

# Apology Strategies in English and Vietnamese

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## Abstract

The paper examined the differences in apology strategies between native speakers of English and advanced Vietnamese ESL learners as well as the factors that might result in those differences through discourse completion tests (DCTs). The data were coded in terms of five apology strategies, and were analyzed according to four situational categories in relation to age, dominance, social distance, and weight of offence. The result indicated that the apologies of the Vietnamese ESL learners showed more politeness and respect for people from higher status, closeness to a friend, less courtesy to an equal and less respect (but greater intimacy) for their kid, a family member. By contrast, the degree of politeness, sincerity and respect of the apologies of the native speakers depended heavily on the weight of offence and the situation itself. The acts of apologizing of the Vietnamese group were significantly influenced by the hierarchical culture of Vietnam, and their restricted linguistic competence as well.

*Key words:* Apology strategies, speech acts, politeness, native speakers, ESL learners

## 1. Introduction

The act of apologizing is one of the most common speech acts across language and culture. According to Trosborg (1987), this speech act occurs when a person has performed

an action or utterance which has offended another person, and for which he can be held responsible. The act of apologizing usually includes two participants: an apologizer and a recipient of the apology. The purpose of an apology speech act is to restore harmony between apologizer and apologee (Goffman, 1971). The culpable person must let the offended person know that he is sorry for what he has done (Trosborg, 1987). The conditions that demand an apology as well as the way people do the act of apologizing differ greatly from language to language and from culture to culture. These differences might lead to miscommunication among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Jung, 2004).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the speech act of apologies. For example, Cohen and Olshtain (1981) examined the relationship between L2 learners' linguistic proficiency and their apology performances. Trosborg (1987) investigated apology strategies in the speech of native and non-native speakers. Suszczynska (1999) provided an analysis of apologetic responses among three groups of English, Polish and Hungarian speakers. The study by Jung (2004) explored differences in apology speech act performances among Korean ESL learners and native speakers of English. The findings by Istifci and Kampusu (2009) improved our understanding of the use of apologies by EFL learners. These studies, generally, have pointed out a range of factors influencing ESL and EFL learners in performing the act of apologizing. These previous studies also indicated the failure in apology speech act performances among learners at high level of proficiency.

These studies have proved that the acquisition of native-like sociocultural and sociolinguistic proficiency is extremely difficult even for the advanced learners (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). It is not always easy even for advanced ESL learners to learn when and how to make appropriate apologies in the target culture although this speech act is very common in daily communication. Compared to other ESL learner groups, very few studies have compared Vietnamese ESL learners with American speakers of English in performing the acts of apologizing. This study, therefore, aims to promote a better understanding of

apology speech act performances among these two groups of speakers by seeking the answer for two following research questions.

1. What are the differences in apology strategies between native English speakers and Vietnamese ESL learners?
2. What are possible factors that influence their choice of those apology strategies?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Apology strategies

Although there have been a range of opinions on category of apologies strategies, the speech act set proposed by Cohen and Olshtain (1983) was widely used to compare apologies in interlanguage pragmatic studies (Kondo, 2010). This classification by Cohen and Olshtain (1983) was, therefore, used as the framework for the analysis of apology strategies in this present study.

**Table 1. The speech act set for apologies**

Strategies	Examples
1. An expression of an apology (IFID)	
a. Expression of regret	I'm sorry.
b. Offer of apology	I apologize.
c. Request for forgiveness	Excuse me. / Please forgive me. / Pardon me.
2. An explanation or account of the situation	The bus was late.
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility	
a. Accepting the blame	It's my fault.

b. Expressing self-deficiency	I was confused. / I wasn't thinking. / I didn't see you.
c. Recognizing the other person as deserving apology	You are right.
d. Expressing lack of intent	I didn't mean to.
4. An offer of repair	I'll pay for the broken vase. / I'll help you get up.
5. A promise of forbearance	I won't happen again.

*(Adapted from Olshtain & Cohen 1983, as cited in Kondo, 2010, pp.146-147)*

As can be seen in Table 1, there are five major strategies that can be used in performing the acts of apologizing, including expression of an apology, explanation of the situation, acknowledgement of responsibility, offer of repair and promise of forbearance. As Kondo (2010) explains, the first strategy is associated with apologizing explicitly by using illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) such as (be) sorry, apologize, regret and excuse. The degree of these IFIDs can be increased with the aid of common intensifiers, for instance very, terribly, so, and really. The purpose of second strategy is to explain that the cause of the offense was beyond the speaker's control. The third strategy reveals that the offender recognizes fault, and his or her degree of recognition can range from high to low intensity. An apologizer may offer to repair the damage which has resulted from his infraction (Trosborg, 1987, p.152). Finally, the apologizer promises that the offence will not be repeated (Kondo, 2010).

## **2.2. Potential factors affecting apologies**

According to Trosborg (1987), dominance and social distance are two potential factors that might influence the acts of apologies. These two parameters are used to indicate the role

relationships between two participants in the acts of apologizing. Dominance refers to the relationship between two participants which might be specified by the authority or by the lack of authority of one interactant over the other (Trosborg, 1987). Social distance indicates whether the interactants either knew each other or they had never met before. As Trosborg (1987) explains, the addition of the two parameters would result in situations demanding different levels of politeness. Three different types of role constellations are described below.

- |                                    |                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| (a) Status unequals, non-intimates | + dominance       |
| (authority figures/ subordinates)  | + social distance |
| (b) Status equals, non-intimates   | – dominance       |
| (strangers)                        | + social distance |
| (c) Status equals, intimates       | – dominance       |
| (friends or near acquaintances)    | – social distance |

*(Adapted from Trosborg, 1987, p.153)*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The subjects for this study included ten native speakers of English and ten Vietnamese learners of English. Each group comprised five males and five females, at the age of 30s and 40s. All the participants were pursuing a graduate degree at a large public university in the south-central part of America. All the Vietnamese speakers gained a minimum of TOEFL score of 79 (Internet based test) or IELTS overall band score of 6.5, and a minimum of eleven years learning English in Vietnam. They have been living and studying in the United States for at least one year at the time of the study. We can say that they were the advanced Vietnamese ESL learners.

### 3.2. Instrument

The data were collected from a written discourse completion test (WDCT). This DCT was adapted from Cohen and Olshtain (1981, pp.132-134), including eight situations that require apology (see Appendix A). A description of role constellations of these eight situations was provided in the following table.

**Table 2. Role constellations of eight situations in the DCT**

Role constellations	Eight situations							
	situ 1	situ 2	situ 3	situ 4	situ 5	situ 6	situ 7	situ 8
Dominance	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-
Social distance	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+

These situations were divided into four primary categories according to potential factors that might affect apologies between the two interactants, as illustrated in Table 3 next page.

**Table 3. Four situational categories**

Categories	8 situations	Potential factors affecting apologies		
		age	dominance	social distance
1	situ 1	-	-	+
2	situ 3	-	-	-
3	situ 2	-	+	+
	situ 4	-	+	-
4	situ 5	-	-	+
	situ 6	+	-	+

(increased weight of offence)	situ 7	+	-	+
	situ 8	+	-	+

### 3.3. Procedure

The study involved two groups of participants, the native speakers of English (NS-E) and the Vietnamese learners of English as a second language (VS-E). The NS-E group completed eight situations of apologizing provided in the DCT in English (their native language). The VS-E group also completed eight situations of apologizing provided in the DCT in English (their second language). The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants, and then delivered each of them a hard copy of the DCT in form of an open-ended questionnaire. Each of the participants was given 10 minutes to read those situations so that they could have a general understanding of the situations. All the DCTs were collected in two weeks.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The data were first coded according to five apology strategies developed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) (see Appendix B for coding). Two types of apologies (e.g. those made by American speakers of English and those made by Vietnamese learners of English as a second language) were analyzed in terms of five apology strategies reviewed from Olshtain and Cohen (1983). Then, the data were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage according to four situational categories summarized earlier in the paper. These four situational categories enabled the researcher to explore the differences in apology strategies between two groups as well as possible factors that might result in those differences.

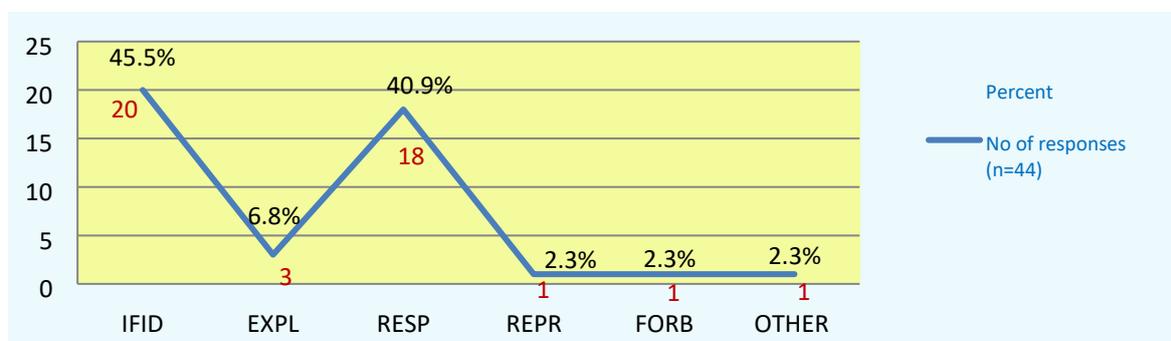
## 4. Findings and discussion

The findings of the present study were discussed in terms of four situational categories below. Category 1 (-age, -dominance, + social distance) contained situation 1; category 2 (age, -dominance, - social distance) was comprised of situation 3; category 3 (-age, + dominance, +/-social distance) covered situations of 2 and 4; category 4 (+/- age, - dominance, + social distance, increased weight of offence) was involved with situations from 5 to 8.

### 4.1. Category 1

The result from the following chart showed that both NS-E and VS-E group used expressions of apology (IFID 45.5%) and acknowledgement of responsibility (40.9%) as the main strategies to do the act of apologizing in situation 1. The other strategies such as explanation of the situation, offer of repair, promise of forbearance were at a much lower percentage, as much as 6.8% and 2.3% respectively.

**Figure 1. Apology strategies used in situation 1**



What made the finding interesting was that there was almost no difference in terms of the linguistic items chosen for expressing apology and acknowledging responsibility between two groups. As depicted in Table 4 below, both native and nonnative speakers selected expression of regret and offer of apology as ways to apologize to a stranger who has the same status. However, while the native speakers used many intensifiers with “I’m sorry”, “I’m so sorry”, “I’m **really** sorry” or “my apologies” to express their apology, “I am sorry” was a

very popular expression among the Vietnamese speakers of English. It was likely that these intensifiers were regarded unnecessary when doing the speech acts of apology to a stranger of an equal status in Vietnamese culture. Another possible explanation might be that the offense in situation 1 was not perceived as serious to Vietnamese speakers, and therefore the intensification appeared pointless. Different from American culture, it was not obligatory to increase the degree of politeness to people at the same social status in Vietnamese culture.

Likewise, the discrepancy was noted in the way that two groups tried to acknowledge responsibility (mainly expressing lack of intent 100%). To express lack of intent, the Vietnamese learners used very few expressions, for example “I didn’t mean that”, “I didn’t mean it”, “I didn’t mean it at all” whereas the native speakers employed a variety of the linguistic terms with “I didn’t mean any offense”, “I didn’t mean it like that”, “I mean no offense against you at all”, “I didn’t mean it that way”, “That wasn’t mean intention”, “I wasn’t referring to you”, “I didn’t mean to offend you”, “It’s certainly not what I mean”. This finding admitted that although the advanced Vietnamese ESL learners have been learning and studying in the States for at least one year, their linguistic competence was still limited in comparison with the native speakers. Nevertheless, using similar strategies of apology partly revealed that the Vietnamese speakers integrated with the target community after over one year of stay.

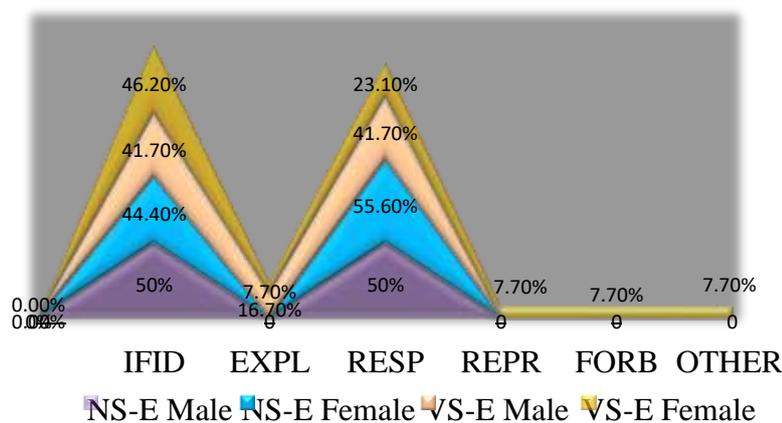
**Table 4. Sub-categories of IFID and RESP strategy**

Sub-categories of IFID	No of responses (n=20)	NS-E (n=9)	VS-E (n=11)
a. expression of regret	15 (75%)	6 (66.7%)	9 (81.8%)
b. offer of apology	5 (25%)	3 (33.3%)	2 (18.2%)
Sub-categories of RESP	No of responses (n=18)	NS-E (n=10)	VS-E (n=8)

d. expressing lack of intent		10 (100%)	8 (100%)
	18 (100%)		

However, there was a huge difference in use of acknowledgements (RESP) by gender between two groups. According to Figure 2, the female respondents from the NS-E group used acknowledgement more regularly than the male respondents, 55.6% compared with 50%. In contrast, the proportion of acknowledgements received from females of the VS-E group was around 23.1%, only a half in comparison with males' (41.7%). Compared with the female native speakers, the female Vietnamese ESL learners were less likely to acknowledge responsibility in their apology even though all of them used the same sub-categories, expressing lack of intent (both at 100%). This result can be interpreted that acknowledging responsibility to a speaker of the same social status was not the habit of the female Vietnamese ESL learners. The male Vietnamese learners, on the contrary, took more acknowledgement of responsibility (50%, equivalent to the male speakers), which indicated that they were integrated into the target culture quicker than the females.

**Figure 2. Apology strategies used by gender**

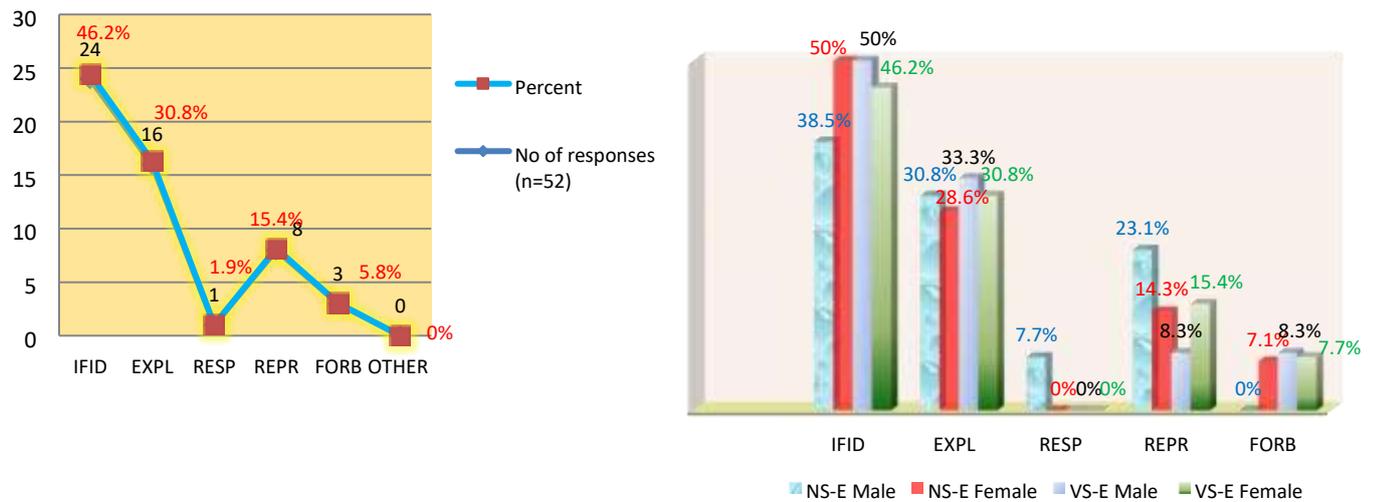


In short, when doing the act of apologizing to a speaker of an equal social status (- dominance, + social distance), both groups of speakers employed similar strategies (IFID and RESP) as

the primary strategies. Yet, the native group showed more politeness in their apology by the use of several intensifying adverbials whereas the Vietnamese group did not. A possible explanation was likely that too politeness to an equal was not necessary in Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, that the Vietnamese respondents from the VS-E group used very few linguistic items in acknowledging responsibility demonstrated their limited linguistic competence in comparison with the native speakers. Following sub-categories of acknowledgements, all speakers from two groups were in favor of expressing lack of intent. Nonetheless, the female Vietnamese learners appeared less responsible than the native speakers and the male Vietnamese learners. This might be understood in the sense that the male Vietnamese ESL learners have become assimilated into the target community quicker than the females. Gender might be a factor that influenced the choice of apology strategies.

#### **4.2. Category 2**

As can be seen in Figure 3 (see next page), both native and Vietnamese speakers used the IFID (46.2%), explanation (30.8%), offer of repair (15.4%) as the main strategies to do the act of apologizing in this situation. There was very little difference in the use of apology strategies between males and females. The percentage of the IFID was slightly higher among female natives and male nonnatives, both at 50%. On the contrary, an offer of repair (REPR) was more common among male natives (23.1%) and female nonnatives (15.4%). The result showed that both the NS-E and VS-E group used similar strategies to apologize to a friend. All groups tended to use an expression of regret beginning with “I am sorry”, “I’m so sorry”, “I’m sorry for missing again” and followed by an explanation along with an offer of repair.

**Figure 3. Apology strategies used in situation 3**

What made the finding more valuable was that most of the participants acknowledged responsibility to a stranger of an equal status as illustrated in situation 1 above, almost none of them used this strategy to apologize to a friend (except NS-E males, at 7.7%). They gave an explanation of the situation and an offer of repair as an alternative to an acknowledgement. A promise of forbearance accounted for a very tiny percentage of the total of responses. This finding implied that the Vietnamese ESL learners did not pay much attention to the acknowledgement of responsibility in their apology to a friend or a near acquaintance as the native speakers did. In addition, all two groups acknowledged significantly more to a stranger than they did to a friend. In general, dominance, social distance and cultural background might influence the choice of the apology strategies among the participants.

#### 4.3. Category 3

This category was involved with the dominance parameter between two interactants. The result indicated that the IFID had a highest percentage of the total of responses in both situations (SITU 2 and SITU 4: NS-E 37.9% and 33.3% vs. VS-E 41.7% and 35.5%). The VSE

group had a slightly larger proportion than the NS-E group. An expression of regret occurred most frequently, approximately 68.2%. Offer of apology accounted for 27.3% and request for forgiveness dropped to the lowest point (4.5%). However, the significant differences between two groups were noted in the linguistic items chosen for the sub-categories of the IFID. In apologizing to their boss, while many native speakers used several adverbial intensifiers to increase the degree of their apology such as “I’m really sorry”, “I’m really, really sorry”, “I’m so sorry”, many of Vietnamese learners employed an offer of apology, for example “I apologize wholeheartedly”, “I apologized for missing the second meeting”, “I sincerely apologize”. An expression of regret with intensification became dominant in the apologies of the native speakers while the offer of apology was most noticeable in the apologies of the Vietnamese learners. As analyzed in Category 1 and Category 2, an expression of regret appeared the central apology strategy of the NS-E group in various situations and to different interactants. When apologizing to someone who had a higher social status (like a boss in situation 2), the degree of apology was increased by using and repeating intensifying adverbials. The VS-E group, on the contrary, expressed the degree of politeness differently depending on the situation and the interlocutor. When apologizing to a stranger of an equal status (situation 1) or a friend (situation 3), they simply said “I’m sorry” or “I’m so sorry”. Conversely, they offered sincere apologies when missing a crucial meeting with their boss, as indicated in the examples above. This finding proposed that the way the Vietnamese ESL learners apologized varied differently from situation to situation. Their apologies were strongly influenced by the parameters of dominance and social distance. Their apologies showed more politeness and respect to people from higher status, closeness to a friend, and less courtesy for a stranger of the same status.

In situation 4, while many native speakers used the intensifiers such as “I’m super sorry”, “I’m really sorry” to say apologies to their kid, the Vietnamese learners were keen on

sweet words like “Sorry son”, “Sorry my dear son”, “Honey, I’m sorry”, “I’m so sorry, sweetheart”. Their apologies showed a close sense of intimacy between parent and child. These findings proved the hierarchical culture of Vietnam dramatically. In comparison to the NS-E group, the VS-E group’s apologies differed greatly from higher status to lower status, from a stranger to a family member. Although the Vietnamese speakers used similar strategies as the native speakers did, their apologies were directly affected by their cultural background, hierarchical culture of Vietnam. There remained a certain gap in culture between two groups.

**Table 5. Percentage of participants’ use of apology strategies by situations**

Situations	Apology strategies	NS-E		VS-E		Male	Female
		n=29	Percent	n=24	Percent	n=28	n=25
SITU 2	IFID	11	37.9%	10	41.7%	35.7%	44%
	EXPL	9	31%	4	16.7%	28.6%	20%
	RESP	2	6.9%	3	12.5%	14.3%	4%
	REPR	1	3.4%	3	12.5%	3.6%	12%
	FORB	6	20.7%	4	16.7%	17.9%	20%
		n=30	Percent	n=31	Percent	n=32	n=29
SITU 4	IFID	10	33.3%	11	35.5%	34.4%	34.5%
	EXPL	4	13.3%	7	22.6%	15.6%	20.7%
	RESP	5	16.7%	1	3.2%	12.5%	6.9%
	REPR	7	23.3%	7	22.6%	21.9%	24.1%
	FORB	4	13.3%	4	12.9%	15.6%	10.3%
	OTHER	0	0%	1	3.2%	0%	3.4%

In addition to the IFID, all the participants from two groups tried to mitigate their guilt by giving an explanation of the situation (EXPL) and an offer of repair (REPR) in both situations. There was a large discrepancy in the choice of EXPL strategy between two groups

(SITU 2 and SITU 4: NS-E 31% and 13.3% vs. VS-E 16.7% and 22.6%). In situation 2, the native speakers of English used the explanation strategy more frequently than the Vietnamese learners of English. By contrast, in situation 4, the Vietnamese learners employed the explanation strategy most often. Two groups used a promise of forbearance (FORB) regularly in situation 2 (NS-E 20.7% vs. VS-E 16.7%) and an offer of repair commonly in situation 4 (NS-E 23.3% vs. VS-E 22.6%). Surprisingly, the speakers from the native group provided detailed and satisfactory explanation for situation 2 while those from the Vietnamese group chose simple words for their explanation. To take an example, the native speakers used more words to explain the situation like “I’ve had a rough semester and I’m just not doing great with meetings lately”, “I just was in the middle of working on something and didn’t remember the meeting”, “I know I should have checked my schedule, but I got busy with this other project...”, “I completely forgot about the meeting” whereas the Vietnamese learners used less words with “I don’t know why these days I am so absent-minded”, “I completely forgot due to some personal reason”, “I have a fever from last night”. The Vietnamese learners tried to point out the reason directly while the native speakers tried to elaborate the justifications in order to decrease their sense of guilt. A possible interpretation was because of limited linguistic competence of the Vietnamese ESL learners. Additionally, in order to mitigate their guilt, two groups tended to promise to improve their behavior in a number of ways, for example “I try my best to avoid doing that again”, “I will note down the day and time of next meeting in my calendar and so that I would not forget”, “I promise I won’t make mistake again”, “It will never happen again”, “I promise it won’t happen again”, “I will not let this happen again” and so on.

In situation 4 (doing the act of apologizing to the kid), the native speakers of English used less explanation (13.3%), more acknowledgement (16.7%) and more offer of repair

(23.3%). On the contrary, the Vietnamese learners of English gave much explanation and repair

(both at 22.6%), but less acknowledgement of responsibility (RESP, 3.2% only) while in situation 2, the percentage of the use of RESP strategy was considerably higher (12.5%). The NS-E group's percentage of the use of RESP strategy in situation 2 was only at 6.9% while in situation 4, this number went up to 16.7%. This contrasting finding proved that the Vietnamese learners showed more politeness and respect for their boss (who has a higher social status than them) while the native speakers were even more courteous in behavior to their kid (a family member). This result partly revealed the cultural gap between two groups of participants. Although the Vietnamese participants have been living and studying in the States for at least one year at the time of the study, their choice of apology strategies were significantly influenced by the hierarchical culture of Vietnam, involved with the parameters of dominance and social distance. Surprisingly, in English culture, the parent treated their kid with great respect, and even with greater respect than they did to their boss.

The differences were also noted in the choice of apology strategies between males and females. In situation 2, the female participants used many expressions of apologies (IFID 44%) rather than the males (IFID 35.7%) while there was a relatively low number of acknowledgements (only 4%) among the female speakers. Likewise, the percentage of acknowledgements was at very low point (6.9%) in situation 4. The result showed that the male speakers were likely in favor of acknowledging the responsibility for their fault while the female speakers provided most likely explanation.

In brief, the findings of Category 3 reflected fundamental differences in the choice of apology strategies between the native speakers and the Vietnamese ESL learners. The apologies of the VS-E group were heavily influenced by two parameters of dominance and social distance. Those apologies showed more politeness and respect for people from higher

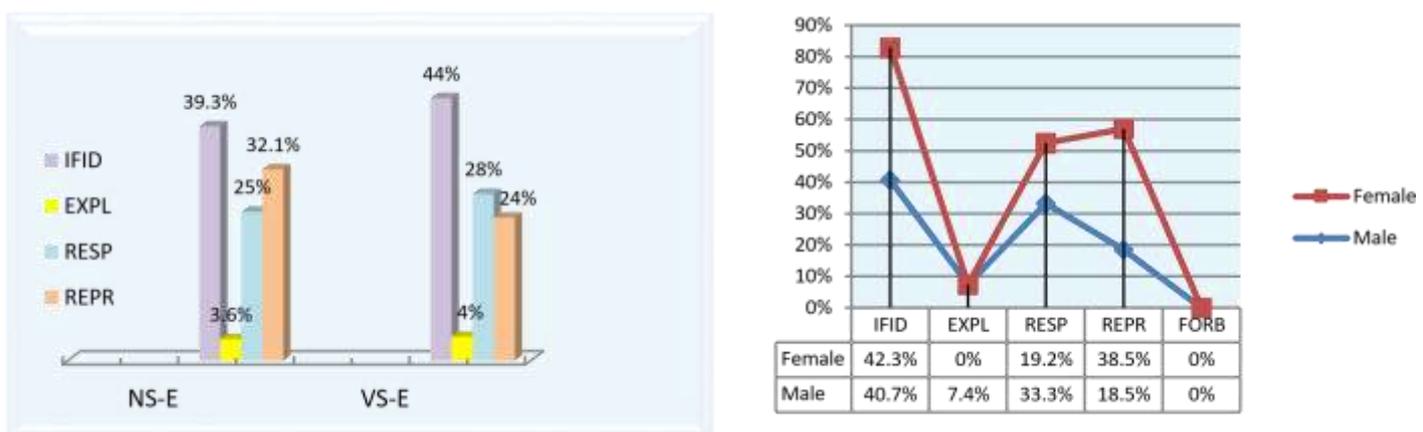
status, closeness to a friend, less courtesy for a stranger of an equal status, and less respect (but more closeness) to their kid. The apologies from the NS-E group, by contrast, pointed out politeness to all people including a stranger of an equal status, a friend, a boss and even their kid. To the boss, the native speakers used more words to elaborate the justifications with the aim of mitigating their sense of guilt. In terms of gender, the male speakers were more in favor of acknowledgements while the females were most interested in detailed and lengthy explanation. The earlier discussion implied the fact that although the advanced Vietnamese learners have been living and studying in the States for at least one year, their linguistic competence was not much improved, and their choice of apology strategies were still influenced by the hierarchical culture of Vietnam.

#### **4.4. Category 4**

As depicted in Figure 4 below, such strategies as expressions of apology (IFID), repair and acknowledgement occurred more frequently than the remaining strategies. In terms of the IFID strategy, the graph demonstrated an increase in proportion between two groups of participants. The Vietnamese speakers of English achieved the highest percentage of using the IFID strategy (44%) while the native speakers of English, unexpectedly, had a slightly lower percentage (39.3%). The majority of respondents from the NS-E group offered a repair (32.1%) in this situation (when running into the side of another car). The number of acknowledgements (25%) was not as regular as the number of repair offers (32.1%). By contrast, the speakers from the VS-E group tended to acknowledge responsibility (28%), much more than offering a repair (24%). Explanation was not noticeable in this situation. An expression of regret, for instance “I am so sorry”, “Sorry bud”, “I am terribly sorry”, “I am sorry”, “I am really sorry”, “I am so sorry for that”, “Oh no, I’m so sorry”, “Oh man, I’m sorry” was the only choice (100%) out of sub-categories of the IFID. Despite the fact that there was not any difference in the choice of the linguistic items to express apologies (IFID) between two groups as well as

between males and females, the result of this situation denoted a complete contrast in the strategy order between two groups. According to the data from the NS-E group, the IFID was immediately followed by an offer of repair and acknowledgement while the predominant order in the VS-E data was the IFID followed by an acknowledgement and then an offer of repair. Compared to the native speakers, the Vietnamese ESL learners rarely offered to repair the damage or some kind of compensatory action to the driver in this situation.

**Figure 4. Apology strategies used in situation 5**



Few differences were also noted among male and female speakers. As described in the chart above, both males and females preferred expressions of apology (male 40.7% vs. female 42.3%). While the males were keen on acknowledging responsibility (male 33.3% vs. female 19.2%), the females were in favor of offering repairs (female 38.5% vs. male 18.5%). Similar to the findings in previous situations, the males appeared more responsible than the females while the females were more concerned about the emotional feelings and compensatory action which would partly help them lose the sense of guilt.

Compared to situation 5, the weight of offence has increased from situations of 6 to 8 (when ‘she’ bump into an elderly lady). As discussed earlier in this paper, such factors as dominance, social distance, gender, linguistic competence and cultural background affected

the choice of apology strategies to some degree. As analyzed in the following table, the group of

VS-E accounted for a higher percentage of the IFID in both situations (SITU 6 41.4% vs. SITU 7 55.6%). By contrast, the NS-E group would rather an offer of repair (SITU 6 43.8%) or acknowledgements (SITU 7 23.8%) than too many empty apologies as learners from the VSE group did. Like the finding of situation 5 above, this finding supported the fact that the Vietnamese learners did not become accustomed to an offer to pay for the damage.

**Table 6. Percentage of participants' use of apology strategies by situations**

Situations	Apology strategies	NS-E		VS-E		Male	Female
		n=32	Percent	n=29	Percent	n=28	n=33
SITU 6	IFID	10	31.2%	12	41.4%	35.7%	36.4%
	EXPL	0	0%	1	3.4%	0%	3%
	RESP	2	6.2%	2	6.9%	7.1%	6.1%
	REPR	14	43.8%	9	31%	39.3%	36.4%
	FORB	0	0%	1	3.4%	3.6%	0%
	OTHER (concern)	6	18.8%	4	13.8%	14.3%	18.2%
		n=21	Percent	n=27	Percent	n=24	n=24
SITU 7	IFID	10	47.6%	15	55.6%	54.2%	50%
	EXPL	0	0%	0	0%	0%	0%
	RESP	5	23.8%	5	18.5%	25%	16.7%
	REPR	1	4.8%	1	3.7%	4.2%	4.2%
	FORB	0	0%	0	0%	0%	0%

	OTHER (concern)	5	23.8%	6	22.2%	16.7%	29.2%
		n=14	Percent	n=21	Percent	n=12	n=23
SITU 8	IFID	12	85.7%	11	52.40%	83.3%	56.5%
	EXPL	1	7.1%	2	9.50%	0%	13%
	RESP	1	7.1%	1	4.80%	8.3%	4.3%
	REPR	0	0%	1	4.80%	0%	4.3%
	FORB	0	0%	0	0.00%	0%	0%
	OTHER (concern)	0	0%	6	28.60%	8.3%	21.7%

The most important thing to be noted was that both groups expressed much concern for the hearer (for the elderly lady) in situations of 6 and 7. However, there was a real distinction in the way they expressed the concern. “Are you okay?” was the most common and only form of concern spoken by the natives whereas the Vietnamese speakers tried to employ more expressions like “Do I scare you?”, “Are you okay”, “Are you hurt”, “Are you alright?” to express their concern for the elderly lady. These expressions showed their feelings of guilt when bumping into that elderly lady. Hence, these expressions would help them increase their concern for that lady after the infraction. Following “Are you okay?”, the majority of the native speakers offered a range of repairs (help) like “Please let me help you up and get you first aid if needed”, “Let me help you pick this up”, “Let me help you pick up your things”, “Should I take you to the hospital?”, “Do you want me to call for help”, “Anything I can do to help”, “Can I help you with that?”, “Let me help you with all those packages”, “What can I do to help”, “Let me help you”, etc. The Vietnamese ESL learners, on the contrary, repeated the IFID to emphasize their deep sorry about that infraction before an offer of repair. Moreover, they also use much more words in the offer, for example “Is it possible if I check your leg for

broken bone. If so I will take you to the hospital and pay all the damage for you”, “Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?”, “Do you want me to take you to hospital?”, “Please let me help you. Can I carry these things for you?”, “I will help you out to collect all your spilled items” and so forth. This distinction may reach the conclusion that the Vietnamese ESL learners showed more politeness, respect and particular concern for the elderly lady even though she was just a stranger and did not have a higher status. Although two groups showed sincere concern for that lady, the finding proved that age was a decisive factor in choice of apology strategies of the VS-E group, but age did not have a significant impact on the strategy choice of the NS-E group.

The significant difference between males and females was involved with the use of acknowledgement and the other strategy (mainly concern for the hearer). The male speakers had a higher proportion in the use of acknowledgements in all three situations (SITU 6, male 7.1% vs. female 6.1%; SITU 7, male 25% vs. female 16.7%; SITU 8, male 8.3% vs. female 4.3%). This result partly revealed that males were more responsible in their behavior. By contrast, the female speakers were more emotional and concerned about feelings of the offended person. As illustrated in Table 6, the females accounted for a larger percentage of using the other strategy (specifically concern for the hearer) in all situations from 6 to 8 (SITU 6, male 14.3% vs. female 18.2%; SITU 7, male 16.7% vs. female 29.2%; SITU 8, male 8.3% vs. female 21.7%). This result showed that the female speakers were more sensitive and concerned about others' feelings rather than the males.

The last situation ('she' bumps into an elderly lady at a department store because she was blocking the way) produced a very striking result. The use of apology strategies changed remarkably according to the weight of offence by situations. In situation 6 ('she' bumps into the elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her packages all over the floor and hurt her leg), the strategies of the IFID, offer of repair and concern were employed

most often in both groups. The number of offer of repair went up to 31% among the Vietnamese learners and up to 43.8% among the native speakers. However, moving to situation 7 ('she' bumps into a well-dressed elderly lady at a department store, shaking her up a bit), the number of repair offer was relatively rare of all the strategies outlined. The occurrence of the IFID, acknowledgement and concern was more frequent as an alternative to a repair offer. In situation 8 ('she' bumps into the elderly lady because that lady was blocking the way), the NS-E data showed that none of the native speakers offered repair or expressed concern for that elderly lady. Simply, most of them would prefer sub-categories of the IFID such as expressions of regret (70.8%) with "I'm sorry", "Oops. Sorry", "Sorry main", and few cases left to "Excuse me" (25%). No intensifiers were included in their expressions of apology to show their sincerity or most politeness. Meanwhile, none of them showed their concern for the hearer as they did in earlier situations. The result asserted that age was not a main factor that influenced the use of apology strategies among the native speakers. The way they performed the act of apologizing to a strange elderly lady was completely different from situation to situation. The degree of politeness, sincerity and respect of their apology changed dramatically according to the weight of offence, but not the age of the offended person.

The VS-E group, on the contrary, had a highest percentage of using the IFID of all the apology strategies in all three situations. Noticeably, the Vietnamese ESL learners showed much concern for the elderly lady in situation 8 (28.6%) rather than in situation 6 (13.8%) and in situation 7 (22.2%). The VS-E group represented a slightly higher percentage in use of such strategies as explanation, acknowledgement and repair offering in comparison with the NS-E group. This result confirmed that age should be a factor that affected the Vietnamese speakers' act of apologizing. The data depicted that they always expressed much concern and respect for the elderly lady, especially in situation 8 (VS-E 28.6% vs. NS-E 0%). The prototypical form of the VS-E group's apology in situation 8 might be look like this:

She: "Oh, my!"

You: I am so sorry. Do I hurt you? I apologize for that. Is there anything I can do for you to make you feel better?

Or

You: "Oh goodness! I'm sorry. I was just trying to squeeze past. Are you okay?"

Or

You: "I'm sorry. This hall is so small. Are you okay?"

To express their sincere apology and respect to that elderly lady, some of them repeated their apology again, explained the situation and finally expressed their concern for her. By contrast, the NS-E group would prefer the following pattern:

She: "Oh, my!"

You: "Sorry. Excuse me."

Or

You: "Oh, excuse me. I'm sorry."

The majority of the native speakers followed this pattern (repetition of apology and emotional exclamation 'Oh'). Only two of them either explained the situation like: "I'm sorry. I tried to get around you but couldn't." or acknowledge responsibility by saying: "Sorry, maim. I didn't see you there."

To conclude, the findings of Category 4 identified a certain gap in culture between two groups of participants. Different from the native speakers, the Vietnamese ESL learners were not accustomed to an offer to pay for the damage after their infraction. The Vietnamese learners

showed more politeness, respect and special concern for the elderly lady regardless of her dominance and social distance. Not surprisingly, age was not an important factor to the native speakers of English. The degree of politeness, sincerity and respect of their apology altered radically depending on the weight of offence, but not the age of the offended person. In both groups, the male speakers were more responsible in their behavior than the females while the female speakers were more sensitive and concerned about the feelings of the offended person rather than the males. In other words, gender did not affect the choice of apology strategies as much as age. Although the advanced Vietnamese ESL learners have spent at least one year in the States, their choice of apology strategies partly reflected their cultural identity.

## 5. Conclusion

The study revealed some interesting findings with regard to the differences in apology strategies between the native speakers of English and the Vietnamese ESL learners. Meanwhile, the study pointed out the possible factors contributing greatly to those differences. In terms of Category 1 (- dominance, + social distance), there was certain similarity in choice of apology strategies. The IFID and acknowledgement were most frequent of all the strategies outlined. The notable differences were observed in use of the linguistic items to express a pang of regret and lack of intent. While the native speakers utilized several intensifying adverbials to increase the degree of their regret, the Vietnamese ESL learners did not. Likewise, the participants from the NS-E group used a wide range of linguistic terms to express lack of intent whereas the linguistic terms from the VS-E group were very restricted. In comparison with the native speakers and the male Vietnamese learners, the female Vietnamese learners rarely acknowledged responsibility after the infraction. These differences can be attributed to the fact that the native speakers of English showed more politeness in apologizing to an equal rather than the Vietnamese ESL learners. In other words, it was pointless to show politeness and

respect for a stranger of an equal status in Vietnamese culture. According to the findings, although the advanced Vietnamese ESL learners have been in the States for at least one year, their linguistic competence was still limited. Acknowledging more responsibility, the male Vietnamese ESL learners seemed to be assimilated into the target community quicker than the females. Such factors as dominance, social distance and limited linguistic competence were most likely causes for those differences.

With reference to Category 2 (- dominance, - social distance), the Vietnamese ESL learners did not pay much attention to the acknowledgement of responsibility to a friend or a near acquaintance as the native speakers did. However, all two groups acknowledged significantly more to a stranger than they did to a friend. The Category 3 (+ dominance, +/- social distance) showed strong reaction of both groups to the parameters of dominance and social distance. The apologies of the VS-E group gave more politeness and respect for people from higher status, closeness to a friend, less politeness to a stranger of an equal status, and less respect (but greater intimacy) for a kid, a family member. By contrast, the apologies of the NS-E group showed politeness to all people including a stranger at the same status, a friend, the boss, and even the kid (a family member). When apologizing to the boss, the native speakers tried to elaborate the justifications to mitigate their guilt. The male speakers were in favor of acknowledgments while the females were most interested in most likely explanation. These findings contributed to the fact that the Vietnamese ESL learners' choice of apology strategies was considerably influenced by the hierarchical culture of Vietnam. Gender did not have a very significant impact on the strategy choice of the participants.

With regard to Category 4 (+/- age, - dominance, + social distance), the findings revealed that the VS-E group has not been accustomed to an offer to pay for the damage after their infraction. They showed more politeness, respect and special concern for the elderly lady

regardless of her dominance and social distance. The NS-E group, on the contrary, did not react strongly to the age factor. The degree of politeness, sincerity and respect of their apologies depended on the weight of offence and the situation itself. The male speakers seemed more responsible while the females became more concerned about the feelings of the offended person. The gender, generally, did not have as much influence as the age factor.

This study enabled ESL or EFL teachers to have a general overview of the cultural differences in the acts of apologizing between the Vietnamese ESL learners and the native speakers of English. The findings from this study also provided useful information about the apology strategies as well as the linguistic items by situations that were considered appropriate by the target language speakers. Most noticeably, the findings indicated the factors that might result in the differences in choice of apology strategies and the linguistic items by situations between two groups. These findings, therefore, would be very fruitful to the classroom instruction about the speech acts of apologizing. It was also productive to ESL/EFL learners who would like to reach the appropriateness in apologizing in the target culture. Despite its value, the study still had many limitations. First, the sample was rather small, so it was almost impossible in generalizing these findings to a larger population. Second, although it was relatively convenient and time saving to collect data through the DCTs, a deeper insight into the issues might not be gained. Therefore, the future research should concentrate on a larger scale with a wide of instruments such as DCT, role-play, retrospective interview. Additionally, it would be of value to compare the apology strategies used by the Vietnamese EFL learners, Vietnamese ESL learners with the native speakers of English. There should be an urgent need for further research in the area of apology speech acts among the Vietnamese EFL learners who have never been overseas.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A - APOLOGY INSTRUMENT

*This appendix was adapted from Cohen & Olshtain 1981, pp.132-134.*

**Please circle your gender: Male or Female**

*You will be asked to read eight brief situations calling for an apology. In each case the person who you owe the apology to will speak first.*

#### **Situation 1**

You're at a meeting and you say something that one of the participants interprets as a personal insult to him.

He: "If I feel that your last remark was directed at me and I take offense."

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

#### **Situation 2**

You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting.

Your boss gets on the line and asks:

Boss: "What happened to you?"

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

**Situation 3**

You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him to apologize. This is already the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the phone:

Friend: "What happened?"

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

**Situation 4**

You call from work to find out how things are at home and your kid reminds you that you forgot to take him shopping, as you had promised. And this is the second time that this has happened. Your kid says over the phone:

Kid: "Oh, you forgot again and you promised!"

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

**Situation 5**

Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault.

You dent in the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily.

Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done?"

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ .

**Situation 6**

You accidentally bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her packages all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too. It’s clearly your fault and you want to apologize profusely.

She: “Ow! My goodness!”

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ .

**Situation 7**

You bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at a department store, shaking her up a bit. It’s your fault, and you want to apologize.

She: “Hey, look out!”

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ .

**Situation 8**

You bump into an elderly lady at a department store. You hardly could have avoided doing so because she was blocking the way. Still, you feel that some kind of apology is in order.

She: "Oh, my!"

You: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

*Thank you very much for your time!*

**Appendix B – Coding scheme of apology strategies**

1. IFID: first strategy (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device which involves apologizing explicitly such as (be) sorry, apology, regret and excuse.
2. EXPL: giving explanation, cause or reason (e.g. The bus was late.)
3. RESP: acknowledging responsibility for the offense (e.g. It's my fault.)
4. REPR: an offer of repair or redress or compensation for the damage (e.g. I'll pay for the broken vase.)
5. FORB: promising for not repeating the action again. (e.g. It won't happen again.)