The production and comprehension of apology strategies: Effects of English language proficiency

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study examined the effects of English language proficiency on Jordanian EFL students' production and comprehension of apology strategies. The participants were 270 Jordanian EFL learners and 90 native speakers of English. Data were collected using Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT). Descriptive statistics and the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (rho) test were used to analyse the data. Results showed that Jordanian EFL learners' production and comprehension of apology strategies are influenced by their levels of English language proficiency. A small to large negative correlation relationship was reported between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of explicit apology strategies and non-apology strategies. On the other hand, the study revealed a small to medium positive correlation relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of less-explicit apology. The study also showed a significant correlation relationship between proficiency and the comprehension of apology strategies. Thus, teachers of English at Jordanian schools may need to consider focusing on classroom activities that can help EFL learners enhance their pragmatic knowledge of apology strategies.

1. Introduction

For effective communication, learners of language need both grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence. Unlike grammatical mistakes that can be expected from non-native speakers (NNSs) of a language, mistakes related to pragmatic failure are considered to be breaches of politeness by native speakers (NSs) (Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic competence is one of the issues that has been under the

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spotlight of researchers in pragmatics and language teaching fields in the past two decades (Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Taguchi, 2011). Recently, researchers in Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) development have shown a noticeable interest in examining factors affecting pragmatic competence. Among these factors, language proficiency has been found to play an influential role in pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Schauer, 2006, 2008; Xiao, 2015). However, previous studies on the influence of language proficiency on pragmatic competence have reported controversial findings. While some studies have revealed that language proficiency positively affects pragmatic competence (e.g., Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; İstifçi, 2009; Qorina, 2012; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014), other studies have reported that language proficiency has no effect on pragmatic competence (e.g., Farnia & Suleiman, 2009; Khorshidi, Mobini, & Nasiri, 2016; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014). However, the effect of English language proficiency on the production and comprehension of strategies of apology among students of English as a foreign language (EFL), especially young students in schools, has not been widely considered in ILP studies. Further, it is worthy to note that in the Jordanian EFL context, research on the pragmatic development has not properly addressed the effect of English language proficiency on EFL learners' pragmatic competence, including the speech act of apology. Researchers in the Jordanian EFL context have recommended further studies on the effect of language proficiency on the production and comprehension of apology strategies (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008; Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2015).

Previous related studies on pragmatic development of Second Language (L2) learners have exhibited some gaps. First, most of the previous studies have not sought how various levels of English language proficiency can affect the pragmatic development of apology strategies. Further, participants in most of the previous studies were university students with higher proficiency levels, with controlled research methods (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). In other words, pragmatic knowledge of EFL learners in schools have not been adequately considered in previous studies. Regarding this gap, Kampf and Blum-Kulka (2007) have argued that "children's apologies are greatly under-researched" (p. 11). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the effect of English language proficiency on strategies of apology among Jordanian EFL learners at three language proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The present study draws its data from a large research project which set out to examine apology strategies by Jordanian EFL students and English native speakers (ENSs).

This study has its contributions to the field of ILP, especially in EFL contexts, because the findings can add some significant additions to the existing studies on ILP by involving NSs of Arabic language who are learning English as their L2. Furthermore, the results of this study can provide a comprehensive view of different pragmatic developmental stages of Jordanian EFL learners in schools. Additionally, differences in the comprehension and production of the speech act of apology in terms of the proficiency levels will be of importance for teachers of English in L2 contexts. As the acquisition of speech act of apology by EFL learners has not been systematically investigated, a careful analysis of EFL learner data across proficiency levels can most probably improve understanding of L2 pragmatic development.

1.1. Literature review

The effect of language proficiency on the acquisition of pragmatic competence is still a controversial issue among L2 researchers, including its effect on the speech act of apology. Some of the studies that have focused on the apology strategies have reported an influential role of language proficiency on the use of apology (Qorina, 2012; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014; Shardakova, 2005). Furthermore, these studies have shown that L2 learners with higher proficiency are inclined to use a wider range of apology strategies (Li & Suleiman, 2017; Qorina, 2012). However, some other studies have revealed that language proficiency has no effect on the pragmatic competence of apology strategies (Arghamiri & Sadighi, 2013; Farashaiyan & Hua, 2012; Khorshidi et al., 2016). Recently, Cedar (2017) focused on

the effects of English proficiency on the apology strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners from two English proficiency levels. Cedar reported that there is no significant effect of English proficiency levels.

In the Jordanian EFL context, researchers have been keen to understand how Jordanian EFL learners produce and comprehend apology strategies (Al-Khaza'leh, 2018; Al-Sobh, 2013; Banikalef, Maros, Aladdi, & Al-natour, 2015; Bataineh, 2013; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006, 2008; Hussein & Hammouri, 1998; Huwari, 2018). In one of the early studies, Hussein and Hammouri (1998) opened the door for other researchers to seek understanding the apology strategies among Jordanian EFL learners. They investigated the similarities and differences between the way Jordanian Arabic speakers and American English speakers used the speech act of apology and reported that Jordanian speakers were more varied in apology strategies, compared to the Americans. Bataineh and Bataineh (2006) investigated male and female Jordanian EFL learners' production of apology strategies and reported that the primary strategies (i.e., accounts, compensation, reparation, showing a lack of intent to do harm, and promising not to repeat offence) were employed by the two groups. Yet, they showed that female students were more inclined to apply these primary strategies more than male students. Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) analysed the similarities and differences in the production of the speech act of apology among Jordanian male and female EFL learners and American male and female ENSs. They reported differences in the use of apology strategies between the two groups as well as the male and female respondents of each group.

Some recent studies have considered apology strategies in the Jordanian context, with variation in their methodologies. While Al-Sobh (2013) used DCT to collect data concerning apology strategies, Banikalef et al. (2015) employed both DCT and interviews. However, Huwari (2018) relied on only interviews. Both Al-Sobh (2013) and Banikalef et al. (2015) reported that Jordanian EFL learners use apology to express regret, give explanation, and offer of repair. In a very recent study, Huwari (2018) examined the similarities and differences of the speech act of apology in English between six Jordanian EFL learners and six Asian undergraduate students at a Jordanian university. He reported that both groups used account and compensation as the most frequent apology strategies. In another recent study, Al-Khaza'leh (2018) employed Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and Scaled Response Questionnaire to look into the influence of social power on the perception of the speech act of apology. He focused on three groups — Jordanian second language speakers, Jordanian NNSs, and ENSs — with 40 participants in each. The findings revealed similarities and differences between Jordanian Arabic and British English cultures. The study also reported the occurrence of negative pragmatic transfer by Jordanian second language speakers who are highly proficient in English. Moreover, the study showed that the social power affects Jordanian participants' perception of the speech act of apology more than ENSs. In a conference paper, Al-Harbi and Suleiman (2019) reported that English language proficiency affected Jordanian EFL learners' production of the speech act of apology. However, they have not investigated the effect of proficiency on the comprehension of apology strategies.

Thus, the review of previous studies that have examined apology strategies among EFL students including the Jordanian EFL context has highlighted that these studies have not properly addressed the effect of language proficiency of English on Jordanian EFL learners' production and comprehension of the speech act of apology. Besides, most of the Jordanian researchers have been more interested in examining the similarities and differences among Arabic NSs and ENSs in terms of the production of apology strategies. In other words, the comprehension of apology strategies has not been addressed adequately in EFL contexts. Taking the Jordanian EFL context into account, the comprehension of apology strategies has not been considered by the researchers except for Al-Khaza'leh (2018). Furthermore, the participants in most of studies in the Jordanian context were university students, which reflects that EFL young learners in schools were ignored in these studies. Therefore, the current study intended to fill these gaps in previous literature in EFL contexts through examining the effects of English

language proficiency on both the production and comprehension of apology strategies among EFL learners.

1.2. Research questions

This study intended to address the following two research questions:

1. How does Jordanian EFL learners' level of English language proficiency affect their production of apology strategies?
2. How does Jordanian EFL learners' level of English language proficiency affect their comprehension of apology strategies?

2. Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional approach in which data were collected from learners at various levels of proficiency and compared NNSs to NSs of English in terms of the speech act of apology. In fact, this approach was selected for some reasons. First, it is a recommended and appropriate approach for investigating the pragmatic development of learners at various stages such as the proficiency levels (Rose, 2000). Second, it allows researchers to study a larger number of participants to generate "more robust generalizations" based on the findings of a study (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 141). Third, the design of a cross-sectional study can most probably provide researchers with more information on the developmental aspects of the users of a language because it is "straightforward and economical" (Tavakoli, 2012, p. 594). Fourth, the cross-sectional design which is applied in this study was useful because it has enabled the researchers to find a proper explanation of the developmental aspects concerning the speech act of apology among Jordanian EFL learners.

2.1. Participants

In this study, 360 participants were selected: 270 Jordanian EFL students and 90 ENSs. The 270 Jordanian EFL students were in three schools of the Islamic Education College (IEC) in Amman, Jordan. All Jordanian participants' mother tongue is the Arabic language, and all of them started learning English at the age of six. TOEFL Junior test was used to categorise the participants into three groups because it is used in these schools. Additionally, it has been stated that this proficiency test is designed for adolescent English language learners (Gu, Lockwood, & Powers, 2015) as it is a well-designed and an objective measure of proficiency in English for young learners (So et al., 2015). Thus, based on their results in TOEFL test, the Jordanian participants were divided into three groups: beginner-level EFL learners (BEFLL), intermediate-level EFL learners (IEFLL), and advance-level EFL learners (AEFLL). Data from ENSs were collected in Jordan in the course of three months. The baseline data from ENSs were compared with EFL learners to measure the ILP development of EFL learners in terms of the realisation of the speech act of apology.

2.2. Instruments and data collection procedures

Data were collected using Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Test (MDCT). We took into account that DCT has been reported to be an effective data collection method to obtain data on speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms (Kasper, 2000). After permissions were obtained from the administration of the IEC, an adapted WDCT from Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) and a developed MDCT were used to obtain data on the production and comprehension of apology strategies (Appendices A & B). The questionnaire of Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) and MDCT were used in this study because they have been reported to

be a valid and reliable instrument and suitable for the Jordanian cultural context. In MDCT, participants were required to read written descriptions of situations and select what would be best to say in each situation from a set of choices.

2.3. Data analysis

The overall apology strategies elicited from the 270 Jordanian EFL learners at three levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and 90 ENSs were entered in the SPSS24 file. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the participants' production and comprehension of the speech act of apology. The Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (rho) was also used to measure the correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency level and their production and comprehension of apology strategies. The effect size formula developed by Cohen (1992) was used to measure the strength of the relationship between the variables. These guidelines are presented in Table 1. Evaluating the correlation strength between the variables was based on the p-value and effect size. The correlation coefficient can be considered statistically significant if the p-value is lower than 0.05 or 0.01 (Larson-Hall & Plonsky, 2015).

Table 1. Strength of relationship

Correlation value	Interpretation
0.1 – 0.29	Small
0.30 – 0.49	Medium
0.50 – 1.00	Large

3. Results

3.1. Research question one

In this section, the correlation between the 270 Jordanian EFL students' proficiency in English language and their production of three types of apology strategies is reported. First, the correlation between students' proficiency and explicit apology strategies is reported. This is followed by the report of students' proficiency and less-explicit apology strategies. Finally, the correlation between students' proficiency and non-apology strategy is presented.

3.1.1. Learners' levels of proficiency and pragmatic production of explicit strategy
Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics analysis associated with the production of explicit apology strategies across the four groups with equal number of participants in each: three groups of Jordanian EFL students with three proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and a group of ENSs. The results revealed that BEFLL was associated with the numerically highest mean 6.4111, followed by IEFLL's mean which is 3.8333. While ENSs and AEFLL were associated with the numerically smallest means which are 1.4111 and 1.4222, respectively. These results indicate that students with advanced level of proficiency did not produce many sub-strategies of explicit strategy, compared to students with beginner and intermediate proficiency levels. The means in Table 2 show similarities in the production of sub-strategies of explicit strategy between ENSs and only EFL students with advanced level of proficiency.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the production of explicit apology strategies for four groups

Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
BEFLL	90	6.4111	2.48091
IEFLL	90	3.8333	3.14178
AEFLL	90	1.4222	2.17223
ENSs	90	1.4111	1.57861

Table 3 shows the results of the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (rho) analysis of the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of the sub-strategies of explicit apology. In this correlation analysis, we considered both the direction (language proficiency and the production of the sub-strategies of explicit strategy) and the value of the relationship. As shown in Table 3, there is a negative relationship between the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of the sub-strategies of explicit apology. This demonstrates that as language proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreases, their tendency to use sub-strategies of explicit apology increases. In addition, the size of the value of the correlation coefficient for the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of four sub-strategies of explicit apology ((1) 'one expression of apology', (2) 'one expression of apology and one intensifier', (3) 'two expressions of apology', , and (4) 'one expression of apology and three intensifiers') ranged from -.072 to -.247 . These values of correlation coefficient indicate a small correlation, suggesting a weak relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of these four sub-strategies. The study also showed that the correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of the third and fourth sub-strategies of explicit strategy was statistically significant. This means that the production of these two sub-strategies significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreased. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant correlation between language proficiency level and the production of (1) 'one expression of apology' and (2) 'one expression of apology and one intensifier'. This indicates that the production of these two sub-strategies slightly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreased.

Table 3. Correlation between sub-strategies of explicit apology and EFL learners' language proficiency levels

No.	Sub-strategies	Spearman's Rho Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	One expression of apology	-.072	0.240
2	One expression of apology and one intensifier	-.104	.089
3	Two expressions of apology	-.130*	.033
4	One expression of apology and three intensifiers	-.247**	.000
5	Two expressions of apology and one intensifier	-.323**	.000
6	Three expressions of apology and two intensifiers	-.408**	.000
7	Three expressions of apology and one intensifier	-.440**	.000
8	One expression of apology and two intensifiers	-.471**	.000
9	Three expressions of apology	-.478**	.000
10	Two expressions of apology and two intensifiers	-.532**	.000

*** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*
** correlation is significant at the 0.05 level*

On the other hand, the value of correlation coefficient of Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of (5) 'two expressions of apology and one intensifier', (6) 'three expressions of apology and two intensifiers', (7) 'three expressions of apology and one intensifier', (8) 'one expression of apology and two intensifiers', and (9) 'three expressions of apology' ranged from -.323 to -.478 . These values reflect that there is a negative medium correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and these five sub-strategies of explicit apology. In other words, as Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency decreased, their production of these five sub-strategies increased moderately. However, the correlation between language proficiency and the production of these five sub-strategies of explicit strategy was statistically significant. In other words, the production of these five sub-strategies significantly increased as the proficiency level of the Jordanian EFL learners decreased.

In addition, the size of the value of the correlation coefficient of the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of 'two expressions of apology and two intensifiers' was -.532,

suggesting a large correlation. Thus, there is a strong relationship between the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of 'two expressions of apology and two intensifiers'. The correlation between language proficiency and the production of 'two expressions of apology and two intensifiers' was statistically significant. To be more specific, the production of this sub-strategy significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreased.

3.1.2. Learners' levels of proficiency and pragmatic production of less-explicit strategy
Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics analysis associated with the production of less-explicit apology strategy across the four groups of participants (BEFLL, IEFLL, AEFLL, and ENSs). Compared to other groups of participants, ENSs and AEFLLs' means were the highest in terms of the production of the sub-strategies of less-explicit apology. This result indicates that as Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency level increased, they produced more sub-strategies of less-explicit apology. To identify the correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency levels and their production of less-explicit apology strategies, the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (rho) was run. Table 5 reflects that the direction of this relationship was positive. Thus, as Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency level increased, their production of the sub-strategies of less-explicit apology increased. However, the relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of the 'nonsensical, unrelated answer' strategy was negative. Thus, as Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency level decreased, they used 'nonsensical, unrelated answer' strategy of apology, which is a sub-strategy of less-explicit apology.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the production of less-explicit apology for four groups

Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
BEFLL	90	2.2111	1.93428
IEFLL	90	4.8444	2.55242
AEFLL	90	8.0222	2.08245
ENSs	90	8.0889	1.65336

In addition, the size of the value of the correlation coefficient of the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of (1) 'reparation', (2) 'accounts', (3) 'showing lack of intent on harm doing', (4) 'gratitude', (5) 'checking on consequences', (6) 'compensation', (7) 'nonsensical, unrelated answer', and (8) 'negative assessment of responsibility' ranged from -.293 to .297. These values of correlation coefficient reflect a small correlation, suggesting a weak relationship between the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of these eight sub-strategies of less-explicit apology. The analysis of data also showed that the correlation between the language proficiency and the production of the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth sub-strategies of less-explicit apology was statistically significant. The production of first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh sub-strategies significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners increased. However, the production of (8) *'nonsensical, unrelated answer'* sub-strategy of less-explicit apology significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreased.

On the other hand, the value of correlation coefficient of the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their production of (9) 'self-castigation', (10) 'promise of better times to come', (11) 'asking victim not to be angry', (12) 'positive assessment of responsibility', and (13) 'promise not to repeat offence' ranged from .328 to .353. These values reflect a positive medium correlation. That is, as Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency increased, their production of these five sub-strategies of less-explicit apology increased moderately. The study also showed that the correlation between the language proficiency and the production of the ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth sub-

strategies of less-explicit apology was statistically significant. That means the production of these five sub-strategies significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners increased.

Table 5. Correlation between sub-strategies of less-explicit strategy and EFL learners' language proficiency levels

No.	Sub-strategies	Spearman's Rho Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Reparation	.139*	.022
2	Accounts	.202**	.001
3	Showing lack of intent on harm doing	.225**	.000
4	Gratitude	.252**	.000
5	Checking on consequences	.252**	.000
6	Compensation	.263**	.000
7	Nonsensical, unrelated answer	-.293**	.000
8	Negative assessment of responsibility	.297**	.000
9	Self-castigation	.328**	.000
10	Promise of better times to come	.331**	.000
11	Asking victim not to be angry.	.342**	.000
12	Positive assessment of responsibility	.448**	.000
13	Promise not to repeat offence	.353**	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

3.1.3. Learners' levels of proficiency and pragmatic production of non-apology strategy
Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics analysis of the production of non-apology strategy across the four groups (BEFLL, IEFLL, AEFLL, and ENSs). BEFLL and IEFLL were associated with the numerically highest mean levels which are 1.3778 and 1.3222, respectively. While ENSs and AEFLL scored the numerically smallest mean levels which are .5000 and .5556, respectively. These results indicate that as EFL learners' proficiency level decreased, they produced more sub-strategies of non-apology strategy. The Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (rho) was used to find out whether there is a correlation between the Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency and the production of non-apology strategy.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of non-apology strategy production for four groups

Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
BEFLL	90	1.3778	1.92312
IEFLL	90	1.3222	1.45978
AEFLL	90	.5556	1.10271
ENSs	90	.5000	.60429

Table 7 shows that there was a negative relationship between the Jordanian EFL students' proficiency and their production of non-apology strategy. This means that as Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency decreased, their use of non-apology strategy increased. In addition, the size of the value of the correlation coefficient of the Jordanian EFL students' proficiency and their production of (1) 'avoidance of subject or person', (2) 'brushing off incident as non-important', (3) 'blaming victim', (4) 'laughing the incident off', and (5) 'offending victim' ranged from - .078 to -.155 . The values of correlation coefficient reflect small correlation, suggesting a weak relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency and their production of all five sub-strategies of non-apology strategy. However, the correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of the third, fourth, and fifth sub-strategies of non-apology strategy was statistically significant, suggesting that the production of these three sub-strategies of non-apology strategy significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL students decreased. On the other hand, the production of the first and second, sub-

strategy ('avoidance of subject or person' and 'brushing off incident as non-important') had no statistically significant correlation with students' proficiency level. This suggests that the production of these two sub-strategies of non-apology strategy slightly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners decreased.

Table 7. Correlation between sub-strategies of non-apology strategy and EFL learners' language proficiency levels

No.	Sub-strategies	Spearman's Rho Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Avoidance of subject or person	-.078	.201
2	Brushing off incident as non-important	-.083	.172
3	Blaming victim	-.119	.050
4	Laughing the incident off	-.151*	.013
5	Offending victim	-.155*	.011

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

3.2. Research question two

This section reports the results of the analysis of data related to the 270 Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency levels and their comprehension of apology strategies. Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics analysis of the participants' responses to MDCT which focused on the comprehension of apology strategies across the three groups of EFL learners (BEFLL, IEFLL, and AEFLL). As revealed by the data presented in Table 8, participants with advanced proficiency level scored 9.4889 which is the highest mean level, followed by IEFLL and BEFLL. These results indicate that as EFL learners' proficiency level increased, they were able to identify more appropriate strategies of apology in MDCT. Table 9 shows the correlation between EFL learners' proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and the comprehension of apology strategies in MDCT questionnaire (rho = .823, n = 270, *p < 0.05*). The correlation between the 270 Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency and their comprehension of apology strategies was positive. This reflects that as Jordanian EFL learners improved in proficiency from the beginner level to the intermediate level, and from the intermediate level to the advanced level, their comprehension of apology strategies increased. In addition, the size of the value of the correlation coefficient for the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their comprehension of apology strategies was .823, suggesting a large correlation. Thus, there is a strong relationship between the Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and their comprehension of apology strategies. The correlation between language proficiency and the comprehension of apology strategies was statistically significant. To be more specific, the comprehension of apology strategies significantly increased as the proficiency level of Jordanian EFL learners increased.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of apology strategies comprehension for EFL learners

Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
BEFLL	90	4.6556	1.62260
IEFLL	90	6.4889	1.61624
AEFLL	90	9.4889	.78245

Table 9. Correlation between EFL learners' scores in MDCT questionnaire and EFL learners' language proficiency levels

Sub-strategies	Spearman's Rho Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
EFL learners' scores in MDCT questionnaire	.823**	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

4. Discussion

4.1. Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency and pragmatic production of apology strategies

An overall result revealed by this study is that there is a significant correlation between language proficiency and the production of all the three types of apology strategies (explicit, less-explicit, and non-apology). Specifically, the analysis revealed that there is a small to large negative correlation relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of explicit and non-apology strategy. This reflects that the production of explicit and non-apology strategies increased as Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency level decreased. The results also reflect that there is a small to medium positive correlation relationship between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the production of less-explicit apology strategy. This shows that Jordanian EFL learners' production of less-explicit apology strategy increased as their language proficiency level increased.

The negative relationship between language proficiency and EFL learners' production of explicit apology and non-apology strategies can be attributed to the influence of the mother tongue of beginner and intermediate proficiency levels students, their limited vocabulary, the necessity of avoiding grammatical mistakes, and lack of contact with ENSs. While the positive relationship between language proficiency and EFL learners' production of less-explicit apology strategies might be related to advanced proficiency level students' knowledge about the culture of ENSs. Furthermore, advanced proficiency level students' good command of grammatical aspects of English, the extra language learning activities outside their schools (such as listening to the news, reading newspapers, watching movies/TV shows/videos, listening to English songs, chatting online or with friends, and attending private classes) can be factors that can help them to produce less-explicit apology strategies.

There are similarities and differences between the findings of our study and those reported by previous studies (e.g., Arghamiri & Sadighi, 2013; Cedar, 2017; Farashaiyan & Hua, 2012; İstifçi, 2009; Li & Suleiman, 2017; Qorina, 2012; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014; Shardakova, 2005). Based on the results of this study, learners at advanced level of proficiency produced less-explicit strategy more than those at beginner and intermediate levels of proficiency. These findings are consistent with İstifçi (2009), who reported that advanced Turkish learners of English approached NSs norms in the use of apologies while intermediate learners were influenced by their mother tongue. Another study that supports the findings of the current study was conducted by Shardakova (2005), who showed that language proficiency and exposure to the target culture has a distinctive effect on improving pragmatic competence. Furthermore, the findings of the current study concur those reported by Qorina (2012), Rastegar and Yasami (2014), and Li and Suleiman (2017). Rastegar and Yasami (2014) showed significant differences between learners of higher and those of lower of English proficiency level in their apology strategy use. They showed that learners at higher level of English proficiency employed more complex apology strategies than those at lower level of English proficiency. This study has confirmed these findings. Additionally, Li and Suleiman (2017) revealed that L2 proficiency significantly influenced Chinese EFL learners' usage of complaints. These are consistent with the findings of this study which indicate a positive proficiency effect on the production of the speech act of apology. Although the current study showed

that language proficiency has a positive effect on the production of the speech act of apology, in the Indonesian EFL context, Cedar (2017) has reported that English proficiency levels do not significantly influence the performance of the speech act. The findings of Farnia and Suleiman (2009), Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013), and Farashaiyan and Hua (2012) further revealed that there was no positive correlation between proficiency level and pragmatic competence.

4.2. Jordanian EFL learners' proficiency and pragmatic comprehension of apology strategies

The study showed that there is a high positive correlation between Jordanian EFL learners' language proficiency and the comprehension of the speech act of apology. This positive relationship can be attributed to the fact that the distracters which were given for all situations in MDCT were easier to be distinguished from the correct options. The findings of this study have some similarities and differences with those reported in previous studies. For example, the findings of this study do not concur with the findings reported by Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) which showed that there is no significant difference between high and low-level groups of English students' performance in recognising the appropriate pragmatic strategies. Some researchers concluded that there is a negative relationship between grammar and vocabulary knowledge and the pragmatic knowledge of the learners. Moreover, the results of the current study contradicted Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz (2011) who showed that there is no significant difference between EFL students' levels of English language proficiency (elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels) and their pragmatic competence.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the effect of English language proficiency on the production and comprehension of the speech act of apology among Jordanian EFL learners in schools. The study also examined the developmental stages through analysing data from NNSs and ENSs. Apology, as the target speech act in the current study, has a vital role in restoring and maintaining harmony among people (Ogiermann, 2009). The speech act of apology has received considerable attention from researchers since apologising is considered to be one of the most frequently used acts, whether in public or private interactions (Grainger & Harris, 2007). Using proper apology strategies is extremely important for Jordanian NNSs of English as improper apology strategies might cause confusion and misunderstanding in communication. This study has revealed that English language proficiency is correlated significantly with the pragmatic production and comprehension of the three types of apology strategies: explicit, less-explicit, and non-apology strategies. Thus, EFL learners' ability to produce and identify appropriate apology strategies increases as their level of proficiency increases.

We believe that the findings of our study are significant in terms of speech act (i.e. production and comprehension of apology) and population (i.e. Jordanian EFL learners). Our study has surely contributed to the field of pragmatic development in L2 contexts. While previous Jordanian researchers, in general, preferred to select their participants from universities, the current study focused on EFL students in selected Jordanian schools. These students are considered young learners of English, who have not been adequately addressed in previous studies. Further, several researchers have controlled their research methods to target participants of a higher proficiency level (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005), with a special attention given to either intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency, ignoring students with beginner level of proficiency (Al-Issa, 2003). However, our study examined the effect of three levels of English language proficiency on both the production and comprehension of apology strategies in order to yield a more comprehensive view of different pragmatic developmental stages.

As the results of this study indicate that Jordanian EFL learners' pragmatic production and comprehension of apology were positively and significantly correlated with their language proficiency level, teachers and educators in Jordanian schools may consider the improvement of materials of English, especially in terms of the pragmatic aspects because effective communication is mostly achieved based on this knowledge. In fact, it has been argued that ILP research has indicated that teaching materials in L2 contexts tend to focus on grammatical structures with lack of focus on teaching sociopragmatic features (Al Masaeed, Waugh, & Burns, 2018). Thus, in English classrooms extra activities and exercises that focus on the production of apology strategies can encourage Jordanian EFL students in schools to develop pragmatic competence. Further, such activities and learning tasks can promote EFL learners' pragmatic competence development. Besides, teachers can also employ an MDCT to provide opportunities for EFL learners to compare the use of different utterances of apology in the same situation.

5.1. Suggestions for future research

Although this study has uncovered interesting findings concerning the effect of English language proficiency on Jordanian EFL learners' production and comprehension of apology strategies, it has some limitations that can be considered by future researchers. There is a need for more studies in EFL contexts in order to confirm the findings of our study and generate more data on the effect of English language proficiency on apologizing. As the sample in this study was EFL learners in some selected private schools in Amman, Jordan, future studies may address a wider population of varied educational levels or students from other regions. Furthermore, future researchers in EFL contexts may focus on the effect of other factors (such as age, gender, motivation, and L2 contact) which may affect Jordanian EFL learners' production and comprehension of apology strategies. The cross-sectional nature of this study made it difficult for the researchers to track participants' longitudinal development. Accordingly, there is an urgent need for longitudinal studies that can improve our knowledge on the pragmatic development among Jordanian EFL learners.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: August 12, 2020).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Written Discourse Completion Task

I.   GENERAL INFORMATION:
Sex: Male / Female
Name: -- TOEFL Junior's scores: --------------------
Phone number: ---------------------------------- Email: --

II. Please respond to these questions as realistically and honestly as possible.
1. You bumped into a student on the way to class causing that student to drop the books. What would you say to that student?

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2. You called a student by mistake at 3:00 a.m. What would you say to that student who answered the phone?

----
3. You accidentally spilt some coffee on a student's pants. What would you say to that student?

----
4. You promised to help your sibling study for an exam but did not have the time to do so. What would you say to your sibling?

----
5. You lied to your sibling about having to do some homework instead of going to the movies with them, and your siblings found out that you went shopping with one of your classmates. What would you say to your sibling?

----
6. You missed an appointment with your teacher school counsellor. What would you say to the teacher school counsellor?

----

7. You were in class when your cellular phone rings. What would you say to your teacher?

----

8. You interrupted your friend while they were talking with other friends. What would you say to your friend?

----

9. Your sibling was sleeping soundly, and you woke him/her up with the noise you were making in the bedroom. What would you say to your sibling?

----

1 0. You stayed out late after school without notifying your parents who were worried sick about you. What would you say to your parents?

Appendix B. Multiple choice Discourse Completion Task

I. GENERAL INFORMATION:

II. Please respond to these questions as realistically and honestly as possible.
1. You bumped into a student on the way to class causing that student to drop the books. What would you say to that student?
   A. Sorry, then I'll help him/her.
   B. I am sorry, then I will buy a gift for him/her.
   C. Say nothing, I would just pick up the books.
   D. Laugh at him/ her (ha, ha, ha).

2. You called a student by mistake at 3:00 a.m. What would you say to that student who answered the phone?
   A. I got the wrong number. I didn't mean to disturb you.
   B. Say nothing and hang up.
   C. I am sorry, so sorry, forgive me.
   D. Hello, it is (X). Ops sorry sorry bye.
3. You accidentally spilt some coffee on student's pants. What would you say to that student?
   A. Let me clean it for you.
   B. I would laugh (ha, ha, ha), then I help him/her clean it.
   C. I am sorry, I am very very sorry.
   D. Oh, I am sorry. Forgive me.
4. You promised to help your sibling study for an exam but did not have the time to do so. What would you say to your sibling?
   A. Sorry, I will help you study next time.
   B. It is your fault. You should have studied earlier.
   C. I have no time for you.
   D. Buzz off. I did not need any help when I was your age.
5. You lied to your sibling about having to do some homework instead of going to the movies with them, and your sibling found out that you went shopping with one of your classmates. What would you say to your sibling?
   A. Sorry, I shouldn't have lied to you.
   B. I will bring a gift for him/her.
   C. I ignore him/her.
   D. Make your sibling feel he/she was to blame for your action.
6. You missed an appointment with your teacher school counsellor. What would you say to the teacher school counsellor?
   A. Sorry, I had an emergency and could not make it. Can I reschedule?
   B. Say nothing and ask for another appointment.
   C. I am sorry I am very very very sorry.
   D. Sorry. I am so sorry. Please, forgive me.
7. You were in class when your cellular phone rings. What would you say to your teacher?
   A. I won't do this again. I will turn it off now.
   B. I forgot to mute it.
   C. Ha, ha, ha.
   D. Say nothing then turn it off.

8. You interrupted your friend when they are talking with other friends. What would you say to your friend?
      A. I did not mean to interrupt.
      B. I am so, so, so sorry.
      C. Sorry. I am so sorry. Please, forgive me.
      D. Excuse me. I am very sorry.

9. Your sibling was sleeping soundly, and you woke him/her up with the noise you were making in the bedroom. What would you say to your sibling?
      A. I didn't mean to wake you up.
      B. I am sorry, I am so, so, so sorry, forgive me.
      C. Sorry. I am so sorry. Please, forgive me.
      D. Excuse me. I am very sorry.

10. You stayed out late after school without notifying your parents who were worried sick about you. What would you say to your parents?
      A. I did not track time, I won't be late again.
      B. Sorry, ha, ha.
      C. Say nothing, and keep quiet.
      D. No need to be worry I am old enough to be responsible for myself.

Özür dileme stratejilerinin üretimi ve anlaşılması: İngilizce dil yeterliliğinin etkileri

Öz

Bu kesitsel çalışma, İngilizce dil yeterliliğinin Ürdünlü EFL öğrencilerinin özür dileme stratejilerini üretmeleri ve anlamaları üzerindeki etkilerini incelemiştir. Katılımcılar, 270 Ürdünlü EFL öğrencisi ve 90 ana dili İngilizce olan kişilerdi. Veriler Yazılı Söylem Tamamlama Testi ve Çoktan Seçmeli Söylem Tamamlama Testi kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Verilerin analizinde tanımlayıcı istatistikler ve Spearman korelasyon katsayısı (rho) testi kullanıldı. Sonuçlar, Ürdünlü EFL öğrencilerinin özür dileme stratejilerini üretme ve anlama becerilerinin İngilizce dil yeterlilik seviyelerinden etkilendiğini gösterdi. Ürdünlü EFL öğrenenlerin dil yeterlilikleri ile açık özür stratejileri ve özür dilememe stratejilerinin üretimi arasında küçükten büyüğe bir negatif korelasyon ilişkisi rapor edildi. Öte yandan, çalışma Ürdünlü EFL öğrenenlerin dil yeterlilikleri ile daha az açık bir özür üretimi arasında küçük ila orta pozitif bir ilişki olduğunu ortaya koydu. Çalışma ayrıca yeterlilik ile özür dileme stratejilerini anlama arasında önemli bir ilişki olduğunu gösterdi. Bu nedenle, Ürdün okullarındaki İngilizce öğretmenlerinin, EFL öğrenenlerinin özür dileme stratejileri hakkındaki pragmatik bilgilerini geliştirmelerine yardımcı olabilecek sınıf etkinliklerine odaklanmayı düşünmeleri gerekebilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: diller arası edimbilim; pragmatik yeterlilik; özür; İngilizce dil yeterliliği; EFL

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