The Impact of Culture, Social Distance, and Language Proficiency on Apology Strategies among Chinese and Arabic ESL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated apology strategies used among Chinese and Arabic ESL students studying at a university in the United States. It mainly focused on the impact of three factors: social distance, English language proficiency, and cultural background. A 5–scenario discourse completion task (DCT) differentiated by social distance between the interlocutors, was designed and applied to elicit participants' apology speech acts and data was collected from the written responses. Data analysis came from thirty-two subjects (16 Chinese and 16 Arabic), revealing that all the examined factors, such as the selection of the strategies and their frequency of use, can affect the apology strategies used. These results can provide some insight into the apology speech acts of Chinese and Arabic international students and promote inter-cultural communication between them and English native speakers.

1. Introduction

Apologizing is a commonly observed human act throughout different socio-cultural environments. It is a social function pursued by the use of language termed "speech acts" in the field of pragmatics (Cohen, 2010, p. 6). The act of apologizing has long been a field of interest in sociology and linguistics. Erving Goffman defines apologies as remedial "facework" in interactions (Goffman, 1971). John Searle, known for his classic theories of speech acts, defines apologizing as an "expressive," one of five categories of communication that can happen between speaker and hearer (Searle, 1976, p. 12). The apology is a speech act which has been most extensively studied in recent years (Grainger & Harris, 2007, p. 1).

The interest of this study lies in examining the cultural and linguistic factors within the pragmatic study of apology strategies. This paper aims at identifying and comparing apology strategies used in English by Chinese and Saudi Arabian ESL students. The study was conducted in 2011 with a total of 36 Chinese L1 (first language) students and Arabic L1 students studying English in an

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ESL program at a state university in northeast Ohio, U.S.A.[4] Data was collected through a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to examine the frequency of use of different types of apology strategies under five hypothetical scenarios. The study focuses on 1) differences in English proficiency and the impact on apology strategies; 2) cross-cultural comparisons in apology strategies; and 3) the impact of social distance and power on apology strategies.

Despite the limitations of the sample size and DCT methodology, some numerically significant findings were obtained. The findings of the study revealed that *Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices* (*IFIDs*) were the most frequently used strategies in all five scenarios, followed by *taking responsibility* and *explanation* strategies. Also, the result of the study showed that Chinese speakers and Arabic speakers chose distinctly different apology strategies, presumably due to differences in their cultural contexts. Advanced ESL learners used a combination of apology strategies more often than lower-level learners did, indicating higher pragmatic skills.

2. Literature Review

The apology as a speech act is both universal and culture-specific conduct. Studies on apologizing in different languages show that the same types of apology strategies defined by speech act theory are used, while at the same time, they reflect speakers' specific cultural traits (Shariati & Chamani, 2010; Chang, 2016).

To examine such speech acts in relation to culture and language, many studies have shown interest in grasping how L2 (second language) interlocutors make apologies in EFL environments (Cohen et al., 1985; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Almegren, 2018; Çetin & Öztüfekçi & Özdemir, 2021, etc.). Two important findings are provided. First, the speech acts of English learners are influenced by the speaker's L1 and cultural background (Cohen, 2010). The different ways of apologizing may be caused by cultural differences (Trosborg, 1995). Second, a series of studies of English learners from different cultural backgrounds have shown that the English proficiency level of speakers has an impact on the repertoires of apology strategies used (Istifçi, 2009; Çetin & Öztüfekçi & Özdemir, 2021; Al-Harbi & Mahfoodh, 2021). For example, Istifçi conducted a comparative study on apology strategies used in English by Arabic and Turkish speakers and stated that L1 was found to have an impact on their use of apologies, particularly among intermediate-level respondents (Istifçi, 2009).

The typologies of strategies vary among scholars, while largely overlapping with one another, but with different subdivisions

[4] The Saudi students came through a program, 'SACM' (http://www.sacm.org/). According to Ms. Nadeen Katz, the former ESL teacher who participated this study, this university had one of the biggest ESL populations in the US in the year the study was conducted, with 40% being Chinese students and 40% Saudi students and 20% other.

(Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, Trosborg, 1995, Nureddeen, 2008 etc.). Pragmatics asserts that a speech act is performed by choosing from a set of possible strategies. Cohen (2010), one of the leading scholars in this field, is commonly cited for his taxonomy: *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device* (*IFID*); *Recognition of Responsibility*; *Explanations*; *Offering Repair*; and *Forbearance* (Olshtein & Cohen, 1983; Cohen, 2010). This taxonomy of five categories is widely used among linguistic scholars to this day (Ogiermann, 2015). They are found to be used across cultures, while their distribution varies, depending on cultures (Cohen, 2010). Nureddeen, who studied apology strategies among Arabic-speaking students in Sudan, segmented the strategy definitions identically with the preceding studies, into ten categories (Nureddeen, 2008). In analyzing apology strategies used by Arabic- and Chinese-speaking respondents, this study draws on the inclusive categories presented by Nureddeen (2008). The ten categories are listed and defined as follows.

1. IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) is a category using explicit apology expressions meaning sorry, forgive me, etc. Examples are "I am sorry," "Excuse me," and "Sorry."

2. Explanation is given by a speaker as an account of the cause of the offense, why the violation or damage occurred. For example, an explanation for being late for a movie with a friend may be "I was too busy," or "I was caught in a traffic jam."

3. Taking responsibility refers to expressions in which the speaker admits to being responsible for the offense. Expressions that admit the speaker's fault are referred as a strategy of taking responsibility, such as "This is my fault," or "I made a mistake."

4. Denying responsibility refers to expressions in which the speaker denies his or her responsibility for the offense. For instance, "I didn't mean it" is regarded as an expression of "denying responsibility."

5. Offer of repair or compensation is expressed, often explicitly, by speakers when they try to repair or pay for the damage caused by their offence. An example is "I will buy you dinner."

6. Promise of forbearance refers to a situation in which the speaker promises not to repeat the offense in the future. An example would be "I will never do that again."

7. Minimization refers to statements or utterances used to minimize the severity of an offense as well as downgrading the speaker's responsibility for the offense. An example would be "It is not too bad, you will be able to fix it."

8. Humor refers to expressions in which the speakers try to be humorous, with an intent to minimize the threat in the actions.

9. Intensification refers to the use of adverbials (e.g., terribly, very, extremely, really, etc.) and repeated use of *IFIDs* (e.g., I'm sorry. Please forgive me). These phrases intensify the speaker's expression of being sorry.

10. Concern for the hearer is a linguistic pattern which shows the speaker's concern for the hearer, such as "Are you ok?" and "I hope you are all right."

To interpret how the subjects' L1 affects

their apology discourse, it is important to look at both the strategies used and their distribution. Through this process, relevant correlations between the choice of apology strategies and the cultural context can be identified and highlighted.

Apologizing does not occur with the use of only a single strategy. Often, multiple strategies are combined in the apology act. Although the majority of discourse strategy studies have focused on each strategy independently, Cohen et al. (1986, see also Cohen, 2010) and Scher and Darley (1997) have focused on the use of combinations of strategies as well as the use of single strategies. Cohen et al. collected data on various combinations from their subjects' responses and found the following important ones: *explanation* combined with *responsibility*; *responsibility* combined with *repair;* the combination of *explanation*, *responsibility* and *repair*, and so forth. Scher and Darley (1997) focused on the effects of combined strategies in performing the speech of apologizing. Their study showed that a combination of the three strategies of *responsibility*, *repair* and *forbearance* had an impact on subjects' judgement as to what extent an apology was appropriate and apologetic.

To collect data on apology strategies, Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) are commonly used due to difficulty in obtaining data in natural occurrences (Grainger & Harris, 2007, p. 3). DCTs give several scenarios describing hypothetical situations, such as failing to keep promises or causing harm. Differences in situations seem to elicit different apology strategies. Using DCTs, Gauché and Mullet (2005) did research with 215 participants on the impact of different variations on the willingness of a subject to forgive physical or psychological aggression. The variations could be social distance, explicit apologies, intent to harm, cancellation of consequences, and attitudes of others. The results showed that cancellation of consequences had less impact on getting forgiven, while explicit apologies and intent to harm were more influential in being forgiven under a physical aggression condition than under a psychological aggression condition. Namely, when people encounter physical offenses, as compared to psychological ones, they care more about whether the aggressor feels sorry and regretful and whether this will happen again in the future. Therefore, the implication is that the use of an explicit apology under the condition of physical aggression (such as bumping into someone) is critical for the hearer (the apologizee) to forgive the offense.

Another research involving physical aggression was conducted by Schlenker and Darby (1981) with 120 participants. They investigated situations where apologies were used and the forms they took. In their test, the participants were asked to imagine their responses if they bumped into another person by accident. The findings supported their hypothesis that as the consequences of the offense become more negative, subjects tend to use more apology components such as *IFIDs*, *expressing remorse*, and *offering help*. Subjects will even request forgiveness explicitly when there is both high responsibility and high consequences. The

showing of concern and *explanations* can also be used as apology components when there are severe consequences.

Cultural differences in choosing apology strategies compared to those of native English speakers are reported in some studies. As an example with Arabic L1 speakers, male Iraqi EFL learners are found to use more apology strategies with people of higher status, while American participants used more apology strategies with people of lower status (Abu Humei, 2013). Compared to native English speakers, it was reported that Arabic speakers using English were more willing to take on responsibility and that these differences were due to religious beliefs, concepts and values (Al-Zumor, 2010). However, Almegren (2018) found low frequency in Arabic-speaking respondents to acknowledge responsibility.

Social distance is another critical aspect in the study of apology strategies which needs to be looked at within cultural context. In examining the social distance between the interlocutors, the relationship of the speaker with teacher, for instance, is expected to be inconsistent, since some cultures might have different perspectives about the relationship with a teacher. According to Hong (2008), in a culture where the ideas of Confucius influence people's behavior, as in Chinese culture, people are taught to obey and respect teachers since they are believed to be honorable and to have significant influences on their lives. Sometimes Chinese people are even expected to obey and respect teachers more than their parents. That is to say, in Chinese cultures, teachers are often powerful to others. It is expected that power and proximity may coexist in a relationship. People feel close to teachers even if they are powerless under them. However, it is also possible to say that a teacher's power is a guaranteed status and is reflected in a student's feeling of closeness, and therefore, the social distance between a student and teacher can differ across cultures.

As for cultural impact, an investigation of apology-making was carried out on some distinctive features of the selection of apology strategies by Chinese speakers (Song & Liu, 2002). They tried to locate the differences in terms of social norms, cultural values, and cultural contexts. They discussed the idea that the social distance between interlocutors has a big impact on the selection of apology strategies: greater distance leads to a higher obligation to apologize.

Apology studies in pragmatics have focused on "identifying the repertoire of apology strategies," "quantifying them" and "establishing language-specific preferences" rather than interpreting the meanings or functions of apologies (Ogiermann, 2015, p. 3). Simply put, their interest lies more in how apologizing is done than in what it means. Cross-cultural studies on apologizing within the field of pragmatics is beneficial for their insight into second language acquisition with attention to cultural aspects. This study focused on whether ESL students' cultural backgrounds (Chinese and Arabic), English proficiency, and social distance between interlocutors impact the formulation of their apologies in English and their choices of apology strategies. As many pragmatics

studies have proved (Scher & Darley, 1997; Cohen et.al, 1986; Nureddeen, 2008; Cohen, 2010 etc.), three strategies, *explanation*, *taking responsibility* and *offering repair or compensation*, are often used in the apology speech act. Based on cultural features as the discourse context, this study hypothesized the following:

Explanation. This strategy, compared to other strategies, has debatable room in identification. Researchers have different opinions about whether it is an apology strategy. However, their interpretations about the function are almost the same. Cohen et al. (1986) mentioned that *explanation* is "intended to 'set things right,'" (p. 52) and Scher et al. (1997) stated that *explanation* is "given in conjunction with apology" (p. 130). That is to say, *explanation* can arrange apology statements and set the stage in a correct way, or it can be like a token or a guide to an apology statement. The only debate between researchers is whether the statement can be accepted as an apology or not. Cohen et al. (1986) regard it as an apology strategy, but Scher et al. (1997) do not. This study regards *explanation* as one apology strategy and hypothesizes that *explanation* is often used in situations where the speaker is less close to the hearer since the closer the social distance is, the more direct speech is preferred, while omitting the indirect components. In addition, the interpretation of *explanation* might vary in accordance with cultural differences, for some cultures might interpret it as a token of the speaker's excusatory attitude, while others might see it as a token of an appropriate apology manner.

Taking Responsibility and Offering Repair or Compensation. These two strategies are interpreted based on the subject's cognitive skills, as different cognitive skills are required for each action (c.f. Chang, 2016). *Taking Responsibility* only requires the speaker to understand a current situation, which is a simple cognitive skill; however, *offering repair or compensation* requires the subject to not only see the current situation but to also consider a prospective situation in the future. Comparatively, *offering repair or compensation* is a more developed statement in cognitive skills than *taking responsibility*, and therefore, a relationship exists between these two strategies that require a necessary and sufficient condition. That is to say, *taking responsibility* can exist by itself, whereas, *offering repair or compensation* always co-exists with *taking responsibility*. It should also be noted that advanced learners of English can often use *offering repair or compensation*, while elementary and intermediate learners may not be able to do so, due to lacking language proficiency.

3. Methodology

3–1. Participants

Originally 36 ESL students at a state university in northeast Ohio, in the United States, participated in this study in 2011. Thirty-two valid returns (9 female and 23 male) were received, among which 16 were completed by native Chinese speakers and the other 16 were completed by native Arabic speakers. The medium age of the valid returns was 20.12 years old (SD = 1.23). At

the time of the study, the participants were at different English proficiency levels: 5 elementary, 18 intermediate, and 9 advanced levels. Participants received course credit for participation.

3–2. Procedure

A five-scenario Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was designed, and given to participants to complete in their ESL classes. The data in this study was collected from 32 valid returns. Each valid response was studied and analyzed in detail to identify the possible pragmatic differences in their apologies and the different strategies used by Chinese and Arabic speakers. The data was coded according to Nureddeen's ten categories (2008) under all five scenarios which were distinguished by different levels of social distances (the relationship between the interlocutors or who the hearer is). When coding, the coders looked for occurrences of the use of the ten apology strategies in each participants' response under each scenario. That is, each participant could be coded as using zero or up to all 10 strategies under each single scenario, and each strategy could be coded up to 32 times (the total number of participants) if each participant used a particular strategy in a particular scenario. Three researchers first coded each response into categories of apology strategies independently and then worked together to verify the results. When there was disagreement among the coders, it was resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached for each point of contention. The three coders were from three different cultural backgrounds: one native U.S. English speaker, one native Chinese speaker, and one native Japanese speaker. The cultural differences are very likely to have an influence on the coding results. The current mixed-culture coder group was believed to benefit the coding results since the participants were non-native English speakers and some underlying cultural differences could play a part in understanding the participants' responses and in interpreting the apology strategies data.

3–3. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) used in this study

The DCT was chosen from among several available methods used to examine apology strategies. It is one of the most common methods for L2 pragmatics (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The DCT was designed to test participants' usage of apology strategies in different scenarios (see Appendix A). The subject's questions were composed of 5 different hypothetical scenarios, including forgetting an appointment, being late for an appointment, failing to finish an assigned task in a group project, bumping into people, and breaking something, which were differentiated by the levels of social distances between the interlocutors. In Scenario 1, the hearer is the apologizer's teacher. In Scenario 2, the hearer is the apologizer's friend. In Scenario 3, the hearers is the apologizer's classmate. In Scenario 4, the hearer is an unknown student, or to say, a stranger. In Scenario 5, the hearer is the apologizer's father.

When it comes to social distances between the interlocutors in the designed scenarios, the distance between two strangers in

Figure 1 The social distances scale across scenarios

Scenario 4 (S4) was regarded as the most distant, with least familiarity. The distances between a student and a teacher (Scenario 1) and between classmates (Scenario 3) were regarded as that of acquaintances, which is believed to be closer than strangers, but less close than that between friends (Scenario 2). The distance between a student and teacher (S1) could be greater than that between classmates (S3) since a teacher carries social power. The distance between family members (a child and father, Scenario 5) was regarded as the closest. Therefore, the hypothesized social distances between the interlocutors in the arranged scenarios can be presented as: S4 (stranger) > S1 (teacher) > S3 (classmate) > S2 (friend) > S5 (father), from left to right, representing the distance from large to small (see Figure 1).

3-4. Categories

In this study, data was collected and analyzed to identify different apology strategies that were used by each speaker based on the illocutionary force of the expressions from the results of the DCT. In order to achieve this goal, the DCT responses were categorized into ten restricted strategies according to Nureddeen (2008).

4. Results

4-1. Frequency of strategy use by scenario

The coding results are presented in Table 1, which shows the frequency of each strategy use under each scenario by all participants (N = 32).

Table 1 shows that there were 53 total apology strategy uses in S1, 53 in S2, 50 in S3, 69 in S4, and 51 in S5. There were similar numbers of strategy uses in S1, S2, S3, and S5. S4 (stranger) had the highest frequency of apology strategy uses. The frequency of each strategy use in S4 stood out (see Figure 2) and was further investigated. There were 30 occurrences of *IFIDs* in S4, out of a possible 32. There were 15 cases of *explanation*, 7 uses of *offer of repair or compensation,* and 7 uses of *concern for the hearer*. In conclusion, participants applied apology strategies more frequently when they bumped into a stranger as outlined in S4 than in other scenarios, especially the strategies of *IFIDs*, *explanations*, and *concerns*.

4-2. Cultural effects

The apology strategy use was compared between the groups of Chinese-speaking and Arabic-speaking participants. Table 2 showed the frequency of each strategy use by scenario and by culture. Chinese L1 speakers used apology strategies (155 cases) more frequently than Arabic speakers (121 cases)

Table 1 Frequency of strategy use in each scenario. (N = 32)

	IFIDs	*Explain*	*Take Resp.*	*Deny Resp.*	*Repair*	*Forbearance*	*Minimize*	*Humor*	*Intents.*	*Concern*	*Total*
S1 (teacher)	21	8	11	0	3	3	0	0	6	1	53
S2 (friend)	26	1	13	0	2	3	3	0	3	2	53
S3 (classmate)	16	7	6	1	11	3	2	0	3	1	50
S4 (stranger)	30	15	5	0	7	0	2	0	3	7	69
S5 (father)	19	5	5	1	9	0	5	1	4	2	51
Total	112	36	40	2	32	9	12	1	19	13	276

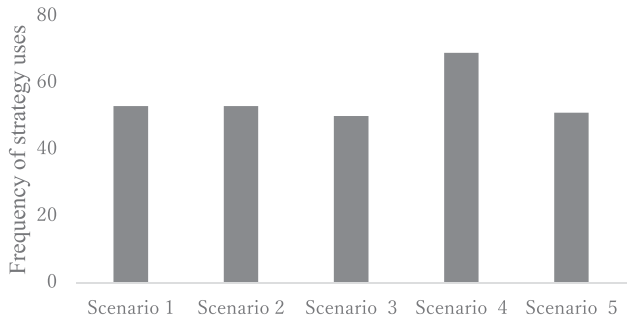

Figure 2 Frequency of strategy use in each scenario.

and both groups had the same sample size (n = 16). When comparing the frequencies of strategy uses between those two cultures in each scenario, it was found that the Chinese participants used more strategies in apology than did their Arabic counterparts in S2, S3, S4, S5, but they used nearly equal number of strategies as the Arabic participants in S1 with the teacher (Figure 3).

Figures 4 and 5 depict the allocations of strategy uses between the Chinese and Arabic participants. From Figures 4 and 5, an interesting cultural similarity was discovered: both cultural groups used mostly four strategies (of the above 10 uses): *IFIDs*, *explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*. These four strategies were focused on in a further comparison between the Chinese and Arabic cultures. The uses of the four targeted strategies (*IFIDs*, *explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*) in each scenario by culture are highlighted in Table 2 and depicted in Figure 6. It was found that both the Chinese and Arabic speakers used *IFIDs* most often among all the strategies, but the Chinese used *IFIDs* more (65 cases) than Arabic speakers (47 cases). Among the rest of the three targeted strategies, the Arabic speakers used the *explanation* strategy more,

Table 2 Frequency of the use of strategies by scenario and by culture.

		IFIDs	*Explain*	*Take Resp.*	*Deny Resp.*	*Offer Repair*	*Forbearance*	*Minimize*	*Humor*	*Intents.*	*Concern*	*Total*
Chinese	S1	13	3	4	0	2	1	0	0	3	1	27
	S2	15	0	8	0	2	2	1	0	1	2	31
	S3	11	2	5	1	8	1	2	0	2	1	33
	S4	15	8	2	0	5	0	1	0	2	4	37
	S5	11	2	2	1	4	0	4	0	2	1	27
	Total	65	15	21	2	21	4	8	0	10	9	155
Arabic	S1	8	5	7	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	26
	S2	11	1	5	0	0	1	2	0	2	0	22
	S3	5	5	1	0	3	2	0	0	1	0	17
	S4	15	7	3	0	2	0	1	0	1	3	32
	S5	8	3	3	0	5	0	1	1	2	1	24
	Total	47	21	19	0	11	5	4	1	9	4	121

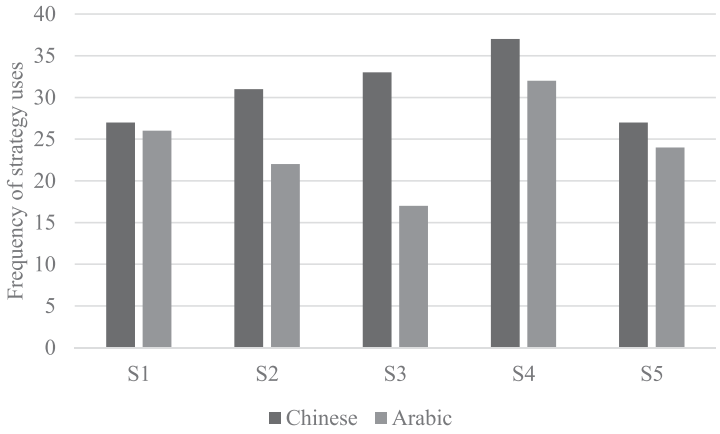

Figure 3 Frequency of strategy uses in each scenario between Chinese and Arabic L1 speakers.

while the Chinese speakers used *offering repair and compensation* and *taking responsibilities* more.

These three strategies, *explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*, are often focused by pragmatics studies on apologizing speech because they carry more advanced pragmatic meanings (Al-Zumor, 2011). Therefore, the uses of those three strategies in each scenario were compared between the two culture groups. In Scenario 1 (teacher), the Arabic L1

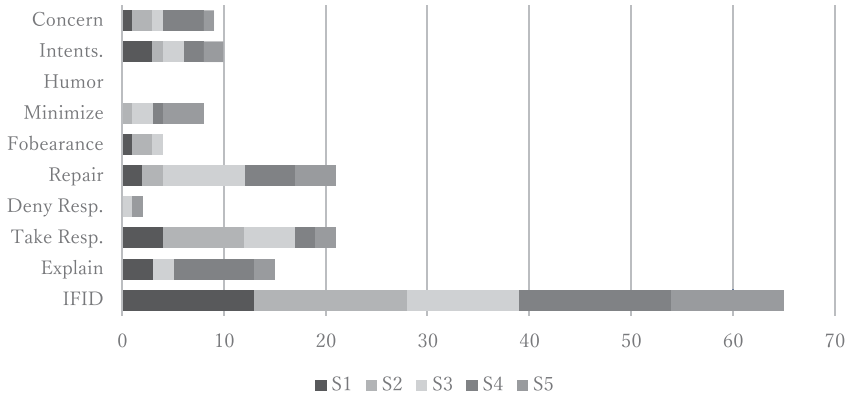

Figure 4 Frequency of each strategy by scenario among Chinese speakers.

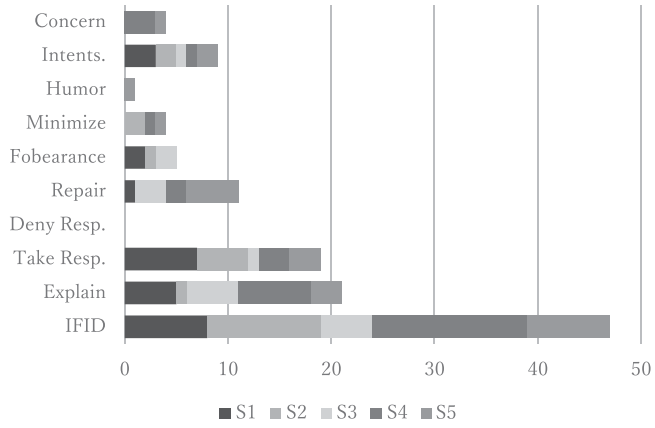

Figure 5 Frequency of each strategy by scenario among Arabic speakers.

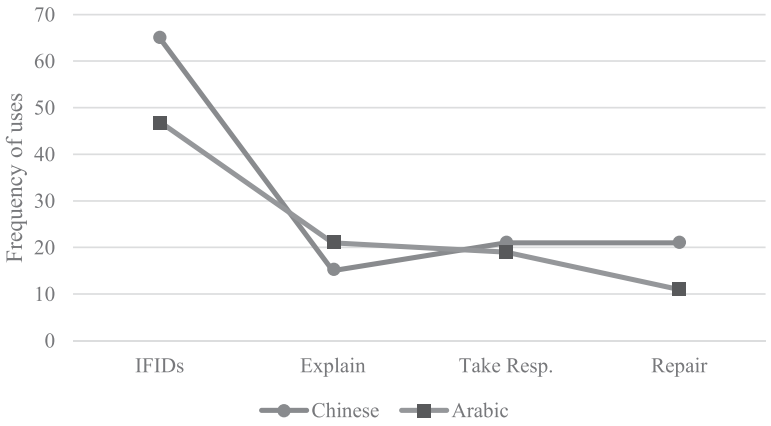

Figure 6 Frequency of the four targeted strategies uses by culture.

speakers used all together 13 of them, while the Chinese L1 speakers used only 9. In Scenario 2 (friend), the Arabic speakers used 6, while the Chinese L1 speakers used 10. In S3 (classmate), the Arabic speakers used 9, while the Chinese speakers used 15. In S4 (stranger), the Arabic speakers used 12, while the Chinese speakers used 15. In S5 (father), the Arabic speakers used 11, while the Chinese speakers used 8. The Chinese speakers were more likely to use those three strategies (*explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*) with a friend, a classmate, and a stranger. Thus, the Arabic and Chinese L1 speakers seemed to allocate apology strategies differently by social distance.

4-3. The effect of social distance

There were also some similarities between the two culture groups regarding the use of the *explanation* strategy. Both the Chinese and Arabic L1 speakers, used the strategy of *explanation* most frequently (except for *IFID*s.) in S4 with strangers, and used the strategy of *explanation* least in S2 with friends. Table 2 showed that the strategy of *explanation* was used 21 times by the Arabic L1 participants while it was used 15 times by the Chinese L1 participants. Given the equal sample numbers in each culture group, the *explanation* strategy was reported more often among the Arabic participants than among their Chinese counterparts.

The frequency of the *explanation* strategy use across scenarios was compared with reference to the factor of social distance. As it is believed that the social power (higher power of the teacher) in S1 (between student and teacher) might outweigh the feeling of closeness and then affect strategy choosing, S1 (teacher) was excluded in the investigation of the effect of social distance. The relationship among the social distances in the rest of the four scenarios were hypothesized as S4 (stranger) > S3 (classmate) > S2 (friend) > S5 (father). The frequency of the use of *explanation* across those four scenarios are presented in Figure 7. It was found among S4, S3, and S2, the closer the social distance was, the less explanation was used. It seemed the frequency of the explanation strategy use could predict the social distance between the interlocutors. One unexpected finding was that both culture groups used the *explanation* strategy more with their fathers than with friends. This could be indicative of friends being regarded as having closer relationships than fathers do among the Arabic and Chinese respondents.

The scenarios were placed in order according to the frequency of *explanation* strategy used in both groups in Figure 8 and 9, representing the perceived social distances (closeness) of those relationships, with strangers being the farthest social distance and friends on the other end.

Cultural differences were noticed when S1 (teacher) was involved. Specifically, the Arabic speakers used an equal number of *explanation* strategies with a teacher and with a classmate, and a little less with the father, while the Chinese speakers used more or less the same numbers with the teacher, a classmate, and the father. Despite the small numbers, the results suggested different

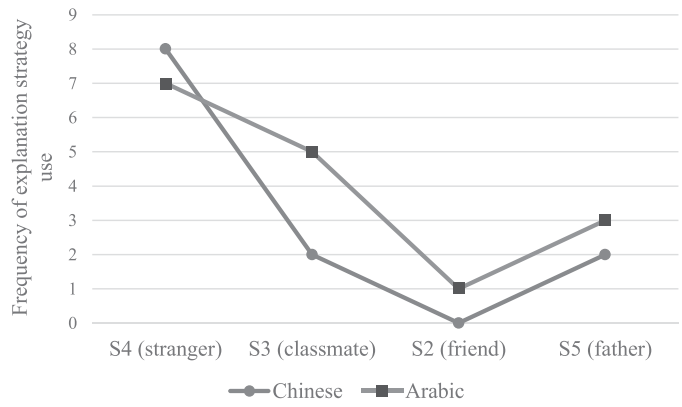

Figure 7 Frequency of the use of *explanation* strategy in S4, S3, S2, and S5.

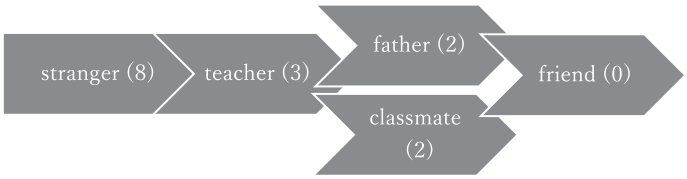

Figure 8 Frequency of the use of strategy of *explanation* among Chinese participants. (Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of *explanation* strategies used.)

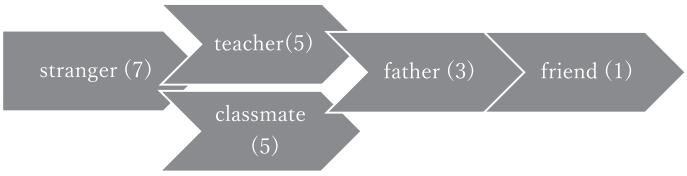

Figure 9 Frequency of the use of strategy of explanation among Arabic participants. (Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of *explanation* strategies used.)

attitudes towards the figure of a teacher in these two cultures.

4-4. The use of combined strategies

4-4-1. Taking Responsibility and Offering Repair or Compensation

Looking at the strategies used in combination rather than singly offers some insight to the relationship among the language level, cultural difference, and apology strategy. One example is to investigate the single use of *taking responsibility* and *offering repair or compensation*, and the combined use of both (see Table 3).

There were 33 occurrences of using *taking responsibility* alone and 25 occurrences of using *repair* alone, while there were 7 uses of a combination of both strategies. We

Table 3 Frequencies of using *taking responsibility alone*, *offering repair or compensation alone*, and the combined use of both across scenarios.

Scenario	Hearer	Responsibility alone	Repair alone	Combination
1	teacher	9	1	2
2	friend	12	1	1
3	classmate	5	10	1
4	stranger	4	6	1
5	father	3	7	2
Total		*33*	*25*	*7*

Table 4 Total frequency and ratio of using *taking responsibility* alone and *offering repair or compensation* alone in all 5 scenarios by English proficiency level.

	n	Responsibility alone	Repair alone	Responsibility alone/n	Repair alone/n
Elementary	5	4	1	0.80	0.20
Intermediate	18	23	17	1.28	0.94
Advanced	9	6	7	0.67	0.78
Total	32	33	25	1.03	0.78

compared the strategy use style (single or combined strategy) with the users' English proficiency levels. Out of the 7 cases where combined strategies were used, 6 of them were generated by advanced level English learners, and 1 was generated by intermediate English learners. The single strategy uses were generated by elementary or intermediate level English learners. It is inferred that more advanced language learners are more likely to use combined strategies.

Table 4 presented the total frequency of using *taking responsibility* alone and *offering repair or compensation* alone in all 5 scenarios by English proficiency level. Even with the understanding that there were more intermediate level learners (18 out of 32 participants) than elementary learners (5 participants), the ratio of the single use of *responsibility* and *repair* strategy each per person at the intermediate level was still the highest (1.28 uses per person, and 0.94 uses per person respectively) among all the levels. The ratio of using *responsibility* alone was higher than that of using *repair* alone at both the elementary and intermediate levels. Thus, *taking responsibility* was more likely to be used than *offering repair or compensation* among the elementary and intermediate ESL learners. The advanced learners seemed to use these two strategies at a similar frequency when they used only one of them.

5. Discussion

5-1. Scenario with a Stranger

Scenario 4 (stranger) received more apology strategy uses than the other four scenarios. One possible reason behind this relates to the unique nature of Scenario 4. Scenario 4 is different from the others in that it involves physical contact, an accidental bumping. In other situations, the participants were set to be late for appointments, were unable to finish group work on time, or had broken their father's guitar string, where no physical contact is involved. In addition, the social distance in S4 is the farthest. Strangers display the least closeness among the hearers in given situations. Some of the pragmatics literature might be helpful in construing the unique aspects of the situation with strangers, as below.

5-1-1. Responsibility

"Apologies are admissions of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event and allow actors to try to obtain a pardon from audiences" (Schlenker & Darby, 1981). Schlenker and Darby states that the more responsible the central characters (participants) are for the consequence in the setting, the greater the obligation is to admit the mistakes they made. As the situation becomes worse, subjects tend to employ some other components in their apologies, such as saying sorry, showing remorse and regret, and offering to help. Subjects might even involve self-blame and request forgiveness if they are highly responsible in a severe situation. In Scenario 4, the physical bumping happened when the participants were rushing to class. In this case, the participants became highly responsible for the consequence: a possibly shocked, stopped, and/or delayed student, along with fallen books. In our study, 94% (30 out of 32) of the participants used *IFIDs* to say "I am sorry" and 22% (7 out of 32) of them offered to pick up the books for the victim.

5-1-2. Physical aggression

Another special aspect to be considered in Scenario 4 is the physical aggression. A study conducted by Gauché and Mullet (2005) claimed that apology and intent have a bigger impact in a "physical aggression condition" than in a "psychological aggression condition." People who have been aggressed against physically care more about the intent and the availability of apologies than they do under a psychological aggression condition. Likewise, in Scenario 4, we noticed that the participants tended to express their apologies in an explicit way (94% *IFIDs*) and showed concern for the hearer most frequently. The responses in this study that expressed *concern for the hearers* included "Are you ok?", "I hope you are fine," and "Good luck!" to reduce the offense by showing their concern. These social strategies help to declare that the participant doesn't intend to hurt the victim but wants to try to build a better relationship between them. Seven out of 32 cases of the use of *concern for the hearer* were reported with the stranger, while there were only 1 or 2 uses in the other scenarios. The results of this study are in fact consistent

with Gauché and Mullet's finding (2005) that people show more concern for the hearer under a physical aggression condition and use *IFIDs* more frequently to express their apology and sincerity.

5–1–3. Low proximity

The participants used the strategy of *explanations* more often (15 cases out of 32) in S4 with a stranger than in any other situations. When facing strangers, with whom the social distance is the largest, the participants tended to explain their mistake more frequently than in other situations in order to soften a face-threatening act (FTA). This finding is consistent with Song and Liu's study (2002) in which they concluded that the social distance between interlocutors has a big impact on the selection of apology strategies. The high social distance (low proximity) may also end up with a higher obligation to apologize, which is indicated by a high frequency of *IFIDs* in the data (94%). On the other hand, Nureddeen (2008) noticed that the more serious the offense, the more *explanations* are supplied. It is likely that as Scenario 4 involves a physical bumping, it is regarded as a more serious offense among the offenses in the DCT, while generating a higher proportion of *explanations* being offered.

5–2. Cultural effects on apology strategies

There were some similarities in the apology strategies use between the Chinese and Arabic speakers in this study. Both culture groups used four strategies most often across scenarios: *IFIDs*, *explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*. This is consistent with the existing research. *IFIDs* are the most commonly used apology strategies across cultures (Sher & Darley, 1997; Çetin & Öztüfekçi & Özdemir, 2021; Al-Harbi & Mahfoodh, 2021). A formulaic apology expression such as "I'm sorry" is used over 90% by English speakers (Ogiermann, 2015, p. 4). Thus, English learners undoubtedly employ *IFIDs* the most in their apology strategies. The other three strategies, *explanation*, *taking responsibility*, and *offering repair or compensation*, as numerous pragmatics studies have proved, are often used in apology speech acts across studies and cultures (C.f. Al-Zumor, 2011).

We also found some differences in the use of apology strategies between the Chinese and Arabic L1 speakers. The results showed that the Arabic speakers used the *explanation* strategy more, while the Chinese speakers used *offering repair and compensation* and *taking responsibilities* (see Fig. 5) more. In an attempt to interpret this difference, a study by Bataineh and Bataineh (2006), who examined the apology discourse used by Jordanian people, suggested that Jordanian Arabic L1 speakers "tend to use justification strategies" and they think that "providing an overwhelming excuse has the power to justify the offence" (2006, p. 1909). This could explain why a larger number of *explanation* strategy uses is documented for the Arabic speakers in the results.

Unlike the suggested cultural impact on apology strategies (Song & Liu, 2002), no evidence was found to support the influence

of the ideas of Confucius in Chinese speakers, when compared to Arabic speakers. We speculated that the Chinese speakers would use a higher number of apology strategies in Scenario 1 (teacher) than the Arabic speakers did, due to the impact of Confucianism. However, the results showed that the Chinese speakers used the same number of apology strategies as the Arabic speakers in S1 with the teacher. Presumably, younger Chinese speakers may not be influenced by Confucianism as deeply as we expected. Other speculation is that since they are studying in the U.S. as international students, their attitudes toward teachers, whatever their ethnicity, may be less formal than they are in China.

5-3. Social distance and apology strategies

It was found that social distance could affect the use of apology strategies, especially the use of the *explanation* strategy. As previously mentioned, *explanation* becomes a strategy when it indicates some information about the speaker's dialogue context (C.f. Scher et al., 1997). This study found that the Chinese and Arabic L1 speakers both used the strategy of *explanation* most frequently in S4 with strangers, and used the strategy of *explanation* least frequently in S2 with friends. *Explaining* in turn seems to represent the social distance between the interlocutors. What can be inferred from these findings is that the use of the *explanation* strategy correlates with the social distance between the interlocutors. One noticeable finding is that the respondents used *explanation* more often with father than with friends in both culture groups. It could be assumed that closer relationships, where people are familiar with each other's personalities or behavior in daily life, may not require as much explanation as in an apology situation. We hypothesized that the speakers feel closer to their fathers, a family member, than to friends. Thus we expected to see more explanation used with friends than father. Yet, the current finding shows the opposite. As far as the *explaining* strategy is concerned, it seems that both culture groups situated friends within higher proximity than fathers. Again, this could be affected by the fact that all participants were international students studying in an ESL center at a university in the U. S. One interpretation is that living independently in a foreign country and being far away from their families could have influenced the perception of their relationships with friends and family. Friends could be essential to surviving in a foreign land, which could very likely draw the students closer to friends than to family.

It should be noted that cultural impacts are very complex variables for an objective examination. The use of *explanation* strategy may depict one aspect of social distance, however, social distance cannot be determined solely by it. The relationship between social distance and the use of *explanation* should be further investigated with attention to specific contexts.

5-4. Language proficiency and apology strategies

The study found that ESL learners with higher levels of English proficiency are more

likely to use combined strategies instead of a single strategy in apologies. Low- and intermediate-level ESL learners are more likely to use single strategies in terms of the targeted strategies of *taking responsibility* and *offering repair or compensation*. Both *taking responsibility* and *offering repair or compensation* are strategies that require stronger linguistic and cognitive demands than *IFIDs* (Chang, 2016). Thus, the combination of these strategies is believed to require more developed cognitive resources. For English language learners, expressing ideas in English alone is already a high cognitive task, without the involvement of multiple strategies. Thus, using combined apology strategies could be cognitively demanding for low- to intermediate-level English learners. Thus, it is more likely for advanced language learners to apply combined apology strategies, which indicates that they have a high possibility of adjusting their discourse in L2 situations. That is to say, their pragmatic skills are obviously higher than those of lower-level learners.

On the other hand, different strategies could require different amounts of cognitive resources. Take the strategies of *taking responsibility* and *offering repair or compensation* as examples. They can be interpreted based on the subject's cognitive skills. *Taking responsibility* requires the speaker to understand a current situation, which is a rather simple cognitive skill, while *offering repair or compensation* requires the subject to not only see the current situation but to consider a prospective situation in the future. Thus, *offering repair or compensation* is similar to a problem-solving task, which requires higher cognitive skills than *taking responsibility*. This could explain the finding that low- to intermediate-level ESL learners are more likely to use the strategy of *taking responsibility* compared to *offering repair or compensation*. It is more difficult for these learners to apply the strategy of *offering repair or compensation,* given the fact that expressing their ideas in English already consumes cognitive resources.

The current study generated some interesting findings regarding the use of apology strategies conducted in English by Chinese and Arabic ESL learners. However, it should be noted that the current finding was limited only to this research sample. To verify the relationship between the language level and apology strategy use would require a larger sample size as well as a research design that focuses better on this research topic. Thus, this study has its own limitations. First, the sample size is small (n＝32). A larger sample size is needed in a follow-up study to better confirm the current findings. Second, the DCT needs to be more inclusive so that the answers of all varying levels of ESL learners could be incorporated. The participants' responses in the DCT were very likely limited by their English language proficiency. Improvement in the DCT is important in order to gather more reliable data from all respondents.

6. Conclusion

From the pragmatic perspective, this paper identified apology strategies used

among L1 Chinese- and L1 Arabic-speaking ESL students when they formed apologies in English. These are two major groups of international college student in the U.S. The study examined the impact of three factors on their use of apology strategies in English: social distance, English proficiency level, and cultural background. Data were elicited from a DCT with five hypothetical scenarios which were differentiated by social distances between interlocutors. Ten categories of apology strategies were devised based on Nureddeen (2008), out of which *IFIDs, explaining, taking responsibility, and offering repair or compensation* were targeted strategies with numerical significance for analysis.

Some interesting clues were obtained. In formulating apologies, the frequency of *IFIDs* usage was outstandingly high, followed by *taking responsibility*, *explaining*, and *offering repair or compensation*, all at about the same rate. The scenario with a stranger presented uniqueness in that the speakers used *explaining* more with strangers than with any other hearers. As for *explanation* strategy, it was found that the less close the relationship is, the more *explanation* is used; in other words, social distance seems to have some effect on the selection of apology strategies. Impacts from culture and language proficiency were also investigated. For example, it was found that there were more frequent uses of the *explanation* strategy by the Arabic speakers than by the Chinese. The advanced leaners were more likely to use a combination of apology strategies, and less proficient ESL learners were more likely to use a single strategy in their apologies, especially a strategy that consumes fewer cognitive resources.

One of the contributions of the current study is that it provides some information and insight into pragmatic aspects of speech acts of international students. With ESL learners being a large and important group in English-speaking countries, it is meaningful to disclose the features of apology strategies among ESL learners, especially for two of the largest cultural groups. The academic ESL setting brings many cultural backgrounds and language levels together, forming a community of learners. Through the lens of sociolinguistics and pragmatics of language, apology studies could benefit students beyond the classroom. The findings of this study might be premature, yet they still serve the pedagogic purposes of fostering more successful communication with ESL learners in English-speaking countries.

In addition, cross-cultural studies on apologizing could also expand the horizon of second language acquisition. To complement the limitation of DCT methodology, which many of the pragmatic studies have applied, one alternative would be to use qualitative research, such as ethnographic methods of observation (Shariati & Chamani, 2010). More attention to specific aspects would bring a deeper understanding of apology use in different cultural contexts.

Acknolwedgement

We would like to extend special thanks to Ms. Nadeen Katz, for her contribution of conducting research and for her professional

and experiential input to the study as a teacher of ESL.

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Appendix A. DCT

Please circle the answer that applies to you.

Gender: Female / Male　　Level: elementary/ intermediate/ advanced
Nationality: _____　　First Language: _____

1. You completely forgot an important appointment with your teacher. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that, this is the second time you have forgotten an appointment with him/her.
When your advisor/teacher picks up the phone, you say:

_____

2. You and your friend make an appointment to watch a movie together and you are 10 minutes late. When you arrive at the movie theater, you see your friend waiting at the door. You say:

_____

3. You are doing a group project with your classmates. Each student in the group is responsible for one part of the project. When it is close to the due time, you are the only one that doesn't finish the assigned work. In the group meeting, you say:

_____

4. You are a student. You are racing to the classroom as you are going to be late for the class. When you turn a corner, you accidentally bump into a student who you do not know and their books fall to the ground. You stop; pick up the books, and say:

_____

5. You borrow your dad's favorite guitar to practice, and then you break a string by accident. You bring the broken guitar to your dad, and say:

_____