

Investigating the Effect of English Language Proficiency on Pragmatic Production of Apology by Jordanian EFL Learners

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Introduction

Communicating successfully in a language requires a good understanding of both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of that language. This understanding helps a speaker to use the right language in the right context for the right purpose. In such a case, the speaker can be referred to as communicatively competent. Communicative competence, which is considered an essential factor in achieving effective communicative goals (Bachman, 1990), is closely dependent on knowledge in both areas of grammar and pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). However, communication breakdown can occur when non-native speakers (NNSs) lack either grammatical or pragmatic knowledge. Cohen (1996) argues that the “control of the vocabulary and grammar of the language without achieving a comparable control over the pragmatic or functional uses of the language” certainly leads NNSs to miscommunication (p. 253).

Scholars in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) development have shown a keen interest in investigating the factors that affect pragmatic competence (Li & Raja Rozina, 2017). One of the factors being investigated is language proficiency, which is a dominant independent variable in the field of ILP development (Xiao, 2015). Exploring the effect of language proficiency may help inform pragmatic developmental pattern since learners’ ability to produce appropriate language is an indicator of their language proficiency. However, empirical studies (e.g. Li & Raja Rozina, 2017; Khorshidi, Mobini & Nasiri, 2016) have reported inconsistent findings as to the influence of language proficiency on the development of learners’ ability to perform different speech acts. The findings of a number of ILP development studies indicate the positive influence of language proficiency on pragmatic competence (e.g. Li & Raja Rozina, 2017). On the other hand, other studies indicate that there is almost no effect on pragmatic competence (e.g., Khorshidi et al., 2016).

Speech act is considered as a basic device of human interaction (Searle, 1975). Some examples of speech acts are apologies, greetings, requests, complaints and refusals. The speech act of apology is the focus of the current study because the act of apologising is considered as one of the most frequently used acts, either in public or private interactions (Grainger & Harris, 2007). Furthermore, Ogiermann (2009) contends that apology is an essential function of language due to its “vital social function of restoring and maintaining harmony” (p. 45) and smoothing out resentment (Intachakra, 2004).

Despite the trend towards an increase in ILP studies among Jordanian scholars, ILP development research is still minimal (e.g., Al-Khaza'leh, 2018). Jordanian researchers, for the most part, have investigated the production of speech acts by native speakers of Jordanian Arabic and American or British English language on the one hand and Jordanian EFL learners with native speakers of English (NSE) on the other hand (e.g., Banikalef, Maros, Aladdi, & Al-Natour, 2015).

Taking into account the discussion in this section, there is a need for studies that examine how various factors such as English language proficiency of learners affect the production of the speech act of apology. The present study is a cross-sectional study that intends to answer two research questions: (1) What strategies do Jordanian EFL at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels of English language proficiency use in expressing apology? (2) What is the effect of Jordanian EFL learners' English language proficiency on their production of the speech act of apology?

Methodology

Participants

The number of participants for this study was 400 and they were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 300 Jordanian EFL learners at three levels of language proficiency. They were recruited from secondary schools in Jordan. The second group was the baseline group consisting of 100 NSE.

Instruments

TOEFL Junior.

Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, Jordanian EFL learners from three levels of language proficiency, i.e. BEFLL,² IEFLL,³ and AEFLL⁴ were selected. All respondents were given a TOEFL junior test. The participants were categorised into 100 beginners, 100 intermediate and 100 advanced students of English language based on their scores in the test.

Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT).

WDCT questionnaire consists of ten situations (Appendix A). The responses were classified into three main apology strategies (Appendix B, C, D) based on the coding scheme adapted from Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) taxonomy of apology strategies (Appendix E). The SPSS24.0 was used to analyse the quantitative data.

Discussion

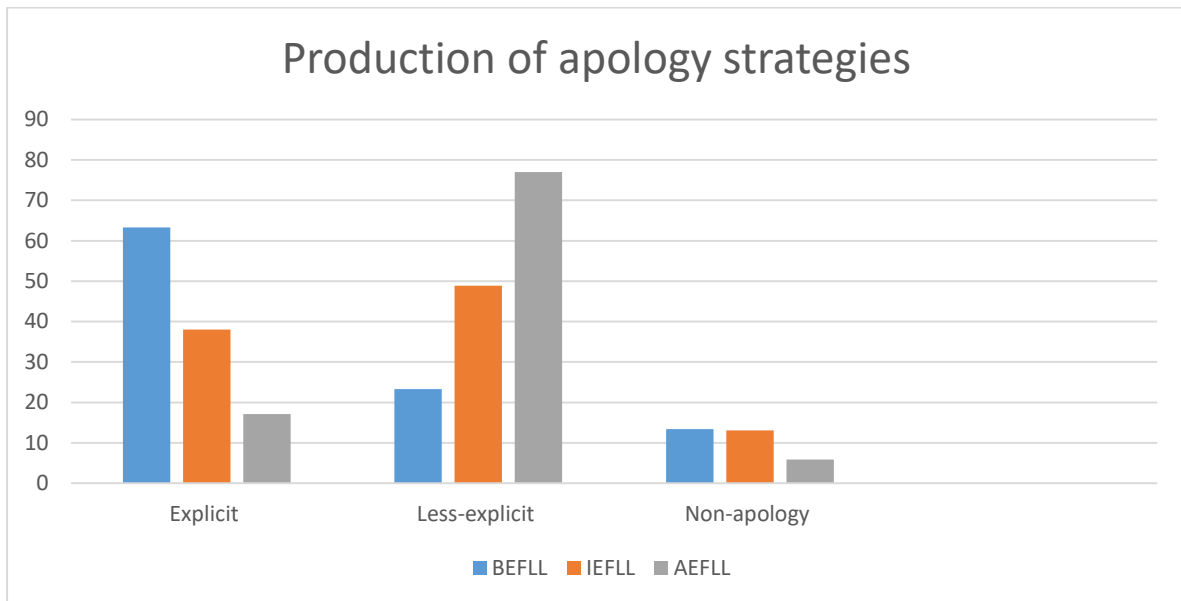
Figure 1 displays the percentages of the overall use of the main apology strategies by Jordanian EFL learners.

² BEFLL refers to beginner English as foreign language learners

³ IEFLL refers to intermediate English as foreign language learners

⁴ AEFLL refers to advanced English as foreign language learners

Figure 1: The overall percentages of the main apology strategies by BEFLL, IEFLL and AEFLL



As can be seen from Figure 1, BEFLL and IEFLL preferred to use explicit apology strategies in 63.3% and 38% of the situations, respectively while AEFLL used explicit strategies in 17.1% of the situations. In other words, BEFLL and IEFLL used explicit strategy more than AEFLL.

Figure 1 also shows that AEFLL, IEFLL and BEFLL used the less explicit apology strategies in 77%, 48.9% and 23.3% of the situations, respectively. As can be noticed, AEFLL used the less explicit apology strategies more than IEFLL while BEFLL used it the least.

Figure 1 shows that the non-apology strategies were the least used strategy by BEFLL, IEFLL and AEFLL in 13.4%, 13.1% and 5.9% of the situations, respectively. The figure shows that BEFLL and IEFLL used the non-apology strategies more than AEFLL.

The Spearman Correlation was used to see whether there is a correlation between EFL learners' language proficiency levels and the production of sub-strategies of the main apology strategies. The correlation strength between variables was interpreted based on Guildford's (1973) Rule of Thumb (see Table 1).

Table 1: Rule of Thumb for Interpreting the Size of a Correlation Coefficient

Size of Correlation	Interpretation
0.90 to 1.00 (-.90 to -1.00)	Very high positive (negative) correlation
0.70 to 0.90 (-0.70 to -0.90)	High positive (negative) correlation
0.40 to 0.70 (-0.40 to -0.70)	Moderate positive (negative) correlation
0.20 to 0.40 (-0.20 to -0.40)	Low positive (negative) correlation
0.00 to 0.20 (0.00 to -0.20)	Negligible positive (negative) correlation

Table 2 shows the relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency levels and the pragmatic production of the apology strategies.

Table 2: Correlation between the apology strategies and EFL learners' language proficiency levels.

Sub-strategies	Proficiency		
	N	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
One expression of apology.	300	-.046	.424
One expression of apology and one intensifier.	300	-.109	.060
Two expressions of apology.	300	-.162	.005
Two expressions of apology and one intensifier.	300	-.295	.000
One expression of apology and two intensifiers.	300	-.439	.000
Three expressions of apology.	300	-.446	.000
Two expressions of apology and two intensifiers.	300	-.496	.000
Three expressions of apology and one intensifier.	300	-.411	.000
Three expressions of apology and two intensifiers.	300	-.382	.000
One expression of apology and three intensifiers	300	-.280	.000
Accounts	300	.163	.005
Reparation	300	.112	.053
Compensation	300	.248	.000
Showing lack of intent on harm doing	300	.215	.000
Promise not to repeat offense	300	.282	.000
Asking victim not to be angry	300	.342	.000
Positive assessment of responsibility	300	.444	.000
Negative assessment of responsibility	300	.327	.000
Self-Castigation	300	.345	.000
Promise of better times to come	300	.331	.000
Gratitude	300	.239	.000
Checking on consequences	300	.239	.000
Proverbs and sayings	300	.	.
Nonsensical, unrelated answer	300	-.276	.000
Brushing off incident as not important	300	-.078	.180
Blaming victim	300	-.109	.058
Offending victim	300	-.145	.012
Avoidance of subject or person	300	-.059	.311
Laughing the incident off	300	-.143	.013

As is shown in Table 2, the correlation between language proficiency levels and production of explicit apology strategies by Jordanian EFL learners was negative, ranging from negligible to low and moderate. In other words, the results indicated that the decrease in EFL learners' level of proficiency could lead to an increase in the production of explicit strategy.

Table 2 further shows that the correlation between language proficiency levels and production of less explicit apology strategies was positive, ranging from negligible to low and moderate. In other words, the results indicated that the increase in EFL learners' level of proficiency could lead to an increase in the production of less explicit strategy.

Finally, as it is shown in Table 2, the correlation between language proficiency levels and production of non-apology strategies by Jordanian EFL learners was a negligible negative relationship. In other words, the results indicated that a decrease in EFL learners' level of proficiency could lead to an increase in the production of non-apology strategy.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study investigated the ILP development of the speech act of apology by Jordanian EFL learners at three levels of language proficiency. The findings revealed that language proficiency is a contributory factor in EFL learners' pragmatic development of the production of apology. The statistical analysis shows that language proficiency is significantly correlated with pragmatic production of explicit, less explicit and non-apology strategies. In other words, the usage of strategies such as explicit and non-apology strategies increases as EFL learners' level of proficiency decreases, while the usage of strategies such as less explicit strategies increases as EFL learners' level of proficiency increases.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Description of the Ten Situations

No.	Name of the situation	Explanation
1	Bumping into a student	You bumped into a student on the way to class causing that student to drop the books. What would you say to that student?
2	Dialling a wrong number	You called a student by mistake at 3:00 a.m. What would you say to that student who answered the phone?
3	Spilling coffee accidentally	You accidentally spilt some coffee on student's pants. What would you say to that student?
4	Promising for help	You promised to help your sibling study for an exam but did not have the time to do so. What would you say to your sibling?
5	Lying	You lied to your siblings about having to do some homework instead of going to the movies with them, and your siblings found out that you went shopping with one of your classmates. What would you say to your siblings?
6	Missing an appointment	You missed an appointment with your school counsellor. What would you say to the school counsellor?
7	Forgetting to turn phone off	In the first day of school your cellular phone rings in the class. What would you say to your teacher?
8	Interrupting your parents	You interrupted your parents when they were talking with their friends. What would you say to them?
9	Waking up your parents	Your parents were sleeping soundly, and you woke them up with the noise you were making in the bedroom. What would you say to your parents?
10	Staying out late	You stayed out late after school without notifying your parents who were worried sick about you. What would you say to your parents?

Appendix B: Examples of Explicit Strategies

	Explicit strategy (10 strategies)	Examples
1	One expression of apology	sorry, excuse me, forgive me, I apologise, my apologies, or pardon me
2	One expression of apology and one intensifier	very, really, terribly, or so sorry
3	Two expressions of apology	Sorry, forgive me or excuse me, I am sorry
4	Two expressions of apology and one intensifier	excuse me; I am very sorry and so sorry; forgive me
5	One expression of apology and two intensifiers	I am very, very(or so, so) sorry very, very sorry or so very sorry
6	Three expressions of apology	sorry; sorry; forgive me
7	Two expressions of apology and two intensifiers	I am so, so (very) sorry; forgive me
8	Three expressions of apology and one intensifier	sorry; I am so sorry; please, forgive me
9	Three expressions of apology and two intensifiers	<i>Sorry. I am so, so sorry, forgive me</i>
10	One expression of apology and three intensifiers	so, so, so sorry

Appendix C: Explanation and Examples of Less-explicit Strategies

	Less explicit strategies (14 strategies)	Explanation and examples
1	Accounts	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer tells of the offence. Examples of the use of this strategy are: It happened so fast I could not call to ask you to come with us.
2	Reparation	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer attempts to repair the damage he/she has inflicted on others and offers words that may cause the harm done to be forgotten. Examples of the use of this strategy are: Let me pick the books up for you.
3	Compensation	I will buy you a new one
4	Showing lack of intent on harm doing	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer attempts to convince the victim he/she had no intention of harming him/her. Examples of the use of this strategy are: I did not mean to disturb you.
5	Promise not to repeat offence	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer does his/her utmost to assure the victim that what has taken place will not occur again. Examples of the use of this strategy are: This will never happen again.
6	Asking victim not to be angry	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer beseeched the victim not to be angry. Examples of the use of this strategy are: I could not help it. I hope you are not angry.
7	Positive assessment of responsibility	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer admitting admission of having committed the act. Examples of the use of this strategy are: he showed up, and I could not say no.
8	Negative assessment of responsibility	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer deny denial of being responsible for the act. Examples of the use of this strategy are: It was beyond my control. You know how traffic is.
9	Self-castigation	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer claims his/her responsibility for the offence and is critical of his/her own behaviour. Examples of the use of this strategy are: It was wrong of me to lie to you
10	Gratitude	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer shows how grateful he/she is that the injured person is even giving him/her the time to speak and finding it in his/her heart to forgive. Examples of the use of this strategy are: I really appreciate giving me the chance to explain.
11	Promise of better times to come	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer promised the victim they would pass lovely times once they forget the injury. Examples of the use of this strategy are: I will help you next time, and it will be great.
12	Checking on consequences	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer tried to check the consequences of what they had done on the victim. Examples of the use of this strategy are: Are you ok?
13	Proverbs and Sayings	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer use proverbs and sayings to mitigate the effect of their offence.
14	Nonsensical, unrelated answer	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer use came up with an answer that had nothing to do with the offence to escape apology. Examples of the use of this strategy are: A friend in need.

Appendix D: Explanation and Examples of Non-apology Strategies

Non-apology strategies (5 strategies)	Explanation and examples
Brushing off incident as non-important.	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer attempts to convince the victim that the offence is getting more attention than it deserves. Examples of the use of this strategy are: They should stop worrying. I am 23.
Blaming victim	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer blames the victim for what happened instead of apologising to him/her. Examples of the use of this strategy are: It is your fault. You should have studied earlier.
Offending victim	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer offends the victim to divert attention from what had happened. Examples of the use of this strategy are: Buzz off. I did not need any help when I was your age.
Avoidance of subject or person	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer attempts to avoid the victim in order not to apologise, and if they happen to meet, they will avoid the discussion. Examples of the use of this strategy are: I will avoid him totally.
Laughing the incident off	They are strategies in which the wrongdoer use tried to laugh the incident to mitigate the harm done. Examples of the use of this strategy are: How about you take it off?

Appendix E: Apology Strategies Adapted from Bataineh and Bataineh (2008)

	Explicit strategy (10 strategies)	Less explicit strategies (14 strategies)	Non-apology strategies (5 strategies)
1	One expression of apology	Accounts	Brushing off incident as non-important.
2	One expression of apology and one intensifier	Reparation	Blaming victim
3	Two expressions of apology	Compensation	Offending victim
4	Two expressions of apology and one intensifier	Showing lack of intent on harm doing	Avoidance of subject or person
5	One expression of apology and two intensifiers	Promise not to repeat offence	Laughing the incident off
6	Three expressions of apology	Asking victim not to be angry	
7	Two expressions of apology and two intensifiers	Positive assessment of responsibility	
8	Three expressions of apology and one intensifier	Negative assessment of responsibility	
9	Three expressions of apology and two intensifiers	Self-castigation	
10	One expression of apology and three intensifies	Promise of better times to come	
11		Gratitude	
12		Checking on consequences	
13		Proverbs and Sayings	
14		Nonsensical, unrelated answer	