

Research Article

Apology Variations among Persian EFL Learners in Iranian, Iranian-Americans and American English Speakers

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Abstract

This study aimed to compare the use of the apology speech act and other semantic formulas among Iranian EFL learners, American native speakers of English, and Iranians living in America for four years. We conducted a transcultural investigation on the use of apology strategies in the two cultures, and then assessed the effects of living in the target language context. The data were collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), and then coded based on the Cohen and Olshtain's (1981), and Istifçi (2009) classification of apology speech act. The results showed significant differences between the use of apology strategies by Iranian EFL learners and American speakers in apology verbs. Also, we found that the Iranians who had lived in America were successful in reaching the target language's cultural norms. This improvement was mainly because of living in the target language context and learning through interaction. We also found that the act of flattery among Persian users which is a subcategory of a cultural habit called *ta'arof* is a strategy to amend their mistakes. The results of this study might be useful for sociolinguists, transcultural researchers, and foreign language teachers.

Keywords: speech act, apology, transcultural studies, face-threatening act, politeness

Introduction

Since 1960, attention has been drawn to communicative competence that would describes language learners' professional use of the target language (Erton, 2017). Later, pragmatic competence and interlanguage pragmatics were emphasized and the role of first language impact on the use of speech acts in the second language was emboldened (Kasper & Blum-kulka, 1993). Speech acts, which are at the heart of pragmatics, are language functions that are inseparable from daily life. In various studies, different types of speech acts were conducted to achieve communicative goals such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals (Khalib & Tayeh, 2014). Among these, apologies have received special attention as they have a crucial role in daily conversations. There has been reports of miscommunication and misunderstanding in general (Shokouhi, 2020), and in particular while apologizing in users of LX (Second or third language) (Hussain & Aziz, 2020). Fluent speakers of an LX may still be unable to produce a Language which is socially and culturally acceptable. Thus, in learning a new language, learners must be guided in gaining such politeness strategies, simultaneously with learning the basics and grammar of LX. Accordingly, numerous studies have investigated apologies transculturally in order to probe similarities and differences among different languages (Rabab'ah & Al-Hawamdeh, 2020; Abedi, 2016; Istifci, 2009; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008; Fahey, 2005).

There has also been some research on apology speech act in Persian context (e.g., Rezaei, 2021; Hussain & Aziz, 2020; Dadkhah-Tehrani et al., 2012; Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011; Shariati & Chamani, 2010; Afghari, 2007) but there has rarely been a comparative study between Iranian English language learners and American natives following with investigating the effects of living in the foreign language context.

Iran is a country with cultural and linguistic diversities and the concept of face (as part of speech acts and pragmatic studies) is crucial in social communication. Yet research shows that Persians are reluctant to explicitly apologize in their own language for their misdeeds (Rezaei, 2021). As a traditionally non-egalitarian society, Iranians tend to choose apology strategies based on hierarchical differences (Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011). As English is not considered a second language in Iran, people are unfamiliar with its norms and communicative rules. Therefore, it is a challenge for Iranians to employ accurate pragmatic conventions and rituals. By following up with Iranians that have moved to an English language context, we can see the extent to which real-life practices help in learning cultural norms (Shokouhi, 2020). The rationale for doing this study which aims at comparing American English users and Persians learning English in

the United States is that primarily English that is taught in Iran has its focus on American English – American accent, American style of life, etc. despite the four-decade of Iranian ruling system rejecting Americanism. Secondly, since we thought a span of four years would be relatively adequate, we selected Iranians who have settled in America for at least four years. In sum, this study attempted to answer the following research questions on the apology strategies that these groups have used:

Do the type and frequency of the used apology strategies differ between Iranian EFL learners and American speakers of English?

Does living in the target culture for a period of 4 years help Iranians in gaining linguistic and cultural norms in using apologies?

Theoretical Framework

Apologies are complex speech acts, and their use is influenced by various socio-cultural and interpersonal features. Understanding the complexities of apologies will provide insights into the dynamics of interaction. Though the focus of the apology in this paper is on politeness theory as understood in Persian, it does not disregard the functions of apology acts and language choice or face-saving acts. Politeness theory posits that apologies are used to refurbish face to the threatened party. In what follows, the main theoretical dimensions of apology that are utilized in the analysis of our data are explained.

One is that when we talk about culture, we do not mean culture as a singular phenomenon – culture is something transcultural. Hall (1997) explains culture in terms of transcultures or multicultures. This is in line with Blum-kulka, House and Kasper (1989) who propose a cross-cultural pragmatic approach to the analysis of apology and request. Their theory is a general approach which argues that effective communication in multicultural contexts is influenced by cultural differences. The authors pinpoint that in communication practices, what plays a significant role is the power dynamics and social distance which are entwined in the politeness norms in a complex way.

In transcultural linguistics, (Hall, 1997; Tannen, 2001, 2011) apologies are about the expression and perception of speech acts across different cultures and languages. Cultural differences that might influence apology speech acts include directness or indirectness (i.e., some cultures emphasize directness in communication whereas other cultures prefer an indirect language to prevent offense). Apologies also involve face-saving acts. Some cultures prefer to maintain social harmony and save face as they regard this to be more essential than an individual's voice about his feelings. In such cultures, apologies are deemed important in restoring face. This becomes particularly important when we take apology at the global level internationally – such is the case for English

as a second or an additional language. The language use in English becomes very diverse cross culturally in lingua franca settings, and teachers and learners need to be aware of the constant change and the diversified patterns.

Observing miscommunications in transcultural settings, we sensed a gap in teaching speech acts in language classrooms. Since the present study is mainly a quantitative analysis, the conceptual framework that is presented here is brief. Research on apologies is a cross over between different disciplines, as mentioned above (see Austin, 1962 and Searle, 1969 on illocutionary acts; Goffman, 1964 and Leech, 1983 on the social acts and the properties of interaction, among others). Given its cross over nature, no specific theoretical framework determines the boundaries of this type of speech act although the studies in this area are immense.

The phenomenon of politeness and apology is highly complex in Persian. The complexity lies in the fact that: a) Persian use of poetic language is pervasive in the language and b) it is socio-political. As for the former, the poetic language can conceal and disguise the explicitness and favors a kind of indirectness (Shokouhi, 2020; Beeman, 2001). The latter is attributed to thousands of years of kings and other rulers ruling the country and suppressing the voices of the people. The suppression leads to indirectness in language, hence a complex network of politeness has been formed over the centuries (Shokouhi, 2020). This has led to the use of politeness and apology to become hierarchically oriented.

Considering the limitations of our study and data collection (i.e., the distance between the location of the participants and the difficulty of collecting cross-cultural data), and the fact that our best choice was using a questionnaire for data collection, we decided to conduct the data collection and analysis through the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) lens. Therefore, we applied the framework presented by Blum-kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) and Kasper and Blum-kulka (1993) to analyze the strategies employed by our participants. What is highly significant by this framework is the communicativeness of apology speech act, its sheer existence and inseparability of it from our daily life, and its miscommunication impact if it is not properly utilized in transcultural communication. On this basis, we decided to study the apology speech acts employed by Iranian LX learners before and after living in the LX-spoken country because they are claimed to reflect cultural values (Istifci, 2009). We also wanted to compare both of these groups with the American speakers to evaluate the significance of similarities and differences and monitor the effect of living in the target language context.

Empirical Studies

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987) introduced the notion of 'face' as the 'public self-image' that every person considers for himself. Although we expect majority of our linguistic interaction to be polite, in real and non-ideal everyday's linguistic practices, many of them could be impolite. Though Brown and Levinson believed in universality of face and politeness, researchers later noted that the norms of politeness are not necessarily the same across cultures or interculturally. In a recent study, Izadi (2022) investigated intercultural politeness and impoliteness in Iranian students while studying in Malaysia. He noted that while complimenting is an act of politeness in Iran, Malaysian Professors found it as a sign of disingenuity and flattery and considered it to be too much and impolite. In another research, Shariati and Chamani (2010) argued that apologizing is a sign of weakness for traditional Iranians and admitting the mistake is not an easy task for Persians. While modern educated Iranians consider apologizing as a sign of politeness.

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) believe that pragmatic failure occurs not only among students with low proficiency in the target language but also among advanced language learners presenting a good command of grammatical and lexical elements. Moreover, Rastegar and Yasami (2014) demonstrated that students' proficiency levels had a significant effect on the type and complexity of used strategies. Therefore, learners with a high level of proficiency are more familiar with and inclined to use different apology strategies. Hence, they recommend pragmatic studies to be done on advanced level learners because controlled tasks favor higher proficiency learners. Shishavan and Sharifian (2013) in a study on Persians use of apology and refusal strategies emphasize that in order to explore areas of potential transcultural misunderstanding, it is important to investigate how English is used as an international language by different cultural groups. Many studies have been done to investigate the use of apologies in different cultural settings (Hussain & Aziz, 2020; Rabab'ah & Al-Hawamdeh, 2020; Sari, 2016; Banikalef et al., 2015; Istifci, 2009; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008).

The use of apology strategies by Persian speakers learning English has been investigated extensively in the past decades. For instance, Eslami-rasekh and Mardani (2010) and Simin et al. (2014) studied the effect of explicit teaching of EFL learners in the Iranian context. They showed that explicit instruction was useful in raising pragmatic awareness and appropriate use of the apology speech act. In another study, Farashaiyan and Yazdi-Amirkhiz (2011) focused on illocutionary force of apology acts and found that participants' preference for using a direct or an indirect act depends on

cultural differences, learning style preferences, and personality. In contrast, Salehi (2014), and Abedi (2016) compared the apology strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers and gained similar records in both participants along with some insignificant differences.

Reviewing the related literature, it seems that no study explored the use of apology strategy in the selected ten categories and in a large number of participants, and also no one investigated Iranians after living in the target culture for a reasonable amount of time. Therefore, to fill in the gap, our goal in this study is to find the similarities and differences in the use of apology strategies by Iranian EFL learners and American speakers of English, by comparing and contrasting the type and frequency of the used apology strategies in ten selected sample situations. And also, we discussed the effects of living in the foreign language context by comparing our first and second group with another group of Iranians living in America. In this respect, we selected our material and method, based on a combination of what we reviewed in the related literature, with a larger number of participants.

DCTs may not represent the real responses of participants in natural setting, and may be affected by serial task effect, but despite the limitations and deficiencies of DCTs, they have been widely used in collecting data (Hussain & Aziz, 2020; Abedi, 2016; Salehi, 2014; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014; Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011). Moreover, in a survey of methods in use in interlanguage pragmatics, DCTs were considered an appropriate way for eliciting pragmatic data (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005).

Method

In this study, we employed a quantitative method to reveal the frequency of occurrence of apologies in three different groups. In this regard we used the analytical framework introduced by Blum-kulka et al. (1989) by collecting DCTs and analyzing the results. DCTs are known to be one of the effective ways to collect a large amount of data in a crosslinguistic study and to draw generalizations based on the comparison (Nurani, 2009). Thus, we first collected our data using a DCT. Then, we counted the number of used strategies in all ten situations and wrote down the frequency and percentage of use. However, we also discussed the type of used strategies descriptively. According to Demeter (2006), this type of analysis is one the best ways to assess the use of indirect speech acts like apologies, and it is this type of use that is important to be mastered by foreign language learners. Our participants, instrument, and data collection procedure are presented as follows.

Participants

The participants of this study were 100 individuals including 60 Iranian EFL learners living in Iran, 10 Iranian-Americans living in Florida, U.S., and 30 Americans living in Jacksonville, Florida. All groups had equal numbers of male and female participants. The participants of the first group were 60 advanced EFL learners in Iran with the age of 18-25. The second group's participants were 30 native speakers of American English with the age of 18-25 in Jacksonville, Florida, who were chosen randomly from the students present on the campus of the University of North Florida. In the next step, another group of Iranians, including 10 native Persian speakers living in the US, was also randomly chosen. They have lived in America for four years after finishing high school in Iran. They were selected to check the probable improvement of Iranians in gaining cultural norms in the time of living in the target culture. For the sake of simplicity, all participants were chosen by the method of convenience sampling.

Instrument

In the data collection process, we had arranged with an Iranian university student in Jacksonville, Florida, to take the provided DCT from American students present on the campus. And we also took our DCT from the Iranian Language Institute students in Karaj, Iran. We explained to the participants how they should put themselves in the given situations and complete our DCT. Then we collected the DCTs, sorted them out to count the ten apology speech acts and related semantic formulas in the responses. The data were then tabulated and the frequency and the percentage of use in each semantic coding were calculated and recorded. In order to determine the significance of the results, related measures were calculated with the SPSS 13 both cumulatively and separately for each strategy. In order to compare the obtained responses, we used the percentage of use in tables 1 and 2. We tested the significance of the difference between the strategy uses of two groups via the Pearson chi-square test and the difference was supposed to be significant when the p-value is less than 0.05. This was followed by a descriptive discussion on the use of apology strategies by Iranians before and after living in the target culture and investigated their change after living in the target culture.

Procedure

Despite their shortages and limitations, DCTs are considered as an appropriate way for eliciting pragmatic data in many studies (Rabab'ah & Al-Hawamdeh, 2020; Sari, 2016; Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013; Istifci, 2009). DCT is a very useful tool for the study of cross-cultural variations as it allows the researcher to generate hypothetical scenarios through which respondents

can create their own apology speech act responses to a particular situation (Blum-kulka et al., 1989). As a result, the researcher can acquire insight into how respondents interpret the apology acts in various situations and contexts. It also allows the researcher to look into different linguistic and cultural factors that influence respondent's choice. For our purpose, in particular, we also specifically chose DCT because it was easy to handle the complexities involved in the participants' responses and it was collectable from long distance as we had participants from America. So, we collected our data using a DCT taken from Istifçi (2009). Two other items were added to Istifçi to yield a more detailed outcome (Item 9 from Sachie (1998) and item 10 from Jianda (2007); see appendix A). To check the reliability of each of the 10 situations in the Persian context, the test was pilot tested with ten participants in the same context before the actual study, and the reliability was found to be 97.7%.

The DCT was a questionnaire involving 10 situations in a social setting all of which started with a description of a faulty deed by the reader, who was supposed to make an apology. The participants were asked to write the first thing that comes into their minds as the response. The responses were either one of the ten considered categories (e.g. I am really sorry.) or a combination of two or more categories (e.g. Oh, my God. I am really sorry. I overslept again. I will do anything to make it up to you. Any suggestions?!). In the Persian context, there were also some answers with a new category that could be added to the previous ones (e.g. I am sorry lady, let me help you stand up. I like your dress). Our data were coded and collected based on the Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) classification of apology speech act and Istifçi (2009) in our text and tables:

- 1) An expression of an apology (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device 'IFID') which has three sub formulas:
 - a) An expression of regret (e.g. I'm sorry.) (REG)
 - b) An offer of apology (e.g. I apologize.) (APL)
 - c) A request for forgiveness (e.g. excuse me. forgive me.) (FRG)
- 2) An explanation or account of the situation (e.g. I missed the bus.) (EXPL)
- 3) An acknowledgment of responsibility for the offense (e.g. it's my fault.) (RESP)
- 4) An offer of repair/redress (e.g. I'll pay for your damage.) (REPR)
- 5) A promise of forbearance (e.g. I'll never forget it again.) (FORB) (p.119)

Istifçi (2009) mentioned some other categories to be added to Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) apology speech act set:

- 1) Deny (denial of fault or offense) (e.g. I did not cause the accident. You parked your car on my way!) (DENY)

2) Blame (putting blame on the hearer) (e.g. why didn't you remind me?) (BLAME)

3) Health (asking the state of health) (e.g. Are you all right? I can take you to hospital.) (HEALTH)

4) Exclamation (Expressing surprise) (e.g. Oh!) (EXL)

5) Questioning (e.g. Can I use it for two days?) (QUEST) (p. 8)

Results

The descriptive analysis of the type and frequency of apology strategies is summarized in table 1, showing the answer to the first research question. Our results showed that in general, there is a significant difference between the frequency of used apology strategies by Iranian EFL learners and American speakers of English. American native speakers of English used more strategies than Iranian EFL learners.

Table 1
Strategy vs. Nationality Crosstabulation and Chi-square test results between the groups

Strategy	Frequency percentage	Nationality		Chi-Square test Sig.
		Iranian EFL learners	American native speakers	
IFID	total	34%	36.1%	0.000
	IFID a.REG	46%	64%	0.000
	IFID b. APL	10%	16%	0.003
	IFID c. FRG	5%	9%	0.023
EXPL		22.5%	19.9%	0.047
RESP		3.5%	9.5%	0.000
REPR		17.8%	18.0%	0.002
FORB		2.6%	2.5%	0.385*
DENY		1.3%	0.1%	0.003
BLAME		1.4%	0.5%	0.102*
HEALTH		1.8%	3.3%	0.001
EXL		9.6%	3.7%	0.000
QUEST		4.7%	7.4%	0.000
Total number of used strategies		1106 as 100%	734 as 100%	0.000

(*) shows that the null hypothesis did not prove to be rejected and the difference is not significant between the groups.

Looking for the differences of use in each strategy, we compared each strategy using separate chi-square tests. In table 1 we can see that the difference in IFID strategy use is significant between the two cultures. As we mentioned before, IFIDs are subdivided into three sub-strategies of 'regret', 'apology', and requesting for 'forgiveness'. Based on the results, the difference was significant in all three sub-strategies of REGs, APLs, and FRGs (as p-value are: 0.00, 0.03, and 0.023 and less than 0.05). However, generally speaking, the type of most frequent to the least frequently used IFID in both Iranians and Americans was the same. The most frequent IFID was REG, and the least frequent strategy was FRG.

IFIDs were the most used strategy in the two groups. Both groups started most of their responses with an IFID. The second and third most frequent strategies were also similar for both groups. However, the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth most frequent strategies were different in the two cultures. The ninth and tenth strategies were again the same for both cultures. The results also showed that the difference between the use of EXPL, RESP, REPR, DENY, HEALTH, EXC, and QUEST strategies by two cultures was statistically significant, but there did not exist a meaningful difference between the use of FORB, BLAME strategies, and the frequency of them were very low in both cultures.

In order to answer the second research question on how living in the target culture helps Iranians in gaining linguistic and cultural norms in using apologies, the strategies used by another group of Iranians living in the US were also counted. The result was 250 strategies in 100 responses of 10 Iranians living in America, which were then compared and contrasted with our previous groups. In this respect, we conducted two separate chi-square tests and we compared Iranians living in America first with Americans, and second with Iranian EFL learners living in Iran. In the first test, the p-value was 0.557 and more than 0.05, but in the second test p-value was 0.00 and less than 0.05. This shows that Iranians who lived in America were significantly different from Iranians living in Iran, and that they were similar to Americans.

In the next step, we investigated each strategy separately. The results showed that living in the native language context helped Iranians in gaining apology norms and in 11 out of 14 strategies the frequency of the strategies used by Iranians living in America is shown to be more than those used by Iranian EFL learners. All of the frequencies and related percentages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Strategy vs. nationality crosstabulation and Chi-Square test results

Strategy	Frequency percentage	Nationality		Chi-Square test Sig.
		American native speakers	Iranian living in US	
IFID	total	36.1%	38.4%	0.069*
	IFID a. REG	64%	71%	0.183*
	IFID b. APL	16%	10%	0.004
	IFID c. FRG	9%	15%	0.000
	EXPL	19.9%	24.4%	0.004
	RESP	9.5%	5.2%	0.000
	REPR	18%	16%	0.285*
	FORB	2.5%	2.4%	1.000*
	DENY	0.1%	0.0 %	0.564*
	BLAME	0.5%	0.5%	0.020
	HEALTH	3.3%	6%	0.000
	EXL	3.7%	4%	0.574*
	QUEST	7.4%	3.6%	0.000
	Total number of used strategies		734 as 100%	250 as 100%

(*) shows that the null hypothesis did not prove to be rejected and the difference is not significant between the groups.

Chi-square tests showed that, in half of our cases, the frequencies of apology strategy use by Iranians who live in the US were not significantly different from American speakers. As it is observable from Table 2, the difference of IFID, REG, REPR, FORB, DENY, and EXL, is not proved to be significant. However, significant differences do still exist between the use of other strategies like APL, FRG, EXPL, RESP, BLAME, HEALTH, and QUEST.

Discussion

According to the results of the study, the frequency of apology strategies was significantly different between Iranian EFL learners and American speakers of English. This, on the one hand, supports the previous studies which gave support to the culture specific aspect of language (Abedi, 2016; Khalib & Tayeh, 2014; Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011). On the other hand, it can be a support for the universality of language in terms of the type of strategy selection (Rabab'ah & Al-Hawamdeh, 2020; Shariati & Chamani,

2010; Lakoff & Idle, 2005). These findings are a further support for the statement by Lakoff and Idle (2005) that despite having universal components, languages are different in many ways.

To further shed light on the issue, we examined a group of Iranians who were living in the US for about four years. Interestingly, the frequency of their strategy was significantly different from that of Iranian EFL learners and similar to Americans. They were no longer similar to the EFL learners in Iran; rather they were similar to Americans in their apology strategy use.

Moreover, a scrutiny of the data analysis revealed to us that living in the target language context has helped Iranians in gaining access to some socio-pragmatic norms of the target language. These results are in line with Cenoz (2007) who believed that the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a foreign language context, in which there is no exposure to native language, is very different from learning it in a community where the language is spoken. He thinks of three reasons for this:

1) Foreign language learners are usually closely identified with their own language and culture. In this condition, adapting to the sociocultural rules of a remote culture may seem unnatural.

2) The pragmatic models that exist in the foreign language contexts are only shown implicitly through teaching materials and because of the different varieties, it is difficult to identify one model of reference.

3) There is no natural context to provide interaction with native speakers and, if there is, it is very limited. This means that there is no feedback for the student to fulfill their communicative needs (Cenoz, 2007).

These three points mentioned by Cenoz (2007) can give us a good indication for the analysis of our results. First, Iranians living in Iran are closely identified with their own culture, and using sociocultural rules of other languages may not be accepted by their community. Second, as to our knowledge, there is no clear-cut teaching material that explains the ways of apologizing, and if there is, they are expressed indirectly in other lessons. Last and the most important reason is the lack of natural context for learning by interaction. Accordingly, living in the target culture plays a crucial role in gaining the pragmatic competence of L2.

When ESL learners cannot distinguish between polite and impolite formulaic expressions of the target language, for the fear of being impolite they sometimes do not use apologies or overuse them. For this reason, we can raise the question why Iranians living in the US used these strategies even more than the Americans. We think of three reasons for this:

- 1) becoming sensitive in the use of apology strategies after gaining awareness,
- 2) trying to be as polite as possible, hence overusing the apology strategies
- 3) thinking that saying ‘sorry’ just once is not enough, so they do it several times in different ways till it shows that they mean it. This is mostly for saving themselves of being labeled as impolite.

However, our results were in contrast with Salehi (2014) and Abedi (2016) who found that the use of apology strategies by Iranians was similar to native English speakers, with only a few differences. In the study by Abedi (2016), results showed that Iranian respondents not only saved face by apologizing but also tried to build and maintain a friendship with the hearer. It was also supported by findings of Shariati and Chamani (2009), and Rastegar and Yasami (2014), that the low frequency of Iranian EFL learners use might be due to lacking language proficiency, and not because they generally use fewer apologies. Conversely, we believe that the study of Rezaei (2021) has a more realistic view of the nature of apology-making in the Persian context. His study showed that the prototypical explicit apologies are rare in Persian public discourse because it brings an implicit responsibility for the apologizer. Other studies also mention that Persians are traditionally from a non-egalitarian background and choose apology words depending on the social status of the hearer (Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011). Considering this, and our results, the importance of highlighting cultural differences in LX classrooms seems essential.

The most frequent strategies used by both Iranians and Americans were IFIDs. As Table 1 shows, REGs, APLs, and FRGs were successively first, second, and third most frequent sub-strategies, and their frequencies were significantly different between Americans and Iranian EFL learners. This was also shown in different studies on apology use in different contexts (Aboud & Shibliyev, 2021; Aboud, 2019; Abedi, 2016; Salehi, 2014; Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011). The frequency of use, however, was significantly lower in Iranian learners. Shariati and Chamani (2010) showed that in the Persian corpus, IFIDs are the most used strategies as well. Our results show that 37% of Persian responses lacked an IFID, while this number was only 14% for Americans. One reason for this may be lack of Iranians’ pragmatic proficiency. Although our Iranian participants were at the high level of English language classes, they still lacked pragmatic awareness. This is in line with previous studies which show that pragmatic competence is the most difficult aspect of language to master in learning a language (Barron, 2016).

Thus, we can here refer to Simin et al.'s (2014) study, and use explicit instruction as a solution to improve their proficiency in the use of the apology speech act. The lower use of IFIDs by Persians cannot be because of negative transfer because in the study of Afghari (2007) the results showed that Persian apologies are as formulaic in semantic structure as are English apologies. So if there is a possibility of transfer, it would be a positive transfer that helps the students in apology making.

Moreover, based on the findings in Tables 1 and 2, the used IFIDs of Iranians after living in the US are significantly different from Iranians living in Iran and similar to the Americans. This is another proof of Cenoz's (2007) idea who thinks that being in the foreign language context fosters the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Additionally, the use of REGs was proved to be more than other strategies in other studies (Abedi, 2016; Farashaiyan & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2011; Istifci, 2009).

The second and third most frequent strategies in both groups were EXPL and REPR which is in line with previous studies (Sari, 2016; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008; Olshtain, 1983) on American English speakers, and Afghari (2007) on Persian speakers, who both found that learners tend to follow IFIDs with an explanation of the situation and an offer of repair. However, the frequency of use in both of them was again significantly different between Iranian EFL learners and Americans. As can be seen from the example below, the Iranian EFL sample contains just an explanation, but Iranian American sample, like the American sample, contains an apology showing regret and an explanation. The Iranian EFL version of the response tries to justify the act and provide more contextual background without directly apologizing.

a) American (**Sit. 1¹**): *I am really sorry. I was having childcare issues, but everything is worked out now.*

b) Iranian EFL (**Sit. 1**): *I just worked on my project and I was really involved with it. So I forgot the meeting.*

According to the results in Tables 1 and 2, the frequency of EXPL for Iranians living in the US is again significantly different with both Americans and Iranian EFL learners. They again used the strategy more than Americans. However, in the case of REPR, Tables 1 and 2 show that after living in America, Iranians have gained related norms. The chi-square results show that they are significantly different from Iranian EFL learners but there is no

1. See appendix A for the situations.

difference between them and the Americans. These results may also be due to the reasons we mentioned earlier.

The next most frequent strategies were not similar in the groups. For Americans, RESP, and for Iranians, EXL were mostly used after REPR (See Table 1).

Regarding RESP, our results were in contrast with the studies of Afghari (2007) and Shariati and Chamani (2009) in Persian corpus, in which acknowledging responsibility (Cohen and Olshtain's, 1981 'partial apology') was the most frequent strategy after IFIDs among Persian speakers. In our study, however, its use was very low in comparison to the Americans. We can also refer this to the lack of pragmatic proficiency and some cultural differences. In this respect responses show that accepting the responsibility of the action by the American participant is direct, by Iranian EFL is indirect, and Iranian American participant is both direct and indirect, which is a combination of what the Iranian EFL and the American participant used. Cohen and Olshtain (1981) discuss the success of apology relies heavily on the cultural understanding and norms. To avoid offense or insult, and become impolite, speakers must realize how and when to be direct in the use of apology. They believe when the context is explicit, a more direct way of addressing is chosen, and when the prediction is a kind of regret, then an indirect form is chosen.

a) American (**Sit. 3**): *I am sorry. It was clearly my fault. Here is my insurance information.*

b) Iranian EFL (**Sit. 3**): *Oh God! I am sorry. I didn't see your car. I will call the police if you want. I give you my insurance.*

c) Iranian living in America (**Sit. 3**): *I am so sorry. I didn't see you. It was my fault. I can give you all the information about my insurance.*

In a previous research by Shishavan and Sharifian (2013) on refusals, it was shown that Iranians tend to use indirect strategies more than direct ones, and instead provide further explanation for justifying their act. In another place, Sari (2016) confirms that native speakers use short and direct patterns in apology making. Another reason, as Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah (2018) mention is that such politeness strategies to some extent depend on the context in which they occur. While Native speakers feel the context of the situation better than non-native speakers because it is written in their L1, non-native speakers do not take the seriousness of the situation. That said, we need to bear in mind that, as Hall (1997) points out, the term multicultural is embedded within every culture. There is no categorical distinction such as

Iranian culture or American culture because in every culture there is so much diversity. However, as this and similar studies emphasize, we are discussing the general and distinctive patterns.

The high use of EXL by Iranian EFL learners, as Eslami-rasekh and Mardani (2010) mention, might be a way to compensate for their lack of language proficiency. Other than EXL, intensifying adverbials are also a type of internal intensifiers (Afghari, 2007). We also counted intensifying adverbials, and compared them with 'exclamations'. We believe that the use of the EXL strategy correlated with intensifying adverbials that came with regrets in the Iranian participants. This means that, to show strong emotion and intensity of their regrets, Iranian EFL learners overused 'exclamation' instead of applying more intensifiers: EXL = 17.6%; intensifier = 17.8%. However, for American participants these numbers were: EXL = 9%; intensifier = 26.7%. After living in the US, Iranians managed to reach the norms and used fewer exclamations and more intensifiers: EXL = 10%; intensifier = 23%. The more Iranians used intensifiers, the less they used EXL. This showed that the form of intensity had changed after living in the target language context.

Based on the collected samples, the Iranian EFL groups frequently employ the linguistic expression of 'oh, my God', and 'oh God' to initiate their responses. A reason for this as discussed in Park (2007) is that using affective words such as 'oh my God' by non-native speakers is a way to compensate for their linguistic deficiency. They utilize the method of self-deprecation and emotive words in order to compensate for their sociolinguistics and pragmatic deficiency. In addition, the speakers can show their feeling of regret and remorse by using emotive actions and exclamations rather than words. This was also proved in the study of Eslami-rasekh and Mardani (2010) that users utilize more intensifiers when lacking sociopragmatic proficiency.

QUEST is another strategy that is again significantly different from Americans and living in the target language context did not have any effect on the use of it. This shows that either the participants may not have been proficient enough in English to include the expected semantic formula in their responses, or it is because of negative transfer from their L1. This strategy and the other five are the less frequently occurring and the learners have less opportunity to encounter and learn to use them in the interactions.

Situations 3, 5, and 7 in our DCT were the only conditions that provided a place for the participant to enquire about HEALTH. The frequency of this strategy in Iranian EFL learners was significantly different and lower than Americans. That, we think, can be due to their lack of linguistic competence to produce sentences fluently. Iranians living in America were significantly

different, but this time higher than Americans. This is another proof to Cenoz (2007) who focuses on the importance of living in the target culture. There was no difference between FORB strategy use in the three groups of Iranian EFL learners, Americans, and Iranians living in the US (see Tables 1 and 2).

Regarding the BLAME strategy, Iranians are a little higher than Americans, but this difference is not statistically meaningful (see Table 1). In regards to DENY the responsibility of the blame, Iranians are significantly different and higher than Americans. Just as, 'accepting the responsibility of the blame', we can refer this difference to the cultural and psychological characteristics of Iranians. We can claim there is a negative correlation between the strategies of RESP and DENY. Iranians accepted less responsibility for their fault and they sometimes blamed others for that fault. The reason we assume is that apologizing is considered face-threatening in the Iranian culture. Apologies in general as Tannen (2001) maintains are among the most power weapons in arguments which often soften the tense situations between speakers. People wish their utterances and experiences acknowledged. This can convey to the other party that what we have said was not intentional and was not meant to cause any harm or offense. She argues that apologizing is a powerful ritual. An apology by one speaker is a motive for other parties in the conversation so that they become stimulated and make an apology when needed.

In a study on apology strategies in Jordanian Arabic, new sub-strategies were found that were culture-specific (Banikalef, Maros, Aladdi, & Al-natour, 2015). We also saw a strategy in the Persian context that can be used to ameliorate the faulty deed. Complimenting by flattery was only seen in the responses of Iranian EFL learners. No flattery was found in the responses of Iranians living in America, which may be due to the low number of participants, but the use of flattery in Iranian EFL was 3.7%. For example, as a response to situation 5, a female Persian wrote: "*I am sorry lady, let me help you stand up. I like your dress*". In another case for the response of situation 10, a boy wrote: "*I am very happy I found this book in such an amazing bookstore*". In another case as a response to situation 8, a boy wrote: "*I knew you are a great teacher and let me have your book for more days*". In these situations, the offenders try to compliment the offended to save face and show their positive intention to mitigate their fault. This strategy is part of Persian culture that is called 'ta'arof' which means saying something positive but not necessarily realistic in order to save face. Beeman (1986, p.140) believes ta'arof in Persian consists of two elements of "other-raising" and "self-lowering", which allows the speaker to "get the lower hand" voluntarily and to elevate the person he or she is interacting with. Using this technique, the

offender can raise the hearer and lower the self to save face and lessen the threat. In a later study, Beeman (2001, p.47) describes that Iranians use ta'arof as a variety of polite communications. He mentions that ta'arof is valued both positively and negatively. Flattery or '*chaplusi*' is an example of negatively valued ta'arof, in which the speaker has manipulative purposes and uses it to control the emotional state of others. This supports our finding that flattery can be used as a device for apology making in Persian culture by, as Beeman (ibid.) says, '*masmali kardan*' or making amends for what has happened. Koutlaki (2002, p.1741) considers flattery as a subcategory of ta'arof, which is used as a face-enhancing act by Persians. Studies have also shown that Iranians use of speech acts is affected by their cultural schema of ta'arof (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013). However, we cannot reliably refer to these responses due to their low frequency of use, yet these findings provide a base for further studies on these strategies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to compare the use of ten common apology strategies between Iranian EFL learners living in Iran, Iranians living in the U.S., and American speakers of English. The study was mainly quantitative in nature. However, the quantifications are discussed in terms of politeness and apology theories chiefly from the classroom perspective (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Hall, 1997).

Results showed that Iranian EFL learners used strategies of IFID, EXPL, RESP, REPR, DENY, HEALTH, EXC, and QUEST meaningfully different. However, in the case of FORB, BLAME no meaningful difference was seen. These differences were due to the lack of pragmatic materials in the teaching curriculum, the lack of pragmatic competence in the Iranian EFL learners, and the inaccessibility of English speakers in Iran and inadequate context for the use of apology strategies. In addition, the high use of emotive expressions like "oh my God!" by Iranian EFL learners was considered to be covering for their deficiencies in pragmatic and sociolinguistic proficiency. Moreover, our study showed that after living in the U.S., Iranians could reach the related sociopragmatic norms in apology strategies such as IFID, REPR, DENY, and EXL to a reasonable extent. Iranian Americans, on the other hand, used EXPL and HEALTH more than Americans. This is because Iranians often like to expand on explanation (EXPL) as to why something has happened to them, and usually to a greater length than required, to justify their actions. We would think this could be the result of inquisitions in the hierarchical structure life in Iran where the addressees are expected to provide further information before the interrogator asks for details, if required at all. The extra use of HEALTH

is also due to the frequent habit of asking about people's health in their daily conversations. Normally, people in Iran ask each other's health condition very frequently because they say '*salam salamati miarieh*', meaning 'saying hello and asking about other's health will bring health'.

Our study has provided support for Istifçi (2009) who mentioned some other categories of denying, blaming the hearer, asking the state of health, exclamation, and questioning to be added to Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) apology speech act set. We also found another strategy that can be added to the previous ones, that is flattery, which was used by Iranian EFL learners. Flattery is a subcategory of ta'arof, which is used as a face-enhancing act by Persians (Beeman, 1986).

Based on the findings of this study, we conclude that learning speech acts such as apologies is a challenge for Iranian foreign language learners. As there is no access to real-life foreign language contexts and such pragmatic situations hardly occur in the classroom context, access to real speech acts use becomes harder. However, improvement can be made with explicit teaching of the speech acts by encouraging students to watch real life shows conducted in English. Teachers should introduce different ways of apology making to the students and encourage using apology strategies whenever necessary. Further transcultural studies are very helpful in finding weak points of foreign language learners, and focusing on them in future studies.

Declaration of interest: None

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