Using Apology Strategies in Letters by EFL Students at University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Apology strategies; direct apology strategies; indirect apology strategies; letters of apology; second-year students.	The act of apologizing in communicative activities is one of the elements of speech acts. Therefore, selecting and using appropriate apology strategies could possibly create effective communication. The article investigates apology strategies used in letters written in English by second-year students at the Faculty of English, University of Foreign Languages, The University of Danang (UFLS-UD). Regarding the aim to identify apology strategies, the frequency of direct and indirect apology strategies, descriptive qualitative methods with the support of quantitative information were employed and based on the data from 282 letters of apology which were collected from 04 EFL classes in the academic school year 2021-2022. The article provides readers with a deep insight into apology strategies and assists EFL learners in understanding and using appropriate apology strategies in specific communicative situations.

Introduction

In everyday conversations, people communicate for different communicative purposes. When people have committed violating incidents, they have a tendency to apologize. Even when there is no violating action, people might also apologize in case they are the ones who have to take responsibility for the mistakes their employees committed. In other cases, like in romantic relationships, males use apology strategies to soothe their partners. Therefore, using apology strategies appropriately plays a crucial part in maintaining relationships. Apologies can be made verbally or non-verbally to show the repentance of the offenders. In this article, the author only focuses on the apology agreements used to perform the act of responding to the apology verbally, not by action. Written and spoken communication are the two subcategories of verbal communication. Written communication includes forms, namely text messages, letters, and emails. Phone calls, video chats, and in-person conversations are some instances of spoken communication. The majority of nonverbal indicators in communication are visual, such as body language, facial expressions, physical space between communicators, or voice tone. Since letters were the primary data source, I narrowed my attention to verbal apology strategies. Despite the fact that there have been many studies on apologizing, few of them offer insights

into the techniques used in the letters of apology submitted by students at the Faculty of English (FE), UFLS-UD. To fill the gaps that may exist, I chose to investigate which apology strategies and common apology sequences are employed in letters of apology and how often each apology strategy is used in the letters written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD.

Literature review

Previous Studies

Similar to other speech acts, apologies have drawn the interest of numerous linguists and scholars. Due to the breakdowns in communication, the research of interlanguage pragmatics has become a burgeoning new subject (Demester, 2006; Kecskes and Romero-Trillo, 2013; Lê, 2011; Qadoury, 2011; Wannaruk, 2008; Shardakova, 2005; Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

Demester (2006) looked into explicit apologies, which means that every apology he examined included an explicit expression of regret, including *"I'm sorry"* or *"excuse me"*. However, many excuses do not include an explicit expression of regret. He had only concentrated on explicit apologies because one of the drawbacks of a corpus analysis was that the searches could not cover all potential sorts of apologies. Shariati and Chamani (2010) demonstrated how exposure to a second culture affects speakers' L1 apologies, making them more like those of native speakers. Additionally, the results of both studies also indicated that preferences for utilizing apology strategies appeared to be culturally distinctive, emphasizing the importance of culture in influencing this decision. In two recent studies of *"learners' refusals"* pragmatic transference is observed. One of these studies analyzes the speech act of realization of Thai EFL learners (Wannaruk, 2008), and the other examines Iraqi EFL learners (Qadoury, 2011).

Lê (2011) was used as an example of someone who captured discussions in natural settings. She studied the various linguistic etiquette utilized by Vietnamese L1 learners in Vietnam and Australia, where she found evidence of the pragmatic transference of Australian culture and Australian English in L1 Vietnamese speakers. The data were recordings of a naturalistic speech made during routine public interactions, such as trips to stores and markets. She took into account the effects of various factors, including the national setting, gender, role, and generation. According to the study, Australian Vietnamese were linguistically more polite than Vietnamese living in Vietnam and utilized much more politeness signals. Their courtesy usage was influenced by two factors: sociocultural change in Vietnam and linguistic and cross-cultural interaction in Australia. According to a recent argument made by Kecskes and Romero-Trillo (2013), communication between languages and cultures has become a new issue for pragmatics study in the twenty-first century. According to them (2013), intercultural pragmatics examines how the language system works in social interactions between speakers of various native languages from different cultures as they try to connect and communicate in a language that they both understand. L2 speakers and learners may use pragmatic language patterns from their first language in their efforts to communicate in their second language. Sienes and Catan (2021) utilized the taxonomy of apology strategies by Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein (1986) and found out that Filipino call center representatives have successfully produced "perfect apologies." However, the sequence was altered by focusing more on *offering a repair*. Ngo and

Luu (2022) solely looked at *direct apology strategies* and discovered that in English, the *expression of regret* was the most effective direct strategy because it was most frequently used. The category of *sorry* became the most popular performative marker for *direct apology strategies*. Ngo and Luu (2022) found out the direct apology strategies and lexicogrammatical realizations of apology utterances in English conversations and suggested several implications for EFL students. They then also investigated the lexicogrammatical realizations of apology response utterances in order to have an overview picture of apologies and apology responses.

Apology

Holmes (1990) defined apology as a speech act that seeks to atone for the wrongdoing for which it accepts responsibility and, as a result, restore social harmony amongst interlocutors. According to Olshtain's (1989) definition, an apology is a spoken act meant to show support for the listener who was actually or possibly harmed by a breach. According to Leech (1983), an apology is an attempt to make up for the imbalance that existed between the speaker and the hearer before the speaker's offense against the hearer. He believes that making an apology is not enough; it must be accepted in order for the balance to be restored by the recipient and the speaker.

Apology Strategies

The variety of apology definitions influences the categorization of apologetic strategies. Additionally, the verbal act of apologizing is complex in that it has a wide range of potential tactics that it may use. In the field of cross-cultural and interlanguage studies, various classifications of apologetic tactics have been put forth (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Fraser, 1981; Holmes, 1990; Owen, 1983; Trosborg, 2011). Since apologies might be made up of a single strategy or a number of combinations of two or more strategies, apologies can be complicated. The techniques people employ to deliver verbal acts of apology, such as statements of regret and compensation, are known as apology strategies. Some common apology strategies are used in apology strategy taxonomies proposed by the researchers mentioned above. Despite a variety of the classification into apology strategies, the adoption between the apology strategy taxonomy proposed by Trosborg (2011) and the theory of direct and indirect speech act developed by Searle (1975) is used as the framework shown in Figure 1 for the analysis of apology strategies in this article. This framework is used in order to answer the three research questions below:

1. What apology strategies in letters of apology are used by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD?

2. How often are apology strategies used in letters of apology written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD?

3. What are the common sequences of apology strategies in letters of apology written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD?
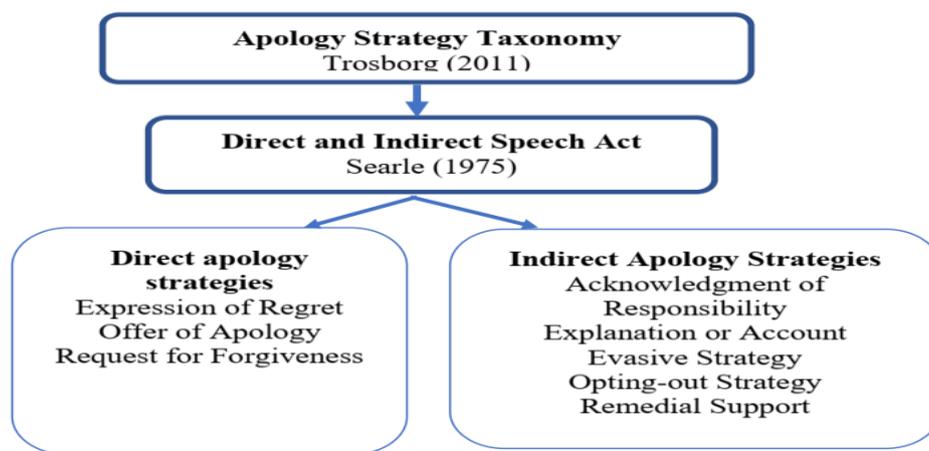
Figure1*. Conceptual framework of apology strategies in the current study*

Methods

Pedagogical Setting and Participants

A person can convey their regret through verbal and nonverbal communication when apologizing, and this article only focused on verbal apologies. Furthermore, explicit and implicit apologies and apology strategies used in letters of apology were both examined.

Therefore, the data of this study involve 282 letters of apology written in English by second-year students at the FE, UFLS-UD, in the first semester of the academic school year 2021-2022.

The information on the students and their course levels where the data were collected is detailed in Table 1. The second-year students learn English skills with two textbooks: the first is Solution - Intermediate, used in the course General English B2.1, and the second is FCE Result, used in General English B2.2. Both textbooks were written by Tim Falla and Paul A Davies and published by Oxford University Press. These two subjects help the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD improve their English language skills at the intermediate level. Many classroom tasks at this level and in these courses require second-year students to write letters, especially those of apology.

Table 1. Information on pedagogical setting and participants

The school year 2021-2022	EFL classes	Quantity	Subjects	Textbooks
Semester 1 August 2021- January 2022	B2.1-03	40	General English B2.1	Unit 1 – Unit 5 Solution – Intermediate
	B2.1-04	36		
	B2.2-02	39	General English B2.2	Unit 1 – Unit 7 FCE Result
	B2.2-15CLC	26		

This article was conducted with the participation of 141 second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD, majoring in English Translation and Interpreting, from 4 classes randomly selected from 15 second-year classes. The age of students ranges from 19 to 21 years old. The majority of the participants in this survey have studied English for 10 years, 40 have been exposed to the language since they were 5 or 6 years old, and the remaining participants have studied English

for 7 years. They have finished their first school year 2020-2021, and are expected to reach the pre-intermediate level.

Design of the Study

The identification of question types for each research question played a crucial role in helping researchers choose the research design for the thesis based on the characteristic of each question, as affirmed by Creswell (2017). The three research questions of this article raised in the section Introduction, in which the nature of research questions 1 and 3 required the author to describe the apology strategies and the common apology sequences in letters of apology written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD in depth and in detail; consequently, the descriptive method was used to deal with these two questions. However, research question 2 was set up to find out the frequency of apology strategies; therefore, quantitative information was provided. After these three research questions were identified, this study was designed as descriptive research, which used the qualitative method with the support of quantitative information based on the data from 205 letters of apology written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD.

Data Collection

The article uses data from 282 letters of apology written in English by second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD in the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022 to ensure that the source of data obtains the most updated apology strategies. Since the data were obtained through the Covid-19 pandemic when students had to attend the virtual courses, the second-year students wrote these letters using Microsoft Word software. The author then collected the letters via the Microsoft Teams platform. At the subsequent stage, utterances containing direct and indirect apology strategies were collected.

Regarding direct apology strategies, they comprised utterances with explicit performative markers of apologizing acts, namely *afraid, apologize, apology, excuse, forgive, pardon, regret*, and *sorry* in English. To collect these explicit performative markers, the Microsoft Word 2019 software was utilized; to be specific, the author typed Control+F to find out these expressions easily. These expressions were located in the letters of apology. The author read and counted the number of utterances consisting of direct apology strategies. *Indirect apology strategies* used utterances that did not comprise performative expressions but inferred the apologies were also obtained.

Data Analysis

After apology strategies were collected from 282 letters of apology written by 141 second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD, a qualitative method was employed to describe apology strategies, then identified and classified into two macro types of direct and indirect apology strategies. In the next step, the quantitative information about the frequency of these apology strategies was displayed in percentages and illustrated with tables and figures. Based on the description and analysis, the author offered a more in-depth discussion on the reality of using apology strategies and common apology sequences written by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD. The data analysis procedure of this study relied on the apology strategy taxonomy classified by Trosborg

(2011), and Searle's (1975) theory of direct and indirect speech acts, as shown in Figure 1.

Results and discussion

The apology strategy taxonomy, which was developed by Trosborg (2011), set the light to investigate what apology strategies in letters of apology were frequently made use of by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD. This apology strategy taxonomy consists of five separate groups, which are entitled *direct strategies, indirect strategies, evasive strategies, opting out,* and *remedial support.* After the theory adoption of direct and indirect speech act proposed by Searle (1975), the adopted apology taxonomy comprises two main categories of *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies.* There are three subcategories in the former, including *the expression of regret, the offer of apology,* and the *request for forgiveness*. Meanwhile, the latter covers *acknowledging responsibility, explanation or account, evasive strategies, opting out,* and *remedial support.*

In the subsequent step after reading the letters, the author identified and specified the apology strategies that the second-year students took advantage of in order to answer research question 1, which was illustrated evidently in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Apology strategies in letters of apology and their frequencies

Apology Strategies	Macro types	Micro types	n	%
Direct strategies	*1. Expression of regret*		35	12.41
	2. Offer of apology		80	28.37
	3. Request for forgiveness		12	4.26
		Subtotal	*127*	*45.04*
Indirect strategies	*1. Acknowledgment of responsibility*	Implicit acknowledgment	44	15.6
		Explicit acknowledgment		
		Expression of lack of intent		
		Expression of self-deficiency		
		Expression of Embarrassment		
		Explicit acceptance of the blame		
	2. Explanation or account	Implicit explanation	68	24.11
		Explicit explanation		
	3. Evasive strategies	Minimizing	8	2.84
		Querying precondition		
		Blaming someone else		
	4. Opting out	Explicit denial of responsibility	0	0
		Implicit denial of responsibility		
		Justification		
		Attacking complainer		
	5. Remedial support	Expressing concern for hearer	35	12.41
		Offer of repair		
		Promise of forbearance		
		Subtotal	*155*	*54.96*
		Total	**282**	**100**

Figure 2 highlights the frequency of direct and indirect apology strategies in letters of apology written in English by the second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD, which allows the author to answer research question 2.
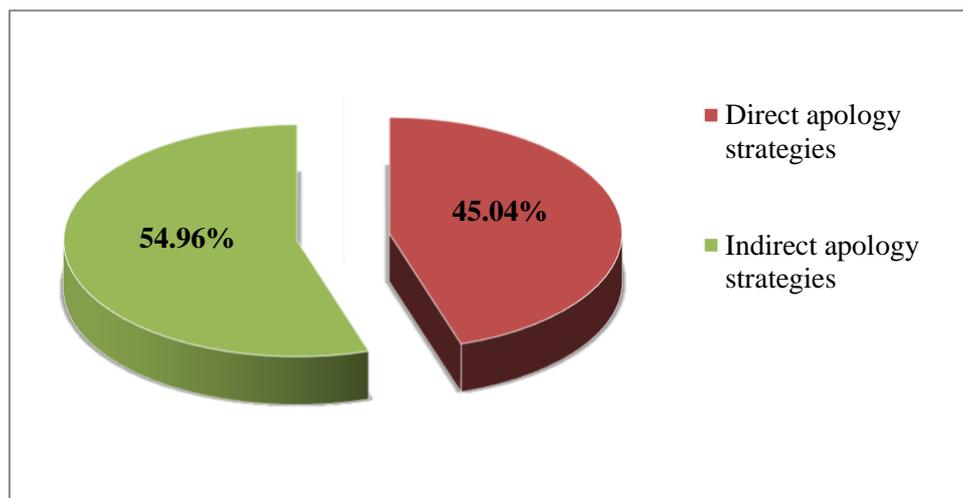
Figure 2. Frequency of using direct and indirect apology strategies in letters of apology

Looking at Figure 2 and Table 2 in more detail, the second-year students preferred employing *indirect apology strategies* with 54.96% (n=155) more than *direct apology strategies* with 54.96% (n=127). There seems to be little disparity among the use of these two types of apology strategies in letters of apology written by second-year students. *Direct apology strategies'* universality was affirmed to be in line with many previous studies (Altayari, 2017; Bataineh, 2008; Deutschmann, 2003; Holmes, 1990, 1995; Hussein & Hammouri, 1998; Qari, 2017; Shardakova, 2005).

Direct Apology Strategies in Letters of Apology

The use of performative expressions of apology, namely *afraid, apologize, apology, excuse, forgive, pardon, regret*, and *sorry* in English, allows the explicit understanding of the direct apology strategy in English. Three macro levels of *direct apology strategies,* namely, *request for forgiveness, expression of regret,* and *offer of apology*, are presented in Figure 3.
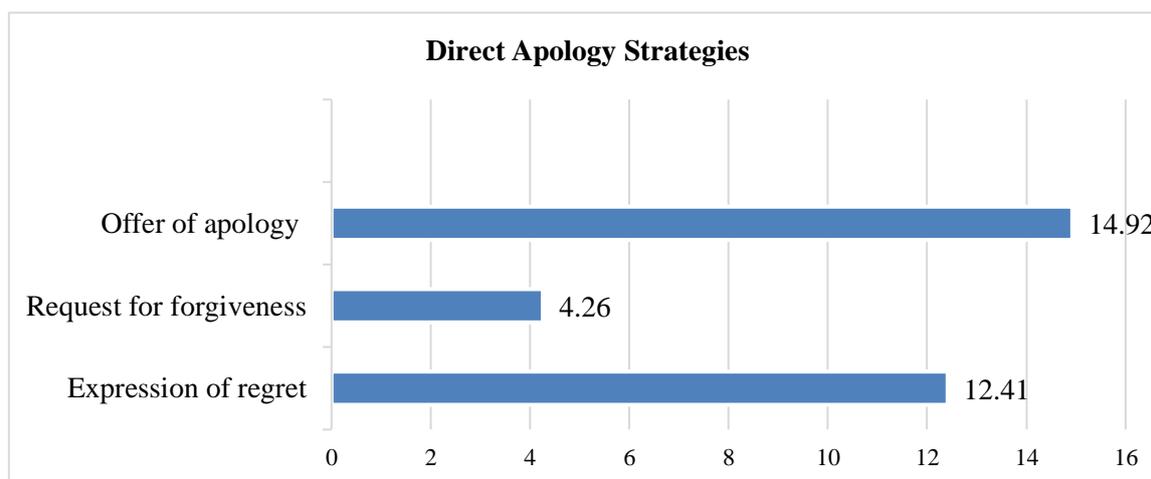

Figure 3. Frequency of using direct apology strategies in letters of apology

The use of performative expressions of apology or apology markers, such as *be afraid, apologize, apology, excuse, forgive, pardon, regret* and *be sorry*, proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), allows for the explicit understanding of *direct apology strategies* in English.

There are three macro types - *offer of apology*, *expression of regret,* and *request for forgiveness* which made up 14.92%, 12.41%, and 4.26%, respectively. As can be seen clearly, the top was more than 3.5 times higher than the least. A thorough understanding of direct strategies is given by the analysis of the instances in the next three subsections.

(1). I'm deeply sorry.

(2). What I did last weekend was terrible, horribly, and I regret about it.

In examples 1 and 2, the apologizers employed performative verbs and expressions comprising of *regret, afraid,* and *sorry* to convey regret to the apologizees.

(3). I humbly ask you to forgive my late attendance.

The request for forgiveness is illustrated in example 3. When the apologizers wanted the apologizees to forgive them, they used performative terms or verbs such as *forgive, pardon*, and *excuse*, which belong to the macro level of *direct apology strategies*.

(4). Once again, I sincerely apologize for missing activities and ask for your understanding of the unavoidable circumstances leading to my absence.

Example 4 illustrates the use of *an offer of apology,* which is used when the apologizers have shown regret for the errors or offenses they have caused.

Indirect Apology Strategies in Letters of Apology

There was no use of performative expressions or verbs because, in contrast to *direct strategies*, *indirect strategies* were used by the apologizers to convey their regrets to the apologizees subtly or implicitly. The categories of *acknowledgment of responsibility, explanation or account, evasive strategies, opting out,* and *remedial support* are among the five categories of *indirect strategies* at the macro level. These apology strategies appeared in letters of apology written by the second-year students with different ranges, as shown in Figure 4.
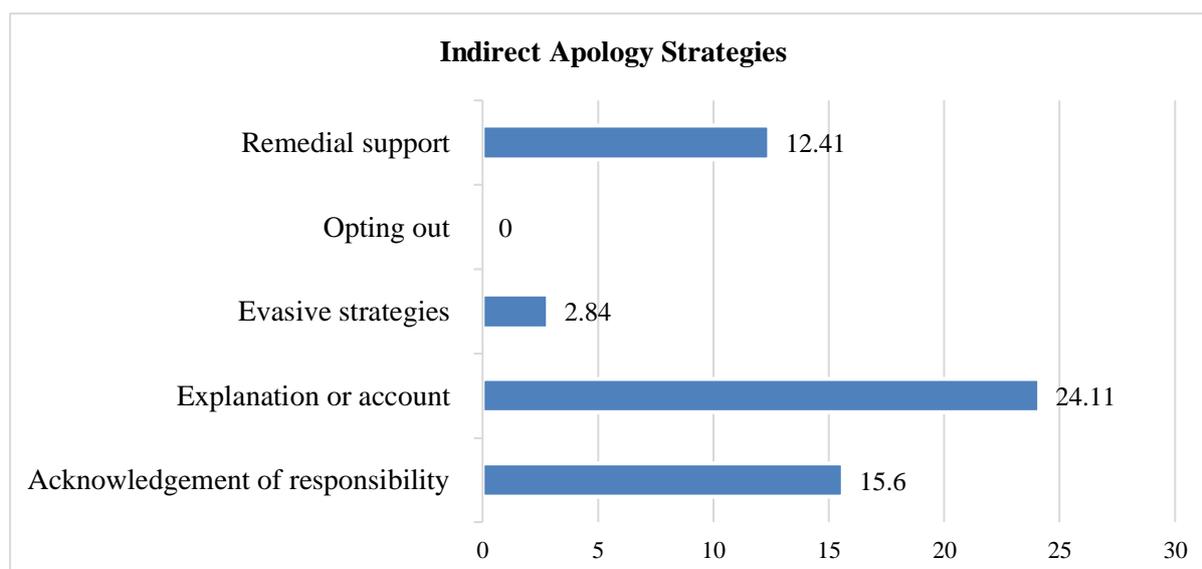

Indirect Apology Strategies

Category	Value
Remedial support	12.41
Opting out	0
Evasive strategies	2.84
Explanation or account	24.11
Acknowledgement of responsibility	15.6

Figure 4. *Frequency of using direct apology strategies in letters of apology*

Figure 4 describes the frequency of all macro types of *indirect apology strategies*. The two most

outstanding apology strategies were *explanation or account* at 24.11% (n=68) and *acknowledgment of responsibility* at 15.6% (n=44). Vollmer and Olsthain (1989) also discovered that the most popular strategy was *an acknowledgment of responsibility*. *Remedial support* ranked third at 12.41% (n=35), which was relatively lower than the second highest and was nearly twice lower than the top. It was *evasive strategies* that stood at the bottom at 2.84% (n=8), which means that there was a big difference in the use of this *indirect apology strategy* compared to the other three. What stands out from Figure 4 is that there is no record of *opting out,* which means that the second-year students did not make use of this kind of indirect apology strategy. Examples are given below to illustrate the use of these *indirect apology strategies.*

(5). I will compensate the amount of money and self-criticism. I assure you that I will be more careful next time.

Example 5 belongs to *acknowledgment of responsibility* when the offender tries to compensate for what he has done by admitting and shouldering the responsibility of the offense committed.

(6). But at that time, because I was careless, therefore, I forgot to note it to inform everyone about this meeting.

Example 6 is in the macro type of *explanation or account*. By explaining the situation to the apologizees who had been upset, the apologizers attempted to minimize errors. *Implicit explanation* and *explicit explanation* are the two sorts of this strategy.

(7). Even though I came late, there was no negative consequence.

In Example 7, the use of *evasive strategies* is demonstrated when the apologizers do not contest their guilt but downplay the severity of the offense. *Evasive strategies* include three distinctive types named *minimizing*, *querying precondition*, and *blaming someone else*.

(8). I understand that kind of attitude is absolutely bad, and it hurts you a lot.

Remedial support is the avatar of example 8. The apologizer employs this tactic when the situation becomes unmanageable. Then, the people who apologize accept their guilt and have no recourse. There are three kinds of this strategy listed as follows: *expressing concern for the hearer, offer of repair*, and *promise of forbearance*.

Common Sequences of Apology Strategies in Letters of Apology

After examining 282 letters of apology in English written by 141 second-year students majoring in the English language at FE, UFLS-UD, the author has found the results of the first two research questions about different types of apology strategies and the occurrence of these strategies. This section further explores the common sequences of apology strategies that second-year students use in these letters.

Based on careful observations, students did not use apologies separately but in sequences. There were letters that employed only direct apology strategies, there were those using only indirect ones, and the remaining simultaneously utilized both macro types of apology strategies. Below are the two letters of apology written by the second-year students in order to illustrate the sequence of apology strategies.

(9). Dear Broadway English center manager,

I am very sorry for not coming to work yesterday and replying so late. I'm reflecting on myself for what I've done.

I have apologized to Tom for insulting him during last Saturday's class, which hurt him. I also come to his house and talked with his parents about my fault. I know that what I have done is unforgivable because I am a teacher. But that day, I was so annoyed because of Tom's behavior. He didn't do his homework 3 times and talked privately during class. My words hurt his self-esteem and affected the image of our center.

So I write this letter to hope you forgive me, please accept my apology. I promise this not happen again.

Yours faithfully,

(10). Dear Mr. Smith,

I am writing this letter to convey my deepest regret and sincerely apologize for sleeping on duty. This embarrassing incident happened when I was teaching for 4A class last Tuesday evening.

During the two previous weeks, I had been suffering from the serious flu, so I had to take strong medicine to overcome it quickly. However, I could not expect some enormous side effects, which led me to lose my teaching concentration and fall asleep after instructing today's lesson for all students, I overslept unpredictably for a half hour when they were doing exercises.

My actions were extremely unprofessional and inappropriate for a teacher, which influenced the face of your English Center. Although It was unconscious, I make no excuse because of my lack of responsibility. I should have called you to arrange time off work some days. I wish I could take it back.

Once more, I sincerely apologize to you and you and the face of the company as well. I promise to you not to let such a situation transpire again. Afterward, I could draw a considerable lesson. I will pay the penalty for my bad.

I hope you will understand and consider it. Please, accept my sincerest apology.

Sincerely,

Conclusion

In conclusion, after 282 letters of apology written in English by 141 second-year students at FE, UFLS-UD had been analyzed, the three research questions were answered. Second-year students tended to use indirect apology strategies more than direct apology strategies; however, the disparity between the use of these two apology strategies is not considerable. The top two apology strategies exploited were the *offer of apology* in *direct apology strategies* and *explanation or account* in *indirect apology strategies. Expression of regret* in *direct apology strategies* and *remedial support* in *indirect apology strategies* had the same occurrence. It is noticeable that the second-year students did not use *opting out*. Students also made use of several macro apology strategies in a letter of apology.

Acknowledgments

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Biodata

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