THE EFFECT OF PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND GENDER ON THE USE OF APOLOGY STRATEGIES BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *Language, as one of the main tools for communication among humans, holds a crucial role on understanding and expressing the world around us and beyond. In line with the recent shifts of focus from grammatical and linguistic competence to communicative competence and development of pragmatic ability in teaching and learning second or foreign languages, research on speech acts, especially apologies, has been the concern of L2 researchers. The common conception among L2 practitioners is that with an increase in L2 learners' proficiency, their pragmatic ability also increases. With reference to this position, the present study was conducted in order to explore the probable effects of proficiency level and also gender on Iranian EFL learners' use of apology strategies. To this ends, 89 university students were asked to take part in the study. An OPT was used to determine their proficiency level. Then, a researcher made Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was distributed among the participants. Using the framework suggested by Cohen and Olshtain (1983), results of chi-square test revealed that proficiency level is not a determining factor in the learners' use of different apology strategies. The findings also indicated that only males and females at the lower-intermediate level of proficiency differ in their use of apology strategies. These results highlight the significance of attending to apology strategies in L2 classrooms and raising L2 learners' awareness of the existence of various strategies to apologize so that they could expand their knowledge of speech acts.*

KEYWORDS*: speech acts; apology; apology strategies; EFL.*

INTRODUCTION

Language, as one of the main tools for communication among humans, holds a crucial role on understanding and expressing the world around us and beyond. Due to this crucial importance of language in the social life of humans, it has been investigated from different dimensions such as structure, sound processes, and cultural aspects. One of the most prominent contexts of the language is the cultural environment in which it is used. LoCastro (2012) believed that actions such as ordering coffee at a coffee shop or asking someone to close the door or are closely related to the social environment. The way people use the language is different from

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one culture to another, and not knowing these cultural norms might affect the effectiveness of communication. Speech act theory was developed to identify the aim of the language used and the underlying meaning (Cutting, 2008). In speech act theory, one could identify the language use and its purpose, such as an apology, request, or refusal. The theory allows researchers to investigate the language use in a deeper manner.

In line with the recent shifts of focus from grammatical and linguistic competence to communicative competence and development of pragmatic ability in teaching and learning second or foreign languages, research on speech acts especially apologies has been the concern of L2 researchers. The emphasis on learners' acquisition of L2 sociolinguistic rules along with knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics originates from Hymes' (1974) ideas. Hymes believed that for L2 learners to be able to communicate appropriately and effectively in the target language, they should be more than grammatically competent. (Anderson, 1990; Olshtain & Cohen, 1981; Wolfson, 1981). With reference to the speech act of apology, Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p.20) posited that "an apology is called for when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is real or potential". Moreover, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) perceived apology as a social event when pointing out that it is performed when social norms are violated. Therefore, mere knowledge of language is not enough for successful communication. As such, if a person wants to communicate his/her meaning functionally, that person should possess both knowledge of language and social conventions affecting language (Sharifian, 2005).

In an attempt to analyze speech acts, Blum Kulka and Olshtain (1984) started a project named Cross- Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP). The project was on the use of requests and apologies by people from a range of cultures and languages. It aimed at exploring the existence of possible pragmatic universals and also their characteristics (Afghari, 2007). This project five different apology speech acts similar to IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) were found in the speaker expresses an overt apology and takes responsibility for the offence which has been made. This project also drew boundaries between various types of apology strategies. After this project, there has been a great deal of studies comparing different languages in terms of their speakers' use of various apology strategies (for example, Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain,1984; Holmes,1990; Selo, 2004; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014; Abedi, 2017).

In spite of the findings in the literature regarding the dissimilarity of languages in their application of strategies to apologize in different discourse conditions, learners of English in the Iranian EFL context seem to lack sufficient knowledge in the use of appropriate apology strategies in various situations. More research seems to be necessary in the realm of L2 pragmatics, especially apology speech act, to raise EFL learners' awareness of similarities and differences between their own native language and the language they are learning. Additionally, it is commonly held that as the learners' proficiency in the target language increases they are able to use more speech acts appropriately. Thus, the present study aims at investigating the apology strategies used by Iranian EFL learners at different English proficiency levels and seek whether students at higher proficiency level outperform those of

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lower English proficiency. The study also aims at examining the probable effect of gender on EFL learners' use of different apology strategies. Therefore, the present study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1. Are there any significant differences between students of different levels of proficiency in terms of their use of apology strategies?

RQ2. Are there any significant differences between Persian-speaking male and female EFL learners in terms of their use of apology strategies?

Based on the previous studies in literature, the following null hypotheses were formulated in this study:

H_01: There are no significant differences between students of different levels of proficiency in terms of their use of apology strategies.

H_02: There are no significant differences between Persian-speaking male and female EFL learners in terms of their use of apology strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Speech acts

When people talk about language, they generally refer to a system of communication using arbitrary signals. However, a language is more than just words or grammar. A language consists of speech acts or functional performances, such as asking a question, apologizing or making a request. These speech acts culturally constructed and, therefore, vary from language to language. So, when a speaker learns a second language, he or she must learn more than just the words or grammar; it is necessary to gain sufficient knowledge about L2 culture to perform these speech acts correctly. Hymes (1972) developed the concept of speech acts in the mid-1960s, and referred to as one of the components of communicative competence. Hymes (1972) defined speech act as "the minimal unit of speech that has rules in terms both of where and when they may occur and of what their specific features are culturally named acts, such as complaining, apologizing, advising, and so on" (p. 269). In order to develop communicative competence, a speaker must gain sociolinguistic competence or knowledge of the sociocultural rules and norms of the target language. The appropriateness of speech acts is established in certain contexts through these rules. For instance, in an American context, the common way of greeting someone in formal situations is to say Hello, how are you? or Nice to see you, however, greeting is very different in informal situations when meeting a friend, and people mostly use Hi, or Hey, whatcha been doing? in these circumstances.

Speech acts are one of the most influential notions in the study of language use (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). According to Searle (1969) that "the speech act is the basic unit of communication" (p.39). He further argued that speech acts are rule-governed forms of behavior, and that speech act rules form a part of linguistic competence. Searle's (1969) principle of expressibility posits that through increasingly understanding the rules for speaking the native language, it is theoretically possible for any speaker to say precisely what he or she intends in any language. The reason for this is that all languages "can be regarded as different conventional realizations of the same underlying rules" (Searle, 1969, p. 39).

Most research on speech acts is either focused on the culture-specific items or on the differences in the nature of speech acts in L2 learners' native and nonnative languages. Most studies usually adopt a cross-cultural perspective, in which the native language of EFL or ESL learners are compared and contrasted with their native language. It is often surprising for L2 learners to notice that they have difficulty at the interpersonal relations involving interaction with native speakers of English. Therefore, becoming familiar with cultural norms and values underlying speech acts seem to be vital for L2 learners.

Apology

Apologies are common phenomena in everyday interaction, they particularly occur for the maintenance of friendships. In fact, apology is a means mostly used to remove the misunderstandings between speakers. Holmes (1990, p.159) defined apology as "a speech act addressed to B's face needed to remedy an offence for which he takes responsibility and thus to restore the equilibrium between A and B (A is the apologizer, and B is the person offended" (cited in Selo, 2004). For Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p.20) "the act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to set things right". Leech (1983) also considered apologies as friendly speech acts which are used with the social goal of maintaining harmony between interactants. It is expected to happen usually in case social norms have been violated; no matter the offence is potential or real (Olshtain & Cohen 1983). In other words, the apology speech act requires an utterance or action which is intended to "set things right" (Trosborg, 1994).

Olshtain (1989) regarded an apology as "a speech act which is intended to provide support for the hearer who was actually or potentially malaffected by a violation" (pp. 156-157). The speech act of apology particularly aims at preserving good relation between participants (Holmes, 1990). Two speakers who are interacting play the role of an 'apologizer' and an 'apologizee' (Istifci, 2009), and apology is used as remedial interchanges to re-create social coherence between an apologizer and an apologizee (Goffman, 1971; Leech, 1983).
Another explication of the nature of apology is provided by Fraser (1981, p.262) who maintained that apologizing is at minimum taking responsibility for the violation and conveying regret "for the offense committed, though not necessarily for the act itself".
As such, an apology can be understood as a remedial action between the speaker and the hearer after an offence has occurred (Schmidt & Richards, 1980). The speech act of apology provides a forum for exchanging ideas in the study of language transfer, and it has been the focus of several researchers (Brokin & Reinhant, 1978; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Walters, 1979).

Apology strategies

Unlike face-threatening attacks like insult, apologizing will have a positive effect on the hearer (Holmes, 1995). Apologizing is, in fact, an attempt to maintain or placate hearer's face and; therefore, it is inherently a face-saving act for the hearer (Edmondson et al., 1984, as cited in Alfattah, 2010).). Moreover, Brown and Levinson (1987) maintained that since apologies directly damage speaker's positive face wants, they threaten speaker's positive face.
Goffman (1971) believed that, at a particular level, apology can be regarded as a class in itself posited within a broader category which he calls remedial work. For Goffman (1971), the

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remediation can be done through the use of one of three devices, including requests, accounts, and apologies. Requests involve "asking license of a potentially offended person to engage in what could be considered a violation of his rights" (p.112). An account is commonly used in making an explanation or excuse when attempting to transfer responsibility to a third person. An apology is usually made after an offense; however, it is different in that the offender accepts responsibility for the offense made and expresses regret through apologizing.

There are a variety of possible strategies which can be employed for apologizing, and that is why this type of speech act is complex in nature. An apology can be composed of one or more components, and each of these components is a speech act in its own (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Some instances of the components of an apology can be Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), such as "I'm sorry"; an acknowledgement of responsibility, "It's all my fault;" an offer to compensate, "I'll replace it;" a promise of forbearance, "It will never happen again;" or an explanation, "It was an accident." Many of the studies on apology have used these semantic formulae as the basis of their analyses.

A further classification of apology is proposed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (cited in Obeng, 1999, p.714), which was used to describe apology strategies in French. In the classification two major ways of performing an apology are outlined, including act of apology (the primary component and an explicit apology) and act of justification for wrongdoing (the secondary component and an implicit apology). Therefore, on the basis of this classification apologies are either explicit (e.g. forgive me and I'm sorry), implicit (use of one of the other strategies), or complex (explicit apology + implicit apology). Obeng (1999) added a 'compound apology' (implicit apology + implicit apology), which can be regarded as a fourth type of apology within the same pattern.

Fraser (1981) provided an extended list of strategies which includes announcing apology, stating obligation to apologize, offering to apologize, requesting hearer to accept the apology, expressing regret, requesting forgiveness, acknowledging responsibility, promising forbearance, and offering redress (pp. 263–265). These strategies were analyzed by Fraser chiefly on the basis of expressions of responsibility and regret, and he noted that often, for a single offense, more than one of these strategies can be combined to perform an apology.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) suggested another classification of apology strategies. However, it is almost a reordering of the set of strategies proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) considered five verbs including, regret, excuse, (be) sorry, forgive, and pardon, in addition to the verb apologize and they considered these verbs as performative verbs in English (IFIDs). However, Fraser (1981) considered only those expressions with an explicit indication of the verb "apologize" as performatives. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) suggested that an apology can be linguistically realized by taking one of two basic forms or a combination of them. This could be through the use of IFID (one of the verbs considered as performatives) and/or using an utterance that refers to a specified set of propositions relating to either the violation of a norm, the doing of the event, or the recognition of a damage. They further posited that any proposition can be linguistically realized by

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different expressions each of which can be used in itself or in combination with a selected IFID. It should be noted that Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) did not take account of intensification as a strategy; but rather they consider it as a different element that can be employed alongside the identified strategies in order to intensify the expression.

Research background

The literature on the use of apology strategies by EFL/ESL learners is abundant. Most of the studies have adopted a contrastive method aiming at comparing and contrasting the apology strategies used by native speakers of language with those of other languages, and some of them focus on a single language. In what follows a number of these studies are reviewed. Selo (2004) conducted a study on apology in Arabic to find out the apology strategies used by Iraqis EFL learners. He also investigated the influence of sex, age and status on apology choice. The findings indicated that the main strategies for expressing apology were: apology and regret, responsibility, explanation, offer of repair, and promise of for balance. AL-Fattah (2010) conducted a study on apology strategies used by 314 Yemeni EFL university students who were studying at the undergraduate level belonging to four colleges of two Yemeni public universities. The participants were between 22 to 23 years old. Data was collected through a researcher made questionnaire in which the students were asked to put themselves in real situations while responding to the items. The results demonstrated that in most cases more than one apology expression were used by the participants. Moreover, most of the apology strategies which were used by Yemeni students were IFID formulae expressing regret, lack of intention, offer of repair, or promise of forbearance.

Abu Humeid (2013) attempted to investigate the effect of gender and status on the apology strategies used by American native speakers of English and Iraqi EFL university students. Twenty Iraqi EFL learners (10 males, 10 females) and eight Americans (4males, 4females) took part in the study. A DCT which was a modified version of Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) model was used. The situations of the DCT were adopted from Hussein and Al Hammouri (1998), Demeter (2000), and Bataineh &Bataineh (2005). The responses of Iraqi students were compared with American native speakers. The results indicated that American learners used more complex responses than Iraqi students. The findings also revealed that American males used more strategies with people of lower position while, Iraqi males used more strategies with those of a higher position.

In a further study conducted by Rastegar and Yasami (2014), 16 Iranian EFL learners took part. They were divided into four groups: elementary, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced level. The goal of study was to investigate the effect of proficiency levels on apology strategies used by Iranian EFL learners. They used Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adopted from Tuncel (1999). The data was classified based on the categorization of Cohen and Olshtain (1981). DCT was distributed among the students and they were asked to consider the apology situations and respond to them. This study was done in an institute, and the levels of the participants were based on the institute's classification. The results revealed that when students are in a higher level of proficiency, they can use more complex sentences for making apologies

in different situations. Moreover, the findings illustrated that the participants' culture and mother tongues have effect on their use of apology strategies.

In a further study Bagherinejad and Jadidoleslam (2015) examined the use of apology strategies by Iranian EFL learners with a focus on the effect of the gender and the proficiency level. This study was done in State and Azad universities of Zahedan and Zabol, and 60 males and 60 females took part in it. After conducting Oxford Placement Test, students were divided into three levels: pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate. Then, the DCT was distributed among the participants. The data were collected and analyzed based on Cohen and Olshtain's (1983) model. It was found that the most frequently used apology strategies were IFID and the other frequent apology strategies included, offer of repair, taking on responsibility, and explanation or account. The findings also showed that the male and female respondents differed in their application of apology strategies. Moreover, the percentage of intensified IFIDs for males increased by an increase in their level of proficiency, while a decrease in the percentage of IFIDs was shown for females as their level of proficiency increased.

Ugla and Zainol Abidin (2016) conducted another study on apology strategies used by Iraqi EFL university students. In this study, fifty-five students were chosen from two colleges in Iraq. The mixed method was used in this study employing a Discourse Completion Task Questionnaire (DCTQ) and interview. The results of the study indicated that Iraqi students were aware of using apologies in appropriate situations. They mostly used explicit expression of apology, especially expression of regret. In addition, they used offer of apology, an explanation or account, and they expressed lack of intent. The participants also used intensifier such as really, very, and so in many situations.

Abedi (2017) also conducted a study in order to investigate apology strategies employed by Iranian male and female EFL learners. She followed Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) classification. 50 students (25 females, 25 males) who were studying at Islamic Azad University, Najafabad branch, took part in this study. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was distributed among participants. The DCT consisted of nine situations. After the collection of students' answers, they were analyzed based on Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) model. It was found that illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) were used more than the other apology strategies. Explanation or account and Offer of repair were other frequent apology strategies used by learners. Some other categories like taking the responsibility were not used for the likely reason that Iranians do not often overtly accept responsibility for an offense.

METHODOLOGY

Participants
The participants of this study were EFL learners studying at the University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran. They were majoring in English Language and Literature, and Applied Linguistics. Eighty-nine EFL students were selected based on convenience sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on convenient accessibility and

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proximity to the researcher. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 33 with the mean age of 26 and they were selected from both B.A and M.A English Literature and Applied Linguistics. Persian was the mother tongue of the participants and they were both males (n=30) and females (n= 59). In this study, the level of students based on Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was the criterion for selection. Nineteen participants were lower-intermediate, forty-two of them were upper-intermediate and twenty-eight of the participants were advanced EFL learners.

Instruments
Two instruments were used in this study: 1. An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was distributed to determine the level of proficiency of the participants, 2. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used to explore which apology strategies are used by the learners. Data was mainly collected via an open-ended DCT, which is the most frequent and effective method in pragmatics studies to elicit respondents' utterances (Cohen & Olshtain, 1994). The DCT contained 20 situations in which the participants were required to write apologies. The DCT situations were designed by the researchers. There were social and real situations in this DCT. The relation between apologizer and apologizee was either formal or informal. The situations were not limited and the DCT comprised different situations such as stores, parties, offices, meetings, classes, and so on. The participants were given 30 minutes to complete the DCT.

Procedures
After the instructors' permission had been obtained to conduct the study, the participants were ensured about the confidentiality of their responses, and data collection started at the middle of October (2016) and it lasted up to the middle of November (2016).In the first step, OPT and DCT questionnaires were administered to be completed at eighty minutes. The participants were first informed about the purpose of the study and were ensured about their anonymity as well. Both questionnaires were administered in one session in each class. Oxford Placement Test (OPT) consisted of 60 questions testing students' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and meaning. The required time for completing it was about 50 minutes. Then, the next questionnaire which was Discourse Completion Task was distributed among students. This open questionnaire included twenty statements with a brief description of the situations which an individual may face with in real life. First, the participants were asked to fill out the demographic section which included information about their age, gender, semester and education. Then, the students were asked to answer twenty social situations which required them to provide apologies and aimed at examining which apology strategies are used by them. They were given 30 minutes to complete the DCT. After completing the questionnaire, the data were analyzed. First, the score obtained from the OPT were analyzed to determine the students' level of proficiency. In the next step, the DCT was analyzed based on Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) framework.

Data analysis
Having gathered the data, the researcher determined the strategies employed by the learners within the framework proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). The framework included five types of apology strategies, namely "an expression of an apology", "acknowledgment of

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responsibility", "offer to repair", "an explanation or account of the situation", and "promise of forbearance". Using chi-square test, the three groups of students, including lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced were compared to see whether there are significant differences among them in using apology strategies. Moreover, the difference between males and females in using the apology strategies was examined through chi-square test. In order to heighten the reliability of the findings, two experts were asked to ensure inter-rater reliability. The SPSS statistical package, version 23, was used to analyze the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 4.1 to 4.3 present descriptive statistics for the use of different apology strategies by the learners at three proficiency levels. They show maximum and minimum scores obtained by these students along with their mean scores, standard deviation of their scores and the observed variance in their responses.

Table 4.1 Descriptive statistics for the use of different apology strategies by students at lower-intermediate level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
S1	19	8.00	19.00	254.0	13.36	3.577	12.801
S2	6	1	3	9	1.50	.837	.700
S3	5	1	2	7	1.40	.548	.300
S4	19	1	8	60	3.16	2.007	4.029
S5	1	1	1	1	1.00	.	.
Valid N	0						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
S1	43	1.00	20.00	499.00	11.60	5.014	25.150
S2	39	.00	5.00	59.00	1.5128	1.097	1.204
S3	38	.00	7.00	31.00	.8158	1.392	1.938
S4	37	1.00	13.00	168.00	4.540	2.834	8.033
S5	3	1.00	5.00	8.00	2.666	2.081	4.333
Valid N (listwise)	3						

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Table 4.3 Descriptive statistics for the use of different apology strategies by students at advanced level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
S1	28	2	20	335	11.96	5.853	34.258
S2	24	0	4	29	1.21	1.103	1.216
S3	24	0	6	34	1.42	1.742	3.036
S4	24	1	10	96	4.00	2.537	6.435
S5	3	1	2	4	1.33	.577	.333
Valid N (listwise)	3						

Table 4.4 Cross-tabulation of different proficiency levels and apology strategies

Levels		Strategy					Total
		one	two	three	four	five	
group	Lower-int	67	6	7	19	1	100
	Upper-int	66	7	4	22	1	100
	advanced	76	3	2	18	1	100
Total		209	16	13	59	3	300

It can be seen in the table that students at the advanced level of proficiency used more apology strategies than those at the lower-intermediate or upper-intermediate level. The table also indicates that among the five apology strategies, the first one, that is, "expression of apology" is the most frequent strategy applied by the learners. The least frequently used apology strategy, as shown in the table, is "promise of forbearance".

Table 4.5 shows the results of Pearson chi-square test which was run to examine whether there is a significant difference among students at the three levels of proficiency in their use of apology strategies.

Table 4.5 Results of chi-square test in different proficiency levels

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.680	8	.663
Likelihood Ratio	6.043	8	.642
Linear-by-Linear Association	.816	1	366
N of Valid Cases	300		

As indicated in the table, the results of chi-square test at the probability level of .05 shows no significant difference among students at the intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels in terms of their use of various apology strategies ($X^2(8)= 5.680$, $p> .05$). Therefore, we cannot reject the first null hypothesis of the study stating that there is no significant difference among students at different proficiency levels in terms of using apology strategies. Moreover, it can be inferred from the results that as learners' level of English language proficiency increases, they make use of more apology strategies of the first type. However, we cannot strongly make this claim, since as the table shows there is not a significant difference among the students at the three levels in their use of all types of apology strategies examined in the present study.

Table 4.6 illustrates the results of cross-tabulation made with regard to the gender of the participants and their use of apology strategies based on the percentage of their usage among learners at the lower-intermediate level.

Table 4.6 Cross-tabulation of gender and apology strategies at the lower-intermediate level

		Strategies					Total
		one	**two**	**three**	**four**	**five**	
gender	female	81	2	2	15	0	100
	male	59	6	5	29	1	100
Total		140	8	7	44	1	200

As shown in the table, the first apology strategy, that is, "expression of apology" is more frequently used than the other four strategies, and females (81%) used them more than males (59%). The strategies of "promise of forbearance", "offer to repair" and "acknowledgment of responsibility" are among the least frequently used apology strategies, respectively.

In order to check whether the difference between males and females at the lower-intermediate level is statistically significant, another chi-square test was conducted and its results are shown in Table 4.7 below.

Table 4.7 Results of chi-square test for lower-intermediate male and females' use of apology strategies

	Value	**df**	**Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	12.197	4	.016
Likelihood Ratio	12.812	4	.012
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.655	1	.002
N of Valid Cases	200		

As indicated in the table, the results of chi-square test at the significance level of .05 showed that there is a significant difference between male and female EFL learners at the lower-intermediate level of English proficiency in their use of apology strategies in different situations ($X^2(4)= 12.197$, $p< .05$). This finding highlights that the lower-intermediate female EFL learners who took part in this study made use of more apology strategies than their male counterparts.

With regard to the second research question, Table 4.8 shows the cross-tabulation of gender and strategy use of students at upper-intermediate level.

Table 4.8 Cross-tabulation of gender and apology strategies at upper-intermediate level

		strategy					Total
		one	two	three	four	five	
gender	female	66	7	4	22	1	100
	male	68	8	1	23	0	100
Total		134	15	5	45	1	200

As in the lower-intermediate level, the first apology strategy is used more frequently by learners at the upper-intermediate level. However, the table indicates that upper-intermediate male students used more apology strategies (68%) of the first type than their female counterpart (66%). The same holds true for the use of strategies two and four, as shown in the table.
In order to check whether the differences between upper-intermediate level male and female participants of the study are statistically significant, another chi-square test was run and its results are shown in Table 4.9 below.

Table 4.9 Results of chi-square test for upper-intermediate male and females' use of apology strategies

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.919[a]	4	.572
Likelihood Ratio	3.433	4	.488
Linear-by-Linear Association	.111	1	.739
N of Valid Cases	200		

a. 4 cells (40,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,50.
As the table indicates, the results of chi-square test at the significance level of .05 does not show any statistically significant difference among upper-intermediate male and female EFL learners in their use of apology strategies ($X^2(4)= 2.919$, $p> .05$). As such, male and female

participants of this study at the upper-intermediate level of proficiency did not differ in their use of strategies to apologize in various discourse conditions.

Table 4.10 shows the cross-tabulation of gender and strategy use among advanced male and female participants of the study.

Table 4.10 Cross-tabulation of gender and apology strategies at advanced level

		strategy					Total
		one	**two**	**three**	**four**	**five**	
gender	female	59	6	10	24	1	100
	male	75	5	4	15	1	100
Total		134	11	14	39	2	200

As in the other proficiency levels, the table shows that students at the advanced level also made more frequent use of the first type of apology strategy. The table further indicates that advanced male students used more apology strategies (75%) of the first type than advanced female learners (59%). However, in using the fourth type of apology strategies, it is shown that female learners (24%) outperformed males (15%) at the advanced level.

Table 4.11 shows the results of chi-square test which was run to examine whether these differences are statistically significant.

Table 4.11 Results of chi-square test for advanced male and females' use of apology strategies

	Value	**df**	**Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	6.650	4	.156
Likelihood Ratio	6.758	4	.149
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.046	1	.025
N of Valid Cases	200		

As the table shows, at the significance level of .05 there is no statistically significance difference between advanced male and female students in their use of apology strategies in various discourse situations ($X^2(4)= 6.650$, $p> .05$). Considering the results of chi-square tests in Tables 4.7, 4.9, and 4.11, it can be argued that the second null hypothesis of the study cannot be rejected, in that, gender was shown to be a determining factor in only one proficiency level. In fact, the findings indicate that there is a significant difference between male and female EFL learners at the lower-intermediate level of English proficiency and males and female in other proficiency levels did not differ in their use o of apology strategies.

This study aimed at investigating a group of EFL learners' use of apology strategies in different situations. More specifically, the study attempted to examine if there is a linear relation between the learners' proficiency level and their use of apology strategies. It also sought to investigate the effect of gender in this regard. To these ends, 89 Iranian university students at B.A and M.A levels were asked to take part in the study. In the first phase, an OPT was conducted through which students were divided into three levels of lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. Then, an open-ended DCT was distributed among the learners which contained twenty situations designed to elicit different apology strategies from them. The corpus of apology speech acts was then coded and analyzed based on the model proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). Then, in order to find answers to the research questions, the results went through analyses via chi-square tests.

The findings of data analysis with regard to the first research question revealed that there is not a statistically significant difference among the three groups of learners at lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels in using different types of apology strategies. In fact, the findings indicated that learners at the advanced level used more apology strategies than the other two proficiency levels. Although, advanced level students outperformed lower- intermediate and upper-intermediate ones, we cannot confidently assume that with an increase in the learners' proficiency level, their use of apology strategies increases. This is due to the fact that the findings of this study showed no superiority for upper-intermediate level students over lower-intermediate ones. This might have occurred due to several reasons, one of which could be the motivation factor. Other reasons, such as lack of concentration, may also have led to the obtained results. The findings of this study with regard to the first research question are in contrast to the results of Rastgar and Yasami's (2014) study who found a significant effect for proficiency level in Iranian EFL learners' use of apology strategies claiming that as their proficiency in English language increases, they use different strategies for apologizing in English. Moreover, in the present study it was found that the first category of apology strategies, namely "expression of apology" is used more frequently by the learners than other strategies. This is in line with what was found in the study of Alfattah (2010) who investigated the Yemeni students' use of strategies for apologizing in different discourse situations. As pointed out by Abedi (2017), the reason for EFL learners' not using the other apology strategies such as, "acknowledging responsibility", might be that Iranian learners do not often overtly accept responsibility for an offence that they have made.

The second objective of the study was to investigate whether there is a difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners in their use of apology strategies. To this end, the performance of males and females was compared through another chi-square test. The findings indicated that there exists a statistically significant difference between males and females in using strategies to apologize in different circumstances only at the lower-intermediate level. To put it more specifically, it was revealed that lower-intermediate males use more apology strategies of the first type, that is, "an expression of apology", than females. These findings are in contrast with the results of Abedi's (2017) study who did not find any difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners in their use of apology strategies. The findings of the present study are also in line with that of Abu Humeid (2013) who found that male EFL

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learners make use of more apology strategies than females. However, Abu Humeid compared the performance of Iraqi EFL learners with those of American native speakers and did not focus on one language. The findings of this study are in part against those of Harb (2015) who did not find any gender effect in the use of apology strategies by Arab male and female EFL learners. It also partly contradicts the findings of Parsa and Jan (2015) who did not find any statistically significant difference in using apology strategies among Iranian male and female EFL students. However, what was found in the present research study are to some extent in line with the results of Bataineh and Bataineh's (2006) study whose findings showed that there is a difference between male and female Jordanian EFL learners in using different strategies to apologize.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study revealed that an increase in L2 learners' level of proficiency in English does not necessarily result in an increase in their ability to use different forms of strategies to apologize in various discourse situations. Although it was found that advanced level students make more frequent use of the apology strategy of the first type, results of statistical analyses did not indicate any significant differences among the three groups of learners. Moreover, the findings of this study showed that gender is not a determining factor in Iranian EFL learners' use of different apology strategies, as males and females were rather similar in their responses to DCT items, and only there was significant difference between males and females at the lower-intermediate level and their upper-intermediate and advanced level counterparts.

These findings point to the fact that EFL learners' knowledge of speech acts, especially apology strategies which was the focus of this study, is rather limited. Contrary to the common expectation that learners will improve their communicative competence as they advance in their English language studies, it is found in the present study that students at different proficiency levels did not differ in their application of apology strategies. Therefore, it is necessary that L2 teachers and practitioners pay due attention to developing learners' knowledge of pragmatics and speech acts. It is also recommended that materials developers include more activities and contents to make EFL learners familiar with sociocultural conditions of the target language. Providing more opportunities for leaners to practice various ways to apologize in real-life like conditions could also be beneficial for developing their communicative and pragmatic competence.

Further research can focus on other types of apology strategies using more authentic data elicitation techniques, such as role plays. In addition, other studies can examine the similarities and differences which might exist between Persian and English languages in terms of sociocultural norms in making apologies in various conditions, and examine whether language transfer occurs in their use of different strategies to apologize. Other speech acts can also be the subject of cross-cultural analyses to raise L2 learners' awareness of their appropriate use in different environments. Finally, further research can be conducted to find the reasons behind L2 learners' avoidance of the use of other apology strategies, and seek whether it occurs as a

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result of their lack of knowledge or there are other reasons that they do not use certain apology strategies.

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Appendix
Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐
Age:
Semester:
Education:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in completing this questionnaire. We would appreciate your taking the time to complete the following questionnaire. This questionnaire only takes 30 minutes to complete. It includes 20 situations concerning how you would apologize in different situations. Be assured that all the answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentiality. Thank you in advance for your time and your help.

How would you apologize in these situations?

1. Imagine that you should take part in an important conference and you're going to present a lecture. You should be there on time but on the way, your car breaks down and you have to repair it. It wastes your time. You arrive at the end of meeting. How would you apologize to the participants?
2. Imagine that you should take part in an important conference and you're going to present a lecture. You arrive at the conference on time but you forgot to bring your USB to show your power point slides and also you forgot to bring the things that you need for your presentation. Moreover, you get stressed and you can't remember anything of your lecture. How would you apologize to the audience?
3. You are a clever student. Your professor tells the class that next week you will have mid-term exam. During the week you were so busy. You tried to do your best to prepare yourself for the exam but you couldn't. On the day of exam, how would you apologize to your professor that you couldn't prepare yourself for it?
4. Consider that you go shopping. You look for the parking space a lot but you can't find any place. You have to park your car in front of an apartment door. When you come back, you see that the owner of the house is so angry and he wants to kill you because he wanted to go to a bank and it was a really important situation for him but because you parked your car in front of his apartment, he couldn't go there. How would you put forward your apology?
5. You are walking in a crowded sidewalk, suddenly you hit somebody who is eating an ice-cream and the ice-cream falls down on his T-shirt. How would you apologize to him in this situation?

6. It is late at night and you want to call one of your friends to ask him about your homework but, suddenly you dial the wrong number. You wake someone else up and he gets angry. Suddenly, you understand that you have made a mistake. How would you apologize to him?

7. It is one of your friend's wedding. She invites you but, the party is held in another city and it is impossible for you to go there. But your friend insists on your presence. It is difficult for you to go there and take part in her wedding. How would you put forward your apology that you can't take part in her wedding?

8. You talk to one of your classmates and she talks behind one of your friend's back. You get shocked and it is difficult for you to accept it but, it causes you to change your behavior towards your friend. Your friend gets sad and asks you what's wrong? Why don't you speak? You don't answer. Afterwards you realized that you made a mistake and your classmate told a lie. What will you do in this situation? How would you apologize to your friend about your silence?

9. You know a person. When you were child, you always greeted her but now you grew up and you think she does not know you. Once you see her on the street, you decide not to say hello but, suddenly she says hello to you. What would be your reaction? How would you apologize to her?

10. You have a naughty son. You take part in a party. You do your best to take care of your son but, suddenly you see your son broke an old and antique plate. How would you apologize to the host?

11. You have a party at your apartment and you invite a lot of guests. You prepare supper for them and they stay there late. Your guests have naughty children and they make noises. It is difficult for you to ask them to be quiet because the neighbors maybe taking rest. Tomorrow morning you see one of your neighbors. How would you apologize to him in this case?

12. When you want to buy a dress you go and see different shops but, you can't find a suitable dress. Finally, you find a shop that has opened recently and when you see the window, it seems that you can select the suitable dress. You go there and you try as many dresses as you can but, finally you realize that you can't choose any of them. You spend a lot of time there. How would you apologize to the shopkeeper?

13. One of your relatives sometimes calls you and tells you that she wants to come to your apartment but, each time she calls, you are not at home. It happens again and again and you get sad and you feel that she thinks you don't want her to come to your apartment. However, you are so busy. If she calls once again and you can't stay at home, what will be your response? How would you put forward your apology?

14. You talk to your manager and you tell your program for a better situation in your office. First of all you think your co-workers will help you and you can do your plan well but unfortunately, you see they won't help you. This event happens several times and it is difficult for you to tell your manager that you can't do all your programs. How would you explain to her? How would you apologize to her that you couldn't keep your promise?

15. As many times ago, one of your friends invited you for her birthday party and she told you, you should cancel all your programs and you promised her surely you would take part but suddenly, one of your cousins wanted to hold up his wedding party on that exact day and time. When you understand, you nag on him why on that exact day you want to hold up the party and he tells because on that time he could rent a saloon. You should take part in your cousin's wedding. How would you apologize to your friend that you can't go to her birthday party?

16. One of your respectable colleagues called you. Your cellphone was on silent and during the day, you were so busy that you didn't check your cellphone. Late at night, you see the missed call and you decide to call. How would you put forward your apology?

17. Imagine that you want to go to your friend's apartment at 5 p.m. but you sleep in the afternoon and you get up at 6 p.m. You arrive there at 7p.m. How would you apologize to your friend because you kept her waiting for you for 2 hours?

18. For a period of time, you decided to go to the art class. Before you go to the class, you thought you could be successful and you will do your best and you will love it more than before. But when you go to the class, you see that you don't have enough time to practice a lot and it is so difficult for you to continue the class. What will be your reaction when your teacher insists on your presence in this class? How would you apologize to her that you don't like to continue the class?

19. You work in an institute. Your manager asks you to advertise for the institute and ask the students to go there but you can't do it. How would you apologize to your manager?

20. You borrow a book and you promise to return it two weeks later to your friend but, after one month you remember that you forgot to return it. How would you apologize to your friend?