

## **APOLOGY STRATEGIES BY MALAY LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is study the use of apology strategies by Malay tertiary learners of English. The study aims to find out the types of apology strategies used in a variety of communicative situations and to look into the more frequently used strategies. Twenty respondents majoring in English Language were used in the study. A Discourse Completion Task questionnaire of six situations was used to collect data and the SPSS software was used for the analysis. The data was analyzed using a framework of apology strategies culled from the literature. The findings showed that Malay learners employed apology strategies that made up of expressions of apology followed with explanations or reasons for the offence and offers for repairs. The strategies used by the learners reflect the Malay cultural value for harmony and interdependence in interpersonal working relationships. Suggestions are made for future research on apologies.

Keywords: apology, apology strategies, Malay learners, Malay culture

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

One of the reasons for people to use language is to ask for apology. According to Bergman and Kasper (1993) (in Demeter 2000), apology is a compensatory action to an offence where the speaker who committed the offence was casually involved resulting in cost to the hearer. The costly impact could be in terms of losing face or causing serious misunderstandings that can impact and give negative influence to the relationship between the individuals involved.

Although there are several studies that tackled apology and the relationship between the apologizer and the offended, the literature review revealed that there is a scarcity of studies about this speech act among Malaysian students. Hence, in this study, the researcher aims to do a research among Malaysian learners of English in a tertiary institution. More specifically, the objectives of this research are firstly, to identify the type of apology strategies used by Malaysian tertiary learners of English in a variety of situations, and secondly, to establish the most frequently used strategies among the learners.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Apology and Apology Strategies**

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) state that apology is needed when certain behaviour, words or utterances have caused disruption to the social norms, and therefore apology is offered in order to “set things right” with the person(s) who had been impacted from the wrongdoing. However, it is only when the person who had caused the offense recognizes himself as the apologizer that we get the act of apologizing since an apology involves two parties, the apologizer and the recipient. They also note that linguistic and sociocultural norms affect the situation and determine whether an apology is needed or not.

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) propose a framework of five apology strategies. They are 1) the expression of apology, 2) an explanation or account of the situation, 3) an acknowledgement of responsibility, 4) an offer of repair, and lastly 5) a promise of forbearance. These strategies are described in Table 1.

### **2.2 Related Studies**

Alfattah (2010) aimed to systemize the various strategies used for the purpose of apologizing from the pragmatic point of view. The results showed that the subjects used the expressions of regret the most. Gonda (2001) aimed to find out the differences between British English natives and Greek non-native speakers of English in using apology strategies. She studied 20 British English and 20 Greek speakers of English who were postgraduate students in a university in United Kingdom and found that in some situations Greek speakers used more words and they used more than one strategy when expressing their regret compared to the British English speakers. Bataneh and Bataneh (2006) researched Jordanian EFL university learners to find out the difference in strategy use between male and female respondents. The results showed that the male and female respondents frequently used the primary strategies (statement of remorse, giving accounts, description of damage, and reparation). The genders were different in their choice of non-apology strategies such as blaming the victim and ignoring the incident as unimportant. Female respondents opted for the latter while preferring to avoid discussion of the offense while male respondents preferred the former.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Participants**

This study involved 20 Malay students who were registered in the Bachelor of Arts in English Language as their major. The rationale for this group was because they would be able to respond to the situations in English since they would have good proficiency in English language.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

A discourse completion task questionnaire (DCT) modified from Afghari (2007) and Bataneh and Bataneh (2006) was used for the study. The DCT comprises six open-ended questions that include a brief description of each of the situations in which learners were likely to encounter in their daily lives. The participants were required to identify themselves with the person committing the offence in the situations and write down their reactions.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

After the data had been collected, the researcher investigated the types of apology strategies used in each situation using Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model as the framework of analysis. The most frequently used strategies were computed using the SPSS software.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Situation 1

You borrowed an umbrella from your best friend and the wind broke it beyond repair. What do you say to him / her?

The respondents used a combination of apology strategies when responding to Situation 1 (See Table 2). The majority of the respondents (60%) expressed apology and offered to buy a new umbrella. Some of their responses were:

"I'm sorry, but I will buy a new one later",

"Hey mate, I'm sorry I broke your umbrella. Please forgive me? I will replace it later."

Besides that, 15% of the respondents chose to ask for forgiveness, explain what had caused the damage and finally offer to buy a new umbrella. Examples of responses obtained were:

"I'm sorry for ruining your umbrella. The wind was so strong. I'll buy a new one for you"

"The other day, the wind was really strong and your umbrella got broken. I'm really sorry. I'll buy you a new one, I promise."

10% chose to express their apology and explain the situation, without making an effort to repair the damaged umbrella. Their responses were "I'm sorry, I think I have broken your umbrella since there was a huge wind when I used it". Meanwhile a minimum number of respondents (5%) chose to show regret by combining "Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair", in which the respondent acknowledged responsibility by expressing lack of intent in dealing with the situation. For example, "Dear friends, I'm sorry I did broke your umbrella, it wasn't that I intend to, I'll buy you another one". Another 5% used the combination of "Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility" where the respondents only apologized and admitted their responsibility by expressing lack of intent, such as "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to".

### 4.2 Situation 2

You have borrowed your friend's notes and because of the rain yesterday, some of the notes have been wet and damaged. What would you say when you want to return the notes?

Table 3 displays the findings for Situation 2. About 45% of the respondents chose to apologize and offered to get new notes to replace the damaged ones in order to show their regret. For example:

"Sorry your notes is damaged, can I do anything to make it up?"

"I'm sorry, I'll print you another one."

Besides that, another combination found in the data is “Expression of apology + Explanation” (20%). The respondents expressed their regret by apologizing and explaining what had happened. For example:

“I’m sorry. Your notes are wet because of yesterday’s rain.”

“Yesterday was raining, it soaked me. Your notes are ruined, I’m very sorry.”

Another 20% responded using “Expression of apology + Explanation + Offer of Repair” where we can see that the respondents tried to express their regret not only by saying sorry but also by giving explanations and offering to replace the ruined notes. Examples of this response are:

“I’m sorry. It rained heavily yesterday and I forgot to bring my umbrella. All your notes that I borrowed have been wet and damaged. Luckily I copied it yesterday. I’m going to give the copy to you, once I get it from our classmates.”

“Hey, I’m really sorry, that your notes got wet because it rained yesterday. How can I make it up to you?”

Besides that, the combination “Explanation + Offer of Repair” only 5% chose to explain the situation that led to the offence and then offered to repair the damaged notes without explicitly saying his/her apologies. An instance of this is “The notes that I borrowed yesterday have been damaged because of the rain. I’ll try to ask my friend if they have the notes and I’ll replace yours with a new one.”

Another 5% of respondents chose to combine the “Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility” in which he or she accepted the blame as a way of acknowledging their responsibility towards the offence. An example of this response is “Sorry. It seems that some of the notes are wet due to the rain. I should have taken care of it carefully.”

### 4.3 Situation 3

You were playing with your friend’s computer and accidentally erased the important paper he/she had been working on for the past two weeks. What do you say to him/her?

As shown in Table 4, 50% of the respondents responded through “Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair”. They chose to apologize and repair the damage either by helping their friends to retrace the document or sending the computer to a center. Examples include:

“Oh no, I am terribly sorry about that, I will help you to work on the important paper.”

“Oh my god! I’m terribly sorry. Tell me and I will do anything to help you out.”

“I’m sorry that I accidentally erased your report. Let me redo it for you.”

15% of them expressed their regrets by apologizing. There was no combination of strategies involved. Examples of such responses are as follows:

“I feel so bad, I’m sorry”

“I am sorry for my mistake.”

However another 15% responded through “Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility.” This combination involved the respondents expressing their regrets and simultaneously admitting their responsibility by showing their lack of intent in causing such offence. Examples include:

“God! Please forgive me, I didn’t mean to. I knew how hard for you to finished up your work. I am sorry.”

“Hey, remember the last time I played your computer? I accidentally deleted a very important file. It was an accident, I swear. Please forgive me.”

“Expressions of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair” is another combination type found in the data. Fifteen per cent of respondents regretted their mistake, admitted their carelessness and offered to repair the damage caused. For instance:

“Honestly, I’m so sorry for my careless mistakes. I don’t mind to help you redo your work again.”

“I am so sorry. I didn’t do it on purpose. Do tell me anything I can do to cover up my mistake. I am so sorry.”

Meanwhile “Expression of Apology + Explanation” only recorded 5% of respondents. An example of this response is “I accidentally erased your work. I am so sorry.”

#### **4.4 Situation 4**

You have borrowed a classmate’s assignments, submitted yours and failed to return his/hers. What do you say to him/her?

A majority of 50% (as shown in Table 5) expressed apology and offered repair. The respondents feel responsible for their mistake and offered to submit their friend’s assignment to the lecturer themselves and also will try to explain to the lecturer concerned the reason for the late submission. Examples of this response are:

“I forgot to submit your assignment. I’m sorry. I will submit it later.”

“I’m sorry I was late returning this to you. I’ll explain to the lecturer.”

Another 20% expressed apology, acknowledged responsibility and offered repair. For instance they said:

“I’m sorry, it was my fault and carelessness. I’ll personally meet the lecturer and tell him/her about this.”

“Sorry, I’ll tell the lecturer it was my fault.”

There was 20% of respondents who apologized without any further expansion. Examples of such response are “I am sorry my dear friend.” and also “I am sorry for everything.”

Meanwhile, the combination of strategies, “Expression of Apology + Explanation” (like “I have matters I couldn’t avoid and that’s why I couldn’t return your assignment. I’m really really sorry.”) and “Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility” (I’m totally careless. I don’t mean to not return it. I’m sorry”) were used by 5% of the respondents respectively.

#### 4.5 Situation 5

You have promised to represent your group in a presentation but due to a very bad cold, you have not been able to even attend the class. What would you say to your group members.

Table 6 shows that 30% of the respondents believe that apologizing and explaining their condition to the group members can help in minimizing the offence. Examples of response provided are:

“I’m sorry I was not able to attend. I had a very bad cold.”

“I’m sorry that I can’t attend the class and represent our group in today’s presentation because I’m having a very bad cold. Good luck with the presentation.”

25% of the respondents chose to express their apologies by expressing apology followed with an offer of repair. Some of the responses include:

“I’m sorry, I can’t attend the class today. I will let the lecturer know and postpone it.”

“I’m sorry that I cannot present for you. Can I do the report and submit it?”

10% chose to express their apologies by saying they are sorry, together with some explanation and offer to pay for their responsibilities in the future (e.g.: “I am sorry that I can’t make it to our group presentation due to health problems. I will make it up to all of you later and explain myself to the lecturer.”)

Another 10% only provided explanation on account of their absence for the day of presentation. The respondents only explained their condition without apologizing to their group members. An example of such a response is “I have a bad cold yesterday and I couldn’t make it.”

Five per cent apologized by offering explanation and repairs with no explicit apology. For instance, “I’m not well today and I’m in no condition to present well. Could someone please do the presentation instead? Here are some notes on the slides. Hope it helps.”

From the data, 20% chose to simply offer their apologies to their group members without any further expansion. Examples of this kind of apology are:

“I’m so sorry but I won’t be able to come.”

“Hey guys, I’m sorry that I can’t attend the class presentation today.”

#### 4.6 Situation 6

You cancelled a group discussion at the last minute and caused inconvenience to all the members of the group. What do you say to them?

About 30% (as shown in Table 7) responded by offering their apologies together with explaining the reason for cancellation and offering repair. This shows that the respondents truly regret their last minute decision and hence show their guilt by asking for forgiveness and enhance the apology by providing explanation and offers for repair. The examples of the response are shown below:

“I am so sorry that I need to attend on an urgent and unavoidable matter at the last minute. I will come up with a plan soon regarding our work.”

“I’m sorry that I have to cancel our group discussion as I have an emergency that I need to attend to. We will postpone the meeting next week.”

Meanwhile, 25% chose to express their remorse also by asking for forgiveness and explain the situation as well. Examples include “I have an emergency and I can’t attend our group discussion tonight. I’m so sorry for the inconvenience”. Another example is “I am sorry to cancel today’s discussion due to some difficulties.”

Fifteen per cent responded through an expression of apology combined with an offer of repair. Examples include:

“Sorry for the inconvenience, we’ll postponed this discussion to a later time. Or you can proceed without me if you want. It won’t be a problem. I’ll ask you about what you’ve discussed later.”

“I’m so sorry that I cancelled the last time. Let’s make the discussion some other time.”

The least frequent strategy is “Expression of Apology + Promise of Forbearance”. Only 5% chose to strengthen their apologies with a guarantee that the offence will never occur again. Example of such response is “Forgive me! I swear to god I won’t do it again in the future.”

Another least used strategy is “Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility”, where the respondents apologize and admitting their mistakes respectively. For instance “I am sorry, I didn’t mean to cause any inconvenience towards you guys. So sorry. Really hope that you guys can forgive me and understand my condition.”

Twenty per cent chose to only ask for forgiveness from the group members without any explanation as to why the discussion was cancelled. Examples are “Sorry guys I had to cancel our group discussion on a last minute. I am really sorry.” and “I’m sorry that this caused inconvenience to you.”

#### **4.7 Apology strategies by frequency of use**

Figure 1 displays the most frequently used strategies across all situations. From the total of 120 responses analyzed, 49 of the responses were ‘expression of apology with offer of repair’ hence making it the most frequently used apology strategy. Following this result, other strategies that were frequently used by the respondents were ‘expression of apology + Explanation’ (19 responses), ‘expression of apology’ (17 responses), and lastly ‘expression of apology + explanation + offer of repair (15 responses).

## 5. DISCUSSION

To recall, the two research questions that the researcher wanted to address were:

- i) What are the apology strategies used by Malaysian learners of English when apologizing in a variety of situations?
- ii) Which is the most frequently used strategy?

The study shows that the use of strategies is contextual. Strategies were mixed and matched to address the face threat in each situation. The most frequently used strategies were expression of apology with offer of repair, expression of apology with explanation, and expression of apology with explanation and offer of repair. The use of explanations and repairs when apologizing in every situation can be explained as reflecting the Malay cultural value for harmony in interpersonal relationships and task accomplishments. Goddard (2006) remarks that the Malay culture values the display of respect, consideration and concern for each other, and in being sensitive to and anticipating the interests of the other. Similar findings were made by Paramasivam (2007) in her investigation of the speech act of disagreement by Malay negotiators in a business transaction. Maros (2006) also observed that Malay speakers tend to have rules in speaking that are related to saving the face of others as well as preserving the relationship with one another. In providing reasons or explanations and in making repairs the offender shows interest in maintaining relationship with the offended. The expression of apology preceded the giving of explanations and the offers for repairs probably because as noted by Alfattah (2010) the learners view the expression of apology as the basic uttering or a compulsory utterance when an apology is forwarded.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As sequels to this study, it is suggested that apology patterns in communicative situations between local Malaysian learners and international students be examined so as to gain insights into how apologies are done in intercultural communication involving English as the international language. This is in view of the fact that many international students come to Malaysia to pursue higher studies and communication between these cultures with the local Malaysian culture is inevitable.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1 Apology Strategies**

Apology Strategies	Descriptors
Expression of apology	<p>The offender admits that he/she had done something wrong. There are three ways of expressing an apology, which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Expression of regret (eg: I'm sorry that...)</li> <li>b. Offer of apology (eg: We're writing to apologize ...)</li> <li>c. Request for forgiveness (eg: Please forgive me...)</li> </ul>
Explanation or account of the situation	<p>The offender describes the situation that prompted him/her to commit the offense. E.g.: "I'm sorry, there was a massive traffic jam."</p>

Acknowledgement of responsibility	The offender realizes his/her responsibility for the offence he/she had caused. There are four ways to perform this. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Accepting the blame (eg: It's my fault...)</li> <li>b. Expressing self-deficiency (eg: I was confused ...)</li> <li>c. Recognizing the other person as deserving apology (eg: You're right...)</li> <li>d. Expressing the lack of intent (eg: I didn't mean to ...)</li> </ul>
Offer of repair	The offender agrees to make payment or anything that can repair the damage he/she had caused. E.g.: "How can I make it up to you?"
Promise of forbearance	The offender guarantees that the offense will not happen again in the future. E.g.: "I will never do that again."

(Olshtain and Cohen 1983)

**Table 2 Situation 1 (Broken Umbrella)**

No.	Apology Strategies	Frequency	Percent
1.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	12	60.0
2.	Expression of Apology	1	5.0
3.	Expression of Apology + Explanation + Offer of Repair	3	15.0
4.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	2	10.0
5.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair	1	5.0
6.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

**Table 3 Situation 2 (Ruined Notes)**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Apology Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	9	45.0
2.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	4	20.0
3.	Expression of Apology + Explanation + Offer of Repair	4	20.0
4.	Explanation + Offer of Repair	1	5.0
5.	Expression of Apology + Explanation + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	1	5.0
6.	Expression of Apology	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

**Table 4 Situation 3 (Deleted Assignment)**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Apology Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	10	50.0
2.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	3	15.0
3.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	1	5.0
4.	Expression of Apology	3	15.0
5.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair	3	15.0
	Total	20	100.0

**Table 5 Situation 4 (Failed to return friend's assignment)**

No.	Apology Strategies	Frequency	Percent
1.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	10	50.0
2.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair	4	20.0
3.	Expression of Apology	4	20.0
4.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	1	5.0
5.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

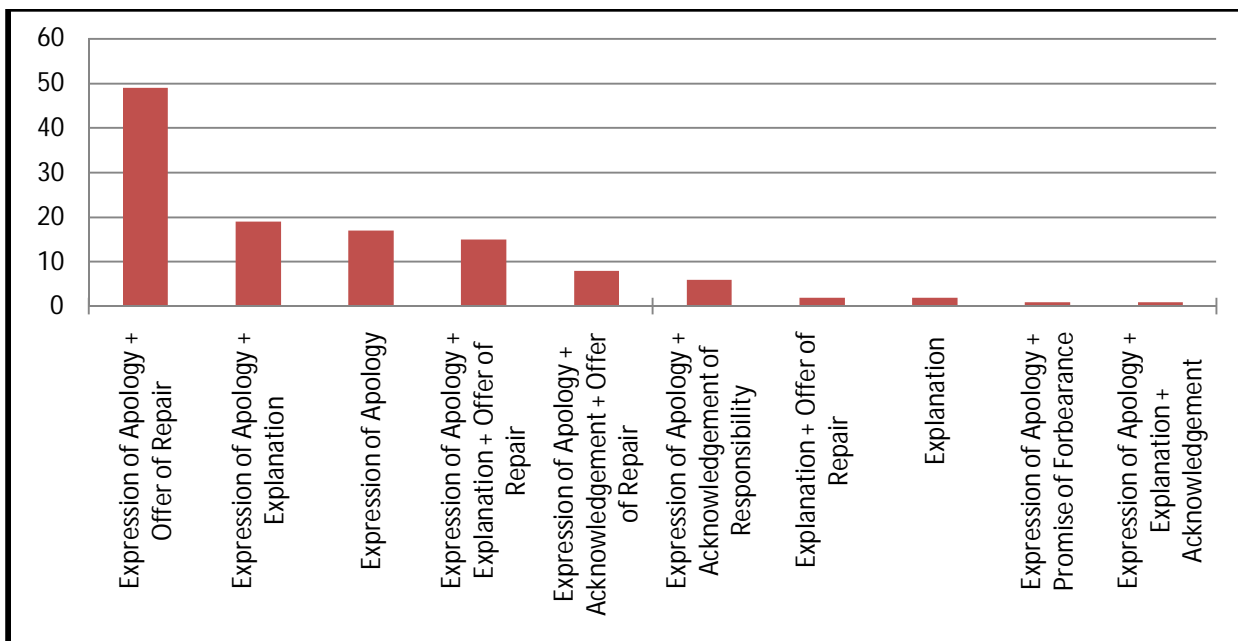
**Table 6 Situation 5 (Failed to do presentation)**

No.	Apology Strategies	Frequency	Percent
1.	Expression of Apology + Explanation + Offer of Repair	2	10.0
2.	Expression of Apology	4	20.0
3.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	5	25.0
4.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	6	30.0
5.	Explanation + Offer of Repair	1	5.0
6.	Explanation	2	10.0
	Total	20	100.0

**Table 7 Situation 6 (Cancelled group discussion)**

No.	Apology Strategies	Frequency	Percent
1.	Expression of Apology + Explanation + Offer of Repair	6	30.0
2.	Expression of Apology + Explanation	5	25.0
3.	Expression of Apology	4	20.0
4.	Expression of Apology + Promise of Forbearance	1	5.0
5.	Expression of Apology + Offer of Repair	3	15.0
6.	Expression of Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

**Figure 1 Apology Strategies by Frequency of Use**



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TunNurHamizahas a Bachelor of Art degree in English Language from Universiti Putra Malaysia. What started off as her final year research project has eventually led to the writing of this paper for publication. This is her first attempt in writing and publishing for an academic journal.

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