of apology in this study was adopted from Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). In the DCT the interlocutors' relative power are shown in the order of speaker to hearer (addressee). For instance, in 'Low-High', the speaker is of a lower relative power relative to the hearer who is superior, hence the asymmetry of the relationship. Power is shown using +P for a situation in which the hearer is of lower social power, -P when the hearer is of higher social status and =P when the hearer and speaker are of equal power statuses. More information on the situations of the DCT is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The variables underlying the construction of apology situations

No.	Situations	Power
1	Failing to read paper	(+P) High-Low
2	Borrowed book forgotten	(-P) Low-High
3	Late for job interview	(+P) High-Low
4	Classmate offended	(=P) Equals
5	Late for meeting	(=P) Equals
6	Crucial meeting forgotten	(-P) Low-High

2.3. The study

The present study is a cross-sectional one; that is, it investigates "a cross section (sample) of a population at a single point in time" (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 377). Cross-sectional studies are, therefore, contrasted with longitudinal studies which serve to examine the route of development of a sample of population over time. In the same vein, the current study takes one snapshot of pragmatic competence, or to be more precise, the sociolinguistic competence of Iranian EFL learners and examines it as it is, and not as it has developed. The impetus for choosing the cross-sectional method instead of the longitudinal method, is the fact the former is far easier to carry out than the latter which requires an extended time commitment and observation on the part of the researcher although the latter is more valuable (Ellis, 2012).

2.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed in four phases. In the first phase, the taxonomy of apology strategies was employed in this study to identify and code the strategies utilized by the participants when apologizing. This taxonomy was first outlined by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989b). This set of strategies consisted of five main strategies as follows: 1) an expression of an apology, 2) an explanation or account of the situation, 3) an acknowledgement of responsibility, 4) an offer of repair and 5) a promise of forbearance. These strategies also comprise sub-strategies. For instance, the first

strategy, an expression of apology, can be realized through an expressing regret, offering apology or by requesting forgiveness. The second phase included identifying the politeness strategies employed in the data. Next, a sample of 90 apology utterances was presented to two English native speakers who were asked to assess the degree of politeness of the utterances on a scale of 1=Polite, 2=Partially Polite and 3=Impolite. Finally, the apologetic behavior of the participants was qualitatively analyzed and discussed, explicating elements of politeness and impoliteness. Descriptive statistics are commonly used in speech act research and, accordingly, they were utilized in this study. Chi-square analysis was used to explore if there was any significant relationship between males' and females' use of apology strategies and politeness strategies.

3. Results

The current study aimed to scrutinize the apologetic behavior of Iranian EFL learners in terms of appropriacy and politeness. Since politeness is closely associated with power and social status, the study also set out to identify the way that Iranian EFL learners dealt with the interlocutors' relative power when apologizing. Following the presentation of results in statistics, the findings will be exemplified and qualitatively discussed. The results are presented below.

3.1. The most frequently used apology strategies

As the first aim of the study, the most frequent apology strategies used by Iranian EFL learners were identified. The results of the type and frequency of the apology strategies are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of apology strategies across gender

		Group				
		Male		Female		
	Apology strategy	No	Percent	No	Percent	Total
1	An expression of an apology					
	a expression of regret	47	47.9	51	52	98 (30%)
	b an offer of apology	6	33.3	12	66.6	18 (5.5%)
	c a request for forgiveness	13	56.5	10	43.5	23 (7%)
2	An explanation or account of the situation	25	39	39	60.9	64 (19.6%)
3	An acknowledgement of responsibility					
	a accepting the blame	0	0	4	100	4 (1.2%)
	b expressing self-deficiency	19	44.2	24	55.8	43 (13.1%)
	c recognizing the other person as deserving apology	2	40	3	60	5 (1.5%)
	d expressing lack of intent	12	44.4	15	55.5	27 (8.2%)
4	An offer of repair	21	55.3	17	44.7	38 (11.6%)
5	A promise of forbearance	2	28.6	5	71.4	7 (2.1%)
	Total	147	44.9	180	55	327 (100%)

Table 3 shows that of the total number of 327 apology utterances, the four most frequently used apology strategies include *an expression of regret* (30%), *an explanation or account of the situation* (19.6%), *expressing self-deficiency* (13.1%) and *an offer of repair* (11.6%).

According to Bataineh and Bataineh (2006), a successful apology has some felicity conditions including an acknowledgment that an offence has taken place, taking responsibility for the offence and offering repair or compensation to the victim. As can be seen, of the strategies mentioned by Bataineh and Bataineh, only two have been employed by the participants. Furthermore, the tendency among the participants towards expressing regret and explaining the situation as strategies for apologizing can be attributed to the fact that these are the most immediate and the simplest ways to apologize.

Another point is that since IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) or "an expression of apology" as referred to by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) is the apology strategy most central in many languages (Al-Zumor, 2011), it is reasonable to assume that the frequent use of this strategy among Iranian EFL learners can be justified on this basis. Regret and explanation of situations do not threaten the apologist's face to such a large extent as accepting the blame does and the extensive use of these two apology strategies can be accounted for on this basis. Regarding the role of gender, females apologized more frequently than males did. In this connection, the major distinction between males and females was noted to be in offering apologies and explaining a situation; in both strategies, females' number of apologies exceeded males'. This finding confirms the common idea that women tend to express apologies more frequently than men do, an idea which was corroborated by Holmes (1989) and was found out to be true. Holmes recognized that unlike men, women were more sensitive to providing apologies which was motivated by social constraints.

As regards the role of gender in the use of apology strategies which was addressed in the second research question, chi-square analysis of the apology strategies showed no significant, a finding that is inconsistent with Holmes' (1989) findings.

Table 4. Chi-square analysis of apology strategies

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	9.20	9	.419

p < .05   Critical Value: 16.91

3.2. Politeness strategies employed across power status

The study also dealt with the politeness strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in apology in English when confronted with an addressee with higher, lower and equal power status. To this end, the apology utterances, totaling to 180 utterances, were analyzed and coded using the politeness strategies as identified in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency of politeness strategies across power status in apology

Relative power	BOR		PSP		NGP		OFP		Do not do FTA	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
+P (S>H; Sit# 1 & 3)	9	8	11	23	21	20	3	3	0	0
=P (S=H; Sit# 4 & 5)	2	4	8	27	20	23	2	0	0	0
-P (S<H; Sit# 2 & 6)	3	2	8	27	37	42	4	0	0	0
Total	14	14	27	77	78	85	9	3	0	0

Note. Sit: situation; BOR: bald on record; PSP: positive politeness; NGP: negative politeness; OFP: off record politeness

As can be seen from Table 5, the most frequently used politeness strategy is negative politeness. This strategy was particularly opted for by both genders when the speaker was in a lower social status relative to the hearer (Situations 2 and 6). The next politeness strategy is positive politeness while one politeness strategy, 'Do not do FTA', was not employed at all. This can suggest that Iranian EFL learners opt more for the performing of an FTA than for opting for the other way round. Table 5 also shows that there are no considerable differences between males and females in their use of politeness strategies except for the case of off record politeness in which males seem to have taken more interest than females. The effect of the speaker's relative power is obvious in the participants' use of bald on record politeness strategy in Situations 1 and 3 where they were in a higher position relative to the hearer. This strategy was, however, used less frequently when the speaker and hearer were equals (Situations 4 and 5) or when the speaker's social status was lower than that of the hearer (situations 2 and 6).

According to Holmes (1995), apologizing substantially more than men, women are more polite and often use positive politeness (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006). The results above clearly confirm Holmes' findings. The above finding can have roots in the fact that compared to men, women, perhaps because of their social positions, tend to assert more solidarity than power, hence their use of positive politeness. Nevertheless, the lack of considerable differences in the use of politeness strategies as shown in Table 6 may be interpretable in light of the fact that the oft-repeated idea that politeness is a women's concern can turn out to be only a stereotype (Mills, 2003).

As regards the role of gender in the use of politeness strategies, a chi-square analysis was run which showed a significant relationship between gender and the politeness strategies employed.

Table 6. Chi-square analysis of politeness strategies use

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	19.40	3	.000

p < .05   Critical Value: 7.81

4. Discussion

4.1. NSs' Assessment

To measure the extent to which Iranian EFL learners have become pragmatically competent in the performance of the speech act of apology, the study procedure included native speaker assessment in which two native speakers of English were asked to assess a sample of 90 speech act utterances in

terms of the degree of politeness on a scale of 1=Polite, 2=Partially Polite and 3=Impolite. The results are presented in Figure 3.
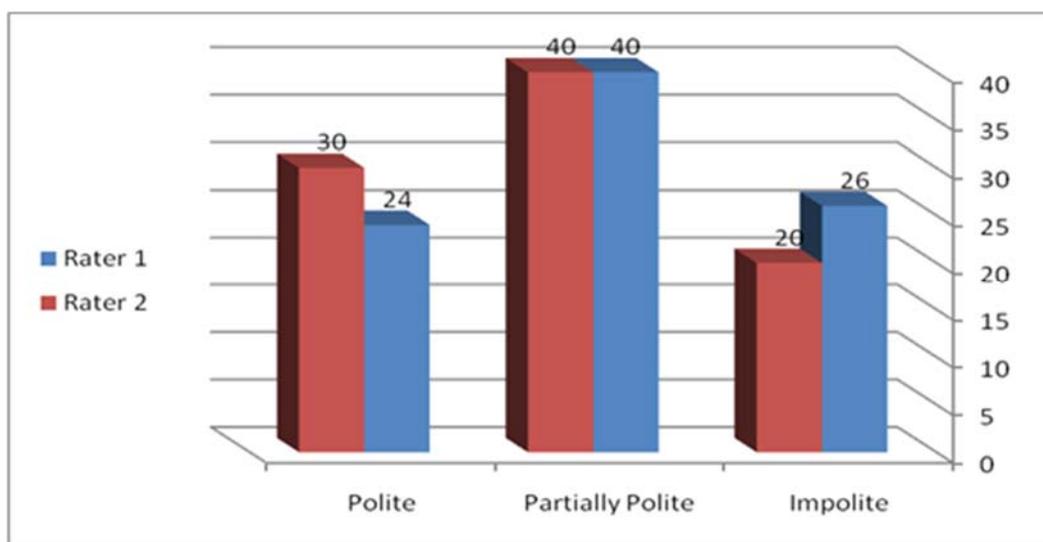

Figure 3. *NSs' Assessment of the Degree of Politeness of the Apology Utterances*

Figure 3 shows that the raters' average agreement indicated that 27 apology utterances (30%) were rated as 'Polite', 40 utterances (44.4%) as 'Partially Polite' and 23 utterances (25.5%) as 'Impolite'.

4.2. Qualitative analysis of the apology strategies

In this section, drawing on the native speakers' assessment, we discuss the apology utterances qualitatively and focus on the interlocutors' relative power. It is worth mentioning that S and H in this part stand for Speaker (=addresser) and Hearer (=addressee), respectively.

Situation # 1 (+P; Speaker > Hearer)

You are a university professor. You promised to return the student's paper that day but you didn't finish reading it.

Student: "Did you read my paper?"

Polite apologies

The polite responses in this situation included the following:

1. Female speaker: *Oh, sorry! I actually forgot about it. I will return it tomorrow.*

2. Female speaker: *I'm so sorry; I completely forgot it. I will bring it tomorrow.*

3. Male speaker: *Sorry! I hadn't enough time, I'm busy these days but I'll do my best to   finish it as soon as possible!*

4. Male speaker: *I'm sorry. I'll do it as soon as possible.*

To sound sincerely apologetic, speakers need to use strategies such as interjections like *oh* to show that they care about what has happened to H (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006). The speaker has employed one such strategy in example 1 above. An IFID is the most direct strategy for realizing an apology (Alfattah, 2010). The majority of the apologies used by the participants consisted of more than one apology strategy with the IFID as the initiating statement as shown in the above utterances of apology. It seems that the participants perceived 'statement of regret' as the inevitable part of a polite apology.

Impolite apologies

Some responses were deemed impolite in this situation by the native speakers, including the following responses:

1. Female speaker: *No, I was up to something else and couldn't find enough time to.*

2. Female speaker: *Sorry, I didn't make time.*

3. Male speaker: *Not yet, maybe tomorrow.*

4. Male speaker: *No, I will tell you about it next session!*

The common features of the above apologies is that they are short, lack an offer of apology and include the response 'no' which can in all probability result in H's interpretation of it as an offence. Although H, the superior interlocutor, has provided a reason (here lack of time) for not having been able to do what is required from him/her (reading and returning S's paper), this reason is not plausible enough and can lead to S's idea that his/her paper had not been worth reading, hence there is the possibility that this would cause an offence. Besides, these apologies do not include a variety of strategies and most of them are expressed using bald on record politeness strategies, which demonstrate more power than solidarity. As Alfattah's (2010) study of Yemeni EFL learners showed, polite apologies were accompanied by an IFID; therefore, the impoliteness of these utterances is the lack of this strategy which can serve as a mitigator. Fetzer (2007) pointed out that expressing negative politeness through such utterances as 'I'm sorry' shows 'subjectification' and thus the participants, superior in this situation, had felt that they might be belittled if they had apologized. They have stressed their power by not apologizing directly and explicitly. Other studies concur to this statement, too. For instance, in their study, Hei, David and Kia (2013) stipulated that impolite direct directives of the hospital staff were caused by the power they had over their patients.

S# 2 (-P; Speaker < Hearer)

You borrowed your professor's book, which you promised to return that day but forgot to bring it.

Professor: "Did you bring the book?"

Polite apologies

1. Female speaker: *Oh my God! I DO apologize! I was so busy these days, and I forgot to bring it! I'm so sorry!*

2. Female speaker: *Sorry; forgot to bring it. Tomorrow at 7 o'clock it will be in your office.*

3. Female speaker: *I'm truly sorry I forgot to bring it, I promise to bring it next time.*

4. Male speaker: *Oh, no! Sorry! Is it OK to bring it back tomorrow, sir/ma'am?*

In Example 1, the speaker has employed a few strategies: the interjection '*oh*' showing the speaker has been shocked by the offence she has committed, an offer of apology accompanied by an emphatic '*do*', an explanation or account of the situation and expression of regret intensified by the adverbial '*so*'. All of these constitute negative politeness strategies aimed at recognizing H's freedom of action. Also, invoking God's name can be attributed to the transfer of cultural norms from the participants' first culture. In Example 2, the speaker has expressed regret, provided an explanation or account of the situation and promised to avoid the offence. All these strategies have minimized the degree of the offence, hence the appropriacy of the apology. Apology 3 is polite since the strategies used in this situation include an expression of regret intensified by *truly* and an offer of repair. From the review of the literature that was provided earlier, one can conclude that expressing regret or apologizing and requesting for forgiveness in the above apologies have contributed to their appropriacy and politeness.

Impolite apologies

1. Female speaker: *The book is with Mr. X, he should bring it back to you.*

2. Male speaker: *WOW! I forgot! Excuse me!*

In Example 1, the speaker has evaded responsibility for bringing back the professor's book and has therefore excessively threatened his/her face. In Example 2, the speaker has provided too short an explanation or reason which is potential to offend the victim. By doing so, he has weakened the strength of his request for forgiveness that follows (*Excuse me*). Since S has far less power than that of H and an explicit apology is fully expected, the failure to do so will be clearly interpreted as rude (Ige, 2007).

Situation # 4 (=P; Speaker=Hearer)

During a class discussion, you offend one of your classmates. After class, he mentions this fact to you.

Polite apologies

1. Female speaker: *I'm so sorry! I do apologize! I have some problems these days and I'm so nervous! That was out of my control!*

2. Female speaker: *Really sorry. I didn't mean it.*

3. Male speaker: *Oh, I'm really sorry pal. I don't know what happened. Let me make it up to you.*

4. Male speaker: *Please accept my apology. [I] really didn't mean to offend you.*

By applying what Holmes (1990) found about polite apologies, that is, their including an explicit apology, it can be concluded that the above apologies are polite on the basis that they contain an explicit apology. Also, considering length, these apologies are fairly long. The explanations that follow the explicit apologies have added to the redress of the threat of the offence as well.

Impolite apologies

1. Female speaker: *Oh! I didn't really mean that.*

2. Female speaker: *Oh, I think you are right to blame me.*

3. Male speaker: *Really?!!Anyway, excuse me.*

4. Male speaker: *Oh really? but that was not what I meant.*

These apologies are impolite on various grounds. On the one hand, they do not include explicit apologies or requests for forgiveness. On the other hand, as apologies 3 and 4 show, the apologists' use of '*really*' conveys to the victim that he/she is not sincere in being offended. This threatens H's face to a large degree. Further, these apologies are very short and remind us of their conforming to Grice's maxim of quantity. Therefore the impoliteness of these apology strategies is compounded by the lack of explicit apologies where these are due, and the chances are that the disruption caused in the social relationship continues (Ige, 2007).

4.3 Linguistic devices indicative of politeness and impoliteness

The present study also investigated the elements or factors which made the utterances seem impolite. To sound polite, the participants utilized certain politeness markers, devices, syntactic structures, etc. in the semantic formulas they uttered in apologizing. One major element of impoliteness was the fact that the apology utterances rated as impolite by the native speakers were either too short, abrupt and terse or too long and verbose. By way of example, the following apology strategies are not appropriate on the basis of their length:

A. *Sorry, I didn't make time.* (Situation # 1; +P; Speaker > Hearer)

B. *Not yet, maybe tomorrow.* (Situation # 1; +P; Speaker > Hearer)

C. *Oh! I didn't really mean that.* (Situation # 4; =P; Speaker=Hearer)

What is more, the vast majority of the 'impolite' semantic formulas were lacking in mitigation, redressive action and softening force. For instance, the following apology semantic formulas hardly contain any plausible mitigating force or politeness markers:

D. *Not yet, maybe tomorrow.* (Situation # 1; +P; Speaker > Hearer)

E. *Oh really? but that was not what I meant.* (Situation # 4; =P; Speaker=Hearer)

F. *Oh, I think you are right to blame me.* (Situation # 4; =P; Speaker=Hearer)

Furthermore, lack of variety of apology strategies used showed that the participants relied on only a limited number of ways to realize this speech act. As it was observed, these apology strategies revolved mainly around an expression of regret, an explanation or account of the situation, expressing self-deficiency and an offer of repair which constituted over 74 per cent of the entire number of the strategies used. This lack of variety can be attributed, perhaps, to the participants' limited pragmatic repertoire.

Besides, the qualitative analysis revealed that some essential politeness markers were absent from the participants' impolite utterances as in the following example which lacks any mitigator to soften the FTA:

G) Student to his/her professor: *The book is with Mr. X, he should bring it back to you.* (S# 2; -P; Speaker < Hearer)

Overall, the causes of impoliteness of these utterances were found to be such factors as the length of utterances lack of use of some politeness markers, and lack of explicit apology as polite apology strategies.

5. Conclusions

The study revealed that for apologies Iranian EFL learners employed an expression of regret, an explanation or account of the situation, expressing self-deficiency and an offer of repair. The results also indicated that, in their attempt to apologize politely and appropriately, they relied on positive and negative politeness strategies. Also, gender was found to have no significant effect on the use of apology strategies. Positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies were found to be the politeness strategies most frequently employed by Iranian EFL learners whether in symmetrical or asymmetrical power relations in all the three speech acts in question, with the bald on record and off record coming next. The assessment of the apology utterances by native speakers on the scale of politeness showed that over half of the utterances were rated as 'Partially polite'. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of the apology utterances demonstrated that in all levels of social status or relative power (P) Iranian EFL learners had difficulty dealing with the concept of the addressee's power, particularly when they are in a position of higher status relative to their addressee. In line with previous studies, the findings of the present study call for explicit instruction in pragmatics as pointed out by Farhadi and Farmanesh, 2008, Lingli and Wannaruk, 2010, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2011, Silva, 2003. In conclusion, Iranian EFL learners were found to be only partially sociolinguistically competent in the speech act of apology. Furthermore, the findings have implications for communicative language teaching in which the learners' communicative competence is to be stressed.

In conclusion, both the native speaker politeness assessment and qualitative analysis of the apology utterances indicated a partial, not a full, pragmatic and, to be more precise, sociolinguistic competence in Iranian EFL learners, hence the need for instructional intervention in teaching pragmatics.

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Appendix A. Discourse Completion Task for Apology

Please read the following apology situations and respond to them. You are kindly requested to answer the items of this questionnaire as realistically, carefully and accurately as possible. Rest assured that the information obtained in the course of this study will be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of academic research.

Thank you.

General information:

Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Your email address (for further contact): ……………………………..

Please respond to these questions as realistically and honestly as possible. Suppose that you are in such situations. You are kindly required to apologize in these situations.

1. You are a university professor. You promised to return the student's paper that day but you didn't finish reading it.

Student: "Did you read my paper?"

You: …………………………………………………………………………………….

2. You borrowed your professor's book, which you promised to return that day but forgot to bring it.

Professor: "Did you bring the book?"

You: …………………………………………………………………………………...

3. You are a manager and you have kept a student waiting for half an hour for a job interview because you were called to an unexpected meeting.

Student: "What happened?"

You: ………………………………………………………………………..……..

4. During a class discussion, you offend one of your classmates. After class, he mentions this fact to you.

You: …………………………………………………………………………….……

5. You are an unpunctual student. You are late again for a meeting with a friend with whom you are working on a joint paper.

Friend: "Well, you are late again."

You: ....

6. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks:

Boss: "What happened to you?"

You: ....

İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin incelikli olan ve olmayan özürleri üzerine çapraz kesişimli bir çalışma

Öz

Başarılı iletişim dilbilimsel yeti ve incelikle yakından ilişkili olan uygunluğu ifade eden toplumsal dil yetisinin ortak ürünüdür. Bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin özür söz eylemini gerçekleştirirken kullandıkları incelik stratejilerini araştırmayı hedeflemiştir. Veri, özür söz eyleminin gerçekleştiği altı durumdan oluşan söylem tamamlama etkinliklerine cevap veren 30 İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerden toplanmıştır. Veri incelemesi üç aşamadan oluşmuştur. İlk olarak, özür ve incelik stratejilerini belirlemek üzere bu çalışma Olshtain ve Cohen'ın (1983) özür stratejileri sınıflamasını ve Brown ve Levinson'ın (1987) incelik teorisini sırasıyla izlemiştir. İkinci aşamada verilen toplam ifade sayısının %50'sini oluşturan 90 özür ifadeleri anadili İngilizce olan iki kişi tarafından incelik Likert ölçeğine göre değerlendirilmiştir: 1=ince, 2=Kısmen ince ve 3= ince değil. Son olarak, anadil olarak İngilizce konuşan kişilerin özür ifadelerini incelik açısından değerlendirmelerine dayanarak, araştırmacılar ifadeleri uygunluk ve uygunsuzluk açısından niteliksel olarak incelemişlerdir. Ortaya çıkan sonuçlar şöyledir: a) Anadili İngilizce olan kişiler 27 tane (%30) özür ifadesini ince, 40 tanesini (%44.5) kısmen ince ve 23 tanesini (%25.5) ince olmayan şeklinde değerlendirmişlerdir; b) en sık kullanılan özür ifadelerinin 'pişmanlık ifadeleri', 'durumu açıklama', 'öz-yetersizlik ifade etme' ve 'düzeltme isteme' olduğu bulunmuştur; c) erkekler ve kadınlar arasında özür dilerken kullanılan incelik stratejileri açısından önemli bir fark olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır ve d) özür dilerken katılımcılar olumlu ve olumsuz incelik stratejilerine bağlı kalmışlardır. Sonuç olarak, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin özür dilerken kısmen toplumsal dil yetisine sahip oldukları görülmüştür.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Özür stratejileri; İngilizce öğrencileri, incelik; kibarlık; edimbilimsel yeti

AUTHORS' BIODATA

Seyyed Hatam Tamimi Sa'd holds an MA in ELT from Urmia University, Urmia, Iran. He is currently a teacher in Iran Language Institute (ILI). His areas of interest include sociolinguistics, acquisitional pragmatics, critical pedagogy and ELT.

Mohammad Mohammadi, currently an assistant professor in Urmia University, holds a Ph.D. in TESOL from the University of Leeds, UK. During his stay in Leeds, he taught several modules in TESOL at the University of Leeds and Thomas Danby College. His research interests include vocabulary learning, L2 reading and writing, phonology and acquisitional pragmatics.