

Between Tradition and Global Norms: Intercultural Apology Strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study explored cross-cultural differences in apology strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL³ learners. Results show that Chinese learners tend to use more diverse, elaborate apology strategies emphasizing relational harmony, while Japanese learners tended to prefer concise, formulaic expressions, particularly Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs). Despite these differences, both groups still share a core reliance on IFIDs, the acceptance of responsibility, and offering repair. A Latent Profile Analysis also identified two apology styles, relation-oriented and task-oriented. Chinese learners exhibited both, while Japanese learners predominantly adopted the task-oriented style. These findings suggest the interaction between native cultural norms and global communication practices, with important implications for EFL pragmatics instruction and intercultural communication training.

Keywords: apology strategy, cross-cultural communication, pragmatics, EFL learners

Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) extends beyond mastering vocabulary and grammar; it involves developing pragmatic competence—the knowledge of a language, cultural norms, and social customs, and the abilities to use the language appropriately in varying social-cultural contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; LoCastro, 2003, p. 15; Taguchi, 2015), which can be particularly challenging for L2 learners. The concept of pragmatic competence has been attracting more attention (Milroy and Milroy, 1990, p. 503), as it has been recognized as fundamental not only in everyday conversations but also in cross-cultural interactions, enhancing contextual comprehension and promoting effective, culturally considerate communication (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2011; Thomas, 1983).

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³ EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) are used interchangeably in this paper.

Misunderstandings caused by different assumptions and beliefs are viewed as more serious than those resulting from linguistic mistakes (Hyde, 1998, p. 7), indicating the significance of pragmatic competence in communication. Therefore, pragmatic competence is fundamental for managing social interactions and avoiding misunderstandings. However, even advanced L2 learners with high grammatical skills in L2 often present various levels of pragmatic competences (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993). This indicates that mastering pragmatic competence in another language can be challenging.

The difficulty in learning pragmatics in a second language partly lies in its complexity. It requires learners to understand the intricate and dynamic relationships between form, meaning, function, force, and context (the form-function-context mappings), and yet these relationships often lack clear, systematic one-to-one correspondences (Taguchi, 2015). Additionally, cultural norms and conventions for performing social functions such as politeness or indirect communication, are usually unique to a certain culture and can be hard for learners to recognize (Wolfson, 1989), making them even harder to acquire. Moreover, adult L2 learners are likely to face greater challenges in acquiring pragmatic skills (Bialystok 1993; Taguchi, 2015) because they would have already developed rich knowledge of pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic knowledge within their native language and culture by the time of L2 learning (Mey 2001), and they have to navigate their existing native language (L1) strategies while simultaneously learning and applying new linguistic forms and sociocultural norms in the L2. The established pragmatic knowledge and strategies rooted in the native language and culture can be burdensome to this process (Bialystok, 1993). Simply, the acquisition of pragmatic skills in a second language is more challenging because these abilities develop over time in natural acquisition environments and are rarely taught in traditional language classroom settings (Taguchi, 2011, 2015).

The significance and challenges in developing pragmatic competences has also increasingly directed a research focus towards intercultural communication and cross-cultural pragmatics (Nureddeen, 2008). Apology-making is an essential aspect of pragmatic competence in intercultural communication and second language (L2) acquisition. The speech act of apology was selected and used by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) to assess sociocultural competence. They believed apologizing, as an emotionally charged speech act, would more likely elicit natural responses because it directs participants' attention more to the message rather than its form. They also found a language learner's ability of apologizing is indicative of his general social-cultural competence (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981).

Apology, one of the most common and frequent speech acts, is believed to play an important role in restoring social harmony in human interaction and relations. Apologies are perceived as a social event being performed to reduce a threat when social norms are violated (Goffman, 1967; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Bergman and Kasper (1993) viewed apology as an approach to restore harmony in social relationships following an offence. Holmes (1995) regarded apology as a speech

act aimed at remedying an offence for which the apologizer takes responsibility, reestablishing social relation in harmony with the hearer.

However, offence is culture-specific (Limberg, 2015). Different cultures have different standards for what is considered offensive. An action or statement that might be seen as rude or hurtful in one culture might not be viewed the same way in another. Similarly, the expectation of an apology for an offence, as well as the realization of the speech act of apology also depend largely on cultural norms (Li & Lida, 2002). Therefore, the speech act of apology is a critical learning target for language learners. The lack of knowledge and skills in making appropriate apologies within the target language's social context may lead to misunderstandings and cause difficulties in communication and social interaction for language learners (Chen et al., 2022). Conversely, an appropriate apology can help save the face of the offended interlocutor and restore the relationship (Derakhshan et al., 2021). Korean EFL learners frequently relied on their L1 norms and pragmatic knowledge, leading to communication difficulties in English interactions. Given the critical role of apology, examining how L2 learners formulate apologies can provide valuable insights into their pragmatic competence. The research interest also extends to exploring different uses of apologies among L2 learners from different cultures.

When it comes to their use, it is found that apologies are often expressed through a variety of semantic meanings, which are categorized as apology strategies (Nureddeen, 2008). Different categorizations of apology strategies are brought up by different researchers, but usually overlap in terms of some core strategies, with some classifications more extended and detailed than others. One of the most influential frameworks, reported by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), includes five strategies:

- 1) an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), e.g., "I am sorry;"
- 2) an expression of responsibility for the offence, e.g., "It was my fault;"
- 3) an account of cause of violation, e.g., "I was late because of traffic;"
- 4) an offer of repair, e.g., "I'll pay for the damage;" and,
- 5) a promise of forbearance, e.g., "It won't happen again."

Holmes (1989) proposed an apology strategy model with only four main categories and sub-categories: explicit expression of apology, an explanation or account, acknowledgment of responsibility, and a promise of forbearance. Trosborg (1987) offered a more extensive model with seven classifications: minimizing the degree of offence, acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation or account, expression of apology (IFID), offer of repair, promise of forbearance, and expressing concern for hearer. The model used by Bergman and Kasper (1993) included six classifications: IFID, downgrading, upgrading or use of adverbials, taking responsibility or admitting the offence, offer of repair, and verbal redress, which refers to concern for the hearer and promises of forbearance. In their model, the classification of upgrading or use of adverbials, such as using "very" or "deeply" to intensify the degree of the IFID, is addressed.

The most influential empirical study in the field of speech act realization focused on apologies

and requests among eight languages between native and non-native speakers in the project of Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used for data collection. The results showed that apologizers from different cultures used similar apologetic strategies while also presenting cultural features in use. Since then, many studies have continued to investigate apology realization patterns among native and non-native speakers (Holmes, 1989; House, 1988; Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1987). Many of those studies used DCT as a data collection tool. In a review article on apology strategies use by Bergman and Kasper (1993), it is concluded that the core elements of an apology were explicit expressions of apology (IFIDs) and acknowledging responsibility. In contrast, strategies such as explanations, minimizing the offence, offers of repair, and verbal redress were considered optional and varied depending on the context.

In the following studies, researchers started to share attention from Western to Eastern languages. For instance, Nureddeen (2008) examined the apology strategy use in Arabic language. In addition to the strategies commonly identified in other studies, such as IFID, explanation, taking responsibility, offer of repair, promise of forbearance, minimization of offence, and intensification of apology, Nureddeen (2008) also included some less frequently investigated strategies, including concern for the hearer, and avoidance or denial of responsibility. Moreover, the data in the study presented a strategy that is less attended, namely humor. The results showed that Saudi Arabian speakers tend to avoid using face-damaging strategies (e.g., taking responsibility) to save their positive face⁴, and relied more on face-saving strategies such as IFID, explanation, humor, minimization etc. A more recent study (Chen, et al., 2022) focused on Chinese EFL learners' apology production in email writing, and found IFID, and the combination of IFID + taking responsibility, were the most commonly used. A new strategy type of request for the chance to repair was identified in email coding and added as a culture-specific use among Chinese English language learners.

Navigating apology strategies in L2 often involves balancing between second language learners' first language (L1) pragmatics and the target language norms. Existent studies found that ESL learners often exhibit unique patterns of apology use influenced by their native language (L1) transfer and cultural norms. For instance, Al-Zumor's (2011) study compared apology strategies use in English among Arab English language learners and English native speakers, and found Arab English language learners used more strategies of taking responsibilities whereas English native speakers used more strategies of offering repairs and verbal redress. The observed differences are attributed to different religious beliefs, concepts and values. Wu and Wang (2016) found Chinese EFL learners tended to use apology strategies similar to those of Chinese native speakers when comparing apology strategies use among

⁴ Positive face is one of the concepts in the politeness theory of linguistics, referring to the desire to be appreciated, liked, and accepted by others (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

English native speakers, Chinese native speakers, and Chinese EFL learners. Their findings support the hypothesis that second language learners' native culture influence their pragmatic performance in a second language. Chinese EFL learners were also found to use more strategies taking responsibility to strangers and offered more repairs to acquaintances rather than English native speakers (Su, 2012).

Distinct apology strategies differences are found between Chinese and English native speakers. Song and Liu (2002) reported that Chinese people tend to avoid direct conflicts and used fewer apologies compared to English native speakers; whereas higher frequencies of IFIDs and taking responsibilities were observed among native English speakers. Chinese native speakers were found to be more status-sensitive in apologizing (Su, 2012; Tsai, 2002) but such features were not observed among American English speakers (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Han and Cai (2010) reported that Chinese individuals maintained higher levels of face concern regardless of situational variables when apologizing compared to Americans. Sun Park & Guan (2006) found Chinese have stronger intention to apologize than American peers.

The observed differences in strategy use between Chinese and English native speakers are often attributed to different social norms, cultural values and cultural contexts. As some reserchers argued, Chinese culture is more collective-oriented with a high concern for the interests of the group (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), while Western English language countries are generally individual-oriented and are more sensitive to the interests of each other.

Discrepancies are also reported in how apologies are expressed in Japanese language compared to English (Otani, 2008). Prior research found that Japanese people not only apologize more often than Americans, but also are more direct and elaborate when apologizing (Sugimoto, 1997). For example, Japanese are more likely to use strategies such as IFIDs, offering repairs and compensation, and requesting for forgiveness, but use less explanation than Americans, making their remorse statements more elaborate in comparison to their American counterparts. What's more, they often directly request for forgiveness. When there is a need to strengthen their apology, Japanese tend to use repeated types such as "Sorry, sorry, I'm very sorry", whereas Americans more often employ intensifiers such as "I'm terribly sorry" (Sugimoto, 1997). Japanese are also found to be more likely to apologize especially in close personal relationships, whereas Americans are more likely to apologize in public settings (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Otani (2008) explained that Japanese are more concerned about the inconvenience of the interlocutor while Americans are more concerned about their own responsibility. In Japanese apologies, greater emphasis is placed on using standardized and formulaic expressions matching social norms and uniformity, rather than focusing on the specific content. Therefore, the repetition of established phrases, such as "I'm sorry" is valued to maintain conformity (Otani, 2008). Kumatoridani (1993) reported that Japanese EFL learners tended to be more apologetic and more conscious of the power factors than English native speakers. Wang and Walker (2006)

observed Japanese EFL students' strong sensitivity to power factors in apologizing with regards to the selection and frequency of strategies. According to Wang and Walker (2006), Japanese EFL learners use more apology strategies with interlocutors with lower or equal status or power, such as a waitress or a friend, than with individuals with higher power or status, such as a professor or a customer. Wang and Walker (2006) argued that this is likely because they feel more at ease with peers or those of similar status. Japanese ESL learners' sensitivity to status and power is consistent with Barnlund & Yoshioka's (1990) observation that Japanese are more status-sensitive when apologizing than Americans.

While several studies have examined speech acts, particularly apologies, comparing how native and non-native English speakers employ communicative strategies, there is limited research comparing the performance of two non-native EFL learners in this area, especially between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners. However, the communication in English among non-native speaker groups is becoming more common and important in cross-culture communication (Wang & Walker, 2006). The current study aimed to investigate how Chinese and Japanese EFL learners at higher-intermediate level of English proficiency construct apology strategies in English, with particular attention to the possible influence of L1 cultural norms. In intercultural communication literature, both Chinese and Japanese cultures are identified as high-context and collective cultures, (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), therefore Chinese and Japanese are generally regarded as implicit and reserved. But, further studies suggested drastic communication style differences between these two cultures. For example, Chinese seem to be more direct than Japanese and employ a broader, sometimes even contradictory range of strategies when interacting with others. Fang and Faure (2011) believed such differences in communication between Chinese and Japanese can be tracked back to the influence of Taoism⁵ (Taoist philosophy), particularly its Yin-Yang principle, which was unique in China. Fang and Faure (2011) also noted that rapid economic growth and highly frequent interactions with the rest of the world, especially the Western world, could largely modify traditional communication styles. That is to say, global interaction could potentially contribute to a culture's communication style shift, and the use of apology strategies could be part of it.

The current investigation primarily focused on the similarities and differences in the use of apology strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, specifically in following aspects: the frequency of strategies, preferences for strategy typology, and preferences for strategy combination.

⁵ Taoism emphasizes "following nature", encouraging people to act spontaneously rather than conform to rigid social protocols (Creel, 1956; Parkes, 1989), which could lead to a more direct communication style where efficiency and authenticity are valued.

Methods

Participants

The study involved a total of 76 participants, including 40 Chinese college students (28 females, mean age=20.94, SD=0.67) from a public university in the city of Shanghai and 36 Japanese college students (21 females, mean age=20.13, SD=0.64) from a private Japanese university in the city of Nagoya. Data from two participants at the Japanese university who reported a native language other than Japanese were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 34 valid Japanese EFL participants (19 females, mean age=20.15, SD=0.61) who are native speakers of Japanese. All participants were native speakers of their respective languages, Chinese and Japanese, and started learning English as a foreign language in elementary school. Chinese participants were junior English language majors recruited from two intact classes. Japanese participants were recruited from four intact sophomore classes majoring in English language. All participants were assessed by their English language instructors as having higher-intermediate English proficiency at the time of the experiment and reported little to no long-term overseas experience. Participants received course credits or rewards for their participation.

Materials

A nine-scenario Discourse Completion Test (DCT; see Appendix A) was designed for this experiment. DCT is one of the most commonly-used methods for L2 pragmatics, as it is challenging to collect apology data in real-world contexts (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The current study incorporated a DCT design following conventional DCT methods to collect participants' verbal responses in predefined scenarios. The scenarios were specifically designed to examine the impact of varying levels of social distance between interlocutors (e.g., stranger vs. best friend), degree of offence (high vs. low), specific relationships (e.g., with family members and with a professor), and a no-offence situation on the use of apology strategies. Table 1 is used to explain the social distance and specific offence in each scenario.

Scenario 1 (S1) and Scenario 8 (S8) are presented for detailed explanation:

S1: "You are at KFC and you have just bought a hamburger. When you try to find a table, you accidentally push off another customer's fried chicken to the floor. You will say..."

S8: "You are at Starbucks with your best friend A. When you are trying to show a picture on your phone to A, you accidentally push off A's donut onto the floor. You say..."

Scenario 1 (S1) and Scenario 8 (S8) both involve accidentally knocking over the interlocutor's food in a public setting, but they differ in terms of social distance. In S1, the speaker is at KFC and accidentally pushes a stranger's burger to the floor. In S8, the speaker is at Starbucks with the best friend and accidentally knocks the best friend's donut off the table. Thus, it is a conversation between two strangers in S2 (far social distance), while in S8, it is between two best friends (close social distance).

Table 1 *Offence details of the scenarios*

Scenario	Relationship	Social distance	Authority	Offence
1	Stranger	6	No	Knocking over the interlocutor's food
2	Classmate	4	No	Forgetting to reply to the interlocutor's message
3	Professor	4	Yes	Submitting an assignment late
4	Father	1	TBD	Forgetting to bring home your father's earphone
5	friend	3	No	Bumping into the interlocutor by accident
6	Best friend	2	No	Arriving on time for an appointment but later than the interlocutor
7	Stranger	6	No	Bumping into the interlocutor by accident
8	Best friend	2	No	Knocking over the interlocutor's food
9	Mother	1	TBD	Forgetting to bring home groceries

Procedure

The experiment was conducted during class time, beginning with a brief introduction. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could earn course credits or rewards. A QR code was then provided, allowing participants to access and submit their responses to the digital DCT via their phones. The digital DCT was administered using Wenjuanxing, an online survey platform in China, and Google Forms in Japan. To ensure that all participants fully understood the scenarios, translations in their native languages (Chinese or Japanese) were provided alongside the English versions. Participants were instructed to respond in English.

After submitting the DCT, participants were asked to complete an English listening comprehension test, which included two conversations from TOEFL practice materials, each followed by five multiple-choice questions.

DCT Coding Scheme and Coding Process

The coding scheme used in this study was adopted from the framework of strategies reported by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), Trosborg (1987), and Nureddeen (2008) (See Table 2).

Four research assistants, trained in the apology strategy frameworks mentioned above, served as coders. After the initial training, the coders practiced coding DCT responses from a different apology strategy experiment individually and discussed their results until they reached a consistent coding standard. Once fully trained, all four coders independently analyzed the DCT responses and reported the strategies used and their frequencies in each response. In cases of discrepancies, they discussed the results until they reached agreements.

Table 2 *Coding scheme for apology strategies*

1	Illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) a. An expression of regret, e.g. I'm sorry. b. An offer of apology, e.g. I apologize. c. A request for forgiveness, e.g. Excuse me/Forgive me/Pardon me.
2	Explanation or Account An explanation or account of the situation to mitigate the guilt. a. Implicit explanation, e.g. Such things are bound to happen, you know. b. Explicit explanation, e.g. The traffic was terrible.
3	Taking responsibility a. Explicit self-blame, e.g. It is my fault/my mistake. b. Lack of intent, e.g. I didn't mean it. c. Expression of self-deficiency, e.g. I didn't see you/I forgot. d. Expression of Embarrassment, e.g. I feel awful about it. e. Self-dispraise, e.g. I'm such a dimwit! f. Justify hearer, e.g. You're right to be angry
4	Offer of repair and compensation An offer to repair or pay for the damage caused by the offence, e.g. I'll pay for the damage.
5	Concern for the hearer The expression of concern for the hearer's well-being and condition to pacify him, e.g. I hope I didn't upset you/Are you all right?
6	Promise of Forbearance A promise of never performing the offence in question again or improving his behavior with respect to future behaviors, e.g. It won't happen again.
7	Denial of responsibility a. Explicit denial of responsibility, e.g. It wasn't my fault. b. Pretend to be offended, e.g. I'm the one to be offended. c. Blame the hearer, e.g. It's your own fault.
8	Humor The use of humorous expressions to mitigate the guilt.
9	Intensification The use of adverbials with the IFID, e.g. I am deeply sorry.
10	Shortening Distance The use of expressions to shorten the social distance, e.g. dear, my dear friend

Results

English proficiency

An independent sample T test was conducted to compare the English conversation listening comprehension test scores between the Chinese L1 and Japanese L1 groups (full score = 10). The analysis revealed that Chinese learners ($M = 8.93$, $SD = 1.23$, $n = 40$) scored significantly higher than Japanese learners ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.39$, $n = 34$), $t(72) = 9.234$, $p < .001$, indicating that in this sample, Chinese learners demonstrated higher English language proficiency compared to their Japanese counterparts. Since increased L2 proficiency has been found to expand learners' range of apology strategy use and are generally better equipped to combine multiple strategies (Wu et al., 2021) —except for the use of IFIDs, which are usually acquired at early stages of

second language learning (Chang, 2010), English conversation listening comprehension test scores were used as a covariate when comparing the frequencies of strategy use between Chinese and Japanese learners, except for IFIDs.

The overall use of strategies

In the following section, the overall frequencies and combinations of apology strategies used by Chinese and Japanese EFL learners were summarized in depth.

The total frequency of strategy use and total word count in the DCT were compared between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners. In order to offset the effect of language proficiency, a General Linear Model (GLM) was conducted to examine the effects of native language and cultural backgrounds (L1: Chinese or Japanese) on total strategy frequencies and total word counts while controlling for English listening comprehension scores as a covariate. The model for total strategy frequencies was significant, $F(2,71)=13.57$, $p<.001$, explaining 27.70% of the variance ($R^2=.277$). English listening scores did not significantly predict total strategy frequencies ($F(1,71)=0.021$, $p=.884$), but L1 had a significant effect ($F(1,71)=11.66$, $p=.001$). The overall model for total word count was also significant, $F(2,71)=16.11$, $p<.001$, accounting for approximately 31.20% of the variance in total word counts ($R^2=.31$). While English listening scores did not significantly predict total word counts ($F(1,71)=1.35$, $p=.25$), the L1 group had significant effect on total word counts ($F(1,71)=21.31$, $p<.001$). Thus, Chinese EFL learners generated a higher number of apology strategies and produced significantly more words than Japanese learners, independent of their English proficiency.

Another GLM analysis was used to further examine the effect of the first language (L1) on the total strategy frequency in each scenario with English listening score used as a covariate (the mean frequencies of the apology strategies used in each scenario by Chinese and Japanese EFL learners are presented in Figure 1). The results showed that L1 had significant effect on the total strategy frequencies in Scenario 2 ($F(1,71)=19.72$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.22$), Scenario 3 ($F(1,71)=28.50$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.27$) and Scenario 5 ($F(1,71)=4.446$, $p=.039$, $\eta^2=.06$), but listening score had no significant effect on any of the total strategy frequencies. That means, Chinese learners used apology strategies significantly more frequently than Japanese peers in S2 (forgetting to reply to a classmate's message), S3 (submitting an assignment late to a professor), and S5 (bumping into a friend by accident).

To explore the preferences for strategy typology between Chinese and Japanese learners, we calculated the mean frequencies of each strategy in all 9 scenarios by Chinese and Japanese EFL learners and their corresponding percentages (see Table 3 and Figure 2). It was revealed that the three most frequently used strategies for realizing apologies among Chinese participants were IFIDs (31.64%), taking responsibility (23.39%), and offering repair or compensation (15.23%). Similarly, the Japanese EFL learners also primarily relied on IFIDs (46.31%), taking responsibility (23.49%), and offering repair or compensation (13.22%). Independent sample T tests were used to compare the percentages of each strategy use between Chinese and Japanese groups. The results

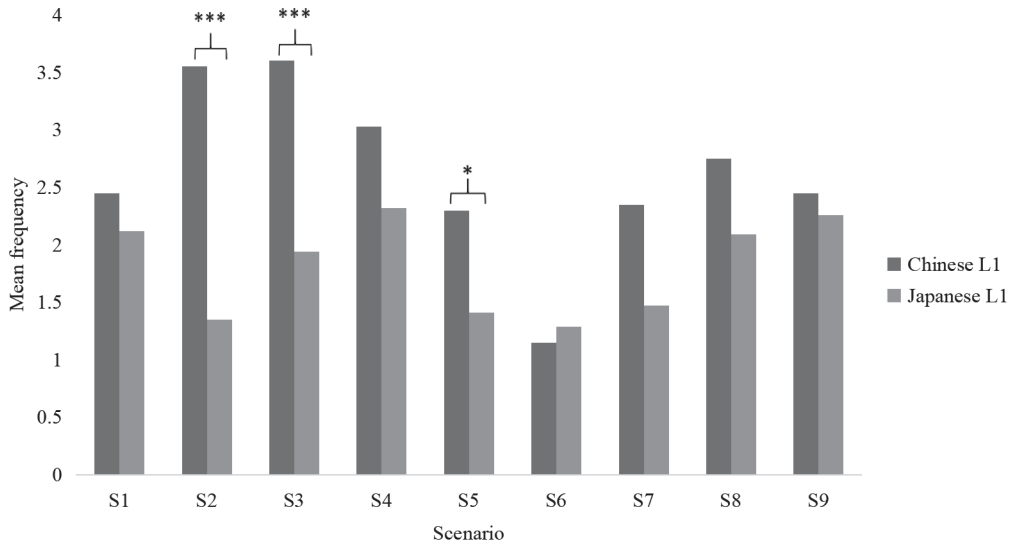


Figure 1 Mean frequency of total apology strategies in each scenario by L1 group

Table 3 Mean frequencies of total strategies and total word counts across scenarios, and mean frequencies and percentages of each strategy by L1.

L1	Strategy	IFID	Exp.	Tkng Res.	Rep.	Con.	Forb.	Dnl Res.	Hum.	Int.	S.D.	Ttl Strategies (SD)	Ttl word count (SD)
Chinese	Freq.	7.48	1.75	5.53	3.60	1.20	.35	.00	.13	1.80	1.80	23.63 (7.41)	132.32 (58.77)
	Mean %	31.64	7.40	23.39	15.23	5.08	1.48	0.00	0.55	7.61	7.61	100	
Japanese	Freq.	7.53	.38	3.82	2.15	.82	.09	.09	.03	1.09	.26	16.26 (3.75)	71.41 (27.60)
	Mean %	46.31	2.34	23.49	13.22	5.04	0.55	0.55	0.18	6.70	1.60	100	

showed that the Japanese group had a significantly higher percentage of IFIDs use when compared to the Chinese group, $t(72) = -7.36$, $p < .001$. The Chinese group demonstrated a significantly higher percentage of explanation use, $t(68.86) = 4.00$, $p < .001$, as well as the use of shortening distance, $t(59.42) = 3.88$, $p < .001$. The remaining strategies were used far less frequently compared to IFIDs, taking responsibility, and offering repair or compensation. Additionally, no significant differences were observed in the percentages of use for these other strategies between Chinese and Japanese learners.

To explore the preferences for strategy combination between Chinese and Japanese learners, we calculated the number of strategy types used in each scenario (see Table 4). On average,

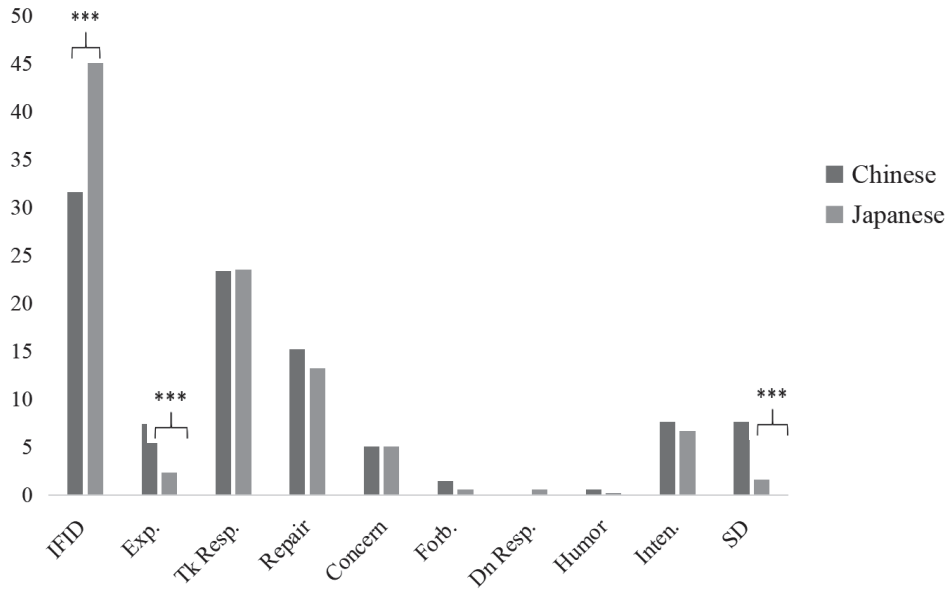


Figure 2 The percentages of each strategy used across all 9 scenarios by the Chinese and Japanese groups

Table 4 The mean number of strategy types used in each scenario by L1

L1	S1 stranger	S2 classmate	S3 professor	S4 father	S5 friend	S6 best friend	S7 stranger	S8 best friend	S9 mother	Mean (SD)
Chinese	2.35	2.90	3.45	2.80	2.15	1.08	2.08	2.50	2.35	2.41 (.64)
Japanese	2.06	1.35	1.88	2.29	1.38	1.29	1.41	1.97	2.21	1.76 (.38)

Chinese EFL learners employed 2.41 (SD = .64) types of strategies, while Japanese learners used 1.76 (SD = .38) types. This difference was statistically significant even after controlling for English proficiency. A general linear model revealed a significant effect of L1 on the mean number of strategy types, $F(1, 71) = 10.77, p = .002$, whereas the covariate, English listening score, did not have a significant effect. These findings suggest that L1 significantly influenced the variety of strategies employed, independent of listening proficiency. Specifically, Chinese learners utilized a greater number of strategy types compared to their Japanese counterparts, indicating that Chinese learners tend to adopt a more complex combination of strategies.

A latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted to examine the number of latent classes that best fit the data of the use percentages of the 5 selected strategies, IFID, explanation, taking responsibility, offering repair or compensation, and shortening distance. The selection of these

five strategies for LPA was based on their higher overall use percentages and observation of significant group differences in these strategies use between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners. Fit indices for one- through five-class models were evaluated, as shown in Table 5. The two-class solution was selected as the optimal model based on lower AIC (2536.277), BIC (2573.142), and AIC3 (2522.720) values when compared to the one-class model, as well as higher entropy (0.963), indicating good class separation. The Lo-Mendell-Rubin (LMR) likelihood ratio test was significant ($p = .02$), and the bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT) was also significant ($p = .001$), supporting the two-class solution. It identified two distinct classes of apology strategy use among the participants: Class 1 (19.2%, 14 participants) and Class 2 (80.8%, 60 participants). Class 1 included 11 Chinese participants and 3 Japanese participants, while Class 2 consisted of 31 Chinese participants and 29 Japanese participants. The two classes exhibited notable differences in the proportional use of the selected apology strategies across the nine scenarios (see Figure 3).

Class 1 was characterized by the highest use of formulaic apologies (IFID; 33.99%, $SD = 12.14\%$), a notable use of shortening distance (17.04%, $SD = 5.47\%$), and moderate use of taking responsibility (18.26%, $SD = 5.87\%$) and offering repairs and compensation (10.53%, $SD = 7.63\%$). Explanation was used relatively sparingly (6.21%, $SD = 7.65$). These findings suggest that individuals in Class 1 adopted a more relation-oriented apology style, emphasizing relational harmony and connection while balancing these with other strategies.

Class 2, by contrast, displayed a higher reliance on formulaic apologies (IFID; 40.33%, $SD = 11.22\%$) and a stronger emphasis on taking responsibility (25.35%, $SD = 7.66\%$) and offering repairs and compensation (15.33%, $SD = 7.57\%$). Shortening distance was rarely used ($M = 1.54\%$, $SD = 2.67\%$), and explanation accounted for only 4.68% ($SD = 5.23\%$) of the total strategies. This indicates a more pragmatic and task-oriented apology style, with a focus on responsibility and problem resolution.

Table 5 *Fit indices for latent profile models*

Model	AIC	BIC	AIBC	Entropy	LMR(P)	BLRT(P)	Class Probabilities
1	2581.138	2604.179	2572.665				
2	2536.277	2573.142	2522.720	0.963	0.02	0.001	0.19/0.81
3	2507.195	2557.884	2488.554	0.98	0.01	0.001	0.78/0.04/0.18
4	2431.443	2495.956	2407.718	0.993	0.01	0.001	0.60/0.21/0.15/0.04
5	2480.216	1558.554	2451.407	0.885	0.94	1	0.36/0.11/0.13/0.33/0.05

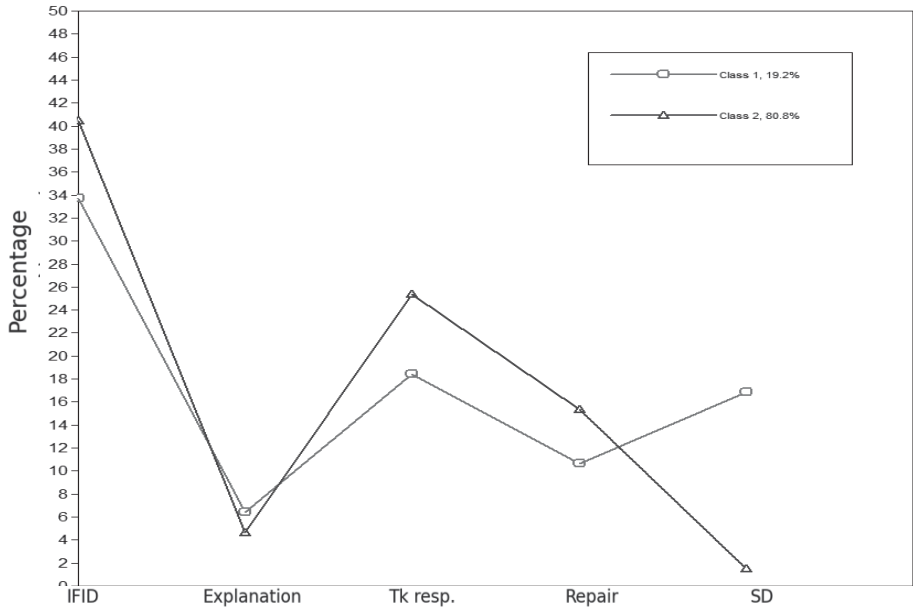


Figure 3 Two distinct classes of the proportional use of the selected 5 apology strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL learners

Use of IFIDs

The proportion of the use of IFIDs in each scenario between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners are listed in Figure 4. Independent sample T tests were conducted to compare the proportions of IFIDs in each scenario between Chinese and Japanese learners. Overall, Japanese learners had a higher proportion of IFIDs among all the strategies used in each scenario compared to their Chinese peers. Significant group differences in the proportion of IFID use were observed in 7 scenarios out of 9. Specifically, Japanese learners used significantly higher proportion of IFIDs in Scenario 1 ($t(72)=-5.16$, $p<.001$), Scenario 2 ($t(46.98)=-2.25$, $p=.03$), Scenario 4 ($t(58.18)=-3.75$, $p<.001$), Scenario 5 ($t(64.70)=-4.97$, $p<.001$), Scenario 6 ($t(54.38)=-2.41$, $p=.02$), Scenario 7 ($t(72)=-3.25$, $p=.002$), and Scenario 8 ($t(72)=-3.05$, $p=.003$).

0 offence, apologies in the absence of actual offence

In Scenario 6, the speaker arrived on time but later than the best friend for an appointment. The speaker made no actual offence in this situation, but apologies were still observed in both cultures with lower strategy frequencies in Scenario 6 (Chinese mean = 1.15, SD = 1.55, Japanese mean = 1.29, SD = .97) compared to other scenarios as illustrated in Figure 1. A GLM was used to examine the impact of L1 on frequencies of each strategy use with English listening scores used as a covariate. A significant effect of L1 on IFIDs ($F(1, 71)=5.30$, $p=.02$), and taking responsibilities was observed ($F(1, 71)=4.57$, $p=.04$). Thus, Japanese used significantly more IFIDs and taking responsibilities than Chinese learners when there was no actual offence.

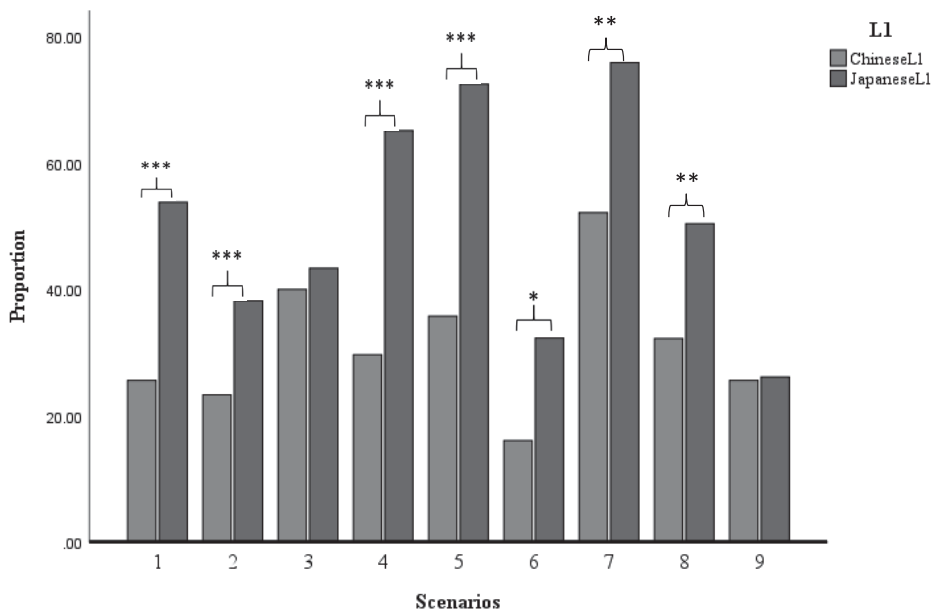


Figure 4 *The proportion of the use of IFIDs in each scenario between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners*

Discussion

The analysis results of the current study revealed significant cross-cultural differences in the use of apology strategies between Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, even when controlling for English proficiency. That is saying, second language learners' L1 and their L1 cultural background continue to shape their L2 use even among higher-intermediate L2 learners.

One of the key findings is that Chinese EFL learners used overall a higher frequency of apology strategies, employed a more diverse strategy types, and produced longer responses than their Japanese peers, irrelevant of their English proficiency level. This suggests that Chinese EFL learners tend to elaborate on their apologies. In specific, they adopt a wider range of apology strategies, use more complex combinations of strategies, and produce longer responses with more details in face-threatening situations than Japanese learners. It may be inferred that Chinese younger generation place more emphasis on mitigating social damage and maintaining relationships through more complex or layered apologies. According to Chen et al., this could be attributed to the influence of Confucian values that stress the importance of social harmony and personal accountability, leading individuals to overcompensate in their apologies to preserve relationships (Chen et al., 2022).

Japanese learners might rely on brief but culturally sufficient apologies. This can be supported by the findings reported by Otani (2008) that Japanese apologies place great emphasis

on using standardized and formulaic expressions rather than content. Sugimoto (1997) also found Japanese used more repeated types of remorse statement (e.g., “Sorry, sorry”), leading to a high count and reliance of IFIDs. Kotani (2016) reported that Japanese speakers often avoid detailed explanations in their apologies as providing such explanations may be perceived as giving excuses, denying responsibility or causing discomfort.

When further analyzed, it was found that Chinese learners employed more strategies in their apologies in Scenario 2 (forgetting to reply to a classmate’s message), Scenario 3 (submitting an assignment late to a professor), and Scenario 5 (bumping into a friend by accident) than their Japanese peers. The finding that Chinese learners used more strategies with classmates in S2 suggests Chinese learners may be more sensitive to peer obligations. This is consistent with Han and Cai (2010)’s observation that Chinese participants maintained consistently high levels of concern for both self-face and other-face across varying levels of responsibility and relationship types, regardless of the severity of the offence. Chinese learners’ elaborate apologies after bumping into a friend by accident (S5) suggest Chinese learners’ tendency to overcompensate even in casual, unintentional offences, reflecting a high attentiveness to maintaining harmony even among friends (Chen et al., 2022). Scenario 3 involves a higher-status authority situation. Japanese learners might show more restraint in hierarchical contexts, possibly trusting that a brief but appropriate apology is culturally sufficient (Sugimoto, 1997).

Significant differences in two groups were also observed in the IFID usage proportions across scenarios. Japanese learners relied more heavily on IFIDs across nearly all contexts, indicating that IFIDs serve as a central and stable component of Japanese learners’ apologizing behavior, regardless of the severity or type of offence (Sugimoto, 1997). This tendency suggests that for Japanese learners, the act of issuing a formulaic apology itself carries important social meaning.

On the other hand, the data analysis also showed similarities in the use of apology strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL learners. Both groups primarily relied on the apology strategies of IFIDs, taking responsibilities, and offering repair or compensation to express remorse and rebuild relational harmony, indicating that similar apology norms exist in both cultures.

Meanwhile, there are also group differences in specific preferences among these three strategies. For example, Japanese learners used IFIDs significantly more often than Chinese learners, suggesting a preference for brief, formulaic expressions of apology that fulfill the necessary politeness without additional elaboration. It seems Japanese young generation favor formal expressions over attempts to shorten interpersonal distance. Chinese learners, by contrast, used significantly more explanations and shortening distance strategies. The tendency of Chinese learners to elaborate apologies indicates their concern for face and a strong desire to maintain harmonious relationships.

The latent profile analysis (LPA) examined the use of apology strategies among Chinese and Japanese EFL learners collectively as one unit group rather than by national group. The

analysis classified participants into two distinct apology styles: a relation-oriented style (Class 1) and a task-oriented style (Class 2).

Class 1, comprising 19.2% of the participants, was characterized by a greater use of formulaic apologies (IFIDs), a relatively high use of shortening distance strategies, and moderate use of taking responsibility and offering repair. The minimal reliance on explanation further highlights the group's emphasis on emotional connection and relational harmony over detailed rationalization. The greater representation of Chinese participants in this group (11 Chinese and 3 Japanese) is consistent with previous inferences that Chinese speakers tend to emphasize relationship maintenance and face sensitivity even in casual or low-stakes contexts.

In contrast, Class 2, accounting for 80.8% of the sample, showed a more task-oriented approach to apologizing. Participants in this class relied heavily on IFIDs, with a strong focus on taking responsibility and offering repairs or compensation but rarely employed strategies to shorten distance or offer extensive explanations. This style suggests an emphasis on fulfilling social obligations and resolving the offence efficiently. The high presence of both Chinese and Japanese learners (31 Chinese and 29 Japanese) in this class indicates that they both exhibited a task-oriented apology style, suggesting similarities in the young generations' current communication styles and the potential influence of globalized communication norms, i.e., mainly reflected as English language-based contexts, where directness, explicit acknowledgment of responsibility, and efficient problem resolution are often preferred.

Unlike their Chinese peers who were distributed in both classes, exhibiting greater diversity in their strategies, balancing emotional and task-oriented approaches, Japanese EFL learners were predominantly concentrated in Class 2 (task-oriented style), demonstrating a more uniform pattern of responsibility and accountability. This distinction is consistent with other findings of the current study: Chinese students employ a wider range of strategies, whereas their Japanese counterparts rely on a more limited set. Despite traditional Chinese cultural norms that emphasize maintaining harmonious relationships, most of the Chinese students displayed a marked preference for a task-oriented style, characterized by direct and explicit acknowledgment of responsibility. This shift may reflect the growing impact of globalized communication norms, the influence of English as an international language, and the acquisition of Western cultural norms. Thus, apology behaviors in intercultural contexts appear to be formed by a dynamic interaction between native cultural norms and the pragmatic conventions of globalized English communication.

The current study shed light on a less explored situation: apologies in the absence of actual offence (0 offence; Scenario 6). We believe this scenario could reveal some unique apology patterns in Japanese culture. Scenario 6 involved a minor situation where no real offence occurred, yet apologies were still observed among both Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, though at lower frequencies compared to other scenarios. This shows the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships even in low-stakes, casual interactions in Chinese and

Japanese cultures as both are identified as collectivist cultures (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). The GLM analysis revealed that Japanese learners used significantly more IFIDs and expressions of taking responsibility than Chinese learners. This pattern suggests that Japanese learners extended apologizing even to no-offence contexts, as apologies serve a ritual social function, not just a response to wrongdoing (Maddux et al., 2011). In such cases, apologies are about proactively maintaining harmony and showing consideration for the other person's feelings, even if no harm was done. Kotani (2016) also found that Japanese people often apologize even when they don't feel personally responsible, viewing apology as a way to show concern and make others feel better. The minor problematic situations, such as the zero offence example in the current study, may reflect certain culture-specific communication patterns among Japanese students.

The observed cultural differences in apology strategy use suggest practical implications for cross-cultural communication training and EFL pragmatics instruction. English as second language learners may benefit from the understanding of interlanguage pragmatic (such as apology strategy preferences) of other ESL interlocutors. ESL educators could provide additional instructions to help bridge the cultural gaps to facilitate intercultural communication. For example, Japanese learners could explore strategies for emotional connection, such as shortening distance, to enhance relational repair. Developing communication skills among Japanese learners could facilitate a more diverse use of apology strategies. More exposure to intercultural instruction or interaction could increase Chinese learners' awareness and appreciation of different communication styles from a different culture, such as Japanese interlocutor's frequent use of IFIDs, and minimal use of explanation.

One important limitation of the current study concerns the difference in English language proficiency levels between the Chinese and Japanese samples. Although English listening scores were statistically controlled for in most of the analyses, the variability in L2 proficiency introduces complexity to the interpretation of the results as L2 proficiency could affect learners' choice of apology strategy range and combination (Chang, 2010; Wu et al., 2021). Thus, some of the observed group differences in strategy use between Chinese and Japanese learners may be argued to be partly caused by differences in English proficiency rather than purely cultural factors. Future studies should aim to match participants more closely in terms of L2 proficiency.

Conclusion

The current study examined how apologies are constructed in various settings among Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, using DCT and applied statistical analysis, and revealed both differences and similarities. Chinese learners tended to adopt a more elaborated and relational style, while Japanese learners preferred concise, formulaic expressions, particularly through frequent use of IFIDs. Despite these differences, both groups shared a common reliance

on core strategies—IFIDs, taking responsibility, and offering repair and compensation.

The latent profile analysis further supported the differences and similarities, showing that while Chinese learners displayed a greater diversity of strategy styles with both relation-oriented and task-oriented styles present, Japanese learners favored a more uniform, task-oriented style. Apologies made even in the absence of offence by Japanese learners highlighted a shared commitment to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships in Japanese culture.

Apologizing is not merely a linguistic act but a culture-bound practice. How individuals are influenced by native and/or target cultural norms depends on a complex interaction among these norms, values, and personal experience, which can sometimes lead to contradictory behaviors. Based on the data, this study described these behavioral patterns and stated possible explanations. Since culture is dynamic and constantly evolving, communicative practices—including apology strategies—are also subject to change. Within this context, shifts in apology behavior offer insights into broader cultural transformations. Understanding how these practices are shaped by local norms, intercultural communication, and globalization underscores the need for further cross-cultural research.

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