Article

From Culture to Classroom: Teaching Politeness Strategies in ESL through Apology

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ABSTRACT

Apologies are crucial to maintaining social harmony, particularly in cultures where interpersonal relationships and respect hold significant importance. For ESL learners, mastering how to apologise appropriately in English involves more than vocabulary or grammar—it requires an understanding of underlying politeness norms and pragmatic competence. In Malaysian classrooms, indigenous learners, such as the Iban community, often face challenges not only in acquiring English but also in navigating the cultural expectations embedded within it. Politeness strategies, which differ across languages and cultures, influence how learners express apologies.

Failure to transfer these strategies effectively may result in pragmatic failures—such as misunderstandings, perceived rudeness, or communication breakdowns. This paper examines the apology strategies employed by Iban undergraduates in both Iban and English across matched social situations. Analysed through Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the data reveal distinctive patterns that reflect sociocultural values and highlight the impact of L1 norms on L2 use. Based on these findings, the paper proposes pedagogical activities to help EFL learners, especially indigenous students, develop pragmatic competence. The goal is to shift from theory to classroom application, equipping teachers with culturally responsive strategies to teach apologies in meaningful, context-sensitive ways.

KEYWORDS: apologies, classroom teaching, culture, ESL, politeness strategies

Introduction

Apologies are a cornerstone in maintaining social harmony in all cultures. They are not merely a form of expressing responsibility and remorse but are also utilised in restoring harmony after social breaches. In all societies, including those in Southeast Asia, apologies are closely tied to the values of politeness, humility, and respect (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Built in generating apologies in English that are both culturally and linguistically competent, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners struggle. The issues are not merely founded on the complexity of the speech act itself but are instead informed by the sociocultural norms on how, why, and to whom we apologise.

In Malaysian ESL environments, and particularly among indigenous communities such as the Iban in Sarawak, cultural politeness principles that deviate from English-speaking conventions influence apology strategies. Harmony, indirectness, and deference to status and age are valued in Iban culture (Coluzzi, 2010). In contrast, English apologies, and particularly those in Western cultures, value directness, individual responsibility, and efficiency (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Such intercultural disparities contribute toward pragmatic transfer from L1 into L2, having implications in accommodation in English (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). Studies have also explored similar pragmatic and intercultural issues. For instance, Chun (2010) highlighted the importance of cross-cultural pragmatics in listening comprehension and communicative tasks among Malaysian ESL students, while Goh and Lowe (2025) examined how pragmatic clarity and politeness are negotiated in Malaysian teacher-student WhatsApp interactions. These studies collectively affirm that communicative competence in Malaysia extends beyond grammar to include sociopragmatic awareness. In the education domain, incompatibilities can lead to pragmatic failure, where expressions are grammatically well-formed but socially inappropriate, resulting in communication breakdown and interpersonal conflicts (Zhang et al., 2025; Thomas, 1983).

Politeness theory, and more especially Brown and Levinson's contribution in 1987, provides a tool by which we can examine apology strategies. The model suggests that speakers choose strategies in an attempt to preserve the face, or the public self-image of themselves and their addressees. Choices between positive politeness (expressing concern or solidarity) and negative politeness

(expressing hedging or indirectness) are made in response to social distance, power, and the severity of the infraction, as these factors all influence the choice. Since apologising itself is a face-threatening strategy, restoring harmony and addressing issues with face requires a balancing act (Holmes, 1995). When Iban learners speak English, politeness strategies are a primary yet challenging area to understand in pragmatic competence.

This study examines how Iban undergraduates construct apology strategies in both Iban and English within comparable social contexts. A discourse completion task (DCT) was employed in data collection, allowing for direct interlanguage comparability. The findings reveal conspicuous distinctions shaped by pragmatic transfer evidence and sociocultural conventions. The Iban apologies tend to adopt lengthy explanations, deferential and indirect forms, and English responses; in some instances, these responses manifest as over-formal or deficient repairs.

Based on these findings, the paper offers pedagogical recommendations that enhance students' pragmatic capabilities, particularly among indigenous and multilingual students. The recommendations involve activities that deepen sensitivity towards politeness strategies, highlight contrasts between L1 and L2 conventions, and provide practice through role-play and reflection. Through bridging theory and practice, this paper proposes a culturally responsive pedagogy that respects learner identity while addressing the pragmatic demands of English communication.

This study contributes to the growing recognition of socio-pragmatic consciousness in second language teaching. It also places emphasis on the necessity of materials and in-service training that suit the different linguistic and cultural profiles of Malaysian learners, and especially those representing marginalised groups.

Literature Review

Politeness Theory

Politeness underlines human communication, framing how people manage relationships. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage remains one of the most influential frameworks. Their framework borrows from Goffman's (1967) concept of "face," which refers to an individual's public self-image. Speakers aim to uphold both their own face and the interlocutor's face, especially in face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as apologising, criticising, or requesting.

The theory presents four primary politeness strategies:
· Positive politeness asserts solidarity and agreement, targeting the positive face of the hearer (e.g., "flattery, inclusion).
· Negative politeness reduces imposition by indirect, hedging, or formality framing something (e.g., "I'm sorry to bother you, but…").
· Bald-on-record is direct with no face redress effort, especially in emergency or intimate situations (e.g., "Give me the report.").
· Off-record relies on hints, metaphors, or vagueness, leaving room for interpretation and avoiding direct responsibility (e.g., "It's cold in here" to suggest closing the window).

Even if widely influential, the model itself was faulted as assuming universalism. Politeness varies across cultures (Mills, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Japanese communication, for example, is averse to forcefulness and puts a value on harmony in groups (Ide, 1989). In contrast, American English is a direct and efficient communicator, resonating with individualist values (Wierzbicka, 2003). Variations along these lines influence how apologies and other politeness strategies are perceived in multilingual settings, such as Malaysia.

Speech Acts and Apologies

Apologies are verbal expressions of behaviour that repair hurt and maintain social stability. As a form of face-threatening act (FTA), apologies threaten the positive face of the speaker by admitting faultiness (Holmes, 1995). However, it expresses deference towards social rules and a willingness to repair relations.

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Trosborg (1987) identify common strategies, such as:
1. Avoiding an apology (AA): No apology made
2. Direct apology (DA): Direct expressions usage (e.g., "I am sorry").
3. Intensifiers (I): Reinforcing with emphasis (e.g., "I am very sorry").
4. Justification (J): Giving a reason (e.g., "I missed the bus").
5. Acknowledgement of responsibility (AR): Assuming blame (e.g., "It is totally my fault").
6. Offer of repair (OR): Offering compensation (e.g., "I will pay for the damages caused").
7. Denying responsibility (DR): Blame-shifting (e.g., "They should have placed a signboard there").
8. Promise of non-recurrence (P): Pledging of not occurring again (e.g., It won't happen again, I promise).

These strategies are adopted in isolation or in combination, depending on context, severity, and relationships (Trosborg, 1995). Their application is culturally influenced: collectivist groups tend towards indirectness or avoidance strategies in an effort to ensure harmony, while individualist groups tend towards directness as a means of taking responsibility (Chen, 2017).

In the Malaysian context, politeness and pragmatic clarity have been examined within classroom and discourse settings. Chun (2010) noted that students' comprehension and interactional success rely on sensitivity to cultural and pragmatic cues. Aryadoust (2009) conducted functional analyses of ESL textbooks in *The English Teacher*, revealing that politeness markers and speech acts are underrepresented, which suggests a pedagogical need for more pragmatic content in instructional materials. In ESL, students tend to find it more challenging with socio-pragmatic awareness - the social rules-influenced knowledge of language (Kasper, 2001) - than with grammar. This results in pragmatic failure, whereby utterances are precise but socially unacceptable (Thomas, 1983).

Pragmatic Transfer and Indigenous Learners

One issue for students of a second language is pragmatic transfer, whereby politeness conventions in L1 influence L2 production. Transfer, although sometimes helpful, is likely to cause mismatches between the intended and perceived senses (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). This is particularly

critical in speech acts such as apologies, where word selection, tone, and sequence have a significant impact on sincerity and appropriateness (Barron, 2003).

In Malaysia, for indigenous learners, including the Iban, transfer is particularly important. The Iban culture places value on *adat* (customs), community responsibility, modesty, and avoidance of conflict (Coluzzi, 2010). Harmony and deference are valued, usually through indirect or implicit approaches. The Iban apology can involve lengthy explanations, expressions of remorse, or indirect recognition, rather than a direct acknowledgement of fault.

When we implement these conventions in English. Students are likely to unknowingly violate expectations. For instance, an Iban speaker would be inclined to avoid a glaring IFID or direct apology, as this could be misinterpreted as insincere or evasive. Alternatively, they would overcompensate by going for overly legalistic or ritualistic apologies that fall flat in everyday contexts.

Despite increasing focus on communicative competence, there are few efforts on the pragmatic development of indigenous Malaysian learners. Fewer are generalisable by race without considering characteristic cultural impacts. The corresponding issues faced by Iban learners, that is, balancing cultural beliefs and English pragmatic demands, are less researched.

This inconsistency has pedagogical and policy implications. Unconsciously, instructors are likely to interpret pragmatic errors as a sign of a lack of skillfulness. Students are vulnerable to marginalisation if their communication patterns are ignored. Culturally aware teaching that confirms students' linguistic selves, as well as targeted pragmatic pedagogy, is required to support Indigenous learners in developing pragmatic competency.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 40 Iban undergraduates from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak, aged 19-24 (21 females, 19 males). They were purposively selected as indigenous Malaysian learners with bilingual proficiency in Iban (L1) and English (L2). All were native Iban speakers with at least 11 years of English study in the Malaysian public school system. Ethical approval was secured, and informed consent was obtained. Iban undergraduates were chosen due to the limited research on the pragmatics of indigenous learners, whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are often underrepresented (Mohamed Nor & Paramasivam, 2013).

Instrument

Data were collected using a Written Discourse Completion Task (DCT), widely used in interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Félix-Brasdefer, 2009). Six apology scenarios reflecting everyday situations of varying social distance, power, and offence severity were adapted from Maros (2006):

S1: Late for a meeting with a lecturer
S2: Accidentally hitting a stranger's car while parking
S3: Spilling soup on an elderly lady's blouse
S4: Leaving half a cake served by a friend's mother
S5: Late for a meeting with a friend
S6: Stepping on somebody's foot in a crowded elevator

Participants wrote responses first in Iban, then in English, reflecting natural L1 processing before L2 transfer. Tasks were completed individually in class to avoid peer influence.

Procedure

Data collection took place in two 60-minute sessions. In the first, participants completed the Iban DCT; after a short break, they repeated the same tasks in English. Instructions were bilingual, with no time pressure. The bilingual design ensures parallel responses for cross-linguistic comparison. Informal interviews with five volunteers validated strategy choices and clarified unclear responses.

Data Analysis

Responses were analysed using a mixed-methods approach (Taguchi, 2015), guided by:
1. Apology Strategies (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987)
2. Politeness Strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Two trained coders fluent in Iban and English coded independently. Inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa) was 0.87, showing strong agreement; disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Quantitative analysis involved frequency counts and chi-square tests to compare Iban and English strategies. Qualitative analysis examined tone, lexical choices, and sociocultural markers, including kinship terms, idiomatic expressions, and deferential forms. Special attention was given to pragmatic transfer, where L1 norms shaped L2 use, and to gaps where strategies differed between languages. These insights were synthesised to highlight Iban learners' pragmatic competence and inform pedagogy.

Findings

Semantic Formula Usage at Different Seriousness Levels

Table 1 shows how Iban and English speakers used semantic formulas in apologies across three seriousness levels: Very Serious (S1), Less Serious (S2), and Least Serious (S3). Rows list the formulas or combinations, while columns show the percentage of responses in both languages. Clear patterns appear in both groups, especially between single and combined formulas. Across all levels, combinations were preferred, with Direct Apology (DA) often forming the core.

Table 1. Comparison of Iban and English Semantic Formula Use Across Situational Contexts and Seriousness Levels

No	Type	Semantic Formula	Percentage (%)					
			Very Serious S1 & S2		Less Serious S3 & S6		Least Serious S4 & S5	
			Iban	English	Iban	English	Iban	English
1	Single formula	DA	3.5	0	28.6	**35.7**	21.4	17.9
2		DA + J	**35.7**	21.4	**32.2**	14.2	**42.8**	**53.5**
3		DA + J + OR	14.4	7.1	0	0	0	0
4		DA + AR	7.1	**28.6**	7.1	17.9	3.6	7.2
5		DA+AR+OR	17.9	17.9	0	0	7.2	0
6	Combination of formulas	DA + OR	21.4	25.0	0	7.2	0	10.6
7		DA + DR	0	0	14.2	3.6	7.2	7.2
8		DA+ H	0	0	0	0	10.6	0
9		DA + Q	0	0	17.9	21.4	0	0
10		DA + I + OR	0	0	0	0	0	3.6
11		AA + J	0	0	0	0	7.2	0
		Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note. DA= Direct Apology; J= Providing Justification; OR= Offer of Repair; AR= Acknowledgement of Responsibility; DR= Denying Responsibility; H= Use of Humour; Q= Use of question; I= Use of intensifiers; AA= Avoiding Apology

In very serious situations, both Iban and English speakers predominantly relied on DA + J, accounting for 35.7% and 21.4%, respectively, showing a shared inclination to acknowledge fault and explain the circumstances. English responses, however, were more diverse, with DA + AR used by 28.6%, compared to 7.1% in Iban, suggesting a more explicit acceptance of blame in English, possibly reflecting different cultural expectations in high-stakes scenarios. DA + OR was moderately used in both Iban (21.4%) and English (25%), indicating a shared emphasis on remedial action.

In less serious situations, Iban speakers favoured the single formula DA (28.6%), while English speakers preferred DA + J (14.2%) and DA + Q (21.4%). The minimal use of DA + DR was more prevalent in Iban (14.2%) than in English (3.6%), reflecting a more indirect and face-saving approach. DA + AR and DA + J + OR were absent in both languages, highlighting avoidance of excessive elaboration in moderate contexts.

In the least serious situations, English speakers preferred DA + J (53.5%), contrasting with Iban (42.8%), suggesting that English speakers may offer more elaborate justifications even for minor transgressions. The single formula DA was used more frequently in Iban (21.4%) than in English (17.9%), reflecting a more direct and concise approach. Other combinations, such as DA + DR, DA + H, and AA + J, appeared more in Iban, indicating wider strategic variation despite lower frequency.

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Overall, English speakers diversify strategies more across seriousness levels, often using elaborate combinations even in minor cases. Iban speakers rely on a few preferred combinations, especially DA + J, but employ a broader set of low-frequency strategies in trivial situations. These findings suggest cultural norms significantly influence apologies, balancing directness, explanation, and repair.

Pragmatic Nuances in Apology Strategies: A Cross-Linguistic Illustration

Situation 2: Very serious
This section compares the Iban and English apologies in a Very Serious situation: damaging another person's car. The examples show how semantic formula combinations reflect cultural and pragmatic orientations.

Excerpt 1: English Version
Situation: Backing out of a parking spot, you dent another car's door. The other driver is angry and confronts you.
Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!"
Participant's apology: "I'm really sorry about that. It was my fault; I didn't check properly. Please let me know how I can fix this."

Excerpt 2: Iban Version
Driver: *"Nama nuan enda meda jalai? Peda nuan nama utai udah digaga nuan!"*
Participant's apology: *"Nya sigi penyalah ti datai ari nuan empu. Pintu entukar ke dilantak nuan tadi bisi balat bebekau."*

The English apology is concise, utilising DA + AR + OR ("I'm really sorry", acceptance of responsibility, and offer of repair), which reflects positive politeness in low-context, individualistic cultures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The Iban apology is more elaborate and indirect, combining DA + J + AR, corresponding to negative politeness strategies that minimise imposition and show deference, typical of high-context, collectivist norms. These differences illustrate pragmatic transfer, where Iban learners may carry L1 politeness into English, making apologies appear overly elaborate or formal. Raising pragmatic awareness in Malaysian ESL classrooms helps learners navigate cross-cultural communication, especially in high-stakes interactions.

Situation 6: Moderately serious
This situation involves accidentally stepping on someone's foot in a crowded elevator. Courtesy and politeness are essential for restoring harmony.

Excerpt 3: English Version
Situation: You step on somebody's (same-age adult) foot in a crowded elevator.
Participant's apology: "Oh! Sorry, I didn't see your foot there. Are you okay?"

Excerpt 4: Iban Version
Participant's apology: "*Alah, ampun. Aku enda meda kaki nuan. Nuan okay kah*?"

Table 1 shows that the single formula Direct Apology (DA) was common: 28.6% in Iban and 35.7% in English, indicating that a simple "I'm sorry" suffices.

Example (English): "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that."
Example (Iban): "*Ampun, aku enda sengaja.*"

The Direct Apology and Justification (DA + J) rate was 32.2% in Iban and 14.2% in English, reflecting Iban cultural norms of offering a rationale to enhance sincerity.

Example (English): "Sorry, I didn't see your foot there."
Example (Iban): "*Ampun, aku enda meda kaki nuan tadi.*"

A Direct Apology and Offer of Repair (DA+OR) occurred in 7.2% of English responses, but was rare in Iban, suggesting that minor offences in English contexts may be accompanied by an offer to redress.

Example: "I'm sorry, do you need help?"

Direct Apology and Denying Responsibility (DA + DR) appeared in 14.2% Iban and 3.6% English responses, softening liability in crowded settings.

Example (Iban): "*Ampun, enda aku ngasoh – lif nya maya gilak.*"
(Translation: "Sorry, I didn't do it on purpose – the elevator is too crowded.")

Direct Apology and Question (DA+Q) occurred in 17.9% of Iban and 21.4% of English interactions, demonstrating relational attentiveness through the use of concern-checking questions.

Example (English): "Sorry, are you alright?"
Example (Iban): "*Ampun, nuan okay kah*?"

Overall, both groups prioritise direct, polite apologies, but Iban speakers often blend direct apologies with justifications or indirect deflection of blame, reflecting high-context, collectivist norms (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). English speakers favour concise apologies with concern, aligning with low-context, individualistic communication (Hall, 1976). This demonstrates pragmatic transfer in the English of Iban learners.

Situation 5: Not serious
This section involves being 15 minutes late to meet a friend because I napped. Courtesy and light-heartedness are expected to preserve social bonds.

Excerpt 5: English Version
Situation: You were supposed to meet your friend in front of a café, but you were 15 minutes late because you had taken a nap. What do you say to him or her?

Excerpt 6: Iban Version
Situation: "*Nuan udah besemaya deka betemu enggau kaban nuan ba depan siti kedai kupi, tang nuan laun 15 minit ari jam ti udah ditetapka laban nuan tetinduk.*"

The single formula DA was common, with 21.4% Iban and 17.9% English. This supports previous findings that, in minor offences, straightforward expressions of regret suffice to maintain rapport (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Example (English): "Sorry, I'm late!"
Example (Iban): *"Maaf aku laun."*

DA + J was most frequent: 42.8% Iban and 53.5% English, reflecting a tendency to provide reasons to mitigate blame or explain the inconvenience (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983).

Example (English): "Sorry, I'm late, I accidentally fell asleep."
Example (Iban): *"Maaf aku laun, aku tertinduk tadi."*

DA + AR appeared more in English (7.2%) than in Iban (3.6%). This pattern may point to a cultural norm in English-speaking contexts where individual accountability is emphasised (Hall, 1976).

Example (English): "I'm really sorry, it's my fault—I should have set an alarm."
Example (Iban): *"Maaf aku laun, salah aku enda ngatur jam."*

Interestingly, the combination DA + AR + Offer of Repair (OR) was found only in Iban (7.2%) and not in English. This suggests that Iban speakers may exhibit a higher inclination to offer compensatory actions even in less serious scenarios, reflecting collectivist tendencies in interpersonal communication (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Example (Iban): "Maaf aku laun, salah aku, aku belanja kopi malam tu."
(Translation: "Sorry I'm late, it's my fault, I'll treat you to coffee tonight.")

Conversely, the DA + OR combination appeared in English (10.6%) but was absent in Iban. This could indicate a preference for English speakers to offer a form of repair without necessarily assuming explicit responsibility.

Example (English): "Sorry, I'm late! Let me buy you a coffee."

The combination of DA + Denying Responsibility (DR) was used equally across both languages at 7.2%. This strategy offers a face-saving approach that acknowledges the offence while subtly deflecting blame (Fraser, 1981).

Example (English): *"Sorry! The nap caught me off guard."*
Example (Iban): "Maaf aku laun, enda nemu tertinduk."

A unique finding was the use of DA + H in Iban (10.6%) and its absence in English. The use of humour may serve to diffuse potential irritation and restore harmony playfully—a common feature of high-context communication (Hall, 1976).

Example (Iban): *"Maaf aku laun, indai aku nyuruh aku bekitai mimpi dulu!"*
(Translation: "Sorry I'm late, my mum told me to finish dreaming first!")

The DA + Intensifier + OR combination (3.6%) was only present in the English language. This might reflect an English-speaking cultural inclination to amplify sincerity and offer restitution even in minor offences.

Example (English): "I'm so sorry I'm late! Let me make it up to you."

Finally, the use of Avoiding Apology + Joke (AA + J) appeared exclusively in Iban (7.2%). This may reflect an indirect, relational approach where the speaker avoids direct responsibility while using humour to maintain rapport.

Example (Iban): *"Nadai laun, just testing kitai nyamai ka ngelala nuan!"*
(Translation: "Not late, just testing how patient you are!")

The linguistic responses in this low-seriousness scenario reveal subtle but meaningful cultural and pragmatic differences. Both Iban and English speakers favour direct apologies, yet diverge in how additional strategies are used. English speakers more frequently pair apologies with justifications or offers of repair, emphasising clarity and accountability. Meanwhile, Iban speakers tend to integrate humour and collectivist-oriented gestures, such as offering repairs or sharing responsibilities. These distinctions mirror broader cultural communication styles—low-context in English and high-context in Iban—highlighting the importance of sociocultural awareness in EFL instruction.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal clear cross-linguistic and cultural differences in how Iban undergraduates realise apologies in their first language (Iban) and their second language (English). The preference for combining direct apologies with justifications and offers of repair in Iban, especially in very serious situations, aligns with the collectivist values of harmony, relational maintenance, and deference characteristic of Iban sociocultural norms (Coluzzi, 2010). This is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies, which seek to minimise imposition and save face through indirectness and elaborate mitigation.

In contrast, English apologies tended to be more direct and concise, often focusing on explicit acceptance of responsibility and immediate offers of repair. These strategies reflect typical patterns of English-speaking, often Western, individualist cultures, which prioritise clarity, accountability, and efficiency in repairing social ruptures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Holmes, 1995).

The tendency of Iban learners to transfer their L1 pragmatic patterns into English demonstrates the concept of pragmatic transfer (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). While such a transfer can facilitate communication when target language norms overlap, it may also result in pragmatic failure when L1 strategies clash with L2 expectations. Findings from Goh and Lowe (2025) and Chun (2010) similarly stress that Malaysian ESL teachers act as pragmatic mediators, bridging local and target language norms. Their studies underscore that teacher-led reflections and contextualised materials enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence. For example, English interlocutors may perceive extended justifications or indirectness as evasive or overly formal, which can potentially impede effective communication.

These findings underscore the significance of cultivating pragmatic awareness in ESL contexts, particularly for indigenous learners whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds diverge significantly from the dominant norms in English-speaking contexts. The disparity in apology strategies suggests a need to bridge the gap between learners' L1 pragmatic competence and the socio-pragmatic demands of English.

Teaching Implications

Incorporating Politeness Theory into ESL Instruction

Explicit instruction on politeness strategies enhances learners' pragmatic competence (Taguchi, 2015; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework is widely used to raise awareness of speech act functions and politeness forms, helping learners to recognise when to apply positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies.

Contextualised Role-Plays and Scenario-Based Learning

Authentic, context-rich role-plays enable learners to practice apology strategies across varying levels of seriousness and social distance (Kasper & Rose, 2003). Scenario-based activities foster dynamic decision-making skills necessary for pragmatic appropriateness in real communication (Taguchi, 2015).

Raising Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Awareness

Metapragmatic discussions focusing on contrasts between learners' L1 and English norms reduce pragmatic transfer errors (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Highlighting Iban cultural values, such as harmony and indirectness, encourages learners to critically examine differences and adapt their language use accordingly (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Developing Materials for Indigenous Learners

Culturally responsive materials that integrate learners' backgrounds improve motivation and relevance (Ali, 2024). Validating indigenous identities through examples and explanations supports pragmatic learning and fosters learner engagement (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Collaborative Learning and Reflective Practice

Peer feedback and reflective activities encourage self-monitoring and internalisation of pragmatic norms (Taguchi, 2015). Scaffolding tools, such as checklists and rubrics, that focus on politeness appropriateness support learners' pragmatic development (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

By implementing these pedagogical strategies, EFL educators can equip indigenous learners, such as Iban undergraduates, with the pragmatic skills needed to communicate apologies effectively in English. This contributes to more successful intercultural interactions and fosters inclusivity in Malaysian multilingual classrooms.

Conclusion

This study has explored the pragmatic realisation of apology strategies among Iban and English speakers, focusing on varying levels of seriousness and applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Semantic formula analysis of authentic responses reveals key similarities and differences in how apologies are constructed and expressed across the two languages. While both groups commonly employed direct apologies (DA), Iban speakers tended to pair these with justifications and indirect strategies such as denial of responsibility or questioning, reflecting the influence of collectivist, high-context cultural norms (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hall, 1976). In contrast, English speakers favoured clear, concise apologies often combined with expressions of concern or offers of repair, indicative of a more individualistic, low-context communicative style.

The pedagogical implications are significant, especially for ESL instruction involving indigenous learners. Embedding politeness theory in the curriculum, using context-based role-plays, and raising cross-cultural awareness can help learners navigate complex socio-pragmatic situations in English. The findings also highlight the importance of culturally responsive materials that validate learners' linguistic and cultural identities while equipping them with effective communicative tools.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of work on intercultural pragmatics and language education, particularly within multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Malaysia. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the study not only informs ESL pedagogy but also supports the broader goal of promoting respectful and inclusive communication across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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