



**WHY AND HOW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS APOLOGIZE
TO THEIR LECTURERS: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN
LANGUAGE STUDIES, VIETNAM**

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ABSTRACT

Apology plays an important role in maintaining social relationships. This paper aims to examine apology strategies employed by students of University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam when apologizing to their English language lecturers. A total of 300 students completed the questionnaires which seek to explore their engagement in apology. Among the 300 respondents who completed the questionnaires, 100 students admitted that they wrote apology emails in English to their lecturers at least once during the last three academic semesters. The emails were also analysed to closely examine the apology utterances. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were employed to analyze the apology utterances and questionnaire data, focusing on the reasons why the students apologized, and the strategies employed in seeking the apology. Data analysis reveals that the students apologized mainly for cheating in exams, being late for classes, showing disrespect to the lecturers and being absent from classes. In terms of apology strategies, the students mostly employed the strategies of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (expression of the apology), Promise of forbearance and Accounts (telling what has happened). The students tended to use email when apologizing for serious offences and they preferred to meet the lecturers face-to-face for the less serious ones.

Keywords: Apology strategy, email, lecturers, students, Vietnam

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In everyday communication, we observe a variety of speech acts. Apology is one of them. Apology plays an important role in maintaining social relationships. When we make a mistake or hurt others unintentionally or deliberately, we will engage in apologetic actions to express repentance as well as to take responsibility for hurting. For example, a speaker apologizes and explains the reason for being late. The hearer accepts the apology directly by saying “OK”, “No problem” or “It’s OK” and explains why the apologizer should not feel sorry about being late. Although there have been several studies on apology, not many of the studies provide insights into the apology strategies used by students in seeking apology from their lecturers. To fill in the gap in the literature, I decided to explore the reasons of apologizing, what apology strategies are employed and how often each strategy is used when the students of University of Foreign Language Studies (UFLS) seek apology from their English language lecturers.

Apology can be performed in verbal or non-verbal communication in order to express the repentance of speakers. Verbal communication can be broken down into the two categories of written and oral communication. Written strategies consist of avenues such as e-mail, text, and chat. Examples that fall into the oral category are phone calls, video chats, and face-to-face conversation. Nonverbal communication consists of mostly visual cues, such as body language, facial expressions, physical distance between communicators, or the tone of the voice. Since emails were the main source of data; I, therefore, focused only on verbal apology strategies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several studies on apologizing (e.g. Owen, 1983; Blum & Olshtain, 1984; Sugimoto, 1997; Dhami, 2016, 2017). Each researcher has come up with different ideas about the speech act of apology and apology strategies. Olshtain (1989) and Trosborg (1995) agree that when a person performs an act or statement which is contrary to social norms or offensive to listeners, the speaker should apologize to the offended. Holmes (1990) draws conclusions about the apathy of the New Zealanders associated with politeness among genders. According to Gooder and Jacobs (2000), the offenders should show remorse and acknowledge that they have hurt the listeners and promise not to repeat the offense. Cedar (2017) found that English proficiency level influences the apology strategies used by Indonesian learners. Dhami (2016) explored the prevalence and nature of the apologies offered by offenders to their victims during face-to-face mediations. These studies have their own contributions to the literature of apology but little is known in the context of student-lecturer interactions.

2.1 Speech Acts

The speech act has been studied and defined by many linguists. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) have the same point of view that each speech act is an utterance that implements a linguistic function in communication such as praise, forgiveness, invitation, explanation, thanks, admonition, request, and greeting.

Austin (1962) classifies linguistic acts into three categories: i) *Locutionary acts* (the acts of vocalizing a sentence and assigning a propositional meaning to it); ii) *Perlocutionary acts* (the acts of producing some kind of effect on the addressee); and iii) *Illocutionary acts* (the acts of performing a particular language function and being commonly known as speech acts). However, it is illocutionary acts that are his main focus, and he identifies five more general classes of illocutionary acts: i) *commissives* (an utterance used to commit the speaker to do something such as promise, guarantee, bet, vow, offer – e.g. *I will not tell anyone your secret, I promise*); ii) *exercutives* (an utterance used to try to get the hearer to do something such as request, permit, order, suggest, insist, forbid, warn, and advise – e.g. *You should study harder, or else you will fail the exam*); iii) *behabitives* (an utterance used to express feelings and attitudes of the speaker such as thank, apologize, greet, object, congratulate, and welcome – e.g. *Thank you so much for your birthday presents*); iv) *verdictives* (an utterance used to tell the hearer how things are such as swear, insist, and suggest – e.g. *Why don't you ask your mother for advice?*); and v) *expositives* (an utterance used to change the status of some entity such as baptize, surrender, resign, appoint, name, and arrest – e.g. *You got sacked*).

Searle (1969) describes five main categories of illocutionary speech acts somewhat differently than Austin. He names them *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declarations*. We tell people how things are (Assertives), we try to get them to do things

(Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations). This paper focuses on the speech act of apology which belongs to the category of *behabitives* or *expressive* according to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

2.2 Apology

Like other speech acts, apology has attracted the attention of many researchers and linguists. According to Holmes (1990), apology is a speech act that intends to remedy the offense for which the apology takes responsibility and as a result, to rebalance social relations between interlocutors. In the definition of Olshtain (1989), an apology is a speech act which is intended to provide support for the hearer who was actually or potentially affected by a violation. An apology is the speech act through which the wrongdoer acknowledges guilt and seeks forgiveness for what he/she has done. A wrongdoer is the person who has committed the act that warrants apology and who is supposed to apologize for what he/she has done. A victim/hearer/injured party is the person who was harmed, whether psychologically, physically, or materially, by the act that warrants apology.

2.3 Apology Strategies

According to Margaret, Jennifer, and Joanna (2015), strategy is a plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose, or the process of planning something or putting a plan into operation in a skilful way. Strategy is important because the resources available to achieve these goals are usually limited. Strategy generally involves setting goals, determining actions to achieve the goals, and mobilizing resources to execute the actions. A strategy describes how the ends (goals) will be achieved by the means (resources).

The problem is how to apologize as effectively as offenders' intentions, and what apology strategies should be used to different listeners due to the social relations among offenders and listeners? Apologies are complex because they can consist of one strategy, or one of a variety of combinations of two or more strategies. Apology strategies are the methods used by individuals to perform the speech act of apology such as statement of remorse and reparation. A statement of remorse is the strategy in which the wrongdoer shows that he/she has done something wrong. This strategy may have manifestations such as one expression of apology, two expressions of apology, and three expressions with one intensifier.

Sugimoto (1997) offers a variety of apology strategies, and classifies them into three main categories on the basis of their frequencies of using in her study: primary strategies, secondary strategies and least frequent strategies: The primary group includes *statement of remorse* expressing regret for the offense, *accounts* telling what has happened, *description of damage* describing what has resulted, and *reparation* repairing the damage. The secondary strategies are used less frequently than the primary ones including *request of forgiveness* which means asking the offended person to forgive, *compensation* offering to compensate for the damage or loss, *promise not to repeat offense* assuring the offense will not recur. The least frequent strategies used are *explicit or positive assessment of responsibility* which means describing the whole context of the offense, *self castigation* (being critical of own behavior), *gratitude* expressing gratefulness for being given the chance to apologize, and showing lack of intent to do harm which convinces the offended person that the offense was not intentional.

Olshtain and Cohen (1981) were among the first to study apology strategies. Their classification of apology strategies differs from those of Sugimoto. This typology includes major apology strategy such as: expression of the apology or *an illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID) which uses a performative word such as “sorry”, “forgive”; *a statement of the situation* that is what the speaker committed the offense; *a promise of non-reoccurrence*; *a suggestion for avoiding the situation in the future*; *an acknowledgement of responsibility*; *an offer of repair*; *an statement of an alternative*; and *verbal avoidance*. The last four apology strategies are further divided into subcategories which include adjuncts to apologies such as using intensifiers, minimizing the offense, and expressing concern for the interlocutor. The IFID is usually a formula which Wipprecht (2004) applies to his theory that the use of the IFID as an explicit expression of apology shows the acceptance of the need to apologize on the speaker’s side and also the acceptance of the cost to do so.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Participants

All students in Department of English, UFLS are Vietnamese. The participants of the study were 300 students in nine different classes in the Department of English, University of Foreign Language Studies – University of Danang which is located on the Central Highland of Vietnam. They took part in the survey voluntarily. Since the percentage of female students outweighed male students in the department, the participants were 10 males and 290 females. Their age ranges from 18 to 23 years old.

3.2 Data Collection

The questionnaire comprises of six questions. Questions 1 and 2 focus on the participants’ information on their age and gender respectively. Question 3 investigates the reasons why students apologize. Question 4 is designed to carry out the frequency of each apology reason. Question 5 uses a rating scale to find out the most and least serious apology reasons, or the minor and major mistakes. The data collected from Question 5 are based on the perception of apology; in other words, the researcher aimed to find out to what extent the students thought they should apologize. Question 6 asks whether the students write emails expressing apologies to their lecturers in English.

Among the 300 respondents who completed the questionnaires, 100 students admitted that they wrote apology emails in English to their lecturers at least once during the last three academic semesters. The researcher, therefore, asked these 100 participants for the email collection. These participants then forwarded 100 email messages which were written in English and sent to their lecturers of English who are Vietnamese and native speakers from English speaking countries. These 100 apology email messages were written before the survey, which means the situations of apologies are authentic because they occurred naturally without any force or request from the researcher to write apology emails. There were 200 apology utterances in the 100 emails collected. A typical sample of an apology is an utterance which includes markers expressing the speech act of apology such as *sorry*, *apologize*, *excuse* in English. Utterances, without markers of apology, expressing the speech act of apology or related to apologizing were also collected.

3.3 Data Analysis

As mentioned in the previous part, the classification of apology strategies are different among researchers and linguists. In this study, the researcher took the advantage of the classification of Sugimoto (1997), and Olshtain and Cohen (1981). The data collected from 100 emails were classified and analyzed basing on the following framework:

Apology Strategy 1 (AS1) - Minimizing the offence degree – e.g. “It’s nothing”, and “I am not only the one who does so”.

Apology Strategy 2 (AS2) - Acknowledgement of responsibility – e.g. “I know I have committed a mistake”, and “It was my fault”.

Apology Strategy 3 (AS3) – *Accounts* – e.g. “I didn’t have time to talk with you”, and “I have to go now, I have an appointment”.

Apology Strategy 4 (AS4) - *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device* – the expression of apologies can stand at the beginning or the end of each sentence.

+ Expression of regret: “I swear I don’t know how it broke, sorry!”

+ Offer of apology: “I would like to apologize for what I have just done.”

+ Request for forgiveness: “I want you to forgive me.”

Apology Strategy 5 (AS5) – *Reparation* – e.g. “I will bring you some books so that you can learn for tomorrow exams”.

Apology Strategy 6 (AS6) - Promise of forbearance – e.g. “It won’t happen again, I promise you”.

Apology Strategy 7 (AS7) - Concern for the hearer – e.g. “I am afraid that I hurt you”.

Apology Strategy 8 (AS8) – *Interjection* – e.g. “Oh my God, I didn’t mean to hurt you”.

Apology Strategy 9 (AS9) – *Intensification* – e.g. “I am very very sorry”.

A total of 300 questionnaires were analyzed to find out the reasons for apologizing and frequencies of apology strategies. After collecting emails containing apologetic expressions, I classified the strategies; then analyzed its frequency.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Questionnaire Data

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent reasons for apologies were *Cheating in exams* (25%), *Being late to classes* (21%), *Disrespecting the lecturers* (17.3%) and *Absence from classes* (15%). By contrast, the bottom list included *other reasons* (0.4%), *Listening to mobile phones during lectures* (1.2%), *Speaking loudly during lectures* (2.4%), and *Not doing homework* (2.9%).

Table 1: Reasons of Expressing Apologies to Lecturers and Their Classification

No.	Reasons	Classification					
		Frequencies	%	Minor Mistakes		Major Mistakes	
				Frequencies	%	Frequencies	%
1	Being late for classes	250	21%	300	100%	0	0%
2	Absence from classes	183	15%	200	67%	100	33%
3	Speaking loudly during lectures	29	2.4%	300	100%	0	0%
4	Listening to mobile phones during lectures	14	1.2%	300	100%	0	0%
5	Plagiarism	100	8.4%	105	35%	195	65%
6	Not doing homework	34	2.9%	260	87%	40	13%
7	Not doing assignments in classes	77	6.4%	247	82%	53	18%
8	Cheating in exams	300	25%	0	0%	300	100%
9	Disrespect to lecturers	207	17.3%	0	0%	300	100%
10	Others	5	0.4%	0	0%	5	1.7%
Total		1,199	100%				

Using a rating scale to each of the apology reason helped participants to classify them into the most serious and less serious mistakes. This rating scale focusing on the level of mistake students made consisted of four scales of *Not at all a problem*, *Minor problem*, *Moderate problem*, and *Serious problem*. The first three scales are considered to be less serious; whereas, the last one is regarded as the serious problem.

With the aim to find out the link of what students think about minor or major mistakes, and the reasons why they wrote the emails of apology, I noted that students tended to write apology emails for mistakes which they perceived as serious or major. What can be seen from Table 1 is that 100% of students thought *Being late for classes*, *Speaking loudly during lectures*, and *Listening to mobile phones during lectures* were minor mistakes; whereas, *Disrespect to lecturers*, and *Cheating in exams* were the most serious ones. The number of students thought that *Absence from classes* was less serious made up 67%, twice as much as the other (33%). On the other hand, 65 % participants considered *Plagiarism* to be serious, twice as much as the other (35%). *Not doing homework* and *Not doing assignments in classes* shared quite the same numbers at approximately just over 80% for being less serious.

4.2 Email Data

There were 300 students taking part in the survey; however, only 100 students wrote apology emails to their lecturers. The other 200 students said that they would like to apologize to their lecturers face-to-face rather than writing emails because they were not confident with their written English. Furthermore, they tended to express their apology directly to their lecturers for less serious mistakes or the minor ones. The 100 students shared the idea that they felt shy and did not know what to say to their lecturers directly. What is more, they tended to write emails if their mistakes were serious such as *Disrespect to lecturers*, *Cheating in exams*; and *Plagiarism*. To these major mistakes, they needed more time to think what should be written to their lectures.

There were seven apology strategies being frequently used by respondents as shown in Figure 1. What stands out from Figure 1 is that ranking on top three are *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device*, *Promise of forbearance* and *Accounts* at 100%, 85% and 70% respectively. In stark contrast, no students expressed their apologies through these two strategies *Reparation* and *Minimizing the offence degree*. The remaining strategies were varied from 5% to 30%.

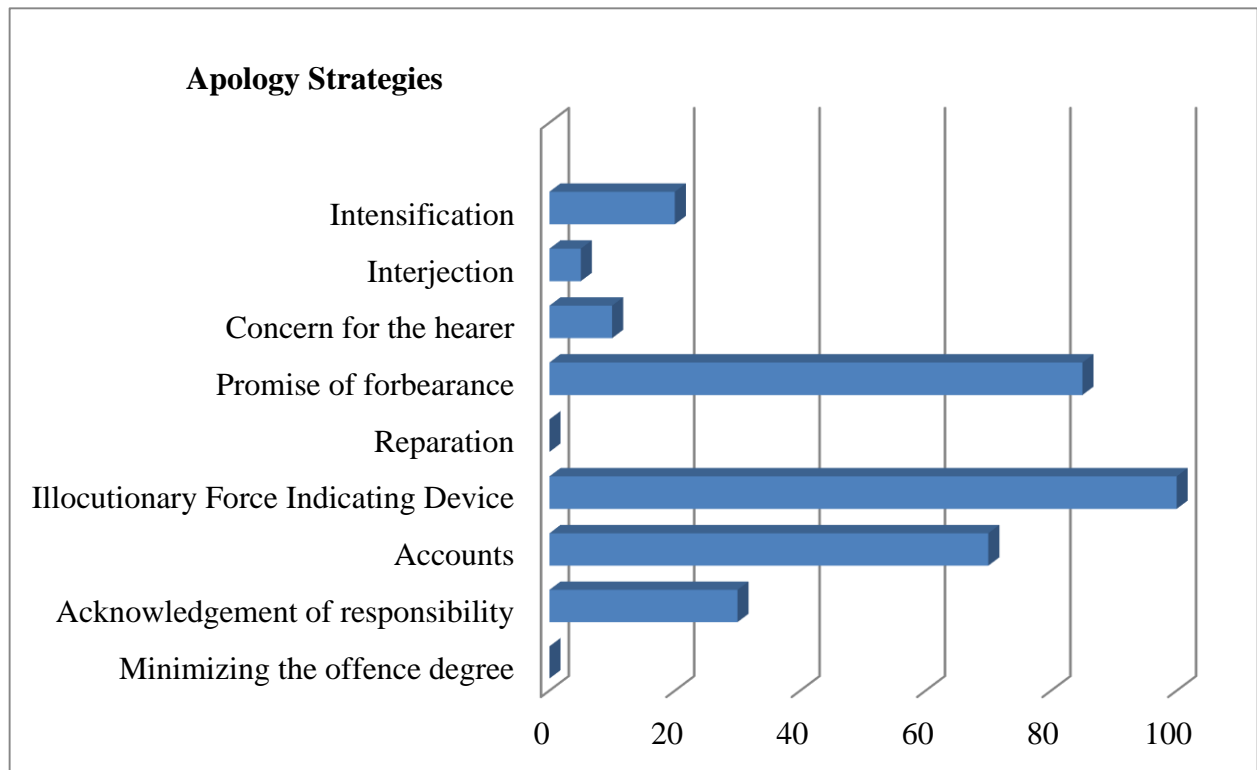


Figure 1: Distribution of Apology Strategies

A total of 200 apology utterances were found in the 100 emails. Therefore, it is evident that there is more than one apology strategies in each email message. They tend to start their emails by expressing their apologies, then explain the situation and end the email by promising not to commit the offense again. The apology email on *Cheating in exams* is presented below to illustrate this point:

“Dear Ms. Anne,
 I am so so sorry for what I did in this morning class during the exam. I didn’t mean to do so; however, I haven’t recovered from my illness yet, and spent time resting, then no time to do any revision for the test. I hope my test will not be deducted.
 I promise to study harder and make further progress in Grammar.
 I am looking forward to your forgiveness.
 Warm regards,”

It is noticeable that there are five different apology strategies in this email namely *Intensification* “I am so so sorry”, *Acknowledgement of responsibility* “I didn’t mean to do so”, *Accounts* “I haven’t recovered from my illness yet, and spent time resting, then no time to do any revision for the test”, *Promise of forbearance* “I promise to study harder and make further progress in Grammar”, and *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device* by the request for forgiveness “I am looking forward to your forgiveness”.

Another apology email on *Disrespect to lecturers* is one of the illustrations for the mix of a few apology strategies in an email. This email uses *Interjection*, and *Concern for the hearer*.

“Good evening Ms. Trang,
 Sorry for showing such an attitude to you yesterday afternoon during your lecture. Honestly speaking, I shouldn’t have behaved badly like that. I was

really afraid that I hurt you. Actually, I just wanted to show my classmates how cool and brave I was to have an argument with you as a lecturer. I didn't mean to hurt you, I swear. Therefore, I am writing this email to send you my sincere apology to what I did.
I hope that you will forgive me.
Best wishes,"

This short email consists of four separate strategies including *Concern for the hearer* "I am afraid that I hurt you", *Interjection* "I didn't mean to hurt you, I swear", *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device* by the request for forgiveness "I hope that you will forgive me" and the offer of apology "Sorry for showing such an attitude to you yesterday afternoon during your lecture", and *Acknowledgement of responsibility* "I am writing this email to send you my sincere apology to what I did". Since there was no record on *Reparation* and *Minimizing the offence degree*, there is no email to describe the two strategies.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The students apologized for committing offenses to their lecturers. Apologies were expressed as a result of Being late for classes, Absence from classes, Speaking loudly during lectures, Listening to mobile phones during lectures, Plagiarism, Not doing homework, Not doing assignments in classes, Cheating in exams, Disrespect to lecturers, and others being listed by students such as Eating in classes, No attention to lectures, and Falling asleep in classes.

However, just one third of the participants dared to write emails in English because they were not confident with their written English. Furthermore, they tended to send their apologies via emails for serious mistakes such as *Cheating in exams*, *Disrespect to lecturers*, and *Plagiarism* because they thought it was more formal to express apologies via emails. Regarding the school regulations, students are not allowed to cheat in exams. Depending on the severity of the act of cheating, their points will be deducted. In terms of socio-cultural perspectives, students also wrote the messages to express their apology of hurting their lecturers with the hope that lecturers would not deduct their marks. They were afraid that if there was no act of sending apologies to lecturers after the lecturers were being offended or disrespected, their own academic achievements might be affected. In my department, not almost every student is fully aware of the severity of *Plagiarism*. This is the reason why *Plagiarism* is only ranked as the third major mistake although it should be ranked the same as *Cheating in exams* since these two are not allowed in school regulations for students.

A mixture of apology strategies was taken advantage of in each email to show students' sincerity. *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device*, *Promise of forbearance* and *Accounts* are the most frequently used strategies. Other strategies were also used with much lower frequency such as *Intensification*, *Interjection*, *Concern for the hearer*, and *Acknowledgement of responsibility*. There is no evidence of *Reparation* and *Minimizing the offence degree*.

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