

PRAGMATIC TRANSFER IN MAKING APOLOGY IN ENGLISH BY VIETNAMESE LEARNERS AT HUE UNIVERSITY

TON NU HOANG MINH TAM^{1,*}, TRUONG VIEN², NGUYEN TRAN NAM PHUONG³

¹MA student, Hue University of Foreign Languages

²Hue University of Foreign Languages

³Nam Phuong Centre for Foreign Languages, Can Tho

*Email: tnhmtam@hueuni.edu.vn

Abstract: This study aims to investigate pragmatic transfer among Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). It examines the speech act of apologizing in American English and Vietnamese focusing on pragmatic transfer. A discourse completion task (DCT) was used to elicit apology responses from four groups of participants: 18 native speakers of American English (Es), 20 native speakers of Vietnamese (Vs), 20 Vietnamese elementary learners of English (VEEs) and 20 Vietnamese advanced learners of English (VEAs). It was found that pragmatic transfer was operative in the performance of Vietnamese EFL learners. VEEs exhibited more negative pragmatic transfer than VEAs, particularly in Concern and Forbearance strategies. In addition, language proficiency was found to affect the operation of pragmatic transfer of Vietnamese learners.

Keywords: Pragmatic transfer, language proficiency, speech act, apology, EFL learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Given that the production of speech acts and speech act sets differ across languages and cultures, successful communication for second/foreign language (L2) learners is a demanding task. Because of such cross-cultural divergence, miscommunication and pragmatic failure are highly likely, particularly for culturally-sensitive speech acts like apologies.

The study of learners' use and acquisition of speech acts was called interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). Although this branch flourished decades ago, little has been done concerning the empirical investigation of the interlanguage (IL) of Vietnamese EFL learners at the pragmatic level. This study, therefore, aims at uncovering its patterns through addressing two main questions:

1. To what extent do the Vietnamese EFL learners reflect their L1 behaviors when they make apologies in English?
2. Does the English proficiency of the Vietnamese EFL learners affect their pragmatic transfer?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The speech act of apology

The speech act of apology is categorized as an expressive speech acts due to its illocutionary aspect to communicate the feeling of the apologizer toward the

illocutionary apologize (Searle, 1976). Apologies can be distinguished from complaints, which are also expressive acts, by being convivial in nature (Trosborg, 1995). In the classification of Leech (1983), the act of apologizing is a convivial speech act, the illocutionary goal of which coincides with the social goal of establishing and maintaining harmony.

Apologies occur when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is real or potential (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). Like requests and refusals, the speech act of apology is a face-threatening act which affects the 'public self-image' (Brown & Levinson, 1987) of the offender as well as the victim.

2.2. Linguistic proficiency and transfer

Kasper (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (p. 207). It can be either positive, i.e. transfer leads to IL performance consistent with L2 patterns, or negative, i.e. IL performance differs from L2 linguistic behavior.

Moreover, pragmatic transfer is distinguished as pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic (Kasper, 1992). Pragmalinguistic transfer refers to the influence of first language (L1) in the use of linguistic structures; i.e. form-function mapping. Sociopragmatic transfer occurs when L1's social assumptions impact the evaluation of situations in target language (TL) regarding the interpretation and the production of language acts.

ILP studies have sought to examine the effect of linguistic proficiency on pragmatic transfer. Based on the assumption that linguistically proficient learners are better able to transfer linguistic structures from L1 to TL, scholars attempt to investigate the extent to which this holds true for their subjects. Some studies have proved this tendency, whereas, for others, it has been considered limited. For instance, Tagushi (2006) investigated linguistic appropriateness in the realisation of the speech act of request by Japanese learners of English. The two proficiency groups (low and high) performed role-plays in response to two scenarios. The author supported previous studies suggesting that proficiency promotes better quality of speech acts in respect of the appropriateness, grammaticality and comprehensibility of linguistic expressions. Conversely, Robinson (1992) dealt with Japanese ESL refusals using DCT. For the author, the low proficiency group was liable to pragmatic transfer from the Japanese style, whereas the high proficiency one approximates the American refusals.

2.3. Studies on IL apologies

Numerous studies dealt with IL production of the apologising act, though few of them focused on transfer and only sufficed with reference to transfer in interpreting their data. Jung (2004) examined IL apologies of Korean ESL learners using role-play. The results showed that proficiency did not seem to positively correlate with L2 performance. Furthermore, NSs and learners differed in the use of lexicogrammatical and pragmatic appropriateness. In other words, Korean learners exhibited 'verbose' transfer of L1

linguistic and pragmatic knowledge and lack of awareness of the appropriate social norms as well as language means concerning the apologetic behaviour. Moreover, they could not use explanation strategy ‘succinctly and affectively’ in L2 and, hence, fell in ‘verbosity’. Their underuse of acknowledgement strategy was attributed this to the influence of L1 and, more frequently, the uncertainty about L2 sociolinguistic rules.

Sabaté i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor (2007) investigated the apologising act from developmental perspective. The authors focused on IFIDs and intensification with reference to transfer and TL behaviour of three Catalan learner groups: Advanced (A), proficient (P) and intermediate (I). The findings suggested that the increase in the proficiency level led to decrease in ‘non-L2-like’ pragmlinguistic performance, but it was not linear or straightforward as group (A) might face difficulties group (P) did not. Learners had the same access to strategies as NSs. In addition, linguistic proficiency may lead to overuse of ‘lexical transparent’ IFIDs (*I’m sorry* and *excuse me*, as they are acquired first). It was noted that group (A) moves toward more newly acquired formulae, while (P) overuses ones like *forgive me*. It was only (A) group that marked politeness by formality and register and showed awareness toward intensification. (P) exhibited more sociopragmatic transfer, while (A) and (I) exhibited more pragmlinguistic transfer. Similarly, Dendenne’s (2016) cross-cultural and IL studies of Algerians EFL learners in two speech acts: requests and apologies revealed that the low-proficiency group exhibits more pragmlinguistic transfer meanwhile linguistic proficient does not impact transfer at the sociopragmatic level.

Al-Zumor (2011) dealt with apologies realisation in Arabic, English and in learners’ production. Pragmatic transfer was evident in the use of more than one IFID, the employment of various terms of address and the avoidance of certain semantic formulae. This, for the author, was also a by-product of lack of exposure to L2. As for the cross-cultural part of the study, the author reported that Arabic and English NSs differed linguistically in responding to the three situations due to disparity in estimating the severity of offense. Moreover, Arabs were more inclined to admitting their deficiency in order to set things right. In contrast, in the Anglo-Saxon culture this was discredited because people believe in “the immunity of one’s private self.” (p. 28); in the Arab culture “people are more publically available to each other” (ibid).

Dendenne (2016) examined pragmatic transfer in IL apologies performed by Algerian EFL learners. Using DCT, Dendenne found that pragmatic transfer is operative in the wording of the strategies and word for word translation. The sociopragmatic type is at play in the use of apology strategies which appear, to a large extent, in line with L1/mother culture’s assumptions as regards the evaluation of situational variables. Moreover, linguistic proficiency does not give marked advantage to the high proficiency group over the low proficiency one. Besides transfer, other factors impact learner’s IL production, including lack of pragmatic competence, IL-specific features and language constraints.

In Vietnam, studies focusing on how Vietnamese EFL learners’ apologies deviate from English NSs’ apologies have been carried out by Van (2000), Ly (2012), Trang (2017).

Firstly, Van (2000) investigated the realization patterns of apology made by Vietnamese learners of English compared to English NSs using DCT. Results revealed that learners differed from English group in the use of Explanation/Account, Offer of repair, Concern for the hearer and Intensifiers. These differences seemed a result of transfer from their L1 pragmatic norms into English.

Ly (2012) investigated how Vietnamese EFL learners' apologies deviate from English NSs' apologies through DCT. The findings revealed some deviations between EFL learners and English NSs for a number of strategies. Some of the deviations may, for the author, be due to negative transfer from Vietnamese patterns EN Speakers. It was also found that English- and Vietnamese NSs, and EFL learners were dissimilar in apology strategy selection according to contextual factors including severity of offense, social status, and social distance. While the Vietnamese and EFL learners enjoying higher power tried to evade giving an expression of apology and acknowledging responsibility for the offense, English NSs did so. Besides, some deviations were found in EFL learners' IL apologies due to the direct transfer from L1 to L2.

Trang (2017) dealt with apologies made by Vietnamese NNSs of English and American NSs through DCT. It was found that the Americans often employed the strategy Offer of repair whereas Vietnamese subjects were more likely to show their Concern for the hearer. This, according to the author, sharpened the images of a sentimental Vietnamese culture and a rational American culture as well as the features of individualism and collectivism. It was concluded that inspite of frequent contacts with one another, both the Vietnamese and American subjects were not affected by others' communicating practices.

Lau (2017), on the other hand, studied the differences in apology strategies between advanced Vietnamese ESL learners and American NSs of English and the contextual factors that might result in those differences. The result revealed that IL apologies of Vietnamese learners exhibited more politeness and respect for people from higher status, closeness to a friend, less courtesy to an equal and less respect (but greater intimacy) for their kid. On the contrary, the degree of politeness, sincerity and respect of apologies of the Americans relied heavily on the severity of violation and the situation itself. Apologies of Vietnamese group were, for the author, very much affected by the hierarchical culture of Vietnam, and their restricted linguistic competence as well.

Although Van's (2000), Ly's (2012), Trang's (2017) and Lau's (2017) studies contributed to the body of research on Vietnamese learners' pragmatic competence, there are caveats and gaps in these studies. None of the research focused on pragmatic transfer and only sufficed with reference to transfer in interpreting their data. Moreover, neither of these studies examined whether pragmatic transfer is affected by learners' proficiency level. This research will, therefore, examined whether pragmatic transfer is operative in Vietnamese EFL learners' apologies and whether it is affected by learners' proficiency level.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Participants

To prove the existence of transfer, it is essential to collect three types of data, including apologies made by NSs in both L1 and L2 and apologies made by L2 learners. In order to examine the effect of the learners' L2 proficiency on their pragmatic transfer, the IL data was collected from two learner groups: advanced and elementary learners. Table 1 provides an overview about the four groups of participants in this study.

Table 1. *Overview of four groups of participants*

Group	Number	Language Used	Label	Background	Age
1	20	Vietnamese as a native language	V: Vietnamese NSs	English major Vietnamese students	18-21
2	18	English as a native language	E: American English NSs	From various backgrounds	14-43
3	20	English as a foreign language	VEE: Elementary	Non-English major university students (A2)	18-24
4	20	English as a foreign language	VEA: Advanced	Second year Master's students	23-34

3.2. Data collection instruments

In order to collect data related to apologies' production, a DCT was employed. DCT is a written instrument providing participants with descriptions of situations with blanks to respond using would-be appropriate apologies.

Example: 1. Your mom agreed to let you hang out with your friends and you promised to come home at 9:00 p.m. You went out with your friends and didn't realise the time. You came home at 11:00 p.m. and saw your mom waiting for you in the living room. She looked really angry. What would you say?

DCT has the following advantages over other data collection methods (naturally occurring data, role play, verbal reports): (1) it allows for a large amount of data to be collected and processed quickly; (2) it secures the best measurement and control of the socio-cultural context which has been proved to influence linguistic and pragmatic; (3) it is capable of revealing the normative or stereotypical expressions of a certain speech act; (4) it enables a sufficient identification of NSs and NNSs' pragmalinguistic features in speech act realization; (5) it offers standardization of situations across cultures and languages. Nonetheless, drawbacks of DCT have been reported in the literature: (1) DCT responses might diverge from the naturally occurring data on the actual wording and the contents and frequency of the semantic formulae used; (2) DCT responses might not represent sophisticated interactional features, such as elaborated negotiation tokens and indirect exchanges occurred in spoken conversations. Taking the advantages and drawbacks of the DCT into account, and considering the focus of this study, the written DCT questionnaire was chosen as the research method.

The DCTs comprised eight apology situations representing different communicative contexts. Each pair of situations varies in at least one controlling factor, including social distance, power, and the severity of the offence. Three levels of social distance were chosen. Close relationship is represented by the relationship between family members and close friends, distant one by strangers and a middle status is represented by acquaintances. Power is represented by three different levels: high-low (the offender has more power over the victim), low-high (the victim has more power over the offender) and equals (no interlocutor has more power over the other). Situations attempt to represent, as much as possible, different types of offenses to elicit various strategies. Offenses are described as either mild or serious.

Table 2. *The variables underlying the construction of situations*

No	Context	Situations	Distance	Power	Severity
1.	family	Apologizing to speaker's mother for coming home late	close	low-high	mild
2.	family	Apologizing to a younger sister for spilling coffee on her assignment	close	high-low	serious
3.	friend	Apologizing to a friend who speaker doesn't know well for forgetting his/her notes	distance	equal	mild
4.	friend	Apologizing to a close friend for forgetting to take him/her to lunch	close	equal	mild
5.	school	Apologizing to a professor who speaker doesn't know well for arriving 15 mins late to take the mid-term test again	distance	low-high	mild
6.	school	Apologizing to a professor who speaker knows well for forgetting to bring his/her book	close	low-high	mild
7.	society	Apologizing for fallen bags from a rack on an elderly passenger	distance	low-high	serious
8.	society	Apologizing for stepping on a child's foot	distance	high-low	mild

The DCT was developed into three versions: the English version for group E, the Vietnamese version for group V, and the bilingual version for two learner groups.

3.3. Coding scheme

The analysis of apologies in the current study has been based on the coding scheme proposed by Cohen and Olshtain (1981), Olshtain and Cohen (1983), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) as well as Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989).

1. Illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs): formulaic routinised expressions that are used to explicitly indicate the intent of the apologizer. IFIDs fall into three sub-types:

- a. An expression of regret: *I'm/ am sorry, Excuse me and I apologise*
- b. Asking for forgiveness: *Forgive me, (I beg your) Pardon (me)*

- c. Requesting for acceptance of the apology: (*Accept*) *My apologies*
- 2. **Explanation or account:** the apologizer may opt for expressing reasons and/or the circumstances of his violation trying to get the hearer to accept his apology. It can be:
 - a. Explicit: *I was in rush this morning and forgot your book at home.*
 - b. Implicit: *The traffic was terrible.*
- 3. **Taking on responsibility**
 - a. Explicit self-blame: *It is my fault/ my mistake.*
 - b. Lack of intent: *I didn't pay attention; I didn't mean it.*
 - c. Expression of self-deficiency: *I didn't see you there; I am very clumsy.*
 - d. Expression of embarrassment: *I feel awful about it.*
 - e. Justify hearer: *It is understandable that you are upset.*
 - f. Refusal to acknowledge guilt: *It wasn't my fault.*
- 4. **Concern for the hearer:** I hope I didn't upset you; Are you alright?
- 5. **Offer of repair:** I will definitely bring it to you tomorrow; I'll pay for the damage.
- 6. **Promise of Forbearance:** I promise it won't happen again.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Quantitative analysis

A modified version of Kasper's (1992) and Shea's (2003, as cited in Chen, 2006) system of determining pragmatic transfer was adopted. Pragmatic transfer could be classified into 4 categories as follows:

1- Strong negative pragmatic transfer

Learners will be considered to indicate strong negative pragmatic transfer when E has a significantly greater or lower frequency of a strategy than V and learners behave indistinguishably from V and significantly vary from E in frequency ($E > EFL \sim V$ or $E < EFL \sim V$).

2- Weak negative pragmatic transfer

Learners will be considered to indicate weak negative pragmatic transfer when E and V differ from each other in the frequency of a strategy and learners fall into the intermediate position with significant difference from both the two groups ($E > EFL > V$ or $E < EFL < V$).

3- No pragmatic transfer

Learners will be considered to indicate no pragmatic transfer when they perform indistinguishably from E and differ significantly from V ($E \sim EFL > V$ or $E \sim EFL < V$).

or when learners fall into the bottom or the top position with significant difference from both V and E ($EFL > V$ & $EFL > E$ or $EFL < V$ & $EFL < E$)

4- Positive pragmatic transfer

Positive transfer occurs when there are no statistically significant differences in the use of an apology strategy between the three groups ($V \sim EFL \sim E$).

3.4.2. Qualitative analysis

In addition to the quantitative analysis, in order to trace back evidence of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer, and acquire a deeper insight into the different strategies used, the actual utterances of four groups for each type of apology strategies and sub-strategies in all situations were compared qualitatively.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. General results

Table 3. Average number of strategies per situation used by groups

V	VEE	VEA	E
2.38	1.90	2.43	2.42

Overall, VEEs employed significantly less strategies than both Vs and Es, whereas VEAs used the same number of apology strategies as the two native speaker groups.

4.2. The overall use of apology strategies

Table 4. Overall use of apology strategies

N = raw number of strategies

	V		VEE		VEA		E	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
IFIDs	42.37	161	56.25	171	43.19	168	42.24	147
Explanation	13.42	51	8.55	26	10.03	39	10.63	37
Responsibility	8.95	34	10.53	32	13.88	54	9.48	33
Concern	7.63	29	8.55	26	11.83	46	10.06	35
Repair	23.16	88	12.83	39	17.48	68	25.00	87
Forbearance	4.47	17	3.29	10	3.60	14	2.59	9
Total	100	380	100	304	100	389	100	348

There was evidence of pragmatic transfer of the EFL learners in some strategies. As for VEEs, they displayed no transfer for most apology strategies, including IFIDs, explanation. Concerning VEAs, they also displayed no transfer for most apology strategies, including explanation, responsibility, concern and repair strategy. They showed positive pragmatic transfer for IFIDs. Both learner groups exhibited weak negative pragmatic transfer for forbearance strategy.

4.3. The overall use of apology sub-strategies

Having considered the overall use of apology strategies, we currently shed light on the use of apology sub-strategies.

Table 5. Overall use of IFIDs sub-strategies

	V		VEE		VEA		E	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
An expression of regret	39.21	149	52.63	160	38.56	150	41.09	143
Asking for forgiveness	3.16	12	3.62	11	3.34	13	1.15	4
Requesting for acceptance of the apology	0.00	0	0.00	0	1.29	5	0.00	0

Both VEEs and VEAs displayed no pragmatic transfer for expression of regret and request for acceptance of the apology sub-strategies. However, they both exhibited strong negative pragmatic transfer for asking for forgiveness sub-strategy.

Table 6. Overall use of responsibility sub-strategies

	V		VEE		VEA		E	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Explicit self-blame	0.53	2	0.66	2	6.43	25	1.72	6
Lack of intent	4.47	17	8.55	26	5.40	21	4.89	17
Self-deficiency	3.68	14	1.32	4	1.29	5	1.15	4
Embarrassment	0.26	1	0.00	0	0.77	3	0.57	2
Justify hearer	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	1.15	4
Refusal to acknowledge guilt	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0

Turning to responsibility sub-strategies, both learner groups displayed no transfer for most sub-strategies, including self-deficiency and embarrassment. Whilst VEEs displayed strong negative transfer for explicit self-blame and justify hearer, VEAs only showed strong negative transfer for justify hearer sub-strategy.

4.4. Pragmatic transfer in content of apology strategies produced by the Vietnamese EFL learners

Not all strategies are going to be presented in this part, but only the ones in which deviation has been apparently observed; namely, explanation, concern and repair.

Explanation

VEEs exhibited much evidence of pragmalinguistic transfer in word for word translation from L1. VEEs extensively employed reasons, e.g. “*I was busy*” and “*I had a busy job*” which appears to be L1-driven, i.e. from Vietnamese “*Mình bận*” and “*Mình có việc bận*”. Explanation was also expressed awkwardly by VEEs owing to word for word translation (e.g. “*I forgot to pay attention to my watch*”; “*I had something else yesterday*”)

As for VEAs, there were differences in the types of accounts offered. Es gave real short general accounts, whereas VEAs were prone to provide exaggerated specific accounts, which were obviously not credible. Moreover, VEAs' account tended to transfer the responsibility of the offense to another source (broken motorbike, traffic jam, or accident), whereas Es did not.

Examples: E: *I'm sorry. I lost track of time. (SIT 1)*

I'm sorry, I couldn't find your office. (SIT 5)

VEA: *Mom, I know I need to come back home at 9 p.m., but my friend's motorbike is broken so I'm late. (SIT 1)*

I am terribly sorry for yesterday. I can't come cause my relative had an accident. I had to go to the hospital. (SIT 4)

This can be explained as a sociopragmatic transfer from learners' L1. For Vietnamese people, an objective exaggerated explanation is more acceptable than a subjective real explanation. Their exaggerated reasons, however, might sound insincere to the Americans, hence being less likely to be accepted than a real subjective reason.

Concern and Repair

As for concern strategy, there was sign of sociopragmatic transfer in VEAs' expressions of this strategy in SIT 8. While VEAs showed concern for the child's feet, such as "*Let me see your feet and fingers!*" or "*Let's me see your feet*", none of Es used these expressions in this situation. It is likely that VEAs transfer this pattern from L1 since Vs also used expressions showing concern for the child's feet (e.g. *Chân em ổn chứ? Chị thành thật xin lỗi (Is your feet ok? I'm sincerely sorry)*)).

Respecting repair strategy, there was sign of sociopragmatic transfer in VEEs' repairs in SIT 8. VEEs offered repair by offering the child candy (e.g. *Oh sorry baby. Are you ok? Let's have some candy*). None of Es used this. This can be attributed to the sociopragmatic transfer from Vietnamese since Vs also inclined to offer candy as a repair for the child (e.g. *Chị xin lỗi em, em đừng khóc, chị cho kẹo em nè (I'm sorry, please don't cry, I'll give you candy)*)).

One possible explanation for such differences in the performance of learners in concern and repair strategies in SIT 8 could be cultural differences between Vietnam and America. Vietnam is a collectivist culture, whereas America is an individualistic culture. Hence, personal boundaries between strangers are less clear in Vietnamese culture than in American culture and they were more friendly to strangers than a person from individualistic culture like America.

4.5. Discussion

The overall use of apology strategies

Results revealed that both negative and positive pragmatic transfer was at work in the Vietnamese EFL learners' apology performance. This is congruent with results from

several ILP studies (Van, 2000; Ly, 2012) where Vietnamese L2 learners were found to transfer their L1 norms to L2.

VEEs' overuse of IFIDs and responsibility strategy and their underuse of other strategies, such as explanation and repair strategies, is a likely outcome of their insufficient L2 proficiency. So as to give a convincing explanation, an adequate account or offers of repair, speakers need the relevant linguistic means, and thus, VEEs were prone to overuse 'lexical transparent' IFIDs or syntactically less demanding responsibility strategy, at the expense of other strategies such as repair or explanation, which are more demanding, linguistically and cognitively speaking. This interpretation is supported by the fact that VEEs extensively used 'pragmatic transparent' expressions such as "*I (am/'m) sorry*" (96,25% of expressions of regret), "*(Please) forgive me*" (100% of asking for forgiveness) and "*I didn't mean to*" (nearly 70% of lack of intent) to realize IFIDs and responsibility, and that in wording other strategies like explanation and repair they resorted to word for word translation from L1 to cope with the linguistic difficulty, such as "*I had a busy job yesterday*" (*Hôm qua tôi có việc bận*, SIT 4), "*I promise tomorrow will pay you*" (*Tôi hứa ngày mai sẽ trả bạn*, SIT 3), "*I go the home to bring book to return the book for doctor*" (*Em về nhà để mang sách trả sách cho thầy*, SIT 6). This result is consistent with Trosborg's (1987, 1995) results, which examined apologies by Danish learners of English. For example, Trosborg (1995) reported that there was lack of minimizing, explanations and query the preconditions and an overuse of direct apologies and denying responsibility by Danish learners which seemed a result of learners' insufficient linguistic knowledge.

VEAs appeared to verbose in responsibility and concern strategies, especially in the case of responsibility, this concurs with Bergman & Kasper (1993) results who also found that the IL users tended to use downgrading responsibility and verbal redress (i.e. concern and forbearance) more frequently than the English NS. As pointed out by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986, p. 177), "verbosity is evident especially among advanced learners who possess the linguistic knowledge to support the intention of their speech acts but still feel uncertain of the effectiveness of their communicative interaction." L2 learners' proficiency level seems to affect the way in which they try to approximate the target language norms. Learners with lower L2 proficiency incline to avoid verbosity because of their limited linguistic knowledge, whilst learners with higher L2 proficiency gain confidence concerning their linguistic knowledge, but are not confident about the effectiveness of their speech acts, and thus, incline to be more verbose than the target language speakers. Furthermore, they, similar to the VEEs, underused repair strategy. This finding showed that even VEAs might still have linguistically and cognitively difficulty of certain apology strategies in L2, i.e. repair.

The overall use of apology sub-strategies

Regarding the learners' use of IFIDs sub-strategies, VEEs used considerably more expressions of regret than both Es and Vs. This was not understood as a signal of pragmatic competence since they extensively used "*I'm sorry*" (90.06%), which was

judged as ‘transparent’, to express regret. Rather, this might be a result of insufficient L2 proficiency as discussed above. VEAs, on the other hand, used requesting for acceptance of the apology sub-strategy which did not appear in both TL and L1 data. This is a likely outcome of their lack of sociopragmatic knowledge. They opted for this sub-strategy to express an additional intensity in equal-status situations (SIT 3, SIT 4, SIT 5), which should not have been necessary.

As to responsibility sub-strategies, notably higher frequency of explicit self-blame by VEAs and of lack of intent by VEEs cannot be traced back to L1 influence; rather, it was attributed to learners’ language proficiency. As discussed above, VEAs tended to verbose the former due to better linguistic knowledge and uncertainty about the effectiveness of their communicative interaction, whereas VEEs overused ‘transparent’ expressions of the latter, e.g. “*I didn’t mean to*” (nearly 70%) at the expense of other more demanding strategies.

Pragmatic transfer in content of apology strategies and sub-strategies produced by the Vietnamese EFL learners

Results revealed that VEEs exhibited more pragmalinguistic transfer than VEAs, whereas VEAs showed more sociopragmatic transfer than VEEs. In other words, the English proficiency of Vietnamese EFL learners affected their pragmatic transfer. This is in line with the findings of Sabaté i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor (2007), Dendenne (2016) asserting that the increase in the proficiency level resulted in decrease in pragmalinguistic transfer. As for sociopragmatic transfer, VEAs exhibited more sociopragmatic transfer than VEEs. This can be a likely outcome of better linguistic knowledge but lack of sociopragmatics. VEAs have better linguistic knowledge to express what they want to say, whereas the relatively higher frequency of sociopragmatic transfer showed the precedence of pragmalinguistics over sociopragmatics in the pragmatic development of the learners. The VEEs due to insufficient linguistic knowledge played it safe and hence showed less sociopragmatic transfer than the VEAs. These findings seemed to support Ellis’ (1994) statement “learners may need to reach a threshold level of linguistic proficiency before pragmatic transfer can take place.” (p.181)

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study revealed that both negative and positive pragmatic transfer was infrequently at work in the Vietnamese EFL learners’ apology performance. Moreover, Vietnamese EFL learners showed great evidence of both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer. Whilst VEAs exhibited more sociopragmatic transfer, i.e. for explanation and concern, VEEs displayed more pragmalinguistic transfer, i.e. for explanation.

As to the effect of L2 proficiency on transfer, the proficiency level affected pragmatic transfer in the learners’ performance of apology strategies. VEAs tended to employ more positive pragmatic transfer than VEEs (i.e. IFIDs and Explanation), while VEEs exhibited more negative pragmatic transfer (i.e. Concern and Forbearance). Learners’

proficiency level also leads to 'verbose' in explicit self-blame by VEAs as well as the underuse of explanation and repair and the overuse of IFIDs by VEEs. Moreover, proficiency level also affected the type of pragmatic transfer. VEAs with better L2 linguistic proficiency exhibited less pragmalinguistic transfer than VEEs, while they showed more sociopragmatic transfer.

Pedagogical implications

As stated above, VEAs appeared to verbose in responsibility and concern strategy and underuse repair strategies. This results show that even VEAs with better linguistic knowledge still have difficulties to produce certain apology strategies in an L2 pragmatically appropriate manner. This finding suggests that together with linguistic competence high proficiency learners also need to develop pragmatic competence. EFL learners regardless of proficiency level need to be taught the appropriate use of speech acts in L2 together with linguistic knowledge.

The data from this research also indicated that there are both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of English that learners should be made aware of in order to gain a better understanding of the target culture and its pragmatic norms. For instance, learners should be made aware of the use of real short general accounts instead of exaggerated specific accounts, which might sound insincere to the Americans. Furthermore, they should be taught about 'deep' cultural element differences between two cultures. For example, the differences between a collectivist culture, Vietnam, and an individualistic culture such as American, which leads to differences in the performance of concern and repair strategies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Zumor, A. W. Q. G. (2011). Apologies in Arabic and English: An inter-language and cross-cultural study. *Journal of King Saud University-Languages and Translation*, 23(1), 19-28.
- [2] Bergman, M. L., & Kasper, G. (1993). Perception and performance in native and nonnative apology. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 82-107). New York: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Blum-Kulka, S. & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*, 5(3), 196-213.
- [4] Blum-Kulka, S. & Olshtain, E. (1986). Too many words: Length of utterances and pragmatic failure. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 8, 47-61.
- [5] Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (1989). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- [6] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Chen, M. T. (2006). *An Interlanguage Study of the Speech Act of Disagreement Made by Chinese EFL Speakers in Taiwan* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Sun Yatsen University, Koashiung.

- [8] Cohen, A. D. & Olshtain, E. (1981). Developing a measure of sociocultural competence: the case of apology. *Language learning*, 31(1), 113-134.
- [9] Dendenne, B. (2016, February). *Cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics: Enriching content for Algerian EFL textbooks*. Paper presented at the First Maghreb Conference and Exhibition on Teaching and Learning EFL/Rethinking the English Language in the Maghreb: Prospects and perspectives, Ouargla (Algeria). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Boudjemaa_Dendenne/publication/323998228_Cross-cultural_and_interlanguage_pragmatics_Enriching_content_for_Algerian_EFL_textbooks/links/5ab79c56a6fdcc46d3b7728a/Cross-cultural-and-interlanguage-pragmatics-Enriching-content-for-Algerian-EFL-textbooks.pdf
- [10] Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- [11] Jung, E. H. S. (2004). Interlanguage pragmatics: Apology speech acts. In C. L. Moder & A. Martinovic-Zic, *Discourse across languages and cultures* (pp. 99-116). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- [12] Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research*, 8(3), 203-231.
- [13] Lau, T. M. (2017). Apology strategies in English and Vietnamese. *International Journal Online of Humanities*, 3(6), 1-33.
- [14] Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- [15] Ly, N. H. (2012). *The speech act of apology made by Vietnamese EFL learners: An interlanguage pragmatic study* (Unpublished master's thesis). Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
- [16] Olshtain, E. & Cohen, A. (1983). Apology: a speech act set. In Wolfson, Nessa & Elliot, Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 18-36). Newbury House, Rowley, MA.
- [17] Robinson, M. (1992). Introspective methodology in interlanguage pragmatics research. In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Pragmatics of Japanese as native and target language* (Technical Report No. 3, pp. 27-82). Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Centre.
- [18] Sabaté i Dalmau, M. & Curell i Gotor, H. (2007). From “sorry very much” to “I’m ever so sorry:” Acquisitional patterns in L2 apologies by Catalan learners of English. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 4(2), 287-315.
- [19] Searle, J. R. (1976). The classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), 1-23.
- [20] Tagushi, N. (2006). Analysis of appropriateness in a speech act of request in L2 English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 16(4), 513-533.
- [21] Trang, N. T. (2017). Apologizing strategies by Vietnamese speakers of English and American speakers of English. *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Nước ngoài*, 33(2), 118-131.
- [22] Trosborg, A. (1987). Apology strategies in natives/non-natives. *Journal of pragmatics*, 11(2), 147-167.
- [23] Trosborg, A. (1995). *Interlanguage pragmatics: Requests, complaints, and apologies*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [24] Van, K. T. H. (2000). *Apologies in Vietnamese and English* (Unpublished master's thesis). Vietnam National University, Hanoi.