Apology response strategies used by Indonesian EFL fresh graduates: on gender and academic achievement

S Waluyo*, S Sutiyatno

1 Department of Informatics Engineering, STMIK Bina Patria, Magelang, Indonesia
2 Department of Information Systems, STMIK Bina Patria, Magelang, Indonesia

*Email: sriwaluyo@stmikbinapatria.ac.id

Abstract. The challenge for language teachers is to make the students able to communicate in the target language. One of the language aspects that many EFL learners, including university students, still struggle to produce appropriate responses is pragmatic competence. This study attempts to investigate whether gender and academic achievement were significant to predict Apology Response strategies used by EFL fresh graduates. Thirty fresh graduates, 18 females and 12 males, from an English Department of a state university in Indonesia were selected as the participants. Their academic achievement was simply derived from their GPAs which then were grouped into three levels of low, middle, high categories. The instrument used was Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which was used as scenario. The participants were asked to answer the DCT orally through interview. The DCT results were then classified into Acceptance (AC), Acknowledgement (AK), Evasion (EV), and Rejection (RJ). The three variables were then analysed using descriptive qualitative approach. The results were quite elaborate. Most of the participants tend to use Evasion strategy when responding to apologies; however, the number of males who apply Acceptance was also significant. Similarly, for the academic achievement, participants with high GPA do not necessarily employ Acceptance and vice versa. To conclude, neither gender nor academic achievement can be considered as the significant predictors of Apology Response strategies used by the participants. This study is expected to be useful for teachers or lecturers to consider Pragmatics studies in their teaching and learning activities.

1. Introduction

The challenge for language teachers is to make the students able to communicate in the target language. Learners of a second or foreign are said to have good proficiency in the target language when they are able not only to produce structurally correct sentences, but also to use the language appropriately. It is important for L2 learners to pay attention to pragmatics. To do so, it should start by the teachers [1]. The way teachers communicate and deliver the learning materials to the students might affect their effective and cognitive learning and their feeling throughout the learning process [2]. Pragmatic competence is one of the language aspects that many EFL learners, including university students, still struggle to produce appropriate responses. Thus, it is important for the teachers to understand the level of students’ pragmatic competence as an attempt to evaluate their teaching. Pragmatic competence requires speakers to use language appropriately and effectively in a particular context [3]. Pragmatic competence needs knowledge of Pragmatic linguistics or how to make speech acts such as apology, complaint, request, and so on [4].
Among the numbers of speech acts, apology had gained much attraction and attention among many practitioners for it is widely used in most of the society groups. However, most of the researches which have been conducted so far have mostly put their focus on the apology strategies and very few have attempted to scrutinize on how Apology Response strategies (ARs) realized by language users especially the non-native speakers.

1.1. Previous Studies
A number of researches dealing with gender and ARs have been done by several researchers. A cross-cultural study on ARs was done by Adrefiza and Jones [5] which investigated the differences of ARs used by native speakers of Australian English and Bahasa Indonesia by covering the gender and cultural issue variables. The findings revealed the complexity of ARs used by both languages. Although they concluded that Bahasa Indonesia speakers tended to be more direct, no gender differences were found in both languages. Saleem, Anjum, and Naz [6] attempted to differentiate the impact of social power on the performance and perception of Pakistani English and British English speakers’ use of ARs. The conclusion revealed that the participants used Acceptance strategies when they responded to the apologies of higher status speakers, and preferred to acknowledge the apologies of equal and lower level interlocutors. They are also found using more Rejection strategies than British English speakers while responding to lower level interlocutors, indicating that Pakistani society abides by non-egalitarian status. In contrast, British English speakers preferred to use Acceptance and Evasion strategies more often while interacting with the people of higher, equal and lower level interlocutors. Waluyo [7] scrutinized ARs realization of Indonesian EFL learners. Here, besides the main categories of ARs, he also included 33 extended categories of ARs. Acceptance dominated in situation where the participants were in the lower status; however, they tended to also choose Acceptance when they had higher position as an attempt to maintain the good relationship. ARs performed by the participants were mostly influenced by the relation between the offender and the sufferer (close or distant), the power the participants have (high, equal, or low), the setting of situations, and also the degree of mistakes made by the addressees.

Several researches have also focused on the relationship between speech acts realization and academic achievement. The effect of grammatical accuracy and gender on request strategy was examined by Sanjaya and Sitawati [8]. They concluded that pragmatic competence may not be predicted by either grammatical competence or gender, either in isolation or in combination. This implied that the development of pragmatic competence did not rely on the development of grammatical competence. A different finding was revealed by [9] in which they compared between the results of Grammatically Judgment Test (GJT) and Discourse Completion Test (DCT). They concluded that participants’ pragmatic performance was significantly affected by their language awareness in this case was the results of GJT.

However, none of those previous researches have captured the relationship between ARs and academic achievement. Thus, this study captures the relationship between ARs and the participants’ levels of GPA in addition to gender issue.

1.2. Apology Response Strategies (ARs)
Most researches in speech acts have been focusing on strategies of expressing complaint, request, compliment, refusal, and not to mention apology without giving due interest to the interlocutor’s potential responses. Chunlin [10] has also confirmed that studies on ARs are still considered as very few compared to the apology strategies. Whereas, responding to an apology can be highly complicated. It involves not only language factor, but also other components.

A speaker who asks for apology would obviously require a response from the sufferer. The apology response could be inferred by the sufferer’s mood, perceptions, and situations they are engaging in, or even the culture where the offender and sufferer are dealing with. Hence, different people or society might give different response on the apology based on the context of situation and culture.

This study adapted the category of ARs as proposed by Maibodi [1] since they provide not only the main categories of ARs but also extended with more sub categories for each. Hence, the judgment for
each of the strategies expressed by the participants could be more precise. The features of ARs used in this study are **Acceptance (AC)** with nine sub categories, **Acknowledgement (AK)** with seven sub categories, **Evasion (EV)** with six sub categories, and **Rejection (RJ)** with eleven sub categories. However, this study would only classify the findings into two categories, i.e. positive FTAs (**AC** and **AK**) and negative FTAs (**EV** and **RJ**) as the final conclusion.

2. Method

2.1. Population
Thirty fresh graduates, 18 females and 12 males, from an English Department of a state university in Indonesia were selected as the participants. In addition to gender, this study also considered their academic achievement which was simply derived from their GPAs which then were grouped into three levels of low, middle, high categories.

2.2. Analysis method
The instrument used was Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which was used as scenario. Originally, Blum-kulka and Olshtain [11] has formatted eight apology situations for DCT; here, the situations were modified to meet with the Indonesian context. The participants were then asked to answer the DCT orally through recorded interview. The results of the interview were then transcribed to be further analysed.

| Situation | Apology Situation |
|-----------|------------------|
| A         | Your professor said sorry to you as she/he forgot to return your term paper that day because she/he didn’t finish reading it. |
| B         | Your junior apologized for being forgotten to bring your book she/he borrowed which he promised to return that day. |
| C         | A staff manager apologized for keeping you waiting for half an hour for a job interview because she/he was called to an unexpected meeting. |
| D         | A waiter in the restaurant where you were having dinner apologized for bringing the wrong menu after half an hour waiting. |
| E         | Your notorious unpunctual friend said sorry for coming late again to do a joint paper with you whilst the due date was the day after that day. |
| F         | Your motorcycle was accidentally hit by another rider in the campus parking area. It got minor scratch. |
| G         | Your friend offended you seriously during a group discussion meeting; but soon after the meeting ended, she/he apologized for what he had done. |
| H         | You were accidentally hit by another passenger’s bag in a bus when she/he was about to put it off from her shoulder. |

The DCT results were then classified **Acceptance (AC)**, **Acknowledgement (AK)**, **Evasion (EV)**, and **Rejection (RJ)**. The three variables of gender, GPA, and ARs were then analysed using descriptive qualitative approach.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Distribution of ARs Realized
Based on gender (Table 2), the distribution of ARs in all situations by the females were quite elaborate. Slight result was revealed for the strategies used by different gender. From the mostly used to the least one, females used **Acceptance (39%)**, **Evasion (38%)**, **Rejection (14%)**, and **Acknowledgement (9%)** respectively; while the males participant **Evasion (40%)**, **Acceptance (37%)**, **Rejection (13%)**, and **Acknowledgement (10%)** respectively. Although it shows that the females tended to be more positive by
applying AC compared to the males, which chose EV, as the highest strategy; yet the gap with the second highest was insignificant for each category. In addition, both have also agreed to apply Acknowledgement as the least strategy used. Thus, the statement that female participants tended to use AC or AK than their counterpart was not completely supported.

Table 2. Realization of ARs based on gender.

| Variable       | AC   | AK   | EV   | RJ   |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|
| Female         | 39%  | 9%   | 38%  | 14%  |
| Male           | 37%  | 10%  | 40%  | 13%  |

This finding confirms Adrefiza and Jones [5] and Sanjaya and Sitawati [8] in which gender differences cannot be used as the predictor of the participants’ strategies in using speech act, in this case is ARs. In addition, Sanjaya and Sitawati [5] conclude that Bahasa Indonesia speakers tend to be more direct but this study suggests that only the females tend to be more direct as indicated by AC as the highest strategy used whilst the males tend to be more indirect by evading the apologies.

In terms of GPA (Table 3), from the mostly used to the least one, high GPA participants tended to use Acceptance (37.5%), Evasion (36.25%), Rejection (18.75%), and Acknowledgement (7.5%) respectively; while the middle GPA Acceptance (41.25%), Evasion (40%), Acknowledgement (10%) and Rejection (8.75%) respectively; whereas the low GPA used Evasion (40%), Acceptance (37.5%), Rejection (12.5%), and Acknowledgement (10%) respectively.

Table 3. Realization of ARs based on GPA.

| Variable       | AC   | AK   | EV   | RJ   |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|
| High GPA       | 37.5%| 7.5% | 36.25%| 18.75%|
| Middle         | 41.25%| 10%  | 40%  | 8.75% |
| Low            | 37.5%| 10%  | 40%  | 12.5% |

As can be seen, the gap between AC and EV in all categories was completely insignificant. While the high and middle GPAs agreed to use AC as the most dominant strategy used, but not with the least used. In fact, although, as predicted, the low GPAs used EV as the dominant strategy, but interesting finding showed where most participants in this category had similar view with the high GPAs to use Acceptance as the least used strategy. Thus, the statement that the higher the academic achievement would tend to use more AC or AK was not completely supported. This finding is in line with Sanjaya and Sitawati [8] in which grammatical accuracy, in this study employed GPA, may not determine the participants’ pragmatic competence. It means this study does not support Dehghayedi and Sadighi [9] which indicate that the participants’ pragmatic performance is significantly affected by their language awareness in this case was the results of GJT.

If gender and GPA are combined (Table 4), AC and EV were nearly evenly distributed. The similar pattern was found between females with low GPA and males with low GPA where EV took the highest rank, whereas the remaining other categories AC took its domination.

Table 4. Realization of ARs based on gender and GPA.

| Variable                  | AC   | AK   | EV   | RJ   |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Female with High GPA      | 37.5%| 6.25%| 35.42%| 20.83%|
| Female with Middle GPA    | 43.75%| 8.33%| 41.67%| 6.25% |
| Female with Low GPA       | 35.42%| 12.5%| 37.5% | 14.58%|
| Male with High GPA        | 37.5%| 9%   | 37.5% | 16%  |
| Male with Middle GPA      | 41%  | 9%   | 37.5% | 12.5%|
| Male with Low GPA         | 41%  | 6.25%| 43.75%| 9%   |
Hence, gender and academic achievement could not be necessarily concluded to relate each other to affect the choice of ARs. This conclusion supports Sanjaya and Sitawati [8] in which academic achievement and gender may not be used to determine the level of pragmatic competence.

3.2. Discussion

From eight apology situations provided, Acceptance (AC) and Evasion (EV) took turn in taking the domination as the most strategy used by the participants. Most participants preferred to use AC in Situation A, C, G, and Situation H; whereas, EV had its most users in Situation B, D, E, and F. Meanwhile, although AK and RJ did not take any domination in any situation; it will be quite important to highlight that highest number of AK appeared in Situation H while RJ in Situation E.

| ARs Category | Situation | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-------|
| AC           | A: 17     |       |
|              | B: 7      |       |
|              | C: 32     |       |
|              | D: 3      |       |
|              | E: 1      |       |
|              | F: 7      |       |
|              | G: 13     |       |
|              | H: 16     |       |
| AK           | 0         |       |
| EV           | 11        |       |
|              | 15        |       |
|              | 2         |       |
|              | 16        |       |
|              | 17        |       |
|              | 20        |       |
|              | 7         |       |
|              | 5         |       |
| RJ           | 1         |       |
|              | 8         |       |
|              | 0         |       |
|              | 10        |       |
|              | 1        |       |
|              | 4         |       |
|              | 0         |       |
|              | 32        |       |

The appearance of AC in Situation A and C are not quite surprising since the participants are socially in the lower positions compared to the addressees, the lecturer and staff manager. In addition, they are also in the more inferior positions as they will not interact with the addressees in a short period of time but could be for years ahead. In those kinds of situations, the participants do not have many options other than accepting the apology.

Quite surprising appearance of AC is in Situation G and H. However, it might be understandable when we consider the relationships between the participants and the addressees. In Situation G, most of the participants agree not to further make the situation as a big issue and prefer to maintain friendship that has long established.

For Situation H, although the participants have higher position as the injured party, but this kind of incident is considered as normally happen in the public spaces. Hence, it is unnecessary to make the situation as a considerable issue. Some expressions of AC appeared include “That’s OK”, “It doesn’t matter”, and “Please return it ASAP.”

In Situation B, D, E, and F have actually higher positions compared to the addressees. They could actually just directly reject the apology conveyed to them. However, most participants select to apply EV strategy in replying to the apology conveyed. It might be explained as the participants’ efforts to adjust their emotion with the situations happened. Evasion (EV) does not mean that the participants reject to neither give apology to the addressees nor accept it. In this strategy, the participants do not verbally accept nor reject the apology but prefer to saying sentences such as “Thanks for letting me know”, “How could that happen?”, “You should be careful next time”, or “I’m a bit pissed at you at the moment” with high intonation.

Expressions of AK such as “That’s OK, but you should careful next time”, or “I accept your apology, but watch your bag” in Situation H show that the participants tend to accept the apology because they understand that the situation normally happens in the public transportation. However, they also consider that it is important to deliver a warning for the addressees not to repeat the mistake in a soft tone.

Expressions of RJ in Situation E such as “You’re really shit”, “That’s not good, you are horrible”, or “I’m really angry” explain that the degree of mistake made by the addresses is unforgiveable. Although the relationship between the participants and the addressees is close, but when dealing with “heart” or personal issue, apology alone will not be able to fix the situation.

The elaborations indicate that several factors influence the participants in choosing the ARs. Those factors include social power, social setting, and social relationship which confirm the findings of Saleem, Anjum, and Naz [6] and Waluyo [7]. However, some findings that show deviations such as the emergence of AK in Situation H and RJ in Situation E as the second highest strategy used indicate some
other factors have influenced the choice of ARs. These factors might include the degree of mistakes made by the offender and the personal characteristics of the sufferer.

4. Conclusion
The results were quite elaborate. Most of the participants tend to use Evasion strategy when responding to apologies; however, the number of males who apply Acceptance was also significant. Similarly, for the academic achievement, participants with high GPA do not necessarily employ Acceptance and vice versa. Furthermore, several factors also influence the strategies preferred to use by the participants. Among the factors include social power, social setting, and social relationship, degree of mistakes, and personal characteristics. To conclude, neither gender nor academic achievement can be considered as the significant predictors of Apology Response strategies used by the participants.

To suggest, pedagogically, it is important for teachers and students to pay more attention to pragmatic competence learning in addition to the conventional ones. Future research may take larger samples to draw more reliable generalization. In addition, statistical analysis is also crucial to apply to provide quantitative results.

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