

Investigating the Effects of Individual Differences in the Speech Act of Apology in Institutional Discourse

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of individual differences (IDs) like language proficiency, gender and age on careful, unpressured online planning on the production of speech act of apology in institutional discourse. For this purpose, one hundred and eighty-seven Persian EFL university students at three academic levels (undergraduates, postgraduates and PhD students) participated and cross-sectional data were collected to compare and analyze the apologies produced by learners at different proficiency levels. A three way between subject analyses (ANOVA) showed quantitative differences among the three groups according to individual differences. Further, in-depth qualitative analyses of test items and retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) taken from the participants revealed developmental information about the series of processes, language states and patterns followed by learners when making an apology in a second language. Sociocultural, socio-psychological and socio-affective aspects of the discourse situations influenced not only students' pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic choices but also their negotiation of lexical and grammatical choices in planning the speech act of apology. Apparently, the degree of sociocultural accommodation to the L2 pragmatic norms may be a matter of choice as of ability. One major pedagogical implication of this study is that any account of the development of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) should take into consideration the interaction of ID variables that are likely to intervene between the stages of noticing and target like production.

Key words: apologies; interlanguage pragmatics; institutional discourse; online planning; individual differences

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1. Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), as a subfield of pragmatics, focuses on pragmatic development of L2 learners and investigates their development and use of pragmatic knowledge in second language (L2) contexts. It examines how nonnative speakers (NNSs) comprehend and produce linguistic actions in L2 (Kasper, 1998).

The study of individual differences (IDs) has a long-standing interest in the field of ILP as factors affecting pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kuriscak, 2010; Taguchi, 2013). The literature on IDs commonly distinguishes such categories as age, gender, language aptitude, personality variables, and cognitive, social, and affective factors (Ellis, 2008). van Geert and Steenbeek (2005) believed that, “individuals tend to actively select and manipulate the contexts in which they function” (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Moreover, they not only determine what aspects of the outside world are relevant to them, but they actively construct a world around themselves and are constantly altering it (Lewontin, 2000, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

This study, anchored in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, explored L2 speakers pragmatic awareness in relation to their individual differences like language proficiency, gender and age on the speech act of apology in institutional discourse. The special interest in institutional discourse is purely on pragmatic behavior that reflects one’s linguistic competence and performance, which is the manifestation of one’s personality and character because the interaction that takes place between the faculty and the student depends largely on how the EFL student comprehends the situation and selects the language to address the interlocutor. Unfortunately, Iranian EFL learners do not acquire a sufficient level of L2 pragmatic competence because the target language they encounter in the L2 classroom simply lacks a sufficient range and emphasis of relevant exemplars. Very often, the status-appropriate input is often limited or absent from the status-unequal encounters (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996) and rules of interaction between the faculty and the student are taken for granted. In the educational domain the far-reaching repercussions that pragmatic infelicities can have, as Boxer (2002) believed is that, “students *may* run the risk of not getting the help required in order to succeed in their education” (p. 158).

The present study gains significance in that limited attempts have been made to study the impact of IDs in pragmatics in institutional discourse as factors that might enable us to specify the nature of the input that best suits L2 learners’ comprehension, and to understand the nature of the output that they produce at a particular stage of learning. Therefore, the focus of this study is especially on what EFL learners ‘*know*’ and what they can ‘*do*’ under communicative conditions. However, not all students acquire the target

language in a monolithic way and IDs largely influence learners' lives and learning contexts. Since IDs and social relationships determine a great deal of what we want to communicate, the important task therefore, must be to identify what psycholinguistic and cognitive processes are involved in L2 acquisition and what motivates individual learner selectivity, and how selectivity and processes interact in the performance of pragmatic tasks.

This study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between ID factors (language proficiency, gender and age) and online language production on written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs) for speech act situations of apology in the three groups (low intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced level) of students when interacting in an unequal status?
2. Are there developmental differences in the production of speech act of apology in institutional discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Speech act of apology*

Apologies, as one of the target speech acts, are most frequently used in human interactions (Afghari, 2007; Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Holmes, 1995; Kim, 2001; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996; Rose, 2000; Sabaté i Dalmau & Curell i Gotor, 2007; Trosborg, 1995). As post events they are required when the social norms of politeness demand the mending of a behavior. Social relations between interlocutors are rebalanced when a linguistic expression has offended another person or when somebody's personal expectations are not fulfilled. In a more formal situation, a speech act involves a high-degree of imposition and is addressed to a person who has more power. If a speaker does not apologize or fails to select a strategy to offer an apology, this threatens the hearer's face.

Implicitly, an underlying component of language ability exists that enables learners to extract meanings from the context, especially when words go unsaid; this aspect is termed *pragmatic knowledge and ability*. While the speech act of apologizing can be regarded as a pragmatic universal, the conditions that call for an apology are clearly not. However, Wierzbicka (1985) believed that "speech communities differ in what counts as an offense, the severity of the same offensive event, and the appropriate compensation" (p. 145).

One of the central research questions in the field of ILP is how learners produce apologies in a second/foreign language and the extent to which their mitigating strategies deviate from or approximate the strategies that native speakers use. Many of the studies on non-native apologies stem from observations that linguistic differences between societies sharing different politeness systems and different sociocultural values can bring about cross-

cultural misunderstanding (Clyne, Ball, & Neil, 1991, as cited in Sabate'i Dalmou & Curell i Gotor, 2007) and such misunderstanding can lead to mutually unfavorable stereotyping. While phonological, syntactic, or lexical errors by non-native speakers are normally regarded as signs of a low command of the L2, native speakers (Barron, 2003) frequently interpret pragmatic inadequacy as rudeness.

Research (e.g. Afghari, 2007; Bayat, 2013) has demonstrated not only the influence of social factors like social distance, social status, age, gender and severity of offense and suggest that these factors can influence L2 learners' performance of apologies in the L2. For example, Shariati and Chamani (2010) studied the apology strategies in Persian and concluded that explicit expression of apology with a request for forgiveness (bebaxš'id) was the most frequently used. Farashaiyan and Yazdi Amirkhiz (2011) did a descriptive-comparative analysis of apology strategies among Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL university students indicating that the pragmatic performance of students relies upon particular factors rather than language proficiency. Moreover, Dadkhah Tehrani, Rezaei, Dezhara, and Kafrani (2012) investigated the different primary and secondary strategies used by Iranian EFL students in different situations as well as the role of gender in this regard. They found that the statement of remorse was the most widely used strategy by male and female undergraduates. Although, Karimnia and Afghari (2012) suggested the universality of apology strategies the adoption of apology strategies supported the culture-specific dimension of language use. Their results indicated an orientation toward positive politeness. Apparently, other than grammatical competence a high level of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge is also required.

There is a belief that the assessment of pragmatic norms both in spoken and written modalities is problematic, for NSs as well as for NNSs learners of English (McNamara, 1997). However, Cohen (2010) claimed that "it is likely that learners will acquire the speech acts that they come in contact with the most, that they notice, or for which they have the most need" (p. 239).

2.2 Institutional discourse

Participants in institutional settings have generally fixed roles, as determined by the nature of the institutional context itself. At universities, institutional discourse, which is purely academic in structure, refers to the important communicative interaction that takes place between students and faculty in colleges and universities (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993, 1996, 2005; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). In such a situation, usually some real world, expected, tangible gain to at least one of the participants is seen as the purpose of the interaction itself. This involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or a set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question and helps in data

collection because the nature of such discourse topics can be anticipated in advance (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005, p. 15). Therefore, the greater the social power/distance between the interlocutors, the more politeness is generally expected.

2.3 Online Planning

In writing research, planning has been viewed as one of several processes involved in the production of written text. Broadly, it is claimed that providing L2 learners with the opportunity to plan their task online frees up learners' limited attentional resources and enables them to align their processing resources to carefully plan and monitor their task and, in turn, produce more accurate and complex language. Within-task planning is defined as on-line planning that takes place during a task performance. When this is unpressured, the participants have the opportunity to conceptualize, formulate and articulate their messages with some care and have many opportunities to plan their productions and make use of this opportunity to attend to the content and/or expression of their performance (Ellis, 2005). Observing the effects of planning on writing, Ellis and Yuan (2004) believed that "speaking has to be accomplished in real time, whereas writing allows the writer much greater control over the time spent in formulation and monitoring" (p. 63).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Initially, two hundred and thirty two students participated in the study. They were from two universities (Esfahan and Yazd) in central Iran. Participants were from both genders and their ages ranged from 20 to 35 years. The proficiency levels of the participants were evaluated through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Based on the scores obtained on the OPT one hundred and eighty seven Persian speaking EFL university students from three academic levels—undergraduates (N=73), postgraduates (N=82) and PhD (N=32) students were found to be eligible. Students' were divided to three proficiency levels—low intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced—according to the standards set by the test itself. Although the OPT is a standard measurement, the KR-21 formula, the reliability index for the OPT in the present study was found to be 0.85, which is considered an acceptable level of reliability.

Demographic information taken from the participants showed that they had never experienced life in a second language environment and their exposure to the English language was only through formal education in high school and university. Participants had covered sixty units in the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This study as part of a larger project (Haji Maibodi, 2016) was piloted with 40 EFL students who shared the

same learning conditions of the actual participants. The rationale behind choosing university students as a source of data collection was a convenience of sampling. Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) believed taking university students as participants in empirical research has the advantage of ensuring homogeneity as far as age, educational, social and cultural backgrounds are concerned. In order to avoid the Hawthorne Effect no information regarding the research project were given. Only brief explanations about 'pragmatics' were given to students and the study was conducted in the participants' classrooms. At the end of the project as a token of appreciation, students were given a handbook on English idioms and phrases together with snacks.

3.2 Instrumentation

For the present research, two major data collection instruments were employed: the written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs) and retrospective verbal reports. The data were collected in two phases.

3.3 Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs)

A WDCT is a pragmatics instrument that aims to elicit experimental (simulated) speech-act data under controlled conditions to measure pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge in non-interactive form. Although WDCTs have been criticized as not being authentic but they are metapragmatic in that they explicitly require participants to articulate what they believe would be situationally appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary, interactional settings. Moreover, they will help participants to have more time to read a written description of a social situation and to plan their responses than in a face-to-face interaction.

The WDCTs for this study had five power asymmetrical apology situations. Four short prompts and one enhanced prompt. As such, the response space for the last enhanced prompt was extended in order to encourage as full a response as possible (*see* Billmyer & Varghese, 2000). The scenarios represented an area of institutional discourse with the aim that the students will address a professor of a course within their major and could be occasions that they may encounter outside the classroom. Such power-asymmetrical social situations are more demanding in that the power rests on the addressee rather than the speaker because of the addressee's institutionalized role. Since the roles of the speaker and hearer are fixed, rights and obligations are clearly defined and the likelihood of compliance is not very high. In this study it was hypothesized that unpressured, on-line planning will provide better opportunities for formulating (planning), executing (programming) and monitoring (reading) well-thought out responses to the WDCTs (*cf.* Ellis & Yuan, 2004). The Cronbach alpha of the WDCTs in this study was 0.83. The

following Figure 1 gives the list of speech act situations of apology of the present study.

Situation 1: spilling tea on borrowed book	Situation 3: being late for class
Situation 2: losing the book	Situation 4: missing appointment
Situation 5: accident on the stairway (enhanced prompt)	

Figure 1. List of apology situations

3.4 Rating/coding of the WDCT questionnaire

Students' performance in the three groups was holistically analyzed for grammar, lexicon and the correct application of the speech act together with the ability to use the typical or natural expression. Appropriateness is the ability to perform the speech act at the proper level of politeness, directness, and formality and should be evaluated quantitatively by native speakers rating learner performance, as well as qualitatively by identifying specific linguistic expressions used to perform the speech acts (Taguchi, 2006). Hence, three experienced native speakers, all university EFL lecturers, were selected as raters because of their experience in using holistic assessment guidelines to evaluate L2 learner production (i.e. writing). They had full command of both Persian and English and had lived in the country for more than twenty-five years. According to Taguchi (2011), "Pragmatics involves linguistic behaviors that are reflective of values and norms of a given culture and addresses a wide range of elements—forms, functions, contexts, social relationships, and cultural conventions. Given this complexity, it is conceivable that the raters' background, cultural experience, and personality will greatly influence the standards they use to judge appropriateness" (p. 455). The inter-rater reliability was 0.92.

A 5-point rating scale was adapted from Taguchi (2006). According to the scale, raters were asked to give two scores for each production, one for content (sociopragmatic: awareness of the consequences of their own pragmatic language choice) and the other for form (pragmalinguistic: competence to use community norms) on a scale of 1-10 (Excellent: 9-10, Good: 7-8, Fair: 5-6, Poor: 3-4, Very poor: 1-2). The following Table 1 provides the rating scale for the test items.

In line with Ellis and Yuan (2004), data were also analyzed according to each of the four aspects of the pragmatic task:

- a. Understanding the prompt,
- b. Planning the organization of the writing,
- c. Planning the content and
- d. Language planning.

The participants were told to provide responses that they think are appropriate to the context and to base their responses according to the institutional discourse and situation under concern. Therefore, findings from

the present study were not treated as those deriving from actual discourse, but rather related to what speakers tend to view as being pragmatically appropriate linguistic behavior without a hearer response. The whole investigation was carried out only in English as a paper-and-pencil test and no translations were made to Persian. In order to enable students to formulate and monitor their language of thought as they perform their task as online planning, no time limit was allotted. However, the average time taken by the students was about 120 minutes. Additionally, in order to study the effect of IDs and online planning, qualitative analysis and percentage scores on test items were calculated.

Table 1

Appropriateness rating scale for the pragmatic tasks as developed by Taguchi (2006)

<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Descriptors</i>
Excellent (9-10)	Expressions are fully appropriate for the situation. No or almost no grammatical and discourse errors
Good (7-8)	Expressions are mostly appropriate. Very few grammatical and discourse errors.
Fair (5-6)	Expressions are only somewhat appropriate. Grammatical and discourse errors are noticeable, but they do not interfere with appropriateness.
Poor (3-4)	Due to the interference from grammatical and discourse errors, appropriateness is difficult to determine
Very poor (1-2)	Expressions are very difficult or too little to understand. There is no evidence that the intended speech acts are performed.
0	No performance

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative data analysis procedures

In response to research question (1), a three-way between-subjects analysis of variance of WCDTs according to language proficiency, age and gender was undertaken. The following Table 2 provides the results.

A three way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the effect of age and gender and proficiency level on pragmatic development of EFL learners, using WCDTs test. The participants in this study were divided into three groups according to their age (group 1: 20-25; group 2: 26-30; group 3: 31-35). The results show that there was no interaction between proficiency, age, and gender, $F(1, 175) = 2.949$, $p = 0.088$. However, proficiency had a significant effect on the performance of the participants $F(2, 175) = 3.95$, $p = 0.021$. The effect size of proficiency was small (partial eta squared = .043). In the same vein, age had a significant effect on the performance of the participants $F(2, 175) = 28.228$, $p = 0.000$. The effect size for age was large (partial eta squared = 0.644). Moreover, gender had a statistically significant effect on the performance of the EFL learners $F(1, 175) = 44.613$, $p = 0.000$. The effect size for gender was also large (partial eta

squared = 0.603). Therefore, in response to research question (1) the results showed the significant differences in the three proficiency levels according to individual differences.

Table 2

Three-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA)

<i>Tests of Between-Subjects Effects</i>								
<i>Dependent Variable:</i>								
<i>WDCT</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Type III Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Partial Eta Squared</i>	
	Corrected Model	22459.129 ^a	11	2041.739	46.719	.000	.746	
	Intercept	474095.445	1	474095.445	10848.138	.000	.984	
	proficiency	345.212	2	172.606	3.950	.021	.043	
	age	2467.278	2	1233.639	28.228	.000	.644	
	gender	1949.726	1	1949.726	44.613	.000	.603	
	proficiency * age	19.012	1	19.012	.435	.510	.002	
	proficiency * gender	64.676	2	32.338	.740	.479	.008	
	age * gender	649.840	2	324.920	7.435	.001	.078	
	proficiency * age * gender	128.899	1	128.899	2.949	.088	.017	
	Error	7648.013	175	43.703				
	A Total	859863.250	187					
	Corrected Total	30107.142	186					
	a. R Squared = .746 (Adjusted R Squared = .730)							

4.2 Qualitative data analysis; verbal reports

In order to get an in-depth understanding of the influence of ID factors on the responses given by the students, percentage scores were calculated for each of the test items. The focus was on the amount of information, formality, directness, and politeness used in the speech act situations. Moreover, since the speech act situations concentrated only on the discourse that normally takes place between the faculty and the students, participants were asked to report on the thoughts they had while they were completing the tasks (see Appendix). The advantage of administering RVRs (Haji Maibodi, Fazilatfar, & Allami, 2016) is that they will help to minimize the possibility that participants may start relying on inferences rather than reporting what happened. Furthermore, RVRs can also help to assess the level of awareness of the participants in a task designed to help them to attend to certain aspects of the input.

Selections from the apology speech act set are determined by a variety of context-internal and context-external factors and are largely influenced by

social power and distance. According to CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project), coding scheme (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), the linguistic realization of the act of apologizing can take the form of any of the five possible strategies available to the apologizer:

- a. An expression of an apology (use of IFID) e.g. *I apologize*.
- b. An acknowledgement of responsibility (RESP). e.g. *It was my fault*.
- c. An explanation of the situation (EXPL) e.g. *I am sorry, I was stuck in the traffic jam*.
- d. An offer of repair (REPR) e.g. *I will pay for the book*.
- e. A promise of forbearance (FORB) e.g. *This won't happen again*.

At first, investigations centered on the use of lexical and phrasal modifiers that act as downgraders meant to act internally as a strategy for expressing concern for the hearer and serves as an additional attempt to placate the hearer by using external modifications by means of supportive moves. The following table 3 displays the percentage scores for the variables found to be more prominent in the responses given to test items according to language proficiency, gender and age. The percentage scores show a developmental pattern in the three groups in the application of some of the strategies.

Table 3
Percentage scores on modifiers for speech act of apology

Variable	20-25 (low intermediate)		26-30 (upper intermediate)		31-35 (advanced)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Valid Percent	Valid Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Expression of regret	56	63	62	74	88	92
Offer of apology	67	73	71	84	85	83.2
Request for forgiveness	60	67	67	75	89.1	87
Accepting the blame	48	62	57	60	81	84
Expressing self-deficiency	34	41	42	57	79.2	79.5
Offer of repair	43	63	72	75	88	90
Promise of forbearance	73	85	74	82	86	91
Concern for the hearer	67	78	77	82	84	88

Supporting Holmes (1995) percentage scores on the modifiers (Table 3) show that females in all three groups were more pragmatically socialized than their male counterparts. They had not only understood the severity of the

situation but also the mitigation strategies adopted revealed their understanding and recognition of the social power of the interlocutor. Analysis of students' responses showed that the politeness strategy in the WDCTs not only increases with age but also differs according to gender with women apologizing more than men do. Females (82%) felt that they are to be blamed for the incident or even had to take responsibility and promise that the offense will not be repeated. That women by nature and temperament seem to be more polite than men are, reveals the fact that as a person grows a growing degree of awareness, responding, and valuing begins to create a system of affective traits that individuals like to identify with themselves. For example, accepting the blame or taking on the responsibility (TOR) was expressed as:

- a. Accepting the blame, e.g., *It was my fault.*
- b. Lack of intent, e.g., *I didn't mean to.*
- c. Justifying the hearer, e.g., *You are right.*
- d. Expression of self-deficiency, e.g., *Oh, my God! I feel so bad.*
- e. Offer of repair, e.g., *I promise to buy a new one.*
- f. Concern for hearer, e.g. *Oh God! Are you all right?*

Pragmatic rules of language use function like suggestions and/or recommendations by the members of a speech community, which are based on norms, behavioral patterns, conventions and standards of that community (Kecskes, 2015). According to Beeman (2001), affectivity is a communicative dimension in language that is by nature systemic. In order to be understood, it requires the active participation of both addresser and addressee. Persian society (like all societies everywhere) provides for basic frames that clue individuals as to appropriate language behavior for any given situation.

With a reference to proficiency levels, findings showed that most of the responses at the low intermediate level started with a simple, "*Excuse me, I am sorry*" similar to openers in Persian discourse: "*Bebakshid, mazerat mikham...*" Notably, sociopragmatic strategies are indeed transferred from one language to another. Analysis of the findings showed that both male and female participants made use of the 'performative' 'excuse me...' But what was evidently missing in these responses were 'alerters' such as '*Good morning/afternoon, Sir/Mr. X*' or sentence openers such as '*Dear Mr. /Mrs. X.*' Surprisingly, many were unaware that openers such as '*Hello*', '*Hi*' or even a plain '*Teacher*' are normally not used in written responses. 'Understanding' seemed not to have taken place for the use of address terms according to social status, gender and age of the interlocutor (Schmidt, 1993). Although much of the language used to accomplish these purposes is in fact quite formulaic and conventionalized, notably students were not aware that these rules have to be observed even in writing.

- *If I have done something wrong, I will apologize. I don't feel ashamed to say "Sorry." But I can never start a letter or a message with a "Dear" especially to a male.... "Dear Professor..." No never!*

Learners of a foreign language already know how to be polite within their own language and culture, but in their attempts to transfer their native conventions to the target language, they may run into unexpected problems. Kecskes (2015, p. 4) believed “pragmatic rules (language use rules), however, are different: not following them may cause misinterpretation of linguistic behavior and many different reactions from the hearers.” However, pragmatic function cannot be completely learned even if learners notice what specific term is used for addressing someone; learners are required to recognize why that particular form was used in relation to the social context of the interaction (Schmidt, 1993). For example:

Situation 1: spilling tea

- *Sorry. Teacher I didn't want to be careless. I should have been more careful. I'm so sorry, but this will never happen again. I promise. I am very ashamed of my behavior.*

In the above example, in explaining the situation (AES) an attempt is made to soothe the hearer and the speaker chooses to express responsibility for the offence that created the need to apologize. In this strategy, the speaker explicitly accepts the blame. It is important that the ‘state of mind’ of both speaker and interlocutor be taken into consideration. The low proficient learner’s frequent use of intensifiers like ‘so’ and ‘very’ in their apologies is a clear indication of pragmatic transfer from the L1. Some opted for ‘*adding an expression of responsibility*’ (RESP) that clearly increases the strength of the apology and intensifies sincerity. In order to lessen the blame, ‘*offer of repair*’ (REPR) is another strategy that allows the speaker an opportunity to repair the damage done. The first four sub-formulas in the list are the sub-formulas shared by CCSARP coding scheme.

- a. Intensifying adverbials: *I'm very sorry.*
- b. Emotional expressions: *Oh God, I didn't mean to...*
- c. Double intensifier: *I'm very, very sorry.*
- d. The word “Please”: *Please, forgive me.*
- e. Hope for forgiveness: *I hope you'd forgive me.*
- f. Swearing: *I swear I forgot.*

The last two sub-formulas, namely, ‘*hope for forgiveness*’ and ‘*swearing*’ are, however, new sub-formulas held by researchers (Afghari, 2007) to be intensifiers used in Persian apologies. The Iranian EFL speaker by nature of his social upbringing where interdependence is the norm in social

relationships is still in the shadow of culturally governed modes of thinking, talking and behaving. For example, frequent intensifying expressions used for showing real concern for the hearer on the part of the speaker:

- *Please excuse me Dr. Mahdavi, I am very, very sorry for spoiling your book.*
- *I am sorry. I don't know how to tell you that I lost your book. I hope you will forgive me.*
- *Sorry, I know today is the first day. Please forgive me.*
- *Oh God! I forgot about our appointment. I don't know what to say.*
- *Oh my god I'm very sorry, I really didn't see you. I wasn't paying attention; let me pick those books for you.*

Situation 2: losing book

- *I am very sorry, teacher. I know you will be unhappy to hear that I lost your book. It is my fault. I am ashamed. God knows that I am not so careless. I will buy another one, give it back to the library, and tell them everything.*

In the above example the student shows his sense of self-deficiency by (*I am not so careless; I am ashamed*) indicating the acceptance of the severity of the offense and lack of responsibility that is influenced largely by L1 cultural communication norms and patterns of social interaction. The EFL learners chooses to apologize by the use of an IFID plus taking the responsibility (TOR) and offering a repair (AOR) for the damage they have caused. A typical example would be, e.g. *I'm sorry, it was my fault. I will make up for the loss. My face is black with shame.* (sharmandam rumsiyah!)

Apologies are usually perceived as negative politeness devices, expressing respect rather than friendliness. For example, in taking responsibility for committing an offense that necessitated an apology males were not too happy about accepting the blame or even in apologizing for being late. Evidently, the offender's obligation to apologize affects the choice of apologetic formula.

Situation 3: Being late to class (low intermediate)

- *Sorry teacher. It is my fault. I had some problems. I am late because my mother is sick. I have to take care of her. I hope you will forgive me. I promise to be on time. This will not happen again.*

The student explicitly accepts the blame (*it is my fault*), expresses intent (*I did not want to be late today*). Responses show that students were aware of social power. Promise of forbearance (POF) (79% undergraduates; 78% postgraduates; 88.5% advanced level) is undertaken when with respect to

future behavior an apologizer can promise either never to perform the offence in question again, or to improve his behavior in a number of ways (*This will not happen again. I promise to be on time for the next class*). Apparently, some acts or conversational functions are more easily observed than others are.

Normally, in any social interaction, anyone who understands the severity of the situation will make use of apologetic strategies. Persian contains a number of stylistic devices and honorifics that are associated with politeness and automatically help individuals to signal each other concerning many aspects of their assessment of their social relationships to each other. Iranians sometimes apologize for ‘*not doing taârof*’ or ‘*speaking without taârof*’ (ritualized pleasant verbosity) in situations where they anticipate that their words may have an unwelcome effect on the addressee (Izadi, 2015). A conversation may start with an ‘apology’ although no serious offense has been committed. Although honesty is taken as a sign of friendship, apologies are most often done privately and Iranians generally tend to sacrifice honesty and straightforwardness in an effort to protect their interactant from being offended. Moreover, in order to avoid telling someone an unwelcome truth an Iranian may take to lying (RVRs).

- *I will never borrow a text from my lecturer. If I do so and something happens to the book I will never tell him what happened. I will buy a new copy and replace the spoilt one.*

Interestingly, explaining what had happened was the second most common strategy—‘*because....therefore*’ strategy—admission of facts. Explanations provided by the low intermediates tended to be shorter and contained some grammatical errors but overall they did not distort the actual meaning of the apology. Comparatively explanations and justifications made for the speech act situations by the upper intermediate and advanced groups were longer and incorporated a wider selection of linguistic structures that were both context-and culture-sensitive. The percentage scores on Table 3 show that students at the advanced level had a better understanding of the situations. Their socio-psychological maturity was evident in the responses given by them. Their RVRs showed their personal commitment and social responsibility to the situation. Responses read as follows:

Situation 4: borrowed book from the library is lost.

- *Sorry Sir, I don't know what to say. I lost the book that I borrowed yesterday. Yesterday when you gave me the book, I went to the cafeteria, had a quick lunch and went home. In the evening, I was busy with my research and this morning, I wanted to study your book and I realized that it was missing. I tried to remember where I had placed it, but nothing comes to my mind. I am looking for it and I hope to find it as soon as possible.*

An expression of apology normally reflects the personality, beliefs, ideals and principles held by the speaker. If apologies are analyzed according to individual differences then in line with Sabate'i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor (2007) it is understandable that people normally apologize because their pragmatic system is a 'positive face-based' system, which functions to satisfy the hearer's need for belonging and the person is looking for common ground and forgiveness. In order to avoid disharmony an individual would like to be desirable to others who will approve and appreciate that person. Furthermore, such a system aims at showing appreciation of the addressee by making use of solidarity and in-group identity markers.

- *Just imagine telling your lecturer you spilt tea on his book. How stupid! No, I will never apologize. I may have a course with him/her the next semester. I will replace the spoilt book with a new one* (RVR-Female participant).

Findings showed that students were aware both of the speech act situations and also the interlocutor's power. Their responses indicated that like in all social interactions conforming to the social norms involves the use of mitigating strategies to soften the threat incurred to face or one's public self-image in communication (Izadi, 2015). The most common syntactic structures used by the three groups to play down the blame were, negative structures used to explain what has happened or to show that the incident was accidental and not at all premeditated.

Situation 5: missing appointment

- *I am sorry I completely forgot about the appointment. I don't know if there's anything I can do to make it up to you.*
- *Forgive me. I am sorry. Can I meet you tomorrow at eight? I know it is my fault. I promise to be on time.*

Beeman (2001) believed, "The basic dimensions of the Iranian society are not terribly complex in a structural sense, but they provide for a rich play of linguistic expressions" (p. 39). Today modern Persian shares with English a rich repertoire of apology strategies that are fully exploited in actual use. In Iran, people are more publicly available to each other (Eslami-rasekh, 2004), which implies less social distance and, as exemplified in the data, the private territory of the offended person is easily 'invaded' in the offender's eagerness to ask for forgiveness and to remedy the offense and set things right. In such situations Iranians tend to be much more detailed, elaborate and emotional in their explanations and together with acknowledgement of responsibility they normally show a tendency to accept the blame. Very often in Persian, appeal for forgiveness forms the most frequent combination of apology strategies. For example, speakers used these forms to indicate their mistake (**situation 3**).

- *I'm so embarrassed professor. I'm ashamed the problem that caused for your book. I accidentally spilled a cup of tea all over your book. You have the right to blame me.*
- *Dear teacher, I want to say to you I'm sorry for what happened. I'm a kind of person, who is trustee, but I couldn't be a good trustee in this case and it bugs me, but I have nothing to say except my apologies.*
- *Teacher, I apologize. I am sorry again, for what has happened. My face is black with shame. Forgive me. (Afv-konid).*

Kecskes (2007) argued that using a particular language and belonging to a particular speech community means having preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts. This clearly relates to the ideals, morals, expectations and principles held by the individual and are not a question of total divergence or convergence to the target language norms but it is entirely related to individual characteristics, attitudes, beliefs and socio-psychological maturity that each individual develops toward language and social interaction. L2 learners will normally select from a variety of strategies and linguistic forms that are based upon the social norms and linguistic forms that characterize their first language.

- *I knew what I had to say but I was looking for words and structures that would make my apology more real and sincere. Probably if this was done orally in Persian, it would have been better.*

Surprisingly all of the students felt more involved with the situations because in being sincere the expressions of addressers are true representations of their feelings and emotional state. No instances of just “*I can only apologize*” were found in any of the three groups. There were only a few cases at the advanced levels for the expression marked for “*I do apologize*”, which is used only in specific formal socially distant contexts, but it is one of the important apology realizations belonging to the English apology speech act set.

Situation 6: accident on the stairway (enhanced prompt)

- *Oh my God! I am really very, very sorry. Professor, please let me help you. Are you all right? Sorry, sorry Dr...I am sorry. I was in a rush. I am sorry I have to go it is getting late for my class.*

Concern for the hearer in all groups ranged from: 72.5%, 79.5% to 86% respectively. The results of this study suggest that as learners become more proficient in the L2 they produce longer realizations that approximate more to target use and are a clear evidence of learner subjectivity where the choice of language is closely related to what the individual believes about maintaining ‘face’ in social relationships.

The aim of this study was to investigate the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development of EFL students at three different (low and upper intermediates and advanced level TEFL students) proficiency levels. Based on the conventional assumption that acquiring native like pragmatic competence is the goal of all learners, investigations explored L2 speakers' pragmatic L2 use in relation to their individual differences. A mixed-method approach was undertaken and data analysis centered on the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the study. The pragmalinguistic knowledge of EFL students was investigated through their understanding of propositional content, the illocutionary force of speech act, and on the strategies, they employed to assess the politeness value of conventions of means and forms in asymmetrical situations. Sociopragmatic knowledge was studied through the variables of power (P), social distance (D) and degree of imposition (R). This study was not restricted to only how the EFL learner is capable of using the language to get things done but also focused on their choice of linguistic expressions to use the speech act to maintain interpersonal relationships with the addressees/addressees in academic talk. Findings showed that linguistic choices were largely influenced by the social status and power of the addressee. Moreover, students' verbal reports showed that pragmatic knowledge, by definition and the distribution of the strategies across a variety of situations is highly sensitive to social and cultural features of the context. Hence, the context that the student brings to understand a message may differ among individuals because of their internal states and cognitive abilities (*cf.* Haji Maibodi et al., 2016). Furthermore, it seems to be an essential feature of human nature that one's true emotions are concealed from others from time to time for personal or for cultural reasons.

Writing well is a major cognitive challenge, because it is at once a test of memory, language, and thinking ability. Therefore, in writing to the faculty a graduate student will be expected to write not only a polished, persuasive request to a professor but also to be more explicit and to the point. Since pragmatic and discoursal knowledge is not always used automatically and unreflectively it was hypothesized, that online planning will significantly influence the ILP of the EFL learner to formulate, plan and monitor the responses. Students in all the three groups employed half of the IFIDs available in English. In line with Ellis and Yuan (2004) analysis of the responses showed that participants clearly engaged in rhetorical planning, in an ongoing appraisal and response process and were involved in outlining the key events. Students reported using the planning time to (a) monitor and evaluate their speech for grammatical accuracy, to be clear (b) retrieve and monitor the appropriate lexical items, adding details and (c) plan and monitor the message they are about to communicate. This made it possible to make amendments if they felt something was going amiss (RVRs). In line with Maeshiba et al. (1996), results showed that advanced learners compared to the low

intermediate were found to better in identifying the contexts in which L1 apology strategy could or could not be used. Their internal and external supportive moves were more convincing showing the truth and sincerity in their intentions. Careful, unpressured online planning helped the advanced level to give responses that had more elaborate and varied structures and their language was fluent and accurate as far as spelling, grammatical structures, and vocabulary was concerned. Interestingly, having understood the severity of the offence and in line with the power of the interlocutor students did not use humor. Bardovi-Harlig (2003) believed that high proficiency level learners are not only pragmatically successful by default but they also tend to show a complex and wide range of behavior, from divergence to convergence, trends sometimes difficult to capture by ILP researchers.

Although students were aware of the necessary level of formality when apologizing to the faculty, students' at all three proficiency levels had access to mitigating strategies but their linguistic ability and pragmatic eloquence in which these strategies were selected and deployed was largely based on their IDs. Considerable variation was seen in their language with some focusing on the vocabulary and some on grammar. Supporting Pienemann (1998) findings indicated that development seemed to depend on the availability of prior cognitive resources. In line with Cohen and Olshtain (1993), the basic findings showed that low proficient EFL learners were less sensitive to the speech act situations in that retrieval and selection of language forms indicated uncertainties regarding the semantic formulae with instances of lexical abandonment and avoidance or simplification. Evidently, there was the frequent use of 'sorry' in the context where 'excuse me' should also be acceptable and possibly preferable. For example, '*I am very, very sorry...*' or '*I am truly sorry...*' instead of the normal target language form of '*really sorry*'. Although they were aware of both the situations and the interlocutor they admitted that they were taught to express themselves in English more directly by showing their intentions right from the beginning and then to provide the reasons and explanations later. Takahashi (2005) believed that we often witness learners who are aware of a mismatch or gap between what they can produce and what they need to produce, or between what they produce and what proficient target language speakers produce. Taguchi (2011, p. 303) claimed that when learners' L1 and L2 cultures do not operate under the same values and norms, or when learners do not agree with L2 norms, linguistic forms that encode target norms are not easily acquired.

Evidently, age and gender as two central ID variables were more effective in that the most common strategies used by females were, expression of regret, explanations/accounts, concern for the hearer, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance. Signs of strategy transfer from L1 to L2 were evident and this is because Persian society highlights power (*ehterām*) more than distance and provides apology strategies that support the positive face of the

speaker when apologizing. Cohen (1996) believed that sociolinguistic forms and sociocultural strategies vary largely in the L1 and the L2 and as such, they are not 'picked up' easily. Adjustments of IFIDs are made according to the interlocutor and the requirements of the situation and intensity is based on severity of the offense. As Kecskes (2015) observed, "the situated, social and cultural nature of meaning often becomes visible to us only when we confront language-at-work in languages and cultures far distant from our own" (p.9). This preference for the other-directed strategy by Persian speakers should be seen as motivated by deeper cultural attitudes related to claiming solidarity and common ground in social interactions. The semantic content of lexical items depends on how speakers of a language categorize their experiences. Interestingly, the present findings confirm and extend that of Trosborg (1995) and show that learners are able to select a polite, conventionally indirect strategy in the L2, when the L2 pragmalinguistic strategy form is formally simple and the same strategy exists in their first language. Speakers' identity and language use can be seen as reciprocally informing and contributing, rather than either one influencing the other. Speakers' sense of self makes an impact on the way they elect to present themselves in the language (McGroarty, 1998).

In an institutional setting, it is understood that the greater the social distance between the interlocutors, the more politeness is generally expected. The greater the relative power of writers over readers, the more politeness is recommended. The RVRs suggest that participants opted toward positive politeness as indicated by their attempts not to damage their own positive face. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996), students must recognize the status of the faculty as institutional representatives. Since the faculty has institutional power to act in ways that can seriously affect students' lives, it is in the best interest of the students to assure that the faculty has positive assessments of them. Evidently, in all social interactions every individual cultivates a sense of self-identity that is expressed through the language he/she chooses to use. This identity is largely dynamic in that, it constantly changes according to the interlocutor (s), the social situation and the context. Identity is not simply given but built up through symbolic interactions and the use of language is entailed in the process of identity construction. The learning and use of a language other than the L1 is bound to have an impact on the person as a whole. Accepting or rejecting the L2 norms and patterns of social interaction need conscious acts by the language learner and the selection of the appropriate form and strategies that are likely to be constrained by L1 cultural communicational patterns. Findings showed that students not only produce utterances based on created intentions but they also do not merely repeat a sentence explicitly identified by their instruction. The present study supports Kasper and Rose's (2002) contention that, "when carefully designed, WDCTs provide useful information about speakers pragmalinguistic knowledge of the

strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented and about their sociopragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate” (p. 96).

5. Conclusions and Implications

The overall analysis of the results supporting (Bardovi-Harlig & Dorneyi, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993) revealed that the role of proficiency in ILP development has been problematic in that grammatical proficiency can be a good predictor of pragmatic competence (*cf.* Haji Maibodi & Fazilatfar, 2015). In-depth analysis of responses showed that “learners do not progress through stages of development in a consistent manner. There is a great deal of variation at one time in learners’ performances and clear instability over time” (Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 593). Although students’ evaluation of the situational variations helped in their assessment of the speech act situations many did not have the pragmatics to make adjustments in accordance with the contextual variables of social power, social distance and severity of offence. As Bardovi-Harlig and Dorneyi (1998) argued this can be attributed to two key factors related to input: the availability of input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input. Analysis of effective input from the point of view of the learner and the learning environment clearly shows that Iranian EFL students access/exposure to native speakers and natural discourse is limited. Especially, learners lack opportunities and have no potential for interaction in the L2; all the input that they get is limited either to textbooks, classrooms or the media. Very often, they have no explanations as to why L2 speakers commonly use the language as they do, why certain meanings are conveyed differently in the L2, and how underlying L2 ideologies and shared cultural values influence L2 speakers’ pragmatic behavior. However, it must be noted that the EFL curriculum is so designed in that it has strong links and roots in the Iranian culture and lifestyle itself. Although cultural rules and conceptualizations are not equally imprinted in the minds of everybody (Sharifian, 2013) we understand that social rules of language are shared as part of social-identity or even self-identity, and this identity helps a person to comprehend situations like institutional discourse. The quality and quantity of exposure to L2 input can be effective only if the individual learner allows it to be. From the RVRs, it can be understood that the task of learning English is much more than learning a set of grammatical rules and lexical items for those speakers of Persian whose general communicative behavior is governed by Persian schemas (Sharifian, 2013).

The pedagogical implications of this study are that since the EFL learner is trying to learn English it is important that attention be paid to pragmatics. Students have to learn more academic English—the variety of language used by the educated and valued in educational settings. Appropriate instruction on L2 pragmatics will ensure that learners will understand the

illocutionary meaning of a range of L2 pragmatic norms typically used and preferred by native speakers. In EFL contexts, importantly language teaching should be based on the successful second language (L2) user, not on the idealised native speaker. However, EFL students should understand that fixed expressions are particularly important in English, largely because they occur so frequently and convey important semantic information.

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Appendix

1. Written discourse Completion task

You borrowed a book from your teacher but you accidentally spilled a cup of coffee all over it. You return it to the teacher. How do you apologize to him/her?

2. Retrospective Verbal Reports

How did you see your relationship with the person you were communicating with? Was it intimate, formal or informal? Please explain.

(1) *Yes. I have experienced such situations so many times. I knew that I was writing to my lecturer. It is a very formal situation. I think it is much better than being face-to-face with the person. But I am not good in writing.*