

The Use of Apology Strategies in English by Japanese University EFL learners

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Abstract

Apology is an expressive illocutionary act, the aim of which is to maintain harmony between the speaker and hearer, and to enhance and restore interpersonal relationships. The Speech act of apology is important for English language learning as speech acts should be integrated in the classroom to help learners develop pragmatic competence in the L2 target language. Japanese English language learners lack knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules of speaking English. Successful communication is therefore possible when English Foreign Language (EFL) learners have pragmatic competence which exhibits the ability to use language forms suitable in a socio-cultural context. The aim of this study is to investigate the strategies used by EFL learners of English of the speech act of apology, which is based on Holmes' (1990) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) apology speech act sets. A Discourse Completion test (DCT) was conducted by 100 university students, and it was found that Japanese EFL learners lack knowledge and communicative competence for most of the strategies of apology.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence has been the goal of teaching a second/foreign language and has gained importance in recent years since its introduction by Hymes in the 1960s. As Hymes (1972) points out, communicative competence involves not only rules of the language but also abstract knowledge about social and functional rules of a language. There have been several studies that focus on the effect of proficiency on pragmatic competence (cf. Rose 2000, Sabaté i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor 2007, Trosborg 1995). These researchers report that in many cases grammatical and pragmatic competence seem to develop together but relatively independently. Individual differences have been linked to learning context and time spent in the target language community. Native speakers of a language have acquired the knowledge of rules of that language, and they choose among the speech acts when communicating with others. However, for second/foreign language learners the situation is different since they face problems in using speech acts as their usage requires socio-pragmatic competence.

Although Japanese EFL learners achieve a relatively high level of L2 competence in grammar, they lack any command of sociolinguistic rules of speaking English. Students in Japan start learning English from the 4th grade of Elementary school (at the time of writing), and continue to study it as a compulsory subject until the last year of High school (8 years of education). They have available contact with English through social, electronic, and print media but they don't have the desired level of functional proficiency in English, especially pragmatic competence. It is a common observation that English teachers in Japan hardly try to teach communicative competence in their classrooms, especially pragmatic competence. In the classrooms, the focus of English teachers is directed toward linguistic competence and there doesn't appear to be a realization on the importance of pragmatic competence. Thus teachers in school settings emphasize the denotative meanings and not the connotative ones, and this will lead to learners' inability to use language

appropriately in different contexts, such as for apologising.

An apology is a communicative strategy used primarily to remedy an offence caused by the apologisee to the person that they have offended. It is an essential component of the maintenance of social harmony as it communicates awareness and acceptance of moral responsibility for offensive behaviour and initiates the process of negotiating absolution (Goffman, 1971; Holmes, 1990). The act of apologising resolves various types of conflict ranging from uncomfortable moments in conversation, through serious breaches of social or cultural norms by an individual, to incidents of national or international political significance. Apologising is considered by sociolinguists as an important speech act in social interaction as it relates to the notion of 'face needs' or basic wants of the individual concerned (Olshtain, 1989). Brown and Levinson (1987) have distinguished two kinds of 'face needs' for which people generally show concern in their social behaviour: positive face needs – the need to be admired, liked and appreciated; and negative face needs – the need not to be imposed upon.

The aim of this study therefore is to investigate the use of apology strategies in English used by Japanese university students and to find out how much students need to develop L2 pragmatic ability.

2. Review of literature

In sociolinguistics, pragmatic competence has been defined and discussed by many researchers. Fraser (1980), defines Pragmatic competence as the ability to communicate the intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of the interlocutor as it was intended. Levinson (1983) explains that pragmatics is the study of how individuals understand and generate a communicative act or speech act in a conversation and thus distinguishes two intents or meanings in each utterance or communicative act; one is the informative intent or the sentence meaning and the other the communicative intent or speaker meaning (Leech, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to by Kaspar (1997) as pragmatic competence, which often includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit.

The act of apologizing is called for when there is some behaviour which has violated social norms (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983:20), to restore social harmony after an infraction of a social rule (Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu, 2007:654), or as Leech (1983:104) explains: a redressive speech act for a face-threatening act, a "convivial speech act". To emphasize its role as a remedy to what is or what might have been seen as an offensive (speech) act, it has also been labeled by Goffman (1971) as a "remedial exchange". An apology is, thus, a prime example of 'face-work', which is, as Goffman states (1967:12), "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" .

Sociolinguists who have studied apologies in different languages and cultures have devised systems to classify the various strategies used (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983, and Holmes, 1990). The following is a summary of the strategies reported in literature:

1. An explicit expression of apology (illocutionary Force Indicating Device IFID)
2. An explanation or a justification
 - a. An explanation, excuse or account
 - b. Expressing lack of intent
 - c. Expressing feeling
 - d. A denial of responsibility
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility for the offence

- a. Accepting the blame or expressing regret for the offence
- b. Stating what has happened
4. An offer of redress or repair
5. A promise of forbearance
6. Consideration for the hearer
 - a. Consideration of the offended person's feelings or condition
 - b. Acknowledgement of understanding the situation
 - c. Appreciation for the offended person's action
7. Keeping silent (non-verbal behaviour)

Apology speech acts have been investigated cross-culturally in order to find similarities and differences between the languages. The studies have mostly been carried out in situations in which learners learn the target language as their second language. The results are varied and have shown that some learners employ language transfer from their L1, some learners approximate native speaker norms or some learners use completely different strategies than they would otherwise use in either their L1 or L2.

Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1984) carried out a study on requests and apologies with native speakers of Hebrew and learners of Hebrew. They found that learners of Hebrew approached native speaker norms when they had the same rules in their native languages and deviated from native speakers when they had language-specific rules. Erçetin (1995) carried out a study on the use of apologies by Turkish EFL learners and claimed that EFL learners exhibited transfer from Turkish.

3. Methodology

The focus of this study is to explore the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university students in Japan. Because of the nature of the data (qualitative) and the data collection procedures (DCT), and data analysis procedures, a quantitative research design was used. For data collection, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that contained 12 items was developed. The DCTs were thoroughly explained and administered to the participants. All participant responses were analyzed using frequencies, an Independent Samples t-Test, and summary narrative methods in order to present a realistic description of the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university students in Japan.

The target population of this study was students studying English in their 1st and 2nd years of University. The participants (100) were selected randomly and they volunteered willingly. The sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of their cultural and linguistic background (Japanese) and academic experiences. Respondents were asked to rate their speaking ability in English by themselves in the questionnaire (DCT) and a majority of respondents (76) out of 100 rated themselves at a good level.

A Discourse Completion Test (DCT), having 8 apology scenarios, was developed in order to collect information from the Japanese English students about their use of apology strategies in English. Following a brief introductory part explaining the purpose of the study, the participants were then invited to complete questions relating to Apology Scenarios (see Appendix A). The first part was intended to collect certain necessary demographic information such as, name of institution, discipline and semester, gender, student status, and level of English. The second part consisted of eight apology situations designed to elicit apology strategies by modifying those situations used in the previous apology speech act studies of Olshtain and

Cohen, (1983). In the design of the apology situations, sociolinguistic status (high, equivalent and low) of the respondents and their interlocutors were also considered. The participants were asked to write responses in English (what they would say in a specific situation as detailed or stated in the DCT, keeping in mind that they are in a real life situation.

All responses were coded and compiled separately in different MS Excel files and sheets. All MS Excel files were converted into SPSS 21 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were run before any of the subsequent analyses to check normality of data. The data sets were analyzed in the light of the research questions using frequencies, descriptive statistics, and an Independent Samples t- Test. A mix of summary narrative, tables with numerals and figures were used for the description and discussion of results and findings. As can be seen in Table 1 below, the elicited data were categorized according to Holmes (1990) apology speech act sets (twelve possible realizations) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) classifications.

Table 1.
Apology Strategies and Possible Realizations

Strategy code	Possible Realization
A	Explicit expression of apology; sorry
A1	An offer of apology e.g. I beg your pardon
A2	An expression of regret e.g. I'm sorry; I'm afraid.
A3	A request for forgiveness e.g. Can you excuse me please?
B	Explanation or account e.g. there was terrible traffic.
C	Acknowledgement of responsibility e.g. Oh, I made a mistake.
C1	Accepting the blame e.g. It is my fault.
C2	Expressing self-deficiency e.g. I got upset/confused.
C3	Expressing lack of intent e.g. I did not mean to break it
C4	Recognizing Interlocutor as deserving apology e.g. you're right
C5	Offering repair/ redress e.g. I'll buy you a new camera.
D	Promise of forbearance e.g. I promise, I'll not do it next time.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the data obtained from the discourse completion questionnaire to ascertain the apology strategies used by the Japanese university students of English. In order to do this, the frequencies of use and non-use of specific apology strategies were obtained by using SPSS 21. As stated earlier, using Holmes (1990) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) classifications of strategies, Table 2 below presents the results of the use and non-use of the specific apology strategies.

Out of the total 100 respondents, a great majority of the participants (93 and 97) used the "explicit expression of apology" (sorry) and an "explanation or account" (there was terrible traffic). On the other hand, there was a majority of respondents (64, 60 and 76) who did not report using "an offer of apology" (I beg your pardon), "an expression of regret" (I'm sorry) and "request for forgiveness" (Can you excuse me please?) respectively. Moreover, there was a majority of respondents (60, 66, and 62) who did not use

“accepting the blame” (it’s my fault), “offering repair/redress” (I’ll buy you a new camera), and a “promise of forbearance” (I promise, I’ll not do it next time) respectively. Similarly, a great majority of respondents (78) did not report using the apology strategies “expressing lack of intent” (I did not mean to break it).

Interestingly, none of the respondents reported using the apology strategy “recognizing interlocutor as deserving apology” (you are right). Similarly, almost all the respondents (99) did not use the apology strategy “acknowledgement of responsibility” (oh, I made a mistake). With regard to “expressing self-deficiency” (I got upset) a majority of respondents (76) reported using this apology strategy.

Table 2.

Frequencies of the use and non-use of apology strategies in English by Japanese English students in Japan

Strategy Code	Brief description	Freq of Use	Freq of non-use
A	Explicit expression of apology; sorry	93	7
A1	An offer of apology e.g. I beg your pardon.	36	64
A2	An expression of regret e.g. I’m sorry.	40	60
A3	A request for forgiveness e.g. Can you excuse me please?	24	76
B	Explanation or account e.g. There was terrible traffic.	97	3
C	Acknowledgement of responsibility e.g. ‘Oh, I made a mistake’.	1	99
C1	Accepting the blame e.g. It’s my fault.	40	60
C2	Expressing self-deficiency e.g. I got upset/confused	76	24
C3	Expressing lack of intent e.g. I did not mean to break it.	22	78
C4	Recognizing Interlocutor as deserving apology e.g. you’re right.	0	100
C5	Offering repair/ redress e.g. I’ll buy a new camera for you.	34	66
D	Promise of forbearance e.g. I promise, I’ll not do it next time.	38	62

5. Discussion

A number of interesting patterns emerge from the data I have described thus far. As highlighted earlier, the results of the descriptive statistics (frequencies) showed that out of a total of 100 participants almost all respondents (93 and 97) used the “explicit expression of apology” (sorry) and an “explanation or account” (there was terrible traffic). The exclusive use of these two types of apology strategies suggests that the respondents feel the need to be explicit and direct. It seems that Japanese learners of English used an “Explicit expression of apology” (sorry) to accomplish stability while dealing with an event that needs apologizing. There is also the possibility that this type of apology strategy is used because this is an expression that is heard or “overheard” in daily routine conversation or in the media. It is quite usual that even at a slighter mistake they say ‘sorry’, whether or not the situation is severe. This finding is consistent with the findings of other studies (Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1993, Markus and Kitayama 1991, Okumura and Wei 2000), that apologies given by EFL learners in English are mostly direct. The respondents were found feeling the need to explain after apologizing because almost all the respondents (99) used an “explanation or account” which is an attempt at minimizing their offenses. The use of explanation as one of the most frequent strategies might be a way of apologizing clearly. In addition, a majority of respondents (76) were found using an “expression of self-deficiency” (I got confused).

One of the reasons for using only these four apology strategies in English is that English learners in Japan are not taught L2 pragmatics or the different rules of using English appropriate to specific contexts. Whatever expressions, especially English rules of speaking; students or users of English in Japan learn and use, are largely learned by them from English speaking movies, fiction, or other media. These are the only types of materials that provide learners with exposure to native English speech or language. As far as the non-use of the apology strategies in English by the respondents is concerned, all the respondents were found not using “acknowledgement of responsibility” (oh, I made a mistake) and “recognizing H/Interlocutor as deserving apology” (you are right). One of the reasons for not using the apology strategies of “the acknowledgement of responsibility” and “regarding H/Interlocutor as deserving apology” is that people in Japan are very group conscious and such types of behavior, i.e., acknowledging responsibility for offense or mistake or regarding interlocutors deserving apology, are considered being outside of the group or norm. However, it does not mean people do not apologize rather apologizing is just a formality.

Moreover, the majority of respondents (64, 60 and 76) were found not using the following apology strategies: “an offer of apology” (I beg pardon), “an expression of regret” (I’m sorry), “a request for forgiveness” (can you excuse me please?). In addition, a majority of respondents (60, 66, and 62) did not use “accepting the blame” (I made a blunder), “expressing lack of intent” (I didn’t mean to break it), “offering repair/redress” (I’ll buy you a new camera), and a “promise of forbearance” (I promise; I’ll not do it again). From these results, it is possible that cross-cultural differences play some role in the way Japanese learners of English select and use apology strategies. The respondents also seem to have not interpreted the situations appropriately. Their lack of knowledge of the apology strategies in English also seems to be affecting their use of apology strategies in English.

This non-use of as many as six different types of apology strategies by a great majority or majority can be attributed to respondents’ (1) lack of knowledge or proficiency in using apology strategies in English, and (2) different cultural values and norms. Because language is so much associated with its culture, naturally there would be some difficulties for learners of English in Japan in acquiring the nuances of the English language that are so culture-bound. This indicates that Japanese learners of English have never heard of these strategies and thus were unable to use these strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university students of English in Japan. Out of twelve different apology strategy types, respondents were found using typically four apology strategies only in English, such as an explanation or account “there was terrible traffic”, an explicit apology “sorry”, expressing self-deficiency “I got upset”, and intensifiers of apology “I’m extremely sorry; I’m terribly sorry about it”. This shows a lack of knowledge from the participants about the different types of apology strategies in different contexts, and explicitly reveals the need for developing the L2 English pragmatic ability of learners of English in Japan.

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Appendix A

Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

This questionnaire aims to investigate Japanese EFL learners of English apology strategies. There are some scenarios below that require an apology. Please read each of the scenarios carefully and try to provide as close a response as possible to what would be your natural response to the situation.

1. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to

apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the phone and asks: Boss: "What happened to you?"

You: _____

2. You forget a get-together with a friend. You call them to apologize. This is really the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the telephone: Friend: "What happened?"

You: _____

3. Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily. Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!"

You: _____

4. You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter. However, you held onto it for almost two weeks. Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.

You: _____

5. You accidentally bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her bags all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too. It's clearly your fault and you want to apologize profusely.

You: _____

6. Spending an evening at a friend's apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her.

You: _____

7. Rushing to get to class on time, you run round the corner and bump into one of your fellow students who was waiting there, almost knocking them down.

You: _____

8. You have forgotten to return the book you borrowed from your professor. In the staff corridor you come across your professor.

You: _____