Apology Strategies among EFL Postgraduate Learners

İngilizce Lisansüstü Öğrencilerinin Özür Dileme Stratejileri

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Abstract

This current study aimed at exploring the varieties of Apology Strategies (AS) used by EFL postgraduate learners. Besides, it investigated the relationship between AS and the gender variable. The Discourse Completion Test questionnaire (DCT) was employed as an instrument to utilize the purposes of the study. The DCT was adopted from Harb's study (2015). The respondents who participated in the study were 84 EFL learners, 42 Males (M) and 42 Females (F) respectively, who were enrolled in the master's and Ph.D. programs at Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU). The participants were from different departments and nationalities. The findings revealed that Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), the accounts and reparation, were the most AS used by the respondents. Additionally, there was not a significant relationship between AS and the gender variable among EFL postgraduate learners. Based on the results, the current study provided limitations and implications for future researches.

Keywords: *speech acts, apology, apology strategies, pragmatic competence, DCT*

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Doğu Akdeniz Üniversitesi'nde öğrenim gören EFL Yüksek Lisans öğrencileri arasında kullanılmakta olan Özür Dileme Strateji çeşitlerini incelemektir. Buna ek olarak, bu çalışmada Özür Dileme Stratejileri ve cinsiyet arasındaki ilişki incelenmektedir. Çalışmanın amacına uygun olarak, Söylem Tamamlama Testi anketi kullanılmıştır. Söylem Tamamlama Testi, Harb'ın çalışmasından alınmıştır (2015). Çalışmaya katılan öğrenciler, Doğu Akdeniz Üniversitesi'nde master ve doktora programlarındaki 42 bay ve 42 bayan olmak üzere toplam 84 EFL yüksek lisans öğrencisidir. Katılımcılar farklı bölümler ve farklı uyruktandır. Katılımcılar arasında en sık kullanılan stratejileri bulabilmek amacıyla, içerik analizi tekniği kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, Edimsel Eylem Gösteren

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Aletlerin, açıklamaların ve telafilerin EFL yüksek lisans öğrencileri arasında en çok kullanılan Özür Dileme Stratejileri olduğunu göstermektedir. Geriye kalan stratejiler, katılımcılar tarafından fazla kullanılmamaktadır. Buna ek olarak, Özür Dileme Stratejileri ve cinsiyet arasında anlamlı bir fark bulunamamıştır. Hem bay hem de bayan katılımcılar Özür Dileme Stratejileri'ni benzer şekilde yoğun olarak kullanmaktadır. Sonuçlara dayanarak, bu çalışma EFL yüksek lisans öğrencilerinin özür dileme söz eylemi hakkındaki bilgilerini arttırmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, bu onların ilgisini kültür ve içeriğin hedef dildeki etkilerine yönlendirmektedir. Çalışmanın sınırlandırmaları gözönünde bulundurulduğunda, ilk olarak bu makale Söylem Tamamlama Testi'ni çalışmanın amaçlarına ulaşmak amacıyla veri toplama aracı olarak kullanmıştır. İleri çalışma için, daha fazla veri elde etmek amacıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler kullanılabilir. İkinci olarak, bu çalışmadaki katılımcılar, farklı bölüm ve uyruklardan olan lisans üstü öğrencilerdir. Daha sonraki araştırmacılar, ileriye dönük çalışmaların sonuçlarının daha belirli olabilmesi için, Özür Dileme Stratejileri'nin belirli bir uyruğa ait EFL yüksek lisans öğrencileri tarafından kullanımını inceleyebilirler.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Konuşma eylemi, özür dileme, özür dileme stratejileri, pragmatik yetkinlik, Söylem Tamamlama Testi*

Introduction

Scholars in the field of language teaching have been interested in studying speech acts such as apology, request, refusal, etc. Specifically, researchers investigated the speech act apology across varied contexts and cultures. Bataineh and Bataineh (2006) identified the apology as a part of speech act that should be as a reflection of inner feelings. Considering the different cultures and backgrounds of foreign language learners, there has been a significant focus on teaching and improving EFL learners' skills regarding their speech act production (Saleem et al., 2014). Consequently, more focus is placed on non-native speakers' need to master different types of competence such as the pragmatic competence to be native like. According to Kasper (1997), it is defined as the efficiency of comprehending and producing the appropriate speech act (as cited in Saleem et al. 2014).

However, in the foreign contexts, mastering the pragmatic competence might be difficult for the learners. Jalilifar et al. (2011) concluded although EFL students do have the grammatical competence, they lack the pragmatic performance. Moreover, El Hiani (2015) found that EFL learners faced difficulties in producing types of speech acts due to their restricted language competence. Moreover, a study revealed that EFL learners transferred their speech from Arabic into English due to their limited knowledge of the target language culture (Alharbi, 2017). However, Cedar, (2017) confirmed that the proficiency level did not impact the apology production between the EFL respondents. Further, Saleem et al. (2014) revealed the similar AS used by female and male EFL learners. Consequently, the current

research is significant in that it examined the use of AS among EFL postgraduate learners (Master's and Ph.D.) in the context of EMU. Further, it focused on examining the influence of the gender variable on the production of speech act apology. Therefore, this study was conducted to answer the following two questions

1. What varieties of apology strategies do EFL postgraduate learners use in the DCT?

2. Are there differences in the production of the apology strategies between male and female participants?

1. Literature review

A few decades ago, scholars were interested in the way people apologize to each other, specifically the foreign language learners in varied contexts. This act (apology) was considered as a main factor that maintains good relationships in any society. The literature of this current research provided two categorizations of AS presented in earlier studies by the following scholars Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Trosborg (1995). In 1983, Olshtain and Cohen established five varieties of AS used by people as following "an Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), an expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense, a statement or account of the cause; which brought about the violation, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance" (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; as cited in Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006, p.1904). A further categorization of AS was presented in Trosborg' study (1995), it consisted of four strategies, respectively: "minimizing the degree of offence, acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation or account, and expression of apology" (Trosborg, 1995; as cited in Jebahi, 2011, p.649).

Considering the use of AS among EFL learners, various scholars have investigated the use of AS in different contexts. For example, Jebahi (2011) found that EFL learners used the statement of remorse most frequently as a strategy to express their apology to others. Another study by Bataineh and Bataineh (2005) revealed that EFL learners presented different AS such as statement of remorse, accounts, and repair. Equally, Bayat (2013) contended in the study that EFL learners used the feeling of regret, offering of repair and level of responsibility as the most used techniques in their apology. Furthermore, Salih and Elhassan (2016) illustrated that offer of repair was the most frequent AS used among EFL learners. Also, EFL learners employed obvious patterns of apology such as feeling of regret toward the hearer (Ugla & Abidin, 2016). Abedi (2017) argued that the EFL learners used IFIDs to apology beside offer of repair. Also, Ghanbari et al. (2015) stated that EFL learners employed the following AS: explanation, taking responsibility, and offering of repair to confirm their

apology.

Regarding the relationship between AS and gender, the gender is considered as a factor impacts the speech act apology among the EFL learners. Salman and Krish (2016) found that boys preferred using direct strategies while interacting with others; for instance, they blamed the victim in some cases. On the other hand, girls endeavored to use the indirect techniques to minimize the damage in any scenario (Bataineh and Bataineh, 2006). In her research, Parsa (2012) stated that, unlike men, women noticeably exploited AS because they were concerned for maintaining the relationship with others. Additionally, the statement of remorse was the most used strategy by female EFL learners (Tehrani et al., 2012). On the other hand, Saleem et al. (2014) revealed the similar AS used by female and male EFL learners. Likewise, according to Harb (2015) and Ghanbari et al. (2015), they concluded that gender did not affect the choices of AS among EFL female and male learners.

2. Method

2.1. Instrumentation

The current study intended to explore the varieties of AS used by EFL postgraduate learners in the context of EMU. It also focused on investigating the relationship between AS and the gender. Therefore, the DCT questionnaire had been employed as an instrument to fulfill the mentioned purposes. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), DCT is the most frequently employed tool by researchers aiming at examining speech acts. DCT is a written questionnaire containing different scenarios related to investigating a particular speech act (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p.14). It allows respondents to read given situations as open-ended questions and answer them based on their competence and knowledge of a particular situation (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

For the current study, the DCT was adopted from Harb's study (2015) after confirming his permission regarding using the mentioned instrument. It was divided into two parts; the first contained the demographic information such as gender, level of education, department, and nationality. While the second included ten varied situations related to AS. Each statement represented a different scenario and a social class, as following statement one "damaging a friend's book"; statement two "being late to a classmate"; statement three "being late to the exam"; statement four "being late to a teacher"; statement five "delaying a friend's invitation"; statement six "missing a friend's ceremony"; statement seven "pushing a lady"; statement eight "forgetting a promise to children"; statement nine "forgetting to return a book to a librarian"; and the last statement "forgetting to return a friend's CD."

In regards with the validity and reliability measurements of the DCT, both were obtained in Harb' study (2015). Harb stated that the expert linguists in English and native speakers of Arabic language attained the reliability and validity of the DCT. Therefore, the DCT tool employed in this current study is both valid and reliable.

2.2. Research context and participants

The participants of this research were EFL postgraduate learners who were enrolled in the master's and Ph.D. programs at EMU, Famagusta, North Cyprus. They were chosen from different departments (namely: foreign language education, civil engineering, electronical engineering, industrial engineering, computer engineering, architecture, economics, finance, business, tourism, mathematics, physics, chemistry, international relation, and communication and media) and nationalities (Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian, Nigerian, Iranian, Libyan, Pakistani, Afghani, Sudanese, Turkish, Turkish Cypriot, Yemeni, and Iraqi). The total number of the participants was 84 EFL postgraduate learners (M=42, F=42) (see Table 1, for the participants' profile).

Table 1

Participants' Profile

Gender	Level of education			
	Ph.D.	Master	Total	%
Male	19	23	42	50%
Female	25	17	42	50%

All the respondents spoke the English as a foreign language, and they were judgmental sampling. This method enabled the researcher selecting the particular participants based on specific criteria (Karatepe, 2013a). The researcher focused on selecting EFL postgraduate learners based on the gender and the level of education as certain standards in this study.

2.3. Data collection procedures

During the spring of 2018, the data was collected from EFL postgraduate learners at EMU. Respondents from different departments and nationalities participated in this study. They were given a consent form in order to answer the DCT. The form explained the aims of the study and ensured the confidentiality of the samples. The time to complete the DCT prompts ranged between 20 to 30 minutes.

2.4. Data analysis

The current study pursued exploring the varieties of AS used by EFL postgraduate learners. Besides, it investigated the relationship between AS and the gender variable. Numbers and percentages were counted to clarify the highest and lowest AS reported by the participants in each situation. The categorization was constructed following Olshtain's and Cohen's (1983) classification of AS. Therefore, the current part focused on providing answers to the research questions.

Q1) what varieties of apology strategies do EFL postgraduate learners use in the DCT?

The results indicated the percentage of the most AS used among the whole participants (see as Table 2, for the percentage of AS used by EFL postgraduate learners). IFIDs (with a percentage of 36.5%), accounts (with a percentage of 36.1%), and repairing (with a percentage of 16.1%) were the most common used strategy among the respondents. However, the expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offence reported a low percentage of use (8.5%). The last technique of apology, a promise of forbearance was the least used between the participants (3.3%).

Table 2

Percentage of AS Used by EFL Postgraduate Learners

Strategy	Percentage
1. IFIDs	36.5%
2. Expression of the speaker's responsibility for the Offense	8.5%
3. A statement or account of the cause, which brought about the violation	36.1%
4. An offer of repair	16.1%
5. A promise of forbearance	3.3%

Q2) Are there differences in the production of the apology strategies between male and female participants?

The number and percentage of each AS used between male and female participants were calculated. Table 3 clarified the percentage of AS used by EFL female postgraduate learners. The qualitative analysis showed that female employed three basic techniques of apology in different situations. The percentages of the most strategies were as following IFIDs (36%), accounts (35.6%), and repairing (16.9%). However, the respondents' responsibility for the offence reported with a less percentage of (8.4%). Lastly, the promise of forbearance was the least AS used between the female participants (2.7%).

Table 3

Percentage of AS Used by EFL Female Postgraduate Learners

Strategy	Statements											
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total	%
1. IFIDs	32	28	15	35	24	24	37	20	21	36	272	36%
2. Expression of the speaker's responsibility for the Offense	0	5	4	2	1	1	7	4	24	16	64	8.4%
3. A statement or account of the cause which brought about the violation	23	35	38	39	37	41	9	19	13	15	269	35.6%
4. An offer of repair	28	0	3	0	14	4	26	33	5	15	128	16.9%
5. A promise of forbearance	0	2	1	1	0	0	2	6	6	3	21	2.7%

Table 4

Percentage of *AS Used by EFL Male Postgraduate Learners*

Strategy	Statements											
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total	%
1. IFIDs	33	34	16	33	23	16	31	24	22	27	259	37.5%
2. Expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense	1	2	0	4	0	2	17	1	22	11	60	8.5%
3. A statement or account of the cause, which Brought about the violation	16	29	40	34	36	35	13	10	16	27	256	36.6%
4. An offer of repair	28	1	0	2	10	6	22	32	3	2	106	15.1%
5. A promise of forbearance	0	2	1	3	0	0	0	4	5	2	17	2.4%

At the same time, the qualitative analysis of the male participants marked three main AS used among them as in Table 4. The strategies were as following IFIDs (37.5%), accounts (36.6%), and repairing (15.1%). But, they did not show a high degree of responsibility for the offence in that the percentage was (8.5%). Also, the male participants reported the least used of a promise of forbearances technique (2.4%).

Table 5. Compared the percentage of AS used between male and female EFL postgraduate learners and it showed the insignificant relationship between the use of AS and the gender variable, in that both male and female selected and produced the same AS in varied statements.

Table 5

Percentage of AS Used between EFL Male and Female Postgraduate Learners

Strategy	Groups' frequency					
	Male	%	Female	%	Male and female	%
1. An Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)	259	37.5%	272	36%	531	36.5%
2. Expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense	60	8.5%	64	8.4%	124	8.5%
3. A statement or account of the cause, which brought about the violation	256	36.6%	269	35.6%	525	36.1%
4. An offer of repair	106	15.1%	128	16.9%	234	16.1%
5. A promise of forbearance	17	2.4%	21	2.7%	38	3.3%

3.Results and Discussion

This section was divided into two parts; the first discussed the use of AS among the EFL postgraduate learners. While the second, examined the relationship between the AS and the gender variable. Numbers and percentage were counted to determine the most and least AS used between the participants. Later, the responses were categorized based on Olshtain and Cohen (1983).

3.1.The use of AS between EFL postgraduate learners

For the first research question **"**what varieties of apology strategies do EFL postgraduate learners use in the DCT?" The analysis showed that the participants mostly used IFIDs, accounts, and repairing to produce their apology. While the least applied AS were the speaker's responsibility for the offence and a promise of forbearance.

3.1.1. IFIDs

The IFIDs strategy scored the highest percentage by the respondents, with an average of 36.5%. This result was similar to the findings in a study conducted by Abedi (2017). Different norms were provided such as "sorry, excuse me, pardon me, forgive me, and accept my apology." For instance, in statement four: "being late to a teacher" some of the participants reported the following: "I am very sorry for being late, I apologize, excuse me, please accept my apology, a thousand apology." Using different apology expressions confirmed the participants' awareness toward the offence that happened in various situations.

3.1.2. A statement or account of the cause, which brought about the violation

The second most AS reported by the participants was the accounts with an average of 36.1%. This finding is in line with Bataineh and Bataineh (2005) and Jebahi (2011). In order to apology, the participants directed to explain the reasons beyond the current situation. This

confirmed their desire to mitigate the offence or the damage in varied situations. For example, in statement four: "being late to a teacher," one of the participants stated, "forgive my late coming, I got caught in the traffic, I appreciated the fact that you waited for me."

3.1.3. An offer of repair

The reparation was reported among the EFL postgraduate learners with a percentage of 16.1%. Ghanbari et al. (2015) and Salih and Elhassan (2016) found that EFL learners used the strategy of repairing while apologizing. For example, in statement ten: "forgetting to return a friend's CD," one of the respondents mentioned, "I am so sorry for that! I forgot it, let us go to my place so I can return it and you can enjoy my homemade cheesecake." To some degree, the participants did not only offer their apology, however they attempted to compensate for the offense.

3.1.4. Expression of the speaker's responsibility for the offense

This strategy was the less used among the participants with a percentage of 8.5%, not in line with Bayat's (2013), and Ghanbari's et al. (2015). The respondents did not show a high degree of responsibility for the offense. However, some of them admitted their fault, it was clearly found in statements seven and nine. For example, in statement seven: "pushing a lady," one respondent stated, "I am so sorry madam, I was not careful enough."

3.1.5. A promise of forbearance

The percentage of this technique was 3.3%. It was the least reported strategy by the entire participants. To some extent, they did not provided responses confirming to not repeat the offense. But some participants utilized this technique specifically in two situations, statement eight (forgetting a promise to children) and statement nine (forgetting to return a book to a librarian). For instance, one participant in statement eight mentioned, "sorry kids, I had to work, and I promise it will not happen again."

3.2. The relationship between AS and the gender variable

In regards to the second research question "are there differences in the production of the apology strategies between male and female participants?" The qualitative results revealed that the gender was not considered a significant factor that affected the participants' selection and production of AS, similar to the findings of Harb (2015), Saleem et al. (2014), and Ghanbari et al. (2015).

3.2.1. IFIDs

IFIDs were found to be the most frequently used techniques among female participants, with an average of 36%. They offered varied expressions of apology (such as sorry, forgive me, excuse me, apologize, accept my apology) in different scenarios. For

example, in statement one, which represented "damaging a book," one female participant stated, "I am sorry." In statement nine "forgetting to return a book to a librarian," another female mentioned "please, forgive me, excuse me this time." The females presented their apology towards the victim by using more than one apology expression, besides they used the intensification (such as I am so sorry) to show a high level of regret and apology in different situations. At the same time, IFIDs were founded to be the most frequently used AS among the male participants with a percentage of 37.5%. They produced varied expressions in different scenarios to express their apology (such as sorry, forgive me, apology, accept my apology, and excuse me). The IFIDs strategy approximately occurred in the entire situations. However, it was mostly used in situations like "damaging a book, being late to a classmate, being late to a teacher, and pushing a lady." For instance, in statement one: "damaging a book", a male participant stated "please accept my apologize." Similarly, in statement four: "being late to a teacher," one man said, "I am sorry." Moreover, the intensification (such as so sorry, truly sorry, really sorry, terribly sorry, etc.) was provided between the male participants to minimize the offense in certain situations.

3.2.2. A statement or account of the cause, which brought about the violation

The second major AS used among the female respondents was the accounts with average of 35.6%. This strategy approximately occurred in all the scenarios, specifically in statements two, three, four, five, and six. For example, in statement four: "being late to a teacher," a female said, "I am so sorry, there was a traffic jam. I tried my best to come here as early as possible." On balance, the female participants provided the causes of the damages or the offenses in different scenarios to express their apology towards the offense. This result was comparable with the male respondents. They used the accounts with a percentage of 36.6%. This technique considerably occurred in situations such as "being late to the exam, being late to a teacher, missing a friend's ceremony." For example, in statement three: "being late to the exam," one male stated, "hello professor, I am sorry. Here is my doctor's note, this is why I could not attend the exam." To sum, both male and female realized the offense and endeavored to explain the causes beyond it.

3.2.3. An offer of repair

This strategy was reported among the female participants with a percentage of 16.9 %. It was most commonly used in three scenarios: "damaging a book, forgetting a promise to children, and pushing a lady." For instance, in statement seven: "pushing a lady," one girl stated "oh my God! I am so sorry it was not on purpose. I hope you are ok. Do you want to go to a hospital for a check?" At the same time, the male reported their use of repairing with an

average of 15.1%. The strategy basically noticed in situations like "damaging a book, pushing a lady, and forgetting a promise to children." For example, in statement seven: "pushing a lady scenario," one participant stated "I am truly sorry, I am in rush, let me help you." To some extent, the male and female participants recognized the offense they made in some situations; therefore, they attempted to compensate the victims kindly.

3.2.4. Expressions of the speakers' responsibility for the offense

The mentioned strategy found to be less offered by the female participants with an average of 8.4%. The females noticeably showed their responsibility for the offense in specific situations like "pushing a lady, forgetting to return a book to a librarian and forgetting to return a friend's CD." For example, in statement nine: "forgetting to return a book to a librarian," a girl mentioned, "I am sorry, I was busy. If I have to pay more money for that I will pay." Besides, the male respondents produced their responsibility for the offense with a percentage of 8.5 %. In scenarios such as "pushing a lady and being late to a librarian," some participants showed their responsibility towards the offended. For example, in statement seven "pushing a lady" a respondent stated "oh! I am sorry, it is all my fault." In short, the degree of the responsibility for the offense between the male and female participants was not highly remarked. However, a few number of the participants admitted their fault in specific situations, while the other ignored it.

3.2.5. A promise of forbearance

It was the least reported strategy with a percentage of 2.7% among the female participants. It highly occurred in situations eight and nine. For example, in statement eight: "forgetting a promise to children," one female mentioned, "I apologize for forgetting my promise, it will never happen again." Similar to the male percentage, they used it with an average of 2.4%. It was reported in cases such as "forgetting to return a book to librarian and forgetting a promise to children". For example, in statement eight: "forgetting a promise to children" a respondent stated, "guys, sorry I forgot that we have a meeting; I brought some ice cream to eat together. I will never forget in the next times." A limited number of male and female participants used a promise of forbearance as a technique to confirm their apology, while the others did not.

Conclusion

The current study intended to explore the varieties of apology strategies used by EFL postgraduate learners in the context of EMU. Besides, it investigated the relationship between apology strategies and the gender variable. The research questions were as following 1) what

varieties of apology strategies do EFL postgraduate learners use in the DCT? 2) Are there differences in the production of the apology strategies between male and female participants? The findings revealed that IFIDs, accounts and reparation were the most reported AS among all of the participants. Moreover, there was not a significant relationship between the gender and AS. Both male and female participants intensively used AS in a similar way. While, the rest of the strategies did not highly occur among the whole participants.

Considering the Implications, the current study investigated varieties of AS used by EFL postgraduate learners in relation to gender in the context of EMU. Therefore, it increases EFL postgraduate learners' knowledge toward the concept of the speech act apology. Besides, it directs their attention to the cultural and contextual influence on the target language.

In regards to the limitations of this study, there were a few limitations, which needed to be considered for the future researches. First, the researcher in this paper used the DCT as a data collection tool to achieve the aims. For further investigations, semi-structure interviews could additionally be utilized to gain more data about the study. Second, the participants in this study were EFL postgraduate learners from different departments and nationalities. Future researchers might want to focus on investigating the use of AS among EFL postgraduate learners from a specific nationality, so that the results can be more specified and generalized

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