



The Use of Apology Speech Acts in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Pragmatic Competence Perspective

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Abstract ;

This study explores the use of apology speech acts by Master students of English at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University. It examines students' awareness and ability to perform apologies in various contexts. Using a mixed-method approach with a questionnaire and a Discourse Completion Task, results revealed gender-based differences in apology strategies. Female students prefer negative politeness, while male students use positive politeness. Power dynamics also affect student-teacher apologies, with students opting for more indirect forms when addressing authority. The study suggests the need for explicit pragmatic instruction for a more effective communication.

Article info

Received

April 14 ;2025

Accepted

May 26 ;2025

Keyword:

- ✓ Apology
- ✓ SpeechAct
- ✓ EFL Classroom
- ✓ Pragmatics Competence
- ✓ Politeness

1. Introduction

The study of pragmatics in language acquisition has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Pragmatics, which involves the use of language in socially appropriate ways, is a key component of communicative competence. One crucial area within pragmatics is the use of speech acts, including apologies. Apology speech acts serve as a fundamental aspect of maintaining social harmony, acknowledging wrongdoing, and preserving face in communication. The use of apology speech acts in EFL classrooms is particularly significant as they reflect a learner's ability to navigate complex social relationships, which is essential for successful communication in English.

Apology speech acts are inherently face-threatening, requiring speakers to navigate the tension between expressing regret or responsibility for an action and maintaining respect for the social identity of both the speaker and the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Given their importance in mitigating face threats, apology strategies are essential for managing social relations in diverse communicative settings. In EFL contexts, learners must not only be linguistically competent but also pragmatically competent, understanding how to use speech acts appropriately according to social, cultural, and contextual cues.

2. Research Aim

This study investigates the use of apology speech acts by first-year Master's students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University, focusing on their pragmatic competence in English. Specifically, the study aims to explore how students use

apology strategies in classroom settings, their awareness of the appropriate use of apologies, and the factors that influence their choice of strategies.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How aware are first-year Master's students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University of the role of apology speech acts in communication?
2. What apology strategies do these students most frequently employ in EFL classroom interactions?
3. How do gender and social power dynamics influence the use of apology speech acts among these students?

This research aims to fill a gap in the existing literature on pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms, particularly regarding apology speech acts. While prior studies have explored the use of other speech acts, such as requests or refusals (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993), there is limited research specifically addressing apology strategies in Algerian EFL classrooms. By focusing on this under-explored area, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how pragmatic competence is developed and applied by non-native speakers of English, with an emphasis on the role of social factors, such as gender and power dynamics, in shaping communication practices.

3. Literature Review

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that examines how language is used to perform various communicative functions, such as making requests, issuing refusals, offering apologies, and more. While much research has focused on the linguistic structures of speech acts, fewer studies have explored

their social and cultural dimensions, particularly in the context of second language acquisition (SLA). Apology speech acts—one of the most frequently used forms of communication—are critical for maintaining social harmony, managing interpersonal relationships, and protecting face in conversation (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Understanding how learners of English utilize apology strategies is essential for assessing their pragmatic competence and their ability to navigate social interactions effectively in a second language.

3.1 Theoretical Framework of Apology Speech Acts

The theoretical framework for apology speech acts is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which divides politeness strategies into four categories: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record strategies. Apology, as a speech act, typically falls under the category of negative politeness, as the speaker seeks to minimize imposition on the hearer's negative face—the desire not to be imposed upon. This is especially important in cultures that prioritize social harmony and where directness may be viewed as confrontational or threatening.

According to Holmes (1995), apologies serve as an essential mechanism for maintaining face in communication, providing speakers a way to acknowledge their mistakes and repair any harm caused. Apologies often involve expressions of regret or statements of responsibility alongside an attempt to mitigate the social impact of the offense. Common forms of apology include phrases such as "I'm sorry," "I apologize," and "Please forgive me." However, the selection of a particular apology strategy is influenced by several factors, including the severity of the offense, the relationship between the

speaker and hearer, and the social context of the interaction (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

Apology speech acts are particularly challenging in second language contexts because learners must navigate the complexities of both their native language and the target language. Chen (1996) notes that second language learners often struggle with applying the appropriate apology strategies, not only because of linguistic differences but also due to cultural misalignments in the norms of politeness. In EFL contexts, students often face the dual challenge of acquiring the linguistic forms of apology and understanding the cultural subtleties that govern their use.

3.2 Factors Affecting Apology Strategies Use

The frequency and form of apology speech acts are shaped by a variety of factors, including cultural norms, gender, status relationships, and situational context (Holmes, 1995).

Cultural differences play a significant role in how apologies are performed. In some cultures, indirectness is preferred to avoid face-threatening situations, whereas in others, directness may be more acceptable, particularly when the offense is minor (Kasper, 2003). For instance, in cultures with a strong emphasis on saving face and maintaining respect for authority, such as in many Asian and Arab cultures, apologies are often more formal and indirect. In contrast, cultures that emphasize efficiency and informality might allow for more direct forms of apology. This variation underscores the importance of not only understanding the language itself but also recognizing the culturally appropriate ways to express apologies.

Gender is another crucial factor influencing the use of apology strategies. Studies by Sifianou (1992) and Kadar et al. (2013) have shown that women tend to use more indirect apology strategies compared to men, often incorporating empathy and emotional expressions of regret. This tendency aligns with Holmes' (1995) findings that women, particularly in formal or hierarchical contexts, are more likely to use elaborate strategies that aim to maintain rapport and social harmony. The gendered approach to apologies reveals that women are generally more conscious of the emotional dimensions of communication, often opting for strategies that soften the impact of their speech.

The role of power dynamics between speakers is also central to understanding apology strategies. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers in higher power positions—such as teachers or employers—are typically allowed to be more direct in their communication, while those in lower power positions—such as students or subordinates—tend to use more mitigated language to avoid threatening the face of those in authority. In an EFL classroom, this dynamic influences how students apologize to their teachers versus their peers. The students are more likely to use negative politeness strategies, such as hedging or apologizing with an explanation, when addressing teachers, due to the perceived social hierarchy.

3.3 Apology Speech Acts in EFL Contexts

Research on apology speech acts in EFL classrooms remains somewhat limited, although studies examining the challenges learners face in acquiring appropriate strategies have emerged. Chen (1996) examined how Chinese EFL learners use apology speech acts, finding that learners often struggle with subtleties in

appropriateness across different situations. EFL learners, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, often face challenges in distinguishing between formal and informal contexts, which impacts their ability to use appropriate apology strategies.

Similarly, Beebe et al. (1990) investigated the use of apology speech acts by Japanese learners of English and found that non-native speakers often struggle with balancing directness and formality in English apologies. These learners tended to overuse certain strategies, such as overly formal apologies, or omit apologies altogether when they were uncertain of the appropriate form. This highlights the gap between learners' native language norms and the apology strategies required in the target language, a challenge common to all EFL learners.

The study of apology speech acts in the Algerian EFL context is still relatively underexplored. However, studies on politeness and speech acts in general are beginning to surface, shedding light on the ways in which Algerian cultural and societal norms influence the use of apology strategies. In Algeria, cultural and societal influences play a significant role in shaping how apologies are performed, especially in formal settings such as classrooms. Algerian students, much like their counterparts in other Arab cultures, are likely to exhibit a high degree of indirectness in their apologies, recognizing the importance of mitigating face threats in hierarchical contexts like teacher-student interactions.

Athamna (2016) explored politeness strategies, including apologies, among Algerian EFL learners in academic emails. The study found that Algerian students employed indirectness when apologizing, recognizing the importance of mitigating

face threats in hierarchical communication, such as between students and teachers. This study emphasized the influence of cultural norms and language proficiency in shaping how apologies were performed, with more proficient students demonstrating a better understanding of when to employ more nuanced strategies.

Similarly, Boudraa (2019) examined the use of politeness strategies in spoken interactions between Algerian EFL students and their teachers. The study revealed that students favored negative politeness strategies, which aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of negative politeness, where speakers seek to avoid imposing on the autonomy of the hearer. The study highlighted the deep influence of Algerian societal norms, where respect for authority is strongly emphasized and leading students to avoid direct apologies in favor of more indirect strategies, such as offering justifications or softening their statements.

In the broader North African context, Zaid (2014) explored apology strategies among Tunisian EFL learners and found that students tended to use formal and indirect apologies, reflecting cultural expectations of deference in communication. Though not directly focused on Algeria, this research provides valuable insights into the broader Arab EFL context, where social hierarchies heavily influence language use in educational settings. Zaid's study found that indirect apologies—such as expressing regret or providing reasons for the offense—were common strategies for mitigating face threats in the classroom.

These studies suggest that apology speech acts in the Algerian EFL context are significantly influenced by cultural and societal norms, particularly those that shape the power dynamics between

students and teachers. While students are generally aware of the importance of politeness in communication, their ability to apply appropriate apology strategies often depends on their understanding of the social context and their language proficiency.

This study contributes to the body of work on apology speech acts in Algerian EFL classrooms, focusing on first-year Master's students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University. By examining students' awareness and use of apology strategies through a combination of questionnaire data and Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), this research aims to provide deeper insights into how apology strategies are utilized and the factors that influence their use in the Algerian EFL context.

3. Research Methodology

This study follows an exploratory research design, which is appropriate for examining a relatively underexplored area of study, particularly in the context of apology speech acts in the Algerian EFL setting. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to capture both the frequency and depth of students' understanding and use of apology strategies. This approach ensures that the findings offer a well-rounded perspective on how apology speech acts are performed and the various factors influencing their use in academic contexts. The combination of these methodologies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how learners navigate politeness strategies, specifically in teacher-student interactions and peer communication within the classroom.

The participants of this study consisted of 74 first-year Master's students enrolled in the English Language and Literature Department at Mohamed Lamine

Debaghine Setif 2 University. A convenience sampling method was used to select students who were readily available and willing to participate in the study. Given that these students had received prior exposure to pragmatics as part of their coursework, they were deemed suitable for the study, as they were expected to have a foundational understanding of speech act theory and politeness strategies.

The sample was predominantly female, with 86.48% female participants and 13.51% male participants, which reflects broader trends in Algerian higher education, where females outnumber males in language and literature programs. The gender disparity is important to consider, as it may influence the results, particularly in terms of gendered differences in the use of apology speech acts, with females generally being more likely to employ indirect and mitigated forms of politeness.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' awareness and use of apology speech acts, two primary data collection tools were employed: a questionnaire and a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The questionnaire was designed to assess students' awareness and perceptions of apology speech acts, focusing on their understanding of when and how to apologize in English.

A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was designed to assess students' practical application of apology speech acts in real-life scenarios. The DCT presented 10 different situations in which participants were asked to respond as they would in typical classroom interactions. These scenarios were carefully crafted to reflect common situations where apologies might be necessary, such as when a student is late for class, makes a mistake during a

presentation, or needs to ask for an extension on an assignment.

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 29 software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages, were calculated to assess students' general attitudes toward apology speech acts. The responses were also analyzed to identify patterns in students' awareness of politeness and apology strategies. Additionally, gender differences were examined to explore whether male and female students displayed differing levels of awareness or preferences for certain types of apology strategies.

The responses from the DCT were analyzed using a framework based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness strategies. The analysis categorized responses into the following four main strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The frequency of each strategy was recorded, and examples from students' responses were examined to understand how these strategies were applied in specific contexts.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants' rights and privacy. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assured that their responses would only be used for academic purposes.

While the study provides valuable insights into the use of apology speech acts among Algerian EFL students, several limitations should be considered:

- **Sample Size and Generalizability:** The sample size of 74 students, although

adequate for this exploratory study, may not be representative of the entire population of Algerian EFL learners. As a result, the findings may be limited in terms of generalizability to other student cohorts or institutions.

- **Gender Imbalance:** The disproportionate number of female participants (86.48%) may influence the findings, particularly in terms of gendered differences in the use of apology strategies. Future studies with a more balanced gender representation would help provide a clearer picture of any gender-based differences in apology strategies.

- **Contextual Limitations:** The study focuses exclusively on first-year Master's students at a single university. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of student experiences or the range of cultural contexts within Algeria or other Arabic-speaking countries.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Questionnaire Results

4.1.1. Awareness of Apology Speech Acts

The responses to the first section of the questionnaire reveal a strong awareness among students regarding the importance of apology speech acts in communication. A notable 90% of participants agreed that the ability to apologize effectively is essential for maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. This aligns with the findings of Holmes (1995), who emphasized the social function of apologies in conflict resolution and maintaining harmony within social networks. Apologies, as Holmes suggests, are integral in mitigating interpersonal tension, restoring equilibrium in relationships, and ensuring the continuation of effective communication.

Furthermore, 92% of students highlighted the importance of sincerity when apologizing, which reflects a nuanced understanding of the function of apologies beyond mere compliance or formality. This high level of agreement correlates with Goffman's (1967) concept of face work, in which apologies serve as face-saving mechanisms, protecting the dignity and social identity of both the speaker and the hearer. By acknowledging fault and expressing regret, students recognize the potential for an apology to repair social bonds, thereby maintaining the integrity of their relationships with others, particularly in the classroom setting where authority dynamics are often at play.

A critical finding of the questionnaire was the role that formality plays in students' choice of apology strategy. More than half (87%) of the students indicated that the context of the apology—especially in formal settings such as teacher-student interactions—shapes their approach to apologizing. This reflects Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness strategies, which posits that in interactions where there is a clear power differential, such as between students and teachers, more mitigated forms of speech are employed to avoid face-threatening acts. In such settings, students are likely to employ hedging, explanations, or other apologetic expressions to soften the impact of their apology, demonstrating a keen awareness of the need to mitigate potential discomfort or imposition on the authority figure.

Additionally, 80% of respondents acknowledged that the severity of the offense, along with social expectations and cultural norms, influences their decision-making process when determining how to apologize. This finding supports the notion of pragmatic competence, as discussed by Holmes (1995), which underscores the ability to

adapt one's language use according to the social context. Students demonstrate an awareness of the intricate social dynamics involved in apology speech acts, recognizing that apologies must not only convey regret but also align with culturally appropriate norms and expectations. The role of culture in shaping speech acts is also affirmed by Buchanan (2005), who suggests that social and cultural contexts significantly influence the performative aspects of language.

4.1.2. Gendered Approaches to Apology

The second section of the questionnaire highlighted gendered differences in the performance of apology speech acts. A striking 80% of participants agreed that female students apologize more frequently than male students, which aligns with longstanding theories of gendered communication (Holmes, 1995). Women are often socialized to engage in more indirect, polite forms of communication as a means of maintaining social harmony, particularly in formal or hierarchical settings. This is consistent with Holmes' (1995) assertion that women are typically socialized to use communication strategies that avoid imposing on others, which leads to a greater frequency of apologies.

The data further suggest that societal influences play a significant role in shaping how students perform apology speech acts. Female students were perceived as more formal in their apologies, which aligns with the research of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), who argued that women are often expected to use more formal, polite language as a means of fostering social cohesion and avoiding interpersonal conflict. This finding also resonates with the idea that females are generally expected to maintain social harmony by showing deference in their

communication, a tendency that is often reinforced by societal and cultural norms.

In contrast, male students were perceived as using more direct and informal apology strategies. This is in line with traditional notions of masculinity, which emphasize qualities such as efficiency and straightforwardness in communication (Holmes, 1995). The tendency of male students to apologize less frequently and in a more direct manner reflects broader social expectations that men should be less concerned with the emotional impact of their words and more focused on addressing the issue at hand. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) distinction between positive politeness (which focuses on affirming solidarity, often employed by males) and negative politeness (which focuses on avoiding imposition, often employed by females).

4.1.3. Discussion of the Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire results provide compelling evidence that students in this study possess a high level of pragmatic awareness regarding the role of apology speech acts in maintaining social relationships. The data suggest that students understand the necessity of sincerity in apologies and recognize the importance of formality and context when determining the appropriate strategy to use. This supports the idea that students are not merely following prescriptive rules but are also attuned to the social dynamics that shape communication in academic environments.

The findings also underscore the significant gendered differences in how apology speech acts are performed. Female students tend to adopt more mitigated, formal apology strategies, which aligns with societal expectations of female communication that emphasize

politeness and deference. Male students, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in direct and informal apologies, reflecting traditional masculine norms that prioritize efficiency and directness.

However, the gender disparity in the sample (86.48% female) may have influenced these results, potentially skewing the data toward more female-centric communication patterns. It is essential to consider this imbalance when interpreting the findings, as the high representation of female students may have amplified the observed tendencies toward mitigated and formal apologies. Despite this potential bias, the findings remain consistent with the broader literature on gendered communication and politeness strategies, where women are more likely to engage in face-threatening avoidance through negative politeness strategies, while men prioritize rapport-building and use positive politeness strategies.

Ultimately, the results suggest that both gender norms and social expectations continue to shape the ways in which apology speech acts are performed in the classroom. This highlights the importance of considering sociocultural factors in studies of pragmatics and reinforces the need for further research on how gender, power, and context intersect to influence language use in educational settings.

These findings lay the groundwork for the next phase of the study: the analysis of the DCT results, which will allow for a more detailed exploration of how students perform apology speech acts in real-world scenarios. The DCT analysis will provide additional insights into the practical application of politeness strategies and the role of gender and power dynamics in shaping communication in the EFL classroom.

4.2 DCTs Results Analysis

4.2.1 Bold-On-Record Apologies: Directness and Efficiency

The bald on-record strategy, characterized by direct and unambiguous expressions of regret, was used minimally across the DCTs. Only a small portion of the students (5%) employed bald on-record apologies, such as "Sorry I'm late." This strategy was most often used in scenarios where the apology was made to a peer, rather than a teacher or figure of authority. The directness of bald on-record apologies indicates a preference for efficiency and a lack of concern for mitigating any potential imposition.

The rarity of bald on-record apologies, especially when apologizing to teachers, is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) view that such direct expressions can be face-threatening in hierarchical relationships. In contexts where the speaker has less power (i.e., the student-teacher relationship), the directness of bald on-record apologies would likely be perceived as inappropriate or disrespectful. This aligns with Goffman's (1967) theory of face work, where face-threatening acts (like direct apologies) are minimized in favor of more indirect strategies, especially when social distance and power imbalances are evident.

4.2.2 Mitigated Apologies: Negative Politeness and Face-Saving Strategies

The most frequent apology strategy, used by 75% of the students, was the mitigated apology, which reflects negative politeness. Students employed this strategy predominantly in formal contexts, especially when apologizing to their teachers. An example of this would be: "I'm really sorry for being late; I hope it's not too much of a problem for you." This type of apology demonstrates a clear effort

to reduce the imposition on the hearer, acknowledging the inconvenience caused while also ensuring that the apology does not come across as overly direct or imposing. The hedging and explanatory components of these apologies further indicate a desire to protect the teacher's face and avoid threatening their status.

The use of mitigated apologies is a direct reflection of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of negative politeness, where speakers engage in strategies designed to avoid the imposition of their speech acts on the hearer, especially when there is a perceived power differential. The mitigated apologies in the DCTs highlight the students' awareness of the social hierarchy in the classroom and their desire to maintain harmony in these formal, potentially face-threatening interactions. By softening the apology with polite expressions and acknowledging the potential discomfort caused, students navigate the delicate balance between maintaining their social face and acknowledging their fault.

4.2.3 Positive Politeness Apologies: Rapport-Building and Solidarity

A smaller proportion of students (10%) used positive politeness strategies in their apologies, typically in interactions with peers rather than teachers. An example of a positive politeness apology might be: "I'm really sorry for missing class; I had an unexpected personal matter to attend to." This strategy is characterized by an attempt to build rapport and express solidarity with the hearer. Rather than focusing solely on mitigating the imposition, these apologies also aim to maintain social bonds by providing an explanation for the behavior and emphasizing shared understanding.

The use of positive politeness reflects a greater concern for solidarity and the

social relationship between the speaker and hearer, rather than the imposition of the apology itself. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that positive politeness is often used in situations where the speaker wants to emphasize mutual respect and closeness with the hearer, particularly in peer-to-peer interactions where there is less concern about power dynamics. The positive politeness strategies employed in the DCTs highlight students' desire to maintain good relations with their peers and to offer explanations that justify their behavior, thus reducing the perceived social distance between themselves and their peers.

4.2.4 Off-Record Apologies: Indirectness and Ambiguity

The least frequent strategy observed was the off-record apology, used by only 10% of students. An example would be: "I hope it wasn't too much of a bother that I was late." Off-record apologies are marked by indirectness and often involve a level of ambiguity, giving the hearer the option to interpret or disregard the apology. This type of apology is typically used when the speaker wants to avoid a direct imposition or when they are uncomfortable with explicitly apologizing. The use of off-record strategies can be seen as a way to maintain distance and avoid confrontation, as the speaker leaves room for the hearer to decide the necessity of the apology.

Off-record apologies are often associated with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face-threatening avoidance, where speakers seek to soften their directness to protect their own and the hearer's face. The relatively low frequency of this strategy in the DCTs suggests that most students preferred more direct forms of apology, possibly because of the perceived seriousness of the offenses in the scenarios presented. However, the use of off-record strategies did appear in some

teacher-student interactions, where students were cautious about imposing too much on the teacher's authority or were unsure how to navigate the formal setting.

4.2.5 Gendered Approaches to Apology

In terms of gendered differences, the DCT results demonstrated a clear pattern. Female students were more likely to use mitigated and indirect apology strategies, emphasizing the politeness and formality required in hierarchical interactions with teachers. This aligns with Holmes (1995), who posited that women are often socialized to adopt more polite and indirect communication strategies, particularly in formal settings where there is a power imbalance. In contrast, male students were more inclined to use positive politeness strategies, often in peer-to-peer interactions. This reflects traditional masculine norms, where men are encouraged to be more assertive and direct, yet still seek to build rapport in their apologies.

These gendered differences in apology strategies suggest that societal expectations surrounding gender play a significant role in shaping communication patterns. Female students, more attuned to social harmony and deference, prioritize face-saving and mitigation, while male students appear to focus more on efficiency and solidarity when apologizing to their peers. This pattern supports the broader literature on gendered communication, where women are typically associated with face-saving behaviors (negative politeness) and men with more direct forms of communication (positive politeness).

The DCT analysis revealed distinct patterns in the use of apology strategies, with the majority of students employing mitigated apologies, particularly in formal interactions with teachers. This reflects a

strong awareness of the power dynamics at play and a desire to maintain social harmony through negative politeness. The use of positive politeness strategies was more common in peer-to-peer interactions, reflecting an emphasis on building rapport and fostering solidarity. The findings also highlight gendered differences in apology strategies, with female students more likely to use mitigated and indirect apologies, while male students favored direct approaches with peers. These patterns align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness strategies and Goffman's (1967) concept of face work, reinforcing the importance of social context and gendered communication norms in shaping apology speech acts.

4.3. Interpretations

The questionnaire results indicate a strong awareness among students of the importance and necessity of apology speech acts in maintaining social harmony and positive relationships in communication. A significant majority (90%) of students in the questionnaire affirmed that apologizing effectively is crucial for maintaining positive relationships, and 92% emphasized the importance of sincerity in apologies. This finding aligns closely with the DCT responses, where the majority of students used mitigated apologies (75%), reflecting their awareness that an apology, particularly in formal settings, requires sincerity and indirectness to mitigate the impact on the hearer's face. In both the questionnaire and the DCTs, there is a clear understanding that apologies should not only express regret but should also preserve social harmony and avoid imposing on others, particularly when addressing authority figures like teachers.

The questionnaire results, which reveal a strong emphasis on the formality of the situation (87% of students indicated that

formality influences their apology strategy), were corroborated by the DCT responses. When apologizing to teachers, students predominantly used mitigated apologies, signaling their sensitivity to the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship. This alignment suggests that students not only understand the importance of formality but also apply it in their actual speech acts. In other words, students are aware that certain apology strategies are more suitable depending on the context and the social distance between themselves and the hearer, particularly in teacher-student interactions.

Both the questionnaire and DCT results highlight significant gender differences in the use of apology strategies. According to the questionnaire, 80% of students reported that female students apologize more frequently than male students, and that females tend to apologize in a more formal and mitigated manner. This is reinforced by the DCT analysis, where female students were more likely to use mitigated and indirect apology strategies, such as: "I'm really sorry for being late; I hope it's not too much of a problem for you." This suggests that female students are more attuned to negative politeness strategies, which are characterized by hedging and softening expressions that minimize the imposition on the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Male students, on the other hand, were observed to prefer positive politeness strategies, such as: "I'm really sorry for missing class; I'll catch up with the material." In both the questionnaire and the DCT responses, male students were perceived as more direct and informal in their apologies, prioritizing rapport-building over mitigation. This finding supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that men tend to favor positive politeness strategies to express solidarity,

especially in interactions with peers, where there is less social distance.

This triangulation of the questionnaire and DCT data shows that gendered communication norms play a substantial role in shaping how students apologize. Female students, socialized to be more polite and deferential, predominantly employ negative politeness, whereas male students are more likely to engage in positive politeness strategies, reflecting traditional gender roles that emphasize directness and efficiency in communication.

Both the questionnaire and the DCTs illustrate the influence of power dynamics in shaping students' use of apology speech acts. The questionnaire results indicate that students recognize the role of authority in shaping their apology strategies, with 80% acknowledging that the status of the person they are apologizing to influences their approach. This is corroborated by the DCT responses, where students predominantly used mitigated apologies in interactions with teachers. For example, students frequently apologized with phrases like: "I'm really sorry for being late; I hope it's not too much of a problem for you."

In the teacher-student context, the DCTs revealed that students were more likely to use mitigated or indirect apologies, demonstrating their understanding that the teacher, as a figure of authority, requires more careful handling of their apology to avoid imposing on their social face. These findings align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies, which are used in interactions with people of higher status to avoid threatening the hearer's face by being too direct. This strong preference for mitigation indicates that students are aware of the power imbalance and adjust their speech to

maintain respect for their teacher's authority.

Conversely, when apologizing to peers, students were more likely to use direct and informal apologies, often paired with positive politeness strategies. This reflects a more egalitarian social dynamic, where rapport-building is emphasized over the protection of face. The triangulation of the questionnaire and DCT results shows that students are acutely aware of the social context in which they apologize, adjusting their strategies based on the relationship with the hearer and the formality of the situation.

The results from both the questionnaire and the DCTs underscore the students' pragmatic competence—their ability to tailor their apology strategies based on the context. The questionnaire showed that 80% of students acknowledged that factors such as severity of the offense, social expectations, and cultural norms influence their choice of apology strategy. This was reflected in the DCT responses, where students chose mitigated apologies for serious infractions, such as missing class or being late to a teacher's lecture, and direct apologies when the offense was less severe, such as accidentally interrupting a peer.

The DCTs also revealed that students exhibit an understanding of social hierarchies by opting for mitigated and indirect strategies when apologizing to teachers. These findings reinforce the notion of pragmatic competence, where students adjust their speech to respect social norms and maintain harmony within the power dynamics of the classroom. This sensitivity to context shows that students are not only aware of the cultural expectations for apologies but also capable of adjusting their linguistic behavior accordingly.

5. Implications and Recommendations

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

In light of the findings of this study, teachers should integrate pragmatic competence into their language instruction, focusing on how to use apology speech acts appropriately in various social contexts. This can be achieved through explicit teaching of politeness strategies, particularly the difference between positive and negative politeness, and the importance of adjusting language according to the social hierarchy and relationship with the hearer.

Teachers can use real-life scenarios, role-playing activities, and discourse completion tasks (DCTs) to simulate interactions where students must decide which apology strategy to use. This will help learners better understand how to navigate social dynamics and use appropriate language in formal and informal settings.

Special attention should be given to gendered communication patterns, encouraging all students to use indirect politeness and to engage in rapport-building strategies, regardless of their gender. By doing so, teachers can help male students practice more polite, indirect communication in formal contexts and encourage female students to experiment with more direct forms of apology when appropriate.

Furthermore, teachers should emphasize the importance of context when teaching apology speech acts. Understanding the power dynamics in teacher-student interactions is important, as students tend to adjust their language to reflect social hierarchies. Teachers can guide students in using mitigated apologies in hierarchical relationships and positive politeness strategies in peer-to-peer communications.

Reflection activities such as discussions, journaling, or peer feedback should be incorporated to encourage students to critically assess their language choices and adapt their apologies according to the relationship and status of the people they interact with.

Teachers should incorporate materials that expose students to cross-cultural differences in apology strategies. This could include readings, videos, or guest speakers that highlight how different cultures approach apologies. Teaching students about cultural norms in politeness and apology will better prepare them for communication in diverse settings, fostering intercultural competence.

Learners should reflect on their own communication style and consider how gender, social context, and cultural norms influence their apology choices. Engaging in activities that encourage self-reflection can enhance students' ability to adjust their apologies and navigate complex social interactions with greater confidence.

EFL learners should be aware of power dynamics and social hierarchies when apologizing. They should understand that in teacher-student interactions, mitigated and indirect apologies are preferred, while in peer-to-peer interactions, more direct and solidarity-building strategies might be appropriate.

By practicing apologies in both formal and informal settings, learners will become more adept at recognizing the appropriate strategy to use based on the context.

Curriculum designers should ensure that pragmatics is a key component of EFL programs. This includes designing activities that allow students to practice politeness strategies such as mitigated, positive, and negative politeness in

authentic contexts. Specific modules or units focused on speech acts such as apologies, requests, and complaints should be included. These units should address the contextual and social factors that influence language use, including the power relations between the speaker and hearer, the formality of the interaction, and gendered expectations.

Materials should include a variety of cultural perspectives on apology speech acts, fostering students' intercultural competence and preparing them to engage in cross-cultural communication.

Policy makers should prioritize pragmatic competence as part of language education standards. Recognizing the importance of social context, cultural sensitivity, and gendered communication in language use should be reflected in national or regional curricula.

Policy makers should promote intercultural communication as a core objective in EFL education. Policies should encourage schools to include culturally diverse materials that provide insight into how apologies are structured in different cultures. This would help students become more culturally aware and capable of adapting their communication styles to various international contexts.

5.2. Recommendations for Further Research

Future research on apology speech acts in the EFL context could benefit from exploring several key areas to deepen our understanding of the dynamics influencing how learners use politeness strategies.

First, cross-cultural comparative studies are needed to explore how apology strategies vary across different cultural contexts. These studies could examine how cultural norms and values shape the

use of politeness strategies, especially in relation to apologies. This would provide valuable insights for designing more culturally sensitive and inclusive EFL curricula that accommodate diverse communication norms.

Second, longitudinal studies would offer a deeper understanding of how pragmatic competence develops over time in EFL learners. Tracking students' use of apology speech acts as they gain more language exposure and participate in various learning environments would help identify how instruction and real-world experiences contribute to students' mastery of politeness strategies.

Third, the relationship between gender and power dynamics in apology speech acts warrants further exploration. Research in this area could examine how gender influences the frequency and type of apology strategies used in different social contexts, particularly in teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions. Understanding these dynamics can help create more equitable communication practices in the classroom.

Additionally, studies examining the impact of explicit instruction on pragmatic competence are essential. Research could assess the effectiveness of teaching methods, such as role-playing, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and reflective activities, in improving students' ability to use appropriate apology strategies in various social situations.

With the growing importance of digital communication, further research is needed to explore how apology strategies are adapted in online environments, such as through emails, social media, or messaging platforms. Understanding how digital spaces affect the use of politeness strategies will provide insights into the

evolving nature of communication in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of apology speech acts among first-year Master's students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University, contributing significantly to the growing body of literature on pragmatic competence in EFL contexts. By investigating the students' awareness, application, and social influences in their use of apology strategies, this research highlights the complex interplay between linguistic knowledge and cultural understanding in second language communication. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including a questionnaire and Discourse Completion Task (DCT), the study provides nuanced insights into how learners navigate the social dimensions of language, particularly in relation to politeness and face management.

The findings revealed that students exhibit a strong awareness of the importance of apology speech acts in maintaining social harmony, though their application of specific strategies, such as direct or indirect apologies, varies depending on contextual factors like social distance, power dynamics, and gendered communication norms. This research underscores the importance of integrating cultural norms and pragmatic competence into EFL curricula, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in politeness strategies that addresses both linguistic and sociocultural considerations. The study also emphasizes the significant role that gender and social hierarchies play in shaping students' apology strategies, which suggests the need for further exploration of how these factors influence communication in formal and informal settings.

While the study has provided valuable insights into the use of apology speech acts in the Algerian EFL context, it is clear that there remains a need for more cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal studies to deepen our understanding of how learners from diverse backgrounds perform apology speech acts. Future research should explore the application of apology strategies in digital communication contexts, examine the impact of language proficiency on pragmatic competence, and investigate the influence of socioeconomic status on students' communication strategies. These areas will enrich our knowledge of second language pragmatics and inform more effective language teaching practices that promote both linguistic fluency and pragmatic sensitivity.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of pragmatics in EFL settings by emphasizing the need for pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in context—as an essential aspect of second language acquisition. The findings not only inform EFL instruction but also have broader implications for fostering intercultural communication, equipping learners with the necessary skills to navigate multicultural and multilingual environments with social sensitivity and linguistic accuracy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Students Questionnaire

Dear Students,

The aim of this questionnaire is to assess your awareness, perception, and use of apology speech acts in academic English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The focus of this survey extends to understanding the influence of contextual factors, gender differences, and politeness strategies on your approach to apologies. Please answer the questions as truthfully as possible. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will remain anonymous. Your input is valuable and will contribute significantly to

understanding the role of apology strategies in communication within academic contexts.

Thank you for your participation!

Section 1: Awareness of Apology Speech Acts

1.Q1: Do you agree that the ability to apologize effectively is crucial for maintaining positive relationships in communication?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

2.Q2: How important is sincerity in an apology?

1. Extremely important
2. Important
3. Somewhat important
4. Not important

3.Q3: In your opinion, does the formality of the situation affect the way you apologize? (e.g., formal setting with a teacher vs. informal setting with peers)

1. Yes, significantly
2. Yes, somewhat
3. No, it does not

4.Q4: How often do you feel the need to apologize for misunderstandings in the classroom?

1. Very frequently

2. Occasionally

3. Rarely

4. Never

5.Q5: When apologizing, which of the following factors influence your approach the most? (Select all that apply)

1. The status of the person you're apologizing to (teacher vs. peer)
2. The severity of the offense
3. Social expectations and cultural norms
4. Personal relationships or rapport with the person

6.Q6: Do you think there are cultural differences in how apologies are perceived or used in the EFL classroom? Please explain briefly.

Section 2: Gendered Approaches to Apology

7.Q7: How often do you observe male and female students apologizing in different ways in your classroom?

1. Frequently
2. Occasionally
3. Rarely
4. Never

8. Q8: In your view, which gender is more likely to apologize in the classroom setting?

1. Female students
2. Male students
3. No difference
4. Both genders equally

9.Q9: Do you believe there are societal influences on the way male and female students apologize in your classroom? Please elaborate.

10.Q10: How do you think gender expectations influence the formality or informality of an apology?

Section 3: Pragmatic Strategies in Apologies

11.Q11: How do you decide when to use a direct (bald on-record) apology versus a more mitigated or indirect apology?

- Based on the relationship with the person
- Based on the severity of the offense
- Based on the context (classroom vs. social setting)
- Based on the emotional tone of the situation

12.Q12: Do you think your cultural background influences how you apologize in EFL contexts? Please describe how.

13.Q13: Which of the following factors plays the most significant role in choosing a type of apology?

- Maintaining the relationship (positive politeness)
- Avoiding imposition (negative politeness)
- Acknowledging the fault (sincerity)
- Reducing the impact of the offense (mitigation)

Appendix b: Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)

Scenario 1: Late for Class (Apology to Teacher)

•Instruction: Imagine you are late for class and the teacher asks why. Choose the apology that fits best:

- Bald on-record apology: "Sorry I'm late."
- Mitigated apology: "I'm really sorry for being late; I hope it's not too much of a problem for you."
- Apology with explanation: "I'm really sorry for being late; I had an unexpected personal matter to attend to."
- Indirect apology: "I hope it wasn't too much of a bother that I was late."
- New Option: Apology with repair: "I'm really sorry for being late; I know it affects the class, and I will make sure to be on time next time."

Scenario 2: Missing an Important Deadline (Apology to Professor)

•Instruction: You missed an important deadline for an assignment. How would you apologize to your professor? (Choose one of the following strategies):

- Bald on-record apology: "Sorry I missed the deadline."
- Mitigated apology: "I'm really sorry for missing the deadline; I hope it's not too much of an inconvenience."
- Apology with explanation: "I'm really sorry for missing the deadline; I had some personal issues that I had to deal with."
- Indirect apology: "I hope missing the deadline didn't cause too much of a problem."
- New Option: Apology with compensation: "I'm really sorry for

missing the deadline; I will submit the assignment by [specific date] and I understand if there are penalties."

Scenario 3: Disrupting the Class (Apology to Teacher)

• Instruction: You accidentally disrupted the class by talking while the teacher was speaking. How would you apologize? (Choose one of the following strategies):

- Bald on-record apology: "Sorry for disturbing the class."
- Mitigated apology: "I'm really sorry for disturbing the class; I'll be more careful next time."
- Apology with explanation: "I'm really sorry for disturbing the class; I didn't mean to interrupt."
- Indirect apology: "I hope I didn't disrupt the flow of the class."
- New Option: Apology with acknowledgment of impact: "I'm really sorry for disturbing the class; I understand that it disrupted the lesson, and I will be more mindful next time."

Scenario 4: Asking for Permission (To Speak in Class)

• Instruction: You want to ask a question during a lecture. How would you apologize if you think you're interrupting? (Choose one of the following strategies):

- Bald on-record apology: "Sorry to interrupt, but I have a question."
- Mitigated apology: "Sorry to interrupt, but if I may ask a question..."
- Apology with explanation: "Sorry to interrupt, I just need some

clarification on something you said earlier."

- Indirect apology: "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but could I ask something?"
- New Option: Apology with acknowledgment of authority: "I apologize for interrupting, I know you're in the middle of speaking, but I have a quick question."

Scenario 5: Apologizing for a Mistake in Group Work

• Instruction: During a group project, you made an error that affected the outcome. How would you apologize to your group? (Choose one of the following strategies):

- Bald on-record apology: "Sorry for the mistake."
- Mitigated apology: "I'm really sorry for the mistake; I'll make sure to fix it."
- Apology with explanation: "I'm really sorry for the mistake, I misunderstood the instructions."
- Indirect apology: "I hope this doesn't cause too much trouble for the group, but I think I made an error."
- New Option: Apology with repair: "I'm really sorry for the mistake; I'll correct it and make sure it doesn't happen again."