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## **Keep Calm and Say Sorry!: The use of Apologies by EFL Teachers in Turkish and English**

ZEYNEP CANLI and BEKIR CANLI

### **Abstract**

The aim of the study is to investigate apology strategies used by EFL teachers in Turkish and English. For the purpose of the study, a qualitative research was carried out. The study utilized purposeful sampling. Three EFL instructors participated in this study. The data were collected via a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) that had eight apology situations. Analyzing the results indicated that there was no significance difference in apology strategies used by the participants, and their L1 apology speech act strategies were not significantly different from their L2 productions. Their L1 can be said to have an effect on their use of apologies, as they transferred native Turkish norms into English. The results of the study emphasized the importance of teaching pragmatic competence in EFL. This study might be of pedagogical help and significance to teachers interested in pragmatics in general, and apology speech act in particular.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, speech acts, apology strategies, EFL teachers.

## Introduction

The goal of teaching a second language is to provide communicative competence, and this has gained importance in recent years. Hymes (1972) postulated that communicative competence includes both the language rules and abstract knowledge about social and functional rules of language. To be able to acquire a language as a native speaker requires knowledge acquisition of the rules and being able to choose among the speech acts in order to communicate with others. On the other hand, the situation is different when someone tries to learn a second language because speech acts are considered as one of the troublesome points in learning a second language (Schmidt & Richards, 1980). While learning a second language, people encounter problems in using speech acts since using speech acts requires pragmatic competence. More or less, all languages have speech acts, but the way people use them differs from culture to culture.

It is found that L2 learners face problems in using speech acts when they communicate with native speakers of the target language (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Cohen & Olshtain, 1983). The speech act of apologizing has been investigated cross-culturally and the results demonstrate that there are differences and similarities between cultures in the use of apologies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Suszczynska, 1999).

A simple search on the internet using the key words “speech act of apologizing” shows how popular this concept is in educational circles; returning some 3,730,000 hits in general, and about 3,910 Turkish-based.

The aim of the study is to investigate apology strategies used by EFL teachers in Turkish and English. It is essential to find apology strategies to thwart misuse of pragmatics. The significance of this study was to extend the research on apology and to consider its impact in the Turkish context. Gathering information about EFL teachers’ apology strategies in Turkish and English might also help teachers and students in terms of the effective teaching and learning of English pragmatics. The participants of the study may realize the practical reflection of their apology strategies in order to improve them.

The study aimed to address the following research question:

- What are EFL teachers’ apology strategies in Turkish and English?

### *Communicative competence*

The importance of communicative competence has been well recognized by second language acquisition domain. According to Richards, Platt, & Weber (1985), it has knowledge of grammar, vocabulary of the language, rules of speaking and knowing how to use speech acts and language. There are four components of communicative competence; grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. As a part of sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence includes linguistic, lexical knowledge and knowing how to use speech act strategies in terms of social variables in communication (Harlow, 1990).

### *Speech Acts*

Speech acts can be explained as the fundamental element of communication and they are part of linguistic competence. As Schmidt and Richards (1980) express, speech acts are all the acts people perform through speaking, all the things they do when they speak and the interpretation and negotiation of speech acts are dependent on the discourse or context.

### *Interlanguage Pragmatics*

Interlanguage pragmatics primarily concentrate on nonnative speakers' production and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in the target language as a second or foreign language and it emphasizes on people's comprehension and production of linguistic action in context (Tuncel, 1999). According to Thomas (1983), L2 learners transfer L1 pragmatic norms into L2, so they hold pragmalinguistic failure or sociopragmatic failure.

### *Apology*

The apology is an expressive and important speech act of face and politeness in communication, so it has been a popular area of the study in the field of pragmatics. The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to "set things right" (Olshtain, 1983).

In point of apologies, Turkish doesn't provide an adequate amount of the data for language teachers, or learners. Few studies have been conducted related to apology strategies in Turkish.

Istifci (2009) sought the act of apologizing with subjects from different English proficiency in order to find out if there are similarities and differences between these groups and whether or not they approach native speaker apology norms. The participants of the study were 20 intermediate EFL, 20 advanced level EFL, and five native speakers. The data were collected by means of a DCT that contained eight different situations. The data were categorized according to Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) apology speech act set. The results of the study revealed a number of similarities and differences between two groups. The participants' L1 has an influence on their use of apologies and it was stated that especially intermediate level learners transfer L1 norms to the target language. This study provided very important data on the Turkish students' choices of apologies and differences between intermediate and advanced learners.

Tuncel (2011) investigated the apology strategies used by prep-school students and senior year college students in comparison with native English speakers, investigating researching apology speech acts used by intermediate and advanced English learners in an EFL setting in Turkey. The researcher intended to see if students applied Turkish pragmatic norms or native English pragmatic norms to their English speech by applying DCT based methodology. The participants of the study were 20 intermediate EFL, 20 advanced level EFL, and five native speakers. A DCT was applied as a means of data collection. The results showed that Turkish speakers transferred their L1 to their L2 frequently. The study also suggested that especially learners in advanced levels used some formulas that do not fit to Turkish or English norms. According to the findings, learners constructed inter-language forms as they develop language skills.

The research in the field of apology speech acts has revealed significant understanding about how speech acts may differ among languages and cultures. It is a fact that the pragmatic strategies of a culture and pragmatic competence are crucial in terms of teaching and learning a language. It can be clearly understood that there is a need for future studies to understand the pragmatics of each culture and to be able to reach a better language teaching. Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate apology strategies used by EFL teachers in Turkish and English.

## Methodology

As stated earlier in this study, the researcher selected the speech act of apologizing since use of apologies may reflect cultural values and it may also demonstrate whether the use of speech acts is appropriate, both in the native and target languages.

The researcher met the head of the Foreign Languages department of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University, Turkey, and explained the details of the study and requested permission to speak with the EFL instructors of the school. After obtaining permission, the researcher met with the instructors. Next, a meeting was held with three EFL instructors who volunteered to be a part of the study. The researcher met the instructors and after explaining the purpose of the study, appealed to them to participate by promising to share the key findings of the study with both the instructors and their institutions.

After the instructors agreed to participate in the study, the researcher gave them the Participant Information form (Appendix A), and the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) for Apology Strategies questionnaire (Appendix B).

The study employed qualitative research methods by using a questionnaire. It was determined that the most appropriate type of research for this study would be case study. As Creswell (1994) stated, case study is an adequate research type for studying an educational phenomenon such as person(s) or process(es).

The participants were selected from among the instructors at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University School of Foreign Languages (KSUSFL) by way of purposive sampling, since it was aimed to include EFL instructors who would participate in the study voluntarily.

These three teachers of the study taught full-time (20-25 hours per week) in the university's preparatory program. The teaching context was a monolingual classroom setting in which most teachers and all students were non-native speakers of English. The participant teachers were not homogenous in respect to age and teaching experience. Subject 1 is 34, male and has been an English Language instructor for 11 years. Subject 2 is 35, female and has been teaching English for 12 years. Subject 3 is 27, female and has been working as an EFL instructor for 5 years. All of them have been teaching A1 level at KSUSFL. All participant teachers graduated with a PhD in Turkey, but all had been abroad a few times before gaining their PhDs.

**Table 1.** Participant Teachers Profile

Participants	Age	Gender	Experience (years)	Institutions worked before
Subject 1	34	Male	11	Ministry of Education, Private School, State University
Subject 2	35	Female	12	Ministry of Education, State University
Subject 3	27	Female	5	State University

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was applied to EFL subjects within their usual class hours by their usual core course teachers. The questions were open-ended in order for the subjects to write down the first thing that came into their minds regarding the situation they were in and the person they were interacting with. The DCT and instructions were designed in both Turkish and English and the teachers were required to answer the questions in both Turkish and English.

EFL instructors were also given a short background information questionnaire (Appendix A) in order to record data about their age, gender, years of experience, occupation experience, and whether or not they had been abroad.

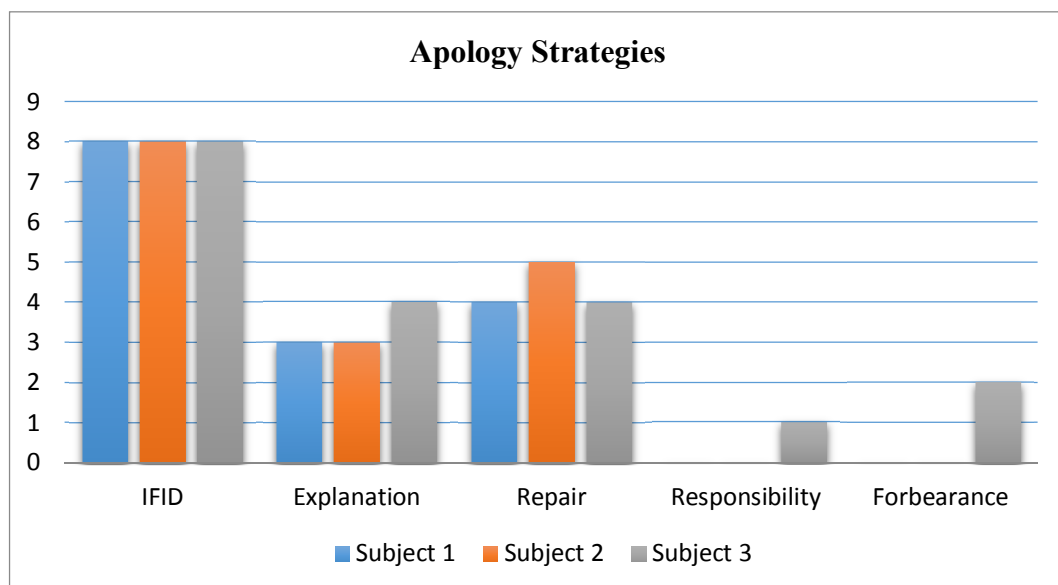
The data analysis of the study was based on the classification of apologies suggested by Cohen and Olshtain (1983). The raw data was analyzed and classified according to the semantic formulas included in each response. The classifications are as follows:

Apology strategies;

- direct apology (IFIDs): “sorry,” “excuse,” “forgive,” etc.
- explanation: nonspecific (There has been a lot going on in my life), and specific (I could not catch the bus.)
- responsibility: implicit (I was sure I did it right.), lack of intent (I did not mean to.), self deficiency (How could I be so blind.), and self-blame (It is my fault.)
- repair: unspecified (How can I fix that?), and specified (Let me buy a new computer for you.)
- promise of forbearance: such as, “It won’t happen again.” (Aydin, 2013).

## Findings

The results of the study is presented and analyzed situation by situation. The main strategies used by three EFL teachers are presented.



**Figure 1.** Overall usage of strategies

The overall results of the study clearly show that the most used strategy by all participants is the IFIDs.

*Situation 1:* Imagine you are a university professor. You promised to return a student’s essay today but you have not finished reading it. The student shows up and asks for the essay. What would you say to the student?

Since the person who is apologizing is a professor in this situation, the situation is related with power. Power relationship in Turkish and English culture is different.

Subject 1 preferred specific explanations such as “I had to take my son to the hospital”, but Subject 2 preferred non-specific explanations such as “I was busy”. All subjects used the

repair strategy. Both for the responsibility and forbearance strategies, there wasn't a significant difference. The results showed that the group obviously was influenced by L2, but there were transfers from L1 in a certain degree.

*Situation 2:* Imagine you are a student. You borrowed a book from one of your professors but you forgot to return it on time. You attend a meeting with the professor and the professor asks for the book. What would you say to the professor?

In this situation there is a different type of power relationship, because the offender has a lower status.

All subjects used IFIDs such as "I'm sorry; I'm really sorry." They all tended to give detailed more explanations when they answered in Turkish. "Daha bitmedi hocam bir an önce bitirip size geri vereceğim. Zamanında getirmediğim için çok özür dilerim. Bir daha olmaz. İnşallah kızmamışsınızdır." In terms of repair strategy usage, all of them preferred this strategy. Lastly, in terms of responsibility, none of them preferred to apply it. Just Subject 3 used forbearance strategy. "I will not forget again".

*Situation 3:* Imagine you are the manager of a café. Today you have an interview with a student who wants to a job in the café. However, you are half an hour late for the interview because of a meeting. The student is waiting for you in the café. What would you say to the student?

In this situation the manager of the café has a higher power, and meaning of punctuality differs from culture to culture. While punctuality is very important and it is not an acceptable excuse in Turkish culture, it is not so important and it is an acceptable excuse to a certain degree.

The IFID strategy usage was used by all subjects. "I am sorry for keeping you waiting for a long time". After IFID, the most used strategy was explanation. "I had to pick up my spouse". The subjects again preferred to use non-specific explanation "Üzgünüm, geç kaldım".

*Situation 4:* Imagine you are a waiter in an expensive restaurant. A customer ordered beef, but in fact you brought chicken instead. The customer mentions the mistake you made. What would you say to the customer?

In situation 4 the customer has a higher power than the waiter.

All subjects preferred to use both IFID and repair strategy. None of them used responsibility and forbearance strategy in their apologies. Only Subject 3 used the explanation strategy in her apology "I have lots of orders and the other waiter didn't come to work today, so I made a mistake; çok siparişim var ve diğer garson bugün işe gelmediği için böyle bir hata yaptım". It can be interpreted that she transferred L1 strategies to L2 by translating what she thought word by word.

*Situation 5:* Imagine you are a student who is often late. Today you are late for a meeting with a friend you are working with on an essay. Your friend has been waiting for you for two hours. What would you say to your friend?

In this situation the participants have the same power within their relationship.

All subjects chose IFIDs by writing "I am sorry. I'm terribly sorry. I feel horrible" "çok, çok, çok özür dilerim". Subject 2 used the repair strategy "I'm awfully sorry for such a

mistake so I will pay for your drink". Only Subject 3 used the forbearance strategy with repair strategy "senin yerine ödevi ben yapacağım, bana kızma nolur. Bir içecek ismarlayayım da barışalım; I will do homework for you; don't be angry with me, please! Let me order a drink to make peace!"

*Situation 6:* Imagine you were in a bus and you bumped into another passenger and broke his computer. What would you say to the passenger?

There is no power relationship in this situation because the participants' status are not known.

All subjects chose to use IFID strategy and repair strategy. Interestingly, they all offered to buy a new laptop: "yenisini alırım" "I can buy a new one for you" instead of offering to pay part of the damage. Subject 3 responded to this situation as "Oh my God, I didn't mean it. I promise to buy you another one. So please can I take your phone number and address, here is mine. Sorry again" This can be interpreted as L1 effect.

*Situation 7:* Imagine you are working for a company. You offended a colleague during a meeting. After the meeting the colleague you offended made a comment about the incident to you by stating that he was offended by your comment. What would you say to your colleague?

In this situation there is equal power relationship. Personal relationship is important in Turkish.

All subjects preferred IFIDs "I am sorry, that was not my intent" "Kusura bakmayın hanımefendi". Nearly the same response by Subject 3 was given by explanation strategy "seni kırmak istemedim; I didn't intend to offend you". The answers given by all subjects are close to each other in terms of repair strategy usage "Let's drink something!"

*Situation 8:* Imagine you are traveling on a bus. You put your bag in the rack, but it fell down and hit another passenger. What would you say to the passenger?

The power relationship in this situation is not certain because the interlocutors do not know each other.

In this situation, IFID strategy is used by all subjects, with no other strategies. "I'm sorry; Afferedersiniz, Pardon, çok özür dilerim".

To conclude, all subjects preferred to use IFIDs in every situation, but they didn't tend to apply responsibility and forbearance strategies relatively.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The results of this study presented the apology strategies of EFL teachers in English and Turkish. The results also showed that there is obvious impingement of L1 pragmatic norms on their apology strategies. When the teachers answered the situations in English, they translated almost every single word that they wrote in Turkish to English. They transferred their native language strategies to the target language.

IFIDs can be explained by directness in terms of apology speech acts. IFID usage was prevalent and the overwhelming expression was "I'm sorry" which expresses regret (Holmes 1990). As stated, the IFIDs are the strategies which are the most conventionalized and



routinized (Suszczyńska, 1999); similarly, the results of this study presented IFIDs as the most used.

It is obvious that non-native speakers are indirect in their apologies. Although non-native speakers reached a high proficiency level of the target language, they tended to use L1 strategies in a number of cases. This can be claimed by L1 effect in view of the fact that they improved their own interlanguage usage. Since even advanced non-native speakers of English are not able to use L2 pragmatic competence to an advanced level, there is a need for them to improve pragmatic competence in L2. Therefore, the decision makers need to consider this gap in teaching ESL.

There are many instances in this study in which L1 pragmatic norms influenced the subjects' realization and usage of apology speech acts. As Olshtain and Cohen (1983) suggest, formal instruction on the use of speech acts by L2 learners speed up the process of learning the target language, although acquisition of native-like production by non-native speakers may take many years. Therefore, teachers should improve both their, and their students', pragmatic ability with real-life situations through the watching of videos, role-playing and simulations, i.e. by consciousness-raising tasks.

This study had certain limitations in attempting to seek answers to the research question. First of all, the number of participants for this study was small; limited to three EFL instructors at KSUSFL. It was beyond the researcher's ability to perform a study with all instructors at KSU due time constraints.

As the findings revealed, to find the relationship between instructors' English and Turkish apologies, a longitudinal study with a larger sample of participants may be more beneficial. There is a need for conducting detailed observation in terms of being able to capture more clues within the data samples.

The duration of the study was another important limitation of the study. The time allotted for the study was rather short in terms of gathering data; hence only a small scale study was applied. It could be further expanded by conducting interviews as part of subsequent studies.

The researcher recommends further studies to be conducted over one semester or an academic year. In addition to interviews, future research could address more real-life observations. An observer could video-record the cases for apology strategies, which can then be examined for correlations with the results of the questionnaire.

Future research could address different samples obtained from different Foreign Language schools at other universities. This could provide a comparison of different strategies of apology used in a variety of contexts. Future studies could also add scrutiny of teacher apology strategies in light of different factors such as the teachers' education level, personal characteristics, or their age.

To conclude, the current study emphasized the importance of teaching pragmatics in language teaching. It is a fact that communicative competence has become important recently and pragmatic competence is essential in order to be able to communicate better. Therefore, it would be recommended to better teach pragmatics in consideration of teaching English as a foreign language.

## Notes

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant Information

Please tick and indicate the relevant responses to the items below; elaborate on your responses, where required. (Provide the following information).

- Gender: male \_\_\_\_\_ female \_\_\_\_\_
- Age:
- Years of teaching experience:
- Highest degree you hold:
- Have you ever been abroad?
- Institutions you worked before KSU:

**Appendix B: Discourse Completion Test (DCT ) for Apology Strategies*****DCT Turkish Version***

Bu anket İngilizce öğretmenlerinin Türkçe ve İngilizcedeki özür dileme tekniklerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Aşağıda büyük ihtimalle özür gerektiren durumlar verilmiştir. Lütfen durumları dikkatlice okuyup doğal olarak vereceğiniz cevaba en yakın cevabı yazmaya çalışınız.

***1. Durum***

Üniversitede profesör olduğunuzu düşünün. Bir öğrencinizin ödevini bugün geri vereceğinize söz verdiniz fakat henüz okumayı bitirmediğiniz. Öğrenciniz size geldi ve ödevini sordu. Öğrencinize ne derdiniz?

***2. Durum***

Üniversitede öğrenci olduğunuzu düşünün. Bir hocanızdan bir kitap ödünç aldınız fakat zamanında geri vermeyi unuttunuz. Hocanızla görüşmeye gittiniz ve hocanız kitabı sordu. Hocanıza ne derdiniz?

***3. Durum***

Bir kafede yönetici olduğunuzu düşünün. Bir öğrenci iş görüşmesine geliyor fakat siz başka bir toplantı nedeniyle yarım saat geç kaldınız. Bu öğrenci sizi kafede bekliyor. Bu öğrenciye ne söylediniz?

***4. Durum***

Çok pahalı bir restoranda garson olduğunuzu düşünün. Bir müşteriniz size biftek sipariş etmesine rağmen siz yanlışlıkla tavuk getirdiniz. Müşteriniz size yaptığınız hatadan bahsediyor. Bu müşteriye ne söylediniz?

***5. Durum***

Sürekli geç kalan bir öğrenci olduğunuzu düşünün. Bugün birlikte ödev yaptığınız bir arkadaşınızla olan toplantınıza geç kaldınız. Arkadaşınız iki saattir sizi bekliyordu. Bu arkadaşınıza ne söylediniz?

***6. Durum***

Otobüste olduğunuzu düşünün. Bir yolcuya çarptınız ve bilgisayarını düşüp kırıldı. Bu yolcuya ne söylediniz?

***7. Durum***

Bir şirkette çalıştığınızı düşünün. Bir toplantı sırasında iş arkadaşlarınızdan birini gücendirdiniz. Toplantıdan sonra bu arkadaşınız size gelip olayla ilgili konuştu ve kırıldığını belirtti. İş arkadaşınıza ne söylediniz?

***8. Durum***

Bir otobüs yolculuğunda olduğunuzu düşünün. Çantanızı üst bölmeye koydunuz fakat düştü bir yolcuya çarptı. Bu yolcuya ne söylediniz?

***DCT English Version***

The current survey aims to investigate EFL teachers' apology strategies in Turkish and English. There are situations given below which possibly require an apology. Please read each of the situations carefully and try to provide as close a response as possible to what would be your natural spoken response to the situation.

*Situation 1*

Imagine you are a university professor. You promised to return a student's essay today but you have not finished reading it. The student shows up and asks for the essay. What would you say to the student?

*Situation 2*

Imagine you are a student. You borrowed a book from one of your professors but you forgot to return it on time. You attend a meeting with the professor and the professor asks for the book. What would you say to the professor?

*Situation 3*

Imagine you are the manager of a café. Today you have an interview with a student who wants to a job in the café. However, you are half an hour late for the interview because of a meeting. The student is waiting for you in the café. What would you say to the student?

*Situation 4*

Imagine you are a waiter in an expensive restaurant. A customer ordered beef, but in fact you brought chicken instead. The customer mentions the mistake you made. What would you say to the customer?

*Situation 5*

Imagine you are a student who is often late. Today you are late for a meeting with a friend you are working with on an essay. Your friend has been waiting for you for two hours. What would you say to your friend?

*Situation 6*

Imagine you were in a bus and you bumped into another passenger and broke his computer. What would you say to the passenger?

*Situation 7*

Imagine you are working for a company. You offended a colleague during a meeting. After the meeting the colleague you offended made a comment about the incident to you by stating that he was offended by your comment. What would you say to your colleague?

*Situation 8*

Imagine you are traveling on a bus. You put your bag in the rack, but it fell down and hit another passenger. What would you say to the passenger?