

## **Realizing Apology Speech Acts in EFL: A Case Study of English Department Students at Universitas Negeri Semarang**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to find out how English Department students at Universitas Negeri Semarang realize the speech act of apology in English and how certain social variables influence their realization. The study is grounded in Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) taxonomy of apology strategies and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which addresses the roles of power, social distance, and rank of imposition. Using a qualitative case study design, this study employed a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) with ten situations involving differences in power, social distance, and offense severity. The subjects of this study were 20 students from the second semester. The collected data were analyzed using a categorization framework based on the five apology strategies by Olshtain and Cohen and contextual factors by Brown and Levinson. The findings showed that explicit expression of apology was the most frequently used strategy and promise for forbearance was the least frequently used strategy. Students were more likely to combine several strategies in their realization of apology speech act rather than using a single strategy. It also revealed that students adjust their apologies according to context, demonstrating awareness of social roles and communication appropriateness. The study concluded that the students can realize their apology speech act based on contextual factors such as power, social distance, and offense severity by their appropriateness in selecting and combining the strategies.

**Keywords:** apology, EFL learners, pragmatic competence, realization, speech act

### **INTRODUCTION**

The speech act of apology plays a fundamental role in maintaining social harmony and repairing interpersonal relationships, especially when someone has committed an offense or caused inconvenience to another. In pragmatics, apologies are recognized as expressive acts that convey regret and seek reconciliation with the hearer. According to Searle (1979), expressive speech act such as apologies is used to show a speaker's feelings or attitudes. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) emphasize that apologies are not only linguistic expressions but also strategic tools

to show regret and maintain positive interpersonal relations.

In contexts where English is learned as a foreign language, apologizing with grammatical correctness alone does not guarantee meaningful or successful exchanges. Language must also be used in ways that are suitable to the situation, sensitive to the relationship between speakers, and reflective of cultural expectations. Without the integration of pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness, even structurally accurate utterances may sound awkward, impolite, or inappropriate in real-world settings.

As emphasized by Taguchi (2015), pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to use language effectively in social contexts where it is an essential component of second language proficiency that should be taught alongside grammar and vocabulary. Supporting this view, Ren (2022) further highlights that explicit instruction in pragmatics significantly enhances learners' ability to perform speech acts appropriately, reinforcing the need for structured pedagogical attention to pragmatic skills in L2 classrooms. Therefore, Students often find it complex and challenging to produce apologies that align with the socio-cultural expectations of native English users. This gap is particularly noticeable in EFL learners, who may know when to apologize but confuse on how realize it in a pragmatically appropriate way.

Despite formal instruction in English grammar and vocabulary, many EFL learners face difficulties in producing pragmatically appropriate speech acts, including apologies. These challenges are often attributed to interlanguage pragmatics, where learners transfer patterns from their first language into the target language (Trosborg, 2011). As a result, apologies may lack the formality, structure, or politeness expected in English-speaking contexts. Research has shown that Indonesian EFL learners tend to rely heavily on simple IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices) like "I'm sorry" without adequately using supporting strategies such as explanation, an offer of repair, or promise for forbearance (Ulinuha, 2020; Cedar, 2017; Retnowaty, 2017; Qorina, 2012).

Developing students' ability to perform speech acts like apologies in appropriate ways is an important part of building pragmatic competence. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) outlined five core strategies for apologies: an explicit expression of apology, acknowledgment of responsibility, an explanation or account, an offer of repair,

and a promise for forbearance. The way in which learners use or combine these strategies often depends on several social variables. These social variables are factors that influenced in how they realize apology.

Drawing on the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), the speaker's choices are shaped by the perceived seriousness of the offense, the power dynamics involved, and the social distance between the speaker and the hearer. The theory explains how speakers manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) like apologizing by adapting their language based on the social context. Apologies are inherently face-threatening because they require the speaker to admit fault or responsibility, potentially damaging the speaker's own positive face (the desire to be liked) or negative face (the desire to be unimpeded). Building from the theory, Pratama (2017) points out that the same linguistic expression can serve different pragmatic purposes such as functioning as a promise, an expression of hope, a strategy to delay, or a means of conveying politeness depending on the situational context and the relationship between interlocutors. Moreover, Wahyuni et al., (2024) emphasize that in hierarchical interactions, careful attention to politeness markers and sentence structure is essential to prevent the utterance from being perceived as coercive and to preserve the addressee's social face.

Many studies have explored apology strategies in EFL settings, but relatively few have combined these two frameworks apology strategy taxonomy and social-context variables. There remains a limited body of research that focuses specifically on Indonesian university learners and their ability to align apology forms with social expectations. For instance, Turhan and Tuncer (2022) studied pre-service teachers but focused more on gender differences than strategy selection patterns. Al-Zumor (2011) studied EFL learners' apology realizations in

relation to social power relations, perceived severity of the offense, and cultural norms, highlighting the importance of incorporating social-context variables when analyzing speech acts. This study, therefore, attempts to bridge that gap by investigating how learners in an Indonesian EFL context realize apology speech acts and how their use of strategies is influenced by social variables.

Focusing on English Department students at Universitas Negeri Semarang, this study investigates how apology speech acts are realized through the five strategies of Olshtain and Cohen (1983):

1. Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID). It is an expression of regret or an offer of apology (e.g. *"I'm sorry"* or *"I apologize"*)
2. Acknowledgement of Responsibility (RESP). This strategy refers to when the speaker accepts blame or fault for the offense committed (e.g. *"It's my fault"* or *"I wasn't thinking"*)
3. An Explanation or An Account (EXPL). In this strategy, the speaker gives an explanation or reason why causing the violation (e.g. *"I got a traffic jam."*)
4. An Offer of Repair (REPR). The speaker offers compensation for damages resulting from the violation made (e.g. *"I'll pay the phone service bill."*)
5. Promise for Forbearance (FORB). This strategy expressed as a commitment to avoid repeating the same violation (e.g. *"It won't happen again."*)

This study also investigates how the use of those strategies of apology influenced by the three contextual factors proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987):

1. Power (P). Relative power of the hearer over the speaker, refers to the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

2. Distance (D). Social Distance Between Speaker and Hearer, refers to the level of familiarity or closeness between the interlocutors.

3. Rank of Imposition (R). Severity or Seriousness of the Offense, refers to how much the act intrudes on or negatively impacts the hearer.

Previous research highlights that EFL learners often demonstrate pragmatic transfer, where expressions in the target language mirror their L1 cultural and communicative norms (Bilfirdausi, 2019; Saleem & Azam, 2015; Ezzaoua, 2023). This study, therefore, also considers how Indonesian students balance pragmatic function with grammatical form. The pattern in using or combining the strategies of apology also linguistic features such as verb modality, sentence structure, and word choice are analyzed to assess whether students can construct not only contextually appropriate but also grammatically correct apology utterances. As Wang and Wang (2018) emphasize, explicit instruction in speech acts is essential to bridge the gap between grammatical and pragmatic knowledge in EFL classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how English Department students at Universitas Negeri Semarang realize apology speech acts in English. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that gathers rich, detailed information through people's own words (spoken or written) and by observing their actions in real-world settings. Furthermore, case study design based on Creswell (2013), is a qualitative approach in which the researcher examines a clearly defined subject whether it is a person, an organization, a program, or a particular event within its natural setting. The goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific issue.

The study was conducted within the academic setting of the English Department, Universitas Negeri Semarang. 20 students from second-semester were selected as sample. These students were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had basic exposure to spoken English and classroom interaction. In qualitative case study research, a sample of this size is considered appropriate as it facilitates the identification of salient patterns and themes while remaining manageable for rigorous, in-depth analysis; in the context of pragmatic speech act studies, such a sample also allows for close examination of each utterance across varied social contexts, thereby ensuring both analytical depth and contextual richness. The research site was chosen due to its relevance to the development of English learners' pragmatic competence within an academic environment.

Data were collected using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) instrument. DCT is a commonly used tool in pragmatics and interlanguage studies, where participants are given written scenarios and asked to respond

with the type of speech act they would naturally use in real-life communication. The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was chosen over other instruments, such as role-plays or naturally occurring conversations, due to its efficiency in eliciting a wide range of speech act realizations under controlled conditions. Unlike role-plays, which may require more time and logistical preparation, the DCT allows researchers to present multiple scenarios with varying contextual variables (e.g., power, social distance, rank of imposition) in a consistent format to all participants, ensuring comparability of responses. According to Labben (2016), Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is the most frequently used instrument to evaluate second/foreign language learners' ability to perform speech acts in a target language. This instrument consisted of ten situational prompts designed to elicit written apologies from participants. The DCT covered a range of offense scenarios, varying in terms of power relations, social distance, and severity of the offense. A summary of the DCT scenarios is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of DCT Apology Scenarios

No.	Scenario Description	Contextual Factors		
		P	D	R
1	Canceling a meeting with a close friend	Equal	Low	Low
2	Forgetting to return a lecturer's book	High	High	Moderate
3	Misunderstanding a classmate during discussion	Equal	Moderate	Low
4	Arriving late to a group presentation (lecturer and classmates are waiting)	Mixed (high and equal)	Mixed (low and high)	Moderate
5	Accidentally damaging a friend's phone	Equal	Moderate	High
6	Submitting an assignment late to a lecturer	High	High	High
7	Spilling coffee on a friend's clothes	Equal	Moderate	High
8	Accidentally hitting stranger's motorbike	Equal	High	High
9	Failing to tell the content of a book to close friend	Equal	Low	Low
10	Giving incorrect information to a classmate	Equal	Moderate	Low

P: Power (Relative power of the hearer over the speaker)  
 D: Distance (Social distance between speaker and hearer)  
 R: Rank of Imposition (Severity or seriousness of the offense)

In analyzing the data in this study, apology students' responses were categorized into five types of strategies based on Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) theory: Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID), Acknowledgement of Responsibility (RESP), Explanation or Account (EXPL), Offer of Repair (REPR), and Promise for Forbearance (FORB). These categories were further interpreted using Brown and Levinson's (1987) contextual factors: Power, Distance, and Rank of Imposition to understand how contextual variables influence strategy selection. All procedures in this study adhered to established research ethics protocols; ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Negeri Semarang, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Conclusions were then written based on the findings obtained.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Realization of Apology

In this study, it was found that students realized the speech act of apology using various apology strategies. The variation of strategies used was significant depending on contextual factors such as power, distance, and rank of imposition. In the 10 situations of DCT and 20 students, there were a total of 451 strategies used. The most frequently used strategy was Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID), which covered 44.1% of all responses, followed by An Offer of Repair (REPR) at 20.8%, An Explanation or An Account (EXPL) at 19.7%, Acknowledgement of Responsibility 12.2%, and Promise for Forbearance 3.1% (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of Apology Strategies Across All Students

Apology Strategy	Code	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Expression of Apology	IFID	199	44.1%
Offer of Repair	REPR	94	20.8%
Explanation or Account	EXPL	89	19.7%
Acknowledgment of Responsibility	RESP	55	12.2%
Promise for Forbearance	FORB	14	3.1%
<b>Total</b>		<b>451</b>	<b>100%</b>

on the table above, the acknowledgement of responsibility and promise for forbearance strategy has a low percentage because of those strategies are less frequently use by the students.

IFID is the most frequently used strategy because it is always used by all students in all situations. These findings align

with previous research by Cedar (2017) and Ulinnuha (2020), who also reported that Indonesian EFL learners tend to overuse explicit expressions of apology (IFID) while underusing strategies such as acknowledgment of responsibility (RESP) and promise for forbearance (FORB). This pattern suggests that learners may possess



awareness of basic politeness formulas but lack the lexical and pragmatic range to diversify their apology forms.

From an L2 development perspective, this pattern reflects a focus on lexical recall of fixed expressions, rather than flexible adaptation to social variables. Such reliance on IFIDs aligns with interlanguage pragmatics research indicating that learners often transfer formulaic routines from their L1 or adopt the most salient L2 forms encountered in instruction, resulting in limited variation in speech act realization. In contrast to Retnowaty (2017), who found minimal use of repair strategies among her participants, the current study indicates that learners in this context actively employ offers of repair (REPR), possibly reflecting

heightened awareness of relational maintenance.

However, in each situation, students tend to use more than one strategy or in other words, a combined strategy. This combination becomes a diverse pattern in the realization of apology. Instead of simply expressing regret through Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID) such as “I’m sorry” or “I apologize”, students often expand their utterances by integrating additional strategies, including explanation of the offense (EXPL), admission of personal error (RESP), offer of repair (REPR), and in some cases, promise to be patient (FORB). Here is the table frequency of apology strategies used in each situation.

Table 3. Most Frequently Used Apology Strategy in Each Situation

Situation	Context Description	Most Frequently Used Strategy
1	Canceling a meeting with a close friend	IFID + EXPL + REPR
2	Forgetting to return a lecturer’s book	IFID + REPR
3	Misunderstanding a classmate during discussion	IFID + RESP
4	Arriving late to a class presentation	IFID + EXPL
5	Accidentally damaging a friend’s phone	IFID + REPR
6	Submitting an assignment late to a lecturer	IFID + EXPL
7	Spilling coffee on a friend’s clothes	IFID + REPR
8	Accidentally hitting a stranger’s motorbike	IFID + EXPL
9	Failing to tell the content of a book to a close friend	IFID + EXPL + REPR
10	Giving incorrect information to a classmate	IFID + RESP

The table 3 shows a strong preference among students to begin their apologies with an expression of apology (IFID), but then combine it with other strategies depend on the situation. The most frequent combination, IFID + REPR and IFID + EXPL, occurred in situations that elicited multicomponent responses, indicating a high level of pragmatic elaboration. Given that pragmatics

is inherently shaped by cultural norms, the preference for certain apology strategies observed in this study can be partly understood through the lens of Indonesian politeness conventions, which emphasize deference, respect for hierarchy, and maintenance of social harmony. These cultural values often prioritize explicit expressions of regret and avoidance of direct

confrontation, which may explain the frequent use of IFID and the tendency to combine them with mitigating moves.

This pattern is consistent with Holmes' (1990) observation that the choice and structure of apologies are strongly influenced by the sociocultural expectations of the speech community, with different cultures attaching varying importance to strategies such as direct expressions, explanation, or repair. In contrast, English-speaking norms of politeness may place greater value on individual accountability and explicit offers of repair, leading to differences in strategy selection. Such cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences highlight the importance of integrating cultural awareness into L2 pragmatic instruction to help learners navigate the expectations of both their native and target language communities. These patterns demonstrate the students' consistent use of compound apology constructions, highlighting their tendency to integrate multiple illocutionary functions within a single response.

### ***Realization of Apology with Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID)***

The realization of apology using the Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID) strategy appeared consistently across all ten DCT situations. The explicit expression that frequently used are **"I'm Sorry"** and **"I Apologize"**. In many responses, IFID served as the opening strategy and was often followed by elaboration, either in the form of explanation or an offer to repair the offense.

For example in situation 1 (canceling a meeting with a close friend):

*"I'm sorry because I can't go to do an assignment with you. I've an important schedule"*

This sentence demonstrates a direct use of IFID (*"I'm sorry"*) followed by minimal justification, showing an initial awareness of politeness norms but limited strategic

variation. Similarly, the example IFID as the opening strategy to apologize followed by another strategy appeared in situation 2 (forgot to return a lecturer's book):

*"I am sorry mam. I forgot to return the book on time,"*

which reflects IFID followed by an explanation of why the violation occurred.

Additionally, in realizing apology with explicit expression of apology, many students incorporated intensifiers such as **"very very sorry"** or **"really really sorry"** within their IFID expressions. The use of such intensifiers reflects an attempt to strengthen the sincerity and emotional impact of the apology. The example of that kind expression with intensifiers appears in the situation 5 (damaging a friend's phone):

*"OMG, I am really really sorry bestie, I accidentally dropped your phone,"*

also, in the situation 7 (Spilling coffee on a friend's clothes):

*"I am very very sorry, I will clean your shirt."*

Based on the example, students used repeated intensifiers. The repeated intensifier served as a way for them to emphasize sincerity and draw attention to the speaker's remorse. From a pragmatic perspective, the overuse or lack of variation in intensifiers reflects limited lexical resources. Rather than using alternative expressions or more nuanced vocabulary to convey the degree of regret, students overuse basic intensifiers, making their apologies sound repetitive or lacking in variety. However, the intensifier construction remains formulaic and shows an overreliance on emotionally charged but simple structures. This may be explained by interlanguage pragmatic transfer (Saleem & Azam, 2015), where learners rely on familiar L1-based patterns rather than experimenting with alternative English expressions. These patterns suggest a need for greater lexical and structural variation in expressing regret, as well as more subtle control over how

emotional emphasis is conveyed in apology utterances.

### **Realization of Apology with Acknowledgement of Responsibility (RESP)**

In this study, Acknowledgement of Apology strategy characterized by the speaker explicitly admitting fault or blame for the offense, which enhances the sincerity and accountability of the apology. In the use of RESP, it was found that students never used RESP as a single strategy. RESP was often used in combination with IFID and other strategies, especially in situations where the offense had social or academic implications. The expression that tends to be realized is **"it is my mistake."** students employed RESP alongside other strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their apologies.

For the example, in situation 3 (misunderstanding during discussion), student wrote:

*"Sorry, it is my mistake, I mistook your point and raised my voice,"*

preceded by IFID, this expression shows a direct acknowledgment of the mistake in addition to expressing regret. Another example is found in Situation 10:

*"I apologize for giving you the wrong information. It was my mistake."*

Effectively combining IFID with RESP, these responses illustrate that when students recognize the interpersonal implications of their actions, they tend to reinforce their apologies with personal accountability, thereby making the act more persuasive and socially appropriate.

Furthermore, this strategy also frequent realized using expression **"my bad,"** which serves as a colloquial form of acknowledging responsibility. This phrase is often used in casual contexts and signals that the speaker admits fault without offering a lengthy explanation. The example in situation 3 (misunderstanding during discussion):

*"Ok sorry, my bad"*

and in situation 7 (Spilling coffee on a friend's clothes):

*"OMG sorry, my bad... let me clean your shirt."*

These examples show that students are aware of how informal expressions like **"my bad"** can be contextually acceptable and still fulfill the function of taking responsibility. However, the use of RESP was still limited compared to other strategies, which suggest that some learners are reluctant or unsure about how to incorporate self-blame linguistically, especially in a second language.

### **Realization of Apology with An Explanation or An Account (EXPL)**

The realization of apology using an explanation or an account (EXPL) was one of the most frequently used supporting strategies in the students' responses. This strategy involves the speaker providing a reason or justification for the offense, often to clarify the circumstances or reduce the perceived severity of the act. Students employed this strategy to show that their action was not intentional or was caused by factors beyond their control. By offering explanations, students attempted to present themselves in a more favorable light and soften the impact of their offense, which aligns with the mitigating function of this strategy in speech act theory.

In this study found that EXPL was not used independently but appeared in combination with IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device), forming the common structure IFID + EXPL. This combination occurred 68 times, with additional variations such as IFID + EXPL + REPR and IFID + EXPL + RESP appearing in more complex or severe situations. It is also found that students commonly used causal connectors such as **"because"** and **"since"** in constructing their explanations. For example



in situation 4 (arriving late for a class presentation):

*"I'm really sorry, I came late **because** there was a traffic jam and heavy rain"*

*"I am apologize for coming late **because** I have problem with my motorbike"*

and the example in situation 6 (Submitting an assignment late to a lecturer):

*"I am sorry sir, I unable to submit my work on time **since** I was feeling unwell. May I have time to finish my assignment?"*

In addition, many students also used softening language such as **"It was an accident," "I didn't mean it,"** and **"I hope you understand,"** which further reduced the potential threat to face and demonstrated alignment with the listener's perspective. These expressions contributed to making the apology sound more genuine and thoughtful, reinforcing the speaker's regret and intention to make amends. The overall realization of EXPL demonstrated that students were developing pragmatic competence, particularly in using explanation not only to justify their actions but also to maintain and repair interpersonal relationships.

### ***Realization of Apology with An Offer of Repair (REPR)***

In this study, students frequently employed REPR to express a willingness to restore what was lost, damaged, or disrupted. The presence of this strategy across various situations suggests that students were not only aware of the importance of apologizing verbally but also of complementing their apology with a concrete gesture of repair. This tendency indicates an understanding that offering restitution can enhance the sincerity and effectiveness of the apology, particularly in maintaining trust and repairing interpersonal relationships.

The REPR strategy was most commonly realized in the form of direct statements offering to fix, return, or compensate for something that had gone

wrong. One of the most frequent expressions used was **"I'll fix it,"** especially in situations involving accidental damage. For example in the situation 5 (damaging a friend's phone):

*"I'm sorry I dropped your phone. **I'll fix it** as soon as possible"*

*"I apologize, it was entirely my fault and **I'll fix it.**"*

These expressions indicate not only an acknowledgment of the harm caused but also an effort to restore the relationship through actionable resolution.

Like the other strategies, it is known that the pattern of realization apology with REPR by students is always combined with other strategies. Most often combined with IFID where the offer to repair the damage caused by the violation is preceded by an explicit apology first. The most common pattern was IFID + REPR, followed by IFID + EXPL + REPR, particularly in situations involving moderate to high offense severity. For the example is in situation 9 (Failing to tell the content of a book to a close friend):

*"I'm sorry but I think I can't tell the content of the book I said before. I was exhausted yesterday, but I'll tell you as soon as possible."*

The example effectively combining regret, explanation, and an offer to repair. These compound realizations reflect an understanding that offering to make amends strengthens the sincerity and effectiveness of the apology. Moreover, the sequencing of the strategies in placing IFID first, followed by an explanation, and then the offer demonstrates a logical and socially appropriate order in delivering the apology.

It is also found that REPR expressions were marked by the use of future tense verbs and modals such as **"I will," "I'll try to,"** and **"Let me."** These forms indicate the students' commitment to future action,

reinforcing the seriousness of the apology. The frequent and contextually appropriate use of REPR suggests that students were not only aware of the strategic function of repair in apology discourse but also capable of implementing it to manage interpersonal consequences and signal accountability.

### ***Realization of Apology with Promise for Forbearance (FORB)***

The realization of apology with the Promise for Forbearance (FORB) strategy in this study was found to be relatively limited but contextually significant. This strategy appeared in responses where students sought not only to express regret or offer justification but also to assure the hearer that the same mistake would not be repeated. Although not commonly used, its presence indicated that some students recognized the value of including a forward-looking element in their apologies. This commitment to avoid future wrongdoing reflects a heightened sense of responsibility and an understanding that apologies can serve both immediate and preventative functions.

FORB was most often realized by students in situations where the offense could potentially affect their credibility or reliability, particularly in academic or formal contexts. For instance, the example is in Situation 4 (Arriving late to a class presentation):

*"I'm so sorry ma'am, I came late because of heavy rain and I will never do this mistake again, and for my classmates I'm sorry to you guys."*

These expressions indicate that the speaker is not only apologizing for the immediate offense but also attempting to rebuild trust by ensuring improved behavior in the future. This type of strategic language reinforces the speaker's sense of responsibility and maturity,

In certain situations, FORB was found embedded in compound apology structures

alongside IFID, EXPL, and RESP. For the example is in situation 6 (Submitting an assignment late to a lecturer):

*"I'm sorry for submitting it late. I had technical issues, but I promise I'll submit on time next time."*

This response combines a clear expression of regret, an explanation for the offense, and a promise for future improvement. The inclusion of FORB in such contexts reveals that students were capable of constructing more comprehensive and socially appropriate apology forms. These compound realizations demonstrate an emerging understanding of how to manage both the interpersonal and reputational dimensions of an apology.

Although not all students utilized FORB, those who did generally used conventional and direct language to express it. Expressions included **"I won't do it again,"** and **"It won't happen next time,"** These phrases, while simple, were pragmatically effective and aligned with the communicative intent of restoring confidence. The overall realization of FORB among students suggests a growing awareness of apology as not only a reactive act but also a proactive commitment to better behavior.

### **Realization of Apology Strategies in Relation to Contextual Factors**

#### ***Influence of Power (P) on Apology Strategy Use***

The power of the hearer over the speaker played a significant role in shaping how students constructed their apology strategies. In situations where the hearer held a higher status, particularly the lecturer, students were more likely to use complex combinations of strategies that conveyed formality, politeness, and deference. These responses typically included an explicit expression of apology (IFID), followed by an explanation (EXPL), and often a promise for forbearance (FORB) or an offer of repair (REPR). The

tendency to include multiple components suggests that students were aware of the hierarchical relationship and made strategic linguistic choices to show respect and minimize the imposition of the offense.

For example, in Situation 6, where students apologized to a lecturer for submitting an assignment late, many employed multi-strategy constructions such as:

*"I'm sorry, ma'am. I couldn't submit the assignment on time because I was sick. I promise it won't happen again."*

This example reflects the combination of IFID + EXPL + FORB, which not only acknowledges the wrongdoing but also provides justification and a forward-looking commitment to change. The use of formal address terms like "ma'am" or "sir" further highlights the speaker's recognition of the power gap and their attempt to maintain the lecturer's positive face. This strategy contrasts sharply with those used in equal-status relationships, where such formality is rarely seen.

The same way, in Situation 2, where the students forgot to return a book borrowed from a lecturer, many responses followed the pattern of IFID + RESP + REPR, the example as in expressions like:

*"I'm really sorry, sir. I forgot to bring your book. I will return it tomorrow morning."*

The inclusion of a concrete repair strategy in this context reveals the students' awareness that failing to fulfill an obligation toward someone of higher authority requires not only acknowledgment but also restitution. By offering to return the book efficiently, the speaker attempts to reduce the impact of the offense and demonstrate accountability.

Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the observed tendency of students to combine multiple strategies in contexts involving higher power dynamics or greater imposition reflects a heightened sensitivity to face-threatening

acts and a deliberate effort to mitigate such acts through layered communicative strategies. This behavior aligns with Wang and Wang's (2018) assertion that explicit instruction in pragmatic strategies can significantly enhance learners' capacity to adjust their speech acts in response to complex social variables, thereby promoting more contextually appropriate and socially effective communication.

In contrast, when students interact with individuals of equal power, such as classmates or close friends, the realization of the apology strategy becomes more direct and informal. These responses often involve only IFID, or IFID + RESP, with little emphasis on detailed explanations or promises. For example, in Situation 10 (students apologize to a peer for providing incorrect information), a common expression was:

*"I'm sorry, my bad."*

Although this form of apology may be pragmatically acceptable among peers, it lacks the layered structure and informal tone seen in apologies directed at someone with greater power. This contrast further supports the idea that the speaker's perception of the hearer's power significantly influences the form and content of the apology.

### ***Influence of Distance (D) on Apology Strategy Use***

Social distance, or the level of familiarity between speaker and hearer, significantly influenced the way students constructed their apology strategies in this study. The data showed a clear distinction between apologies made to close friends (low distance) and those directed toward strangers, lecturers, or unfamiliar classmates (high distance). Students adjusted the tone, formality, and complexity of their apologies based on how well they knew the hearer. In low-distance situations, responses were often casual, emotionally expressive, and direct. Conversely, high-distance situations elicited

more formal, cautious, and strategically layered responses, demonstrating students' sensitivity to the interpersonal closeness of the interaction.

In situations characterized by low social distance, such as apologizing to a close friend for canceling a meeting (Situation 1), students tend to use informal language and personalized expressions. A typical response included:

*"Really sorry bestie, I can't make it today. Let's reschedule soon,"* or

*"I'm sorry bro, I can't meet you tonight because my sister is sick and I have to take her to the doctor. Can I meet you tomorrow at seven?"*

This example features IFID + EXPL + REPR, presented in a relaxed tone with relational markers like **"bestie"**, **"bro"** and casual verbs such as **"make it."** These expressions show that the speaker assumes a shared understanding with the hearer, allowing for more emotionally open and less linguistically complex apologies. The closeness of the relationship allows students to rely on empathy and informality rather than structural formality or explicit commitments.

However, apologies directed toward individuals with whom the speaker had higher social distance such as strangers or lecturer, were constructed more formally. In Situation 8, where students apologized to a stranger for accidentally hitting their motorbike, responses were characterized by structured syntax, polite address terms, and formal vocabulary. For example:

*"I deeply apologize, sir. I was not focused and accidentally hit your motorbike. Let me pay for the repair."*

This expression reflects IFID + EXPL + REPR, but with a notable shift in tone. The speaker maintains distance through the use of **"sir"** and the lack of emotionally intimate language, showing respect and recognizing the unfamiliarity between interlocutors.

Interestingly, in situations with moderate distance, such as with non-close classmates, the responses fell somewhere between formal and casual. In Situation 10 (students apologized to a classmate for giving incorrect information), for example of the expressions like

*"Sorry, I gave you the wrong information. I'll send the correct one later,"* were common.

These show a balanced tone respectful but not overly formal and typically employed IFID + RESP + REPR. This middle-ground approach suggests that students were capable of adjusting their apology strategies to fit the relational context, neither over-apologizing nor neglecting politeness norms.

### ***Influence of Rank of Imposition (R) on Apology Strategy Use***

In the term of the rank of imposition (R), referring to the perceived seriousness or impact of the offense, in this study found that it is significantly influenced the structure and complexity of apology strategies produced by students. The data revealed that students responded to offenses of higher imposition with more elaborate, multi-strategy constructions, often involving expressions of regret, justification, offers of repair, and commitments to prevent recurrence. In contrast, offenses deemed lower in imposition were frequently addressed with brief, simplified strategies. This variation reflects students' awareness of the weight of the offense and their pragmatic sensitivity to the social need for greater redress in more serious contexts.

In high-imposition situations, such as damaging a friend's phone (Situation 5) or submitting an assignment late to a lecturer (Situation 6), students often used three or more strategies in a single response. For example, in situation 5 and situation 6, a common structure was IFID + EXPL + REPR + FORB, the expression like:



*"I'm really sorry, it was an accident. I'll pay for the repair, and I'll be more careful next time."* and

*"I apologize sir, I'm unable to submit my work by on time because I have a lot to do. Would you give me a longer time to submit it? I promise never do this again."*

The presence of explanation and a concrete offer of repair addressed both the immediate material consequence and the emotional impact, while the addition of a future promise helped restore the hearer's trust. These strategies show that students recognized the need to take responsibility seriously when the offense caused significant inconvenience or potential harm.

In moderate-imposition contexts, such as arriving late for a class presentation (Situation 4) or forgetting to return a borrowed item (Situation 2), the majority of responses included two or three strategies. Typical combinations include IFID + EXPL + RESP or IFID + REPR. For the example:

*"I'm sorry, sir, I forgot to return the book. I'll bring it tomorrow."*

Although the offense is not as severe as damaging property, the failure to fulfill a responsibility, especially to someone in a high power, prompted a combination of apology and a proposed solution. These responses suggest that students understood the obligation to repair trust and demonstrate accountability, even in less critical situation.

On the other hand, low-imposition situations, such as canceling a meeting with a close friend (Situation 1) or misunderstanding a classmate's opinion (Situation 3), were typically handled with minimal strategies. Many students used IFID + EXPL or IFID + RESP, reflecting a casual, direct approach. An example from Situation 1 was:

*"Sorry, I can't come today because I have something urgent."*

These responses reflect an assumption that the offense was minor and that the existing

relationship with the hearer did not require elaborate repair. The simplicity of the response was consistent with the limited impact of the offense and the informal context in which it occurred.

## CONCLUSION

Students rarely used single strategies in isolation. Instead, they frequently combined multiple strategies to construct contextually appropriate and pragmatically effective apologies. The most dominant strategy across all situations was the Explicit Expression of Apology (IFID), which appeared in nearly all responses as the foundation of the apology. The explicit expressions of apology (IFID) serving as the foundation across contexts. The selection and combination of apology strategies were significantly influenced by the contextual variables of Power (P), Distance (D), and Rank of Imposition (R).

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the integration of Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) taxonomy with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory in the Indonesian EFL context, demonstrating how learners adapt apology forms in response to varying contextual constraints. However, the study is limited by its reliance on written DCT data, which may not fully capture spontaneous spoken interactions. The sample size (n=20) and the academic homogeneity of participants also limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, include data from authentic spoken interactions, and investigate the effects of explicit instructional interventions on apology strategy development.

Pedagogically, the results underscore the importance of teaching not only formulaic apology expressions but also a wider range of pragmatic strategies, including nuanced lexical choices and culturally appropriate repair mechanisms, to



enable learners to perform speech acts effectively across diverse social situations.

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