

# The Use of Apology Strategies in English by Pakistani EFL University Students in Pakistan

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## Abstract

The speech acts of apology are very important for English language learning and speech acts should be included in the teaching material of English to help learners develop pragmatic competence. Pakistani English language learners lack knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules of speaking English. Successful communication is possible when English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners have pragmatic competence which exhibits the ability to use language forms suitable to socio-cultural context. The use of the speech act of apology of university students of English in Pakistan was investigated in this study based on Holmes' (1990) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) apology speech act sets. The results of the study reveal that out of 106 almost all the respondents (105) used "explanation or account" (there was terrible traffic) and (97) used "explicit apology" (sorry). "Expressing self-deficiency" (I forgot; I was confused) and "intensifiers of apology" (I'm very sorry; I'm really sorry) are two other apology strategies which majority of the respondents (76 and 64) also used. Interestingly, none of the respondents reports using "recognizing H as deserving apology" (you are right!) and "acknowledgment of responsibility" (oh, I made a mistake). There is no statistically significant difference in use of apology strategies between male and female respondents. The results of this study might be of pedagogical help and important for teachers, policy makers, curriculum developers, material designers, students, and researchers.

**Keywords:** sociolinguistic rules of speaking, pragmatic competence, Pakistani EFL learners, pedagogical help, Pakistan.

## 1. Introduction

In view of the recent shifts from grammatical to communicative competence and pragmatic ability in language teaching and learning, it is not surprising that speech act of apologizing and cross-cultural comparisons of apologies and apology strategies in different languages have been popular among researchers within the field of sociolinguistics, especially pragmatics. Starting with Hymes' (1974) original idea that learners of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language, there has been great emphasis that learners must acquire not only linguistic rules such as morphology, syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, but they must also acquire sociolinguistics rules of the target language (Anderson, 1990; Olshtain & Cohen, 1981; Wolfson, 1981). The L2 pragmatic transfer studies have shown that despite being linguistically competent in a second language, learners are likely to transfer L1 pragmatic rules in their L2 production (Samaty, 2005) and there has been a great emphasis on developing pragmatic competence of L2 learners in language classrooms. Researchers and practitioners have emphasized the need that EFL learners must not only acquire the correct syntax and phonology of the English language, but also the knowledge and understanding of how language is pragmatically used in the target culture in order to increase their intercultural communicative competence in English (Lee, 2002). Learners should be taught communicative strategies and the pragmatic differences in the target language. In view of all this, it is surprising that this is not an important consideration as far as English language teaching in Pakistan is concerned.

Though Pakistani EFL learners achieve advance level of L2 competence in grammar but they lack mastery in using sociolinguistic rules of speaking English. Students in Pakistan start learning English from first grade and continue to study it as a compulsory subject till graduation (14 years of education). They have constant contact with English language through social, electronic, and print media but they do not achieve the desired higher level functional proficiency in English, especially pragmatic competence. In addition to the factors which are responsible for the unsatisfactory situation of teaching and learning English, identified by some Pakistani researchers, one of the main reasons for the limited or low English proficiency of students in Pakistan is the lack of understanding on the part of teachers, researchers, curriculum designers and material developers about the

importance of developing English learners' communicative competence and pragmatic knowledge in Pakistan because in cross-cultural communication, foreign language learners have to pay close attention to sociolinguistic rules of the target language in addition to structure and discourse rules to meet the needs of linguistic accuracy and fluency. (Wolfson, 1989; Muhammad, 2012, Hassan, 2001; Warsi, 2004; Sultana, 2007)

It is common observation that English teachers in Pakistan hardly try to teach communicative competence in their classrooms, especially pragmatic competence. In our classrooms, the focus of English teachers remains on linguistics competence and they seem to have no realization as far as the importance of pragmatic competence is concerned. Teachers in school and college settings emphasize the denotative meanings and not the connotative ones. The de-contextualized meaning of vocabulary and sentences is stressed over the ways of using them when, where and why to use them and who says them to whom. This is due to the kind of education which concentrates on the linguistic competence rather than the pragmatic one and hence it seems obvious that this will lead to the learners' inability to use language appropriately in different contexts. However, as no study related to the L2 English pragmatic ability of students of English in Pakistan has yet been conducted, it will be hard to say anything with confidence about the pragmatic competence of English students including their proficiency in using appropriate apology strategies in English. There is a wide research gap and this study attempted to fill in this gap by exploring the use of apology strategies in English by the Pakistani university students in Pakistan.

## 2. Review of Relevant Literature

In the field of sociolinguistics, pragmatic competence has been defined and discussed by many scholars. However, most of these attempts to explain pragmatic competence reflect more or less the same conceptions. According to Levison (1983), pragmatics is the study of how individuals understand and generate a communicative act or speech act in tangible discussion scenario which is usually a conversation. It distinguishes two intents or meanings in each utterance or communicative act of verbal communication. One is the informative intent or the sentence meaning and the other the communicative intent or speaker meaning (Leech, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Pragmatics is often divided into two components. Pragma-linguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relation on interpersonal meanings. Such resources include pragmatic strategies, routines, and other range of linguistic forms which can soften or intensify communicative acts. Socio-pragmatics refers to the sociological interface of pragmatics, referring to the social perceptions underlying participant's interpretation and performance of communicative actions. Socio-pragmatics is about proper social behavior. Learners must be made aware of the consequences of making pragmatic choices (Leech, 1983).

The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to as pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997) which often includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit. In other words, pragmatic competence involves not only linguistic or grammatical knowledge but also the talent to grasp and fabricate socially appropriate language functions in discourse (Wolfson, 1989). Studies have provided evidence that it is vital for L2 learners to be appropriately cultured with pragmatic rules of the target language to help them develop functional proficiency and be able to convey communicative intent and use target language appropriately in various contexts. The acquisition and precision of pragmatic competence of EFL/ESL learners has gained significant consideration in recent times from researchers in the field. Studies dealing with the interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) and pragmatic transfer have shown how non-native speakers, due to the influence of their native language, are at variance from native speakers in understanding a particular speech act and this causes misunderstandings and communication breakdowns (Holmes 2001; Wolfson, 1989). This study investigates the use of apology strategies in English by Pakistani EFL university students.

### 2.1 Research on Apology

In an attempt to discover the pragmatic competence of Iraqi EFL learners, Abdul-Ameer (2013) researched that Iraqi EFL learners' study apology from a lexical perspective, but they do not study it from a pragmatic one. It is discovered that the highest number of apology strategies used by Iraqi EFL male learners is with individuals of greater position. This demonstrates a transfer of the Iraqi social and cultural standards. In a more recent study that aimed at finding and examining the apology expressions used by Jordanian university students.

Al-Sobh (2013) discovered that the apology strategies used were apology and regret, explanation, offer of repair, equal – equal, low high and liability. Similarly, Sadeghi (2013), having used DCT as an instrument, explored the similarities and differences among strategies used in performing speech act of apologizing in Southern Kurdish. The research findings indicated that Kurdish and Persian children's apologies are formulaic in pragmatic structures and there are some significant differences between Kurdish and Persian.

Qorina (2012) analyzed the realization of apology strategies by English department learners of Pekalongan University. The results exposed that an explicit expression of apology, in particular, the technique of showing regret, is the most frequent apology strategy. With pragmatic transfer, pragma-linguistic transfer is

dominated by language features changing from Indonesian language to English, whereas the socio-pragmatic transfer is more covered with a socio-culture changing from Indonesian to English, making it undesirable in English language.

Nevertheless, literature review illustrates that communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behavior that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. This study will help ESL learners to become competent and conscious about the use of language in a context and avoid potential miscommunication.

### 3. Methodology

The focus of the study was to explore the use of apology strategies in English by Pakistani university students in Pakistan and the differences in the use of apology strategies between male and female respondents. Because of the nature of data (qualitative) and data collection procedures (DCT), and data analysis procedures, I used quantitative research design. For data collection, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that contained 15 items was developed. I personally explained and administered the DCTs. All participant responses were analyzed using frequencies, an Independent Samples *t*-Test, and summary narrative methods in order to present a realistic description of the use of apology strategies in English by Pakistani university students in Pakistan.

#### 3.1 Population and Sample

The target population of this study was all students of MA English and BS English degree programs, especially in their final years of study, in departments of English in the institutions of higher education in Pakistan. The participants (106) were selected using *non-random, purposive, and convenience sampling procedures* from the following higher education institutions of the Pakistan: (1) Punjab University, Lahore, (2) Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, (3) Govt. College University, Faisalabad, (4) University of Gujarat, (5) University of Sargodha, (6) Govt. College University, Lahore, (7) Kinnaird College, Lahore, and (8) Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. The sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of their cultural and linguistic background (Pakistani) and academic experiences. There were twenty one (21) male and eighty five (85) female respondents. These students were perusing their Master/ BS degrees in English Literature, Linguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT), and TEFL/TESOL or TESL. Respondents were asked to rate their speaking ability in English by themselves in the questionnaire (DCT) and majority of the respondents (85) out of 106 rated themselves at good level. The master's students were studying in their 4<sup>th</sup> semesters and the BS students were studying in their 8<sup>th</sup> semesters. The reason for selecting the students of these semesters was that they were in their final semesters of the degree programs, and it was assumed that they would be more proficient and have knowledge and some L2 English pragmatic ability, especially in apology speech acts. Moreover, in Focus Group discussions in class only 18 students out of the 106 students participated.

#### 3.2 Instrumentations

A Discourse Completion Test (DCT), having 15 apology scenarios, was developed to collect information from the Pakistani English students about their use of apology strategies in English. Following a brief introductory part explaining the purpose of the study, the DCT consists of two parts- Part A Demographic Information and Part B Apology Scenarios (see Appendix A). The first part was intended to collect certain necessary demographic information such as, name of institution, discipline and semester, gender, student status, and level of English. The second part consisted of fifteen apology situations designed to elicit apology strategies (the type of words/expressions) by modifying those situations used in the previous apology speech act studies of Olshtain and Cohen, (1983); Thijjing, (2010). In the design of the apology situations, sociolinguistics status (high, equivalent and low) of the respondents and their interlocutors were also considered. The participants were asked to write responses in English (what they would say in a specific situation as detailed or stated in the DCT) keeping in mind that they are in real life situation.

#### 3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Before administrating the DCT for data collection, I first sought the permission from the chairpersons of the departments of English in each of the selected eight universities. Responses were collected from participants of MA/BS English (4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> semesters of 2013) degree program. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used for data collection. At each campus, I personally invited students to take part in the Informed Consent Sessions. Students were provided with the information related to this study and requested to participate in the study. Each student was provided with the Informed Consent Sheet (see Appendix D) and the Discourse Completion Test. Students who consented to take part in the research were asked to complete the Discourse Completion Test. I explained to students that the study focuses on language use and apology strategies not the language ability. I also explained each situation to the participants before they completed the DCT.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Using a codebook, all responses were coded and compiled separately in different MS Excel files and sheets. First of all, I used specific code numbers and letters for the universities and respondents. Similarly, specific values were assigned to different variables of both response data and demographic data. All MS Excel files were converted into SPSS 21 (IBM local- version) for analysis. Descriptive statistics were run before any of the subsequent analyses to check normality of data. The data sets were analyzed in the light of the research questions using frequencies, descriptive statistics, and an Independent Samples *t*- Test. A mix of summary narrative, tables with numerals and figures were used for the description and discussion of results and findings. As can be seen in the Table 3.1 below, the elicited data were categorized according to Holmes (1990) apology speech act sets (twelve possible realizations) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) classifications.

Table 3.1.  
*Apology Strategies and Possible Realizations*

Strategy code	Possible Realization
A	Explicit expression of apology; sorry
A1	An offer of apology e.g. I beg pardon
A2	An expression of regret e.g. I'm sorry; I'm afraid.
A3	A request for forgiveness e.g. Can you excuse me please.
B	Explanation or account e.g. there was terrible traffic.
C	Acknowledgement of responsibility e.g. Oh, I made a mistake.
C1	Accepting the blame e.g. It is my fault.
C2	Expressing self-deficiency e.g. I got upset/confused.
C3	Recognizing Interlocutor as deserving apology e.g. you're right
C4	Expressing lack of intent e.g. I did not mean to break it
C5	Offering repair/ redress e.g. I'll buy you a new camera.
D	Promise of forbearance e.g. I promise, I'll not do it next time.
E	Demonstrating sense of shame e.g. I'm really ashamed of it.
F	Intensifiers of the apology e.g. I'm extremely sorry.
G	Refusal to acknowledge guilt e.g. it was already damaged; not my fault.

In addition to Holmes (1990) classifications, I added three more categories of the possible realizations of apology strategies for my study as these three different realizations of apology strategies were not falling into Holmes' twelve categories because of specific cultural norms and rules of speaking of the respondents. These were the following strategies adopted from Blum-Kulka (1989) classifications.

- i. Demonstrating sense of shame e.g. I'm really ashamed of it.
- ii. Intensifiers of the apology e.g. I'm very sorry; I'm really sorry about it.
- iii. Refusal to acknowledge guilt e.g. it was already damaged; not my fault.

## 4. Results

This section presents results of the data obtained from the discourse completion questionnaire in order of research questions. The first question asked:

1. What apology strategies are used by the Pakistani university students of English in Pakistan?

In order to answer the above-stated question, frequencies of use and non-use of specific apology strategies were obtained by using SPSS 21 (IBM local-version). As stated earlier, using Holmes (1990) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) classifications of strategies, the Table 3.1 on the next page presents results of the use and non-use of the specific apology strategies.

As Table 4.1 in the following page indicates, out of the total 106 respondents, a great majority of the participants (97 and 105) used the "explicit expression of apology" (sorry) and "explanation or account" (there was terrible traffic). On the other hand, majority of the respondents (66, 62 and 79) did not report using "an offer of apology" (I beg pardon), "an expression of regret" (I'm sorry) and "request for forgiveness" (Can you excuse me please?) respectively.

Moreover, majority of the respondents (60, 66, 62 and 65) did not use "accepting the blame" (it's my fault), "offering repair/redress" (I'll buy you a new camera), "promise of forbearance" (I promise, I'll not do it next time) and "refusal to acknowledge guilt" (it was already damaged; not my fault) respectively. Similarly, a great majority of the respondents (78 and 86) did not report using the apology strategies "expressing lack of intent" (it did not mean to break it) and "demonstrating sense of shame" (I'm really ashamed of it).

Table 4.1.  
*Frequencies of the use and non-use of apology strategies in English by Pakistani English students in Pakistan*

Strategy Code	Brief description	Freq of Use	Freq of non-use
A	Explicit expression of apology ; sorry	97	9
A1	An offer of apology e.g. I beg pardon.	40	66
A2	An expression of regret e.g. I'm sorry.	44	62
A3	A request for forgiveness e.g. Can you excuse me please?	27	79
B	Explanation or account e.g. There was terrible traffic.	105	1
C	Acknowledgement of responsibility e.g. 'Oh, I made a mistake'.	1	105
C1	Accepting the blame e.g. It's my fault.	46	60
C2	Expressing self-deficiency e.g. I got upset/confused.	76	30
C3	Expressing lack of intent e.g. I did not mean to break it.	28	78
C4	Recognizing Interlocutor as deserving apology e.g. you're right.	0	106
C5	Offering repair/ redress e.g. I'll buy a new camera for you.	40	66
D	Promise of forbearance e.g. I promise, I'll not do it next time.	44	62
E	Demonstrating sense of shame e.g. I'm really ashamed of it.	20	86
F	Intensifiers of the apology e.g. I'm very sorry; I'm really sorry about it.	64	42
G	Refusal to acknowledge guilt e.g. it was already damaged; not my fault.	41	65

Interestingly, none of the respondents reported using the apology strategy "recognizing interlocutor as deserving apology" (you are right). Similarly, almost all the respondents (105) did not use the apology strategy "acknowledgement of responsibility" (oh, I made a mistake). As far as "expressing self-deficiency" (I got upset) and "intensifiers of apology" (I'm extremely sorry for this mistake) are concerned, majority of the respondents (76 and 64) reported using these two apology strategies.

The second research question of this study asked:

2. Is there any difference in the use of apology strategies between male and female respondents?

In order to answer this question, an Independent Samples *t*- Test was run by using SPSS 21(IBM local-version). The Table 4.2 below shows the results of differences in the use of apology strategies by Pakistani male and female students of English.

Table 4.2.  
*Comparison of apology strategies between male and female respondents*

Participants	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>P</i>
Females	85	.42	.10	.20	10	.84
Males	21	.41	.11			

As results in Table 4.2 show, there was no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of apology strategies ( $t = .20$ ,  $df = 10$ , and  $p = .84$ ). Analysis of the two groups' mean scores also indicates that the mean score of female respondents ( $M = .42$ ) is not very different from the mean score of male respondents ( $M = .41$ ).

## 5. Discussion

Starting with the main research questions, results of all questions will be interpreted one by one in this chapter.

The first research question of this study was:

1. What apology strategies are used by the Pakistani university students of English in Pakistan?

As highlighted earlier, results of the descriptive statistics (frequencies) showed that out of the total 106 participants almost all respondents (97 and 105) used the "explicit expression of apology" (sorry) and "explanation or account" (there was terrible traffic). This exclusive use of these two apology strategies suggests that the respondents feel the need to be explicit and direct. It seems that Pakistani learners of English used "Explicit expression of apology" (sorry) to accomplish stability while dealing with an event that needs apologizing. There is another possibility of using this apology strategy because this is the kind of expression which is heard or "overheard" in daily routine conversation. It is quite usual that even at a slighter mistake they say 'sorry', whether or not the situation is severe. This finding is consistent with the findings of other studies (Thijittang, 2010; Istifçi, 2009; Farashaiyan, 2012) that apologies given by EFL learners in English are mostly direct. The respondents were found feeling the need to explain after apologizing because almost all the respondents (105) used "explanation or account" which is an attempt at minimizing their offenses. The use of explanation as one of the most frequent strategies might be a way of apologizing clearly.

In addition, majority of the respondents (76 and 64) were found using "expression of self-deficiency" (I got confused) and "intensifiers of the apology" (I'm extremely sorry; I'm very sorry about it) respectively. One of

the reasons for using only these four apology strategies in English is that English learners in Pakistan are not taught L2 pragmatics or the different rules of using English appropriate to specific contexts. Whatever expressions, especially English rules of speaking; students or users of English or users of English in Pakistan learn and use, are largely learned by them from the English movies or fiction. These two are the only types of materials that provide them exposure to the native English speech or language.

As far as the non-use of the apology strategies in English by the respondents is concerned, all the respondents were found not using “acknowledgement of responsibility” (oh, I made a mistake) and “recognizing H/Interlocutor as deserving apology” (you are right). One of the reasons for not using the apology strategies of “the acknowledgement of responsibility” and “regarding H/Interlocutor as deserving apology” is that people in Pakistan are very status conscious and such types of behaviors, i.e., acknowledging responsibility for offense or mistake or regarding interlocutors deserving apology, are considered as demonstrations of low status. However, it does not mean people do not apologize rather apologizing is just a formality.

Moreover, majority of respondents (66, 62 and 79) were found not using the following apology strategies: “an offer of apology” (I beg pardon), “an expression of regret” (I’m sorry), “a request for forgiveness” (can you excuse me please?). In addition, majority of the respondents (60, 66, 62 and 65) did not use “accepting the blame” (I made a blunder), “expressing lack of intent” (I didn’t mean to break it), “offering repair/redress” (I’ll buy you a new camera), “promise of forbearance” (I promise; I’ll not do it again), “demonstrating sense of shame” (I’m really ashamed of it) and “refusal to acknowledge guilt” (it was already damaged; not my fault). From these results, it is possible that cross-cultural differences play some role in the way Pakistani learners of English select and use apology strategies. The respondents also seem to have not interpreted the situations appropriately. Their lack of knowledge of the apology strategies in English also seems to be affecting their use of apology strategies in English.

This non-use of as many as eleven different types of apology strategies by a great majority or majority can be attributed to respondents’ (1) lack of knowledge or proficiency in using apology strategies in English, (2) different cultural values and norms. Because language is so much associated with its culture, naturally there would be some difficulties for learners of English in Pakistan in acquiring the nuances in English language that are so culture-bounded. As far as “refusal to acknowledge guilt” is concerned, participants might feel to remain true to the interlocutor and save the positive face value. This indicates that Pakistani learners of English had never heard these strategies and did not feel the need to use these strategies.

The second research question of this study asked:

2. Is there any difference in the use of apology strategies between male and female respondents?

As reported earlier, no statistically significant difference was found between male and female respondents in the use of apology strategies. Analysis of the mean scores of two groups (.42 and .41) as well as results of an Independent Sample *t*-Test ( $t = .20$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p = .84$ ) indicate that respondents in both groups used the same types of apology strategies with the same frequencies. These results do not confirm findings of the majority of the previous studies that show that female use more strategies as compared to the male. As reviewed earlier, the literature on gender suggests that (1) females and males are socialized differently in their childhood, which influences their language behaviors as they grow up and causes them to behave in different ways, (2) females are more caring for their interlocutor’s feelings than males and they tend to use more positive strategies for interaction and females use more explicit apology strategies and fewer non-apology strategies than the males (Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1990; Bataineh, 2005). However, the results of the present study confirm findings of Bataineh’s (2006) study, showing similarities between male and female EFL students in their use of apology strategies. The reason of similarity in the use of apology strategies in English by the respondents seems to be cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the respondents of the present study.

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the use of apology strategies in English by the Pakistani university students of English in Pakistan and differences in the use of apology strategies between male and female respondents. Out of fifteen different apology strategy types, respondents were found using only four apology strategies in English such as explanation or account “there was terrible traffic”, explicit apology “sorry”, expressing self-deficiency “I got upset”, and intensifiers of apology “I’m extremely sorry; I’m terribly sorry about it”. This shows lack of knowledge of the participants about the different types of apology strategies in different contexts and the need of developing L2 English pragmatic ability of university students in Pakistan. As far as the differences between male and female respondents were concerned, they were found to be similar in their use of apology strategies. One of the main reasons might be the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the respondents of this study.

### 6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Being the first of its nature, the study has several limitations. First, the data was collected from Pakistani

university students in Pakistan. Secondly, only eight (08) public sector university students were selected for this research. Thus, it limits us to a one-dimensional picture of the public sector universities and ignores postgraduate colleges and the growing number of private universities in Pakistan. Finally, this study could have been more beneficial if a larger number of students from both public and private sector universities had been the participants in this study, but in view of the available time and certain other limitations, it was not possible. Based on the findings of the present study, it is suggested that the following studies need to be conducted to substantiate these findings and add more to the research in this area in Pakistan: There is a need to conduct a comparative study on the use of apology strategies in English as well as in Urdu (Pakistani official language) to see the question of pragmatic transfer.

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