

# Situational Variations in Request and Apology Realization Strategies among International Postgraduate Students at Malaysian Universities

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## Abstract

The present study attempted to describe the request, apology, and request mitigation strategies utilized by international postgraduate students in confronting different situations. In addition, it examined the effects of the situational factors of social distance, power, and imposition on the students' choice of request and apology strategies as well as the modifications in requests. Another objective has been to categorize the difficulties students face in the production of the speech acts. One hundred and thirty international postgraduate students majoring in different fields voluntarily participated in this study. A Written Discourse Completion Task Questionnaire (Liu, 2005) and semi-structured interview were utilized for data collection procedure. The results of the questionnaire illustrated that the participants made use of IFID strategy for apologies and conventionally indirect expressions (Preparatory questions) for requests more frequently than other strategies. Moreover, the situational factors of social distance, power and imposition did not affect the participants' choice of request and apology strategies but they had some influences on the use of mitigating strategies in different situations. Regarding modifiers, the students opted out external modifications (66.6%) more than internal modifiers (33.3%). Among the external mitigation types, "please" with 21% and grounders with 25% respectively have been utilized more than other external mitigation types. Finally, the results of the interviews indicated that the difficulties that students face in the production of the speech acts were grammar, expression, vocabulary and structure. This study has some implications for second language acquisition research and intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** apologies, international postgraduate students, second language pragmatics, requests, request mitigating devices

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the Problem

With the augmentation of globalization and cultural communication, more and more international students have come to Malaysia to pursue their academic studies in higher education. As such, the number of international postgraduate students has increased in Malaysian universities. Some public universities such as University of Malaya (UM), University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and University Putra Malaysia (UPM) as the leading universities in a host of domains of research in Malaysia have attracted more international postgraduate students from all over the world. At the same time, they have developed and internationalized its academic programs and enrollment. Because of the large number of programs and research that are done in the English language (i.e., as the medium of communication), the international students are required to be sufficiently competent in English (Maros, Siti, & Subakir, 2012).

However, coming from a country having no access to English language except in the classroom, the international students may face difficulties in their intercultural communications. According to Thijittang (2010), the main problems that international students face in their intercultural communications are pragmatic-oriented. Thus, it is essential for them to master the appropriate use of target language speech acts in learning L2 pragmatic competence.

On the other hand, the increasing opportunities in intercultural communications have led researchers to crack

down on pragmatic rules and their role in the communication. As such, each culture has established and developed its own appropriate ways of verbal behavior, especially in terms of politeness. During cross-cultural communication, people from various cultures are likely to understand the behavior or utterances of the other cultures according to their own native language systems or cultural norms. This may result in pragmatic failure, which is defined as the lack of ability to understand the meaning of the utterances (Thomas, 1983). For example, when speakers from other cultures make requests in a target language, even when they struggle to triumph over the interference made by the transfer of request strategies from their native language to the target language, they may recognize the social factors in a different way from the speakers of a target language (L2) and, consequently, produce inappropriate requests. So, having the awareness, understanding the different conventions and knowing the appropriate ways of producing speech acts in other cultures may assist interlocutors to lessen the unintentional rudeness or offensiveness, thus hindering the breakdown in communication and making improvements in cross-cultural communication.

As a result, the studies of intercultural problems and cross-cultural pragmatics have gained significance over other types of linguistic studies in recent years. Research on speech act and politeness have also gained more credit and importance as researchers find out that making harmony in relations is a vital matter in human communication. The reason behind it is that successful communication includes grammatical knowledge and text organization as well as the pragmatic aspects of a target language. As such, pragmatic competence is specifically defined by Koike (1989) as “the speaker’s knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts” in a context (p. 279). In other words, pragmatic competence is defined as the knowledge of communicative action or speech acts, how to perform it, and the ability to utilize the language in proper ways according to the context or contextual factors (Kasper, 1997).

Austin (1962) defined speech acts or communicative actions as “acts which are performed by utterances such as giving order, making promises, complaining, requesting, apologizing and so on. When we utter a sentence or a phrase, we are performing an act to which we expect our listeners to react with verbal or nonverbal behavior” (p. 65).

Out of the many speech acts, request and apology are the most important communicative acts. Taking into consideration Searle’s (1969) categorization of illocutionary acts (i.e., representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations), L2 researchers categorize request under directives, which is defined as “an attempt to get hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do, and which it is not obvious that hearer will do in the normal course of events or of hearer's own accord” (p. 66). Anchored in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, requests are regarded as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) because a speaker is imposing her/his desire on the hearer necessitating great expertise culturally and linguistically by the learner. Apology is a speech act that is utilized to reinstate relationships between a speaker and a hearer after the speaker has offended the hearer intentionally or unintentionally. With reference to apology, Olshtain (1983) stated that “the act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to set things right” (p. 235). In addition, Goffman (1971) defined apology as a kind of remedial work involving separating the speaker's self into two parts: One part is guilty of having offended the addressee, the other one aligning himself or herself with the addressee and with the violated norm. This study employed two theoretical models of speech act theory (Austin 1962) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The current study is an attempt to examine some of the constructs of speech act and politeness theories among International postgraduate students. Thus, this study can contribute to the conceptualization of speech act and politeness constructs in an ESL setting since it examined some constructs of each theory within the area of cross-cultural pragmatics. In this regard, the main concepts of speech act theory as speech acts of apology and request and politeness theory as contextual understanding of variables of social power, distance and imposition were examined in this study. The aim is to find out whether students pay attention to the contextual variables when they perform the speech acts of request and apology which are face-threatening acts. In other words, it seeks to evaluate international postgraduate students’ interlanguage pragmatic knowledge including both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge through using the linguistic forms (pragmalinguistics) and paying attention to the contextual variables in performing the two face-threatening speech acts (sociopragmatics). In addition, the students’ difficulties in producing and comprehending the selected speech acts were also identified.

### *1.2 Statement of the Problem*

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) claimed that speech acts are operated by universal pragmatic principles, while Green (1975) and Wierzbicka (1985) claimed for the existence of feasible differences or variations in verbalization and conceptualization across languages and cultures. Owing to the considerable controversy which

exists among the linguists and philosophers in considering language universals and the significance and vitality of such notions in the development of a language theory generally and second language acquisition (SLA) theory particularly (Blum-Kulka, 1983), a number of empirical studies have been done across diverse languages and cultures which have sometimes confirmed the idea of universal pragmatic principles and on other cases have resulted in contrary findings to such claims (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Billmyer & Varghese, 2007; Boxer, 2002; Golato, 2000; Kasper, 2000; Markee, 2002; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Stockwell, 2009).

Undoubtedly, before substantive claims about the universality of pragmatic principles across cultures can be made, more findings from research in many new contexts should be carried out. According to Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), the studies of speech acts are required to deviate from the western cultures; hence researchers should embrace as many nonwestern cultures (Asian cultures) in their domain of study as possible.

Additionally, the most important factors or variables to be considered in the speech act domain are the social variables of social distance (D), social power (P) and imposition (R). These factors are suggested by Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) influential model of politeness, especially with regard to the speech act of request. Brown and Levinson's major argument (1978, 1987) is that the social variables of D, P and R are the most significant and key factors which can affect speakers' linguistic choices. Leaver, Ehman, and Shekhtman (2005) mentioned that if a speaker is talking to a person who has higher social power, he/she will select different grammar and words (different strategy) to speak to that person compared to the individual who is in lower position. For instance, the authors uphold that these factors combine in an additive fashion, thus with the increase in the hearer's power, social distance and degree of imposition of the act, the face threat will become greater and the degree of indirectness to be employed by the speaker will become more. In other words, based on Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory, there is a positive association or correlation between these variables and the degree of indirectness to be used. Since the pragmatic competence as the most important component of intercultural communicative competence is important in intercultural communications, especially in multicultural contexts, this study is an attempt to add to the existing literature by investigating the pragmatic knowledge of international students at Malaysian universities as multicultural and non-western context.

### *1.3 Literature Review*

The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project commenced in 1982 (see Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) was the most overruling empirical work in speech act realization studies. This project focused on two speech acts (i.e., request and apology) and aimed at establishing native speakers' patterns of realization by comparing speech acts across languages and cultures. It established the similarities and differences between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) in the realization of these acts (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The investigation involved eight languages: Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian-French, Danish, German, Hebrew, and Russian. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was utilized for data collection. Results showed that subjects from different groups made use of similar strategies and that there were cultural preferences in their use. For the majority of NNSs and NSs, the essential components of an apology were explicit apology expressions and accounts.

Since then, other studies have been done to investigate apology realization strategies and speaker perceptions by means of different approaches. Guan, Park, and Lee (2009) investigated the impacts of culture (U.S., China, and Korea) and social distance (i.e., interpersonal relationship) (e.g., between a friend and a stranger) on the speech act of apology. The participants consisted of Americans, Chinese and Korean and the data were elicited through DCT. The findings showed that there was a significant difference in participants' perception of the offended person's emotional reaction and their propensities in the use of apology (i.e., desire, obligation, and intention to apologize, in addition to their perception of normative apology use). The subjects were obliged to apologize more to a stranger than to a friend in all three cultures. Both Americans and Koreans differed more in terms of the intention of apology compared to Chinese. Although there was not a difference among the participants regarding their propensities in the utilization of apology for a friend, both American and Chinese subjects illustrated more inconsistency than Korean subjects in terms of being obliged to apologize to a stranger. This suggests that American and Chinese participants were more influenced by the social distance than the Koreans.

Regarding the effects of social variables on participants' performance, Thijittang (2010) conducted a study to examine and compare the apologizing behavior of English native speakers, Thai native speakers, and Thai EFL learners. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used to elicit the required data consisting of 15 situations with diverse sociolinguistic variables of social distance, power, and imposition (severity of offense). The findings illustrated the effect of the mentioned variables on the subject's performance. With regard to social distance factor, the native Thai speakers apologized more frequently with acquaintances whereas Thai learners and

English native speakers apologized more to strangers or in unfamiliar situations.

In another study, Chang and Haugh (2011) investigated the discrepancy in evaluating the politeness of a recording of a naturally occurring intercultural apology by stressing on the feasible variation between cultures in the evaluation process between Australian and Taiwanese speakers. The results indicated that these two groups differed significantly in evaluating the politeness of apology. In other words, the cultural backgrounds of the participants affected their evaluations of politeness of the apology situations. In more recent study, Song (2015) examined the apology strategies produced by 56 native English (NES) and 54 non-native English speaking (NNES) students through emails sent to professors. The results showed that the most common apology strategy used by both groups was the explanation +IFID formula.

In the domain of request, Lin (2009) compared the use of different request strategies made by native speakers of English (NS-Es), native speakers of Chinese (NS-Cs), and Chinese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFLs). A sum of 3600 expressions of request was cumulated from 180 college students (60 in each group; NS-E, NS-C and EFL) by means of the Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The findings of the study uphold Blum-Kulak's (1989) generalizations on the conventionality of indirect request. First, although the same range and types of modals were utilized in Chinese and English, the preference orders and distributions of the sub strategies were different cross-culturally, which yielded inter-language deviations from what was observed in DCT from the native speaker English data. Second, the sub strategies were also different in terms of their forms, functions, and distributions.

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) investigated the relationship between social/situational and cultural parameters and native and nonnative speakers' use of request strategies. He investigated whether the request strategies of English native speakers and Greek learners followed the same trend across different social situations. He also examined whether the same social situations were perceived and rated similarly by the two groups and the extent to which the speakers' directness was affected by familiarity, power, and imposition. Results showed that there were high levels of cross-cultural agreement between the two groups for trends of situational variation. However, there was also some cross-cultural disagreement on the specific directness levels employed for given situations. Although significant differences in the speakers' assessment of social reality were likely to make clear the differences in their linguistic choices to some extent, this study argued that power, familiarity, and imposition alone do not always determine speakers' directness as other factors may intervene.

Regarding the studies pertinent to the use of mitigating devices in request, Nahar and Rami (2010) examined and compared the linguistic mitigation devices used by Jordanian learners of English and native speakers of American English in making requests in English in order to find the factors influencing their pragmatic request behavior. Ninety undergraduate students participated in this study. DCT was used to elicit the required data. Results showed differences in the utilization of requestive acts, type, frequency, and linguistic realization. The findings also showed that three factors, namely language ability, first language (L1) pragmatic knowledge and L1 transfer of cultural norms have influenced the nonnative speakers' linguistic choices.

Hiba Qusay and Salasiah (2011) examined the intercultural communication of requests in English between Malaysian and Iraqi postgraduate students at University Sains Malaysia (USM). The data were elicited by a multiple-choice questionnaire and DCT. Results showed that the two cultures performed differently in two tests. Following this study, Awad (2012) investigated the commonalities and differences in the use of request strategies by Malaysian and Libyan postgraduate students in USM using DCT and role-plays. Results illustrated discrepancies in the utilization of request strategies and mitigators between the two groups.

Regarding the above statements, the present study aims at extracting and categorizing the range of strategies in the speech act of apology and request among international students in Malaysia and to see whether three social variables of imposition, power, and distance influence the students' choice of request and apology strategies. So, the current study attempts to 1) describe and categorize the request and apology strategies used by international postgraduate students, 2) find the possible difference in type and frequency of the request and apology strategies made by international EFL or ESL students based on social constraints of imposition, power and distance, 3) investigate the effects of social factors on the use of request modifiers and 4) investigate the difficulties the international postgraduate students encounter in the production and comprehension of the speech acts.

#### *1.4 Research Questions*

Based on the past studies and the problem statement mentioned before, this study seeks to be crystallized around these research questions:

- 1) How do international postgraduate students produce the speech acts of request and apology in terms of frequency and typology?
- 2) To what extent do the social variables of social distance, social power, and imposition influence students' linguistic choices and politeness strategies in terms of two speech acts of request and apology?
- 3) To what extent do the three social variables of social distance, social power and imposition affect students' performance in mitigating the speech act of request devices?
- 4) *What are the problematic areas for International postgraduate students to produce and comprehend these speech acts?*

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

One hundred and thirty participants from different countries took part in this study including Iraqi, Iranian, Jordanian, Indian and Tunisian postgraduate students at three Malaysian universities. All the participants were full-time students of UKM, UPM and UM universities. English was either their second or foreign language. As they were all enrolled for a Master or Ph.D. degree, they should have participated in one of the formal English language tests (e.g., IELTS Grade 6.0, TOEFL 550) or they should have passed the university English Proficiency Test (EPT) with minimum score 3 out of 5. Since the participants did not have TOEFL or IELTS certificate, so they had participated in EPT and they scored the bands 1 and 2 out of 5, therefore their English language proficiency level can be characterized as "low". The rationale behind choosing low-proficiency learners is that there is little information available about how lower proficiency L2 learners understand different kinds of requests and apologies and, in fact, they have been ignored in most studies (Safont-Jorda, 2005; Vilar-Beltron, 2008).

### 2.2 Sampling Procedure

To select the required sample for the quantitative part of the study, the researcher conducted the convenient sampling. For the quantitative part of the study, the number of the sample size for the present study was 130 international postgraduate students as it is claimed for survey studies, the number of participants should be more than 100. For the qualitative part, however, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty international postgraduate students who answered the WDCT. As it is claimed by Dörnyei (2007), the sample size can be between 6 to 10 participants for interview. In addition, as Creswell (2008) suggests, a researcher should accumulate as much data as possible to reach the point that a person considers the adequacy of the gathered data which no new data are not attained. As such, the researcher attempted to gather as much data as feasible to reach the saturation point.

### 2.3 Research Design

This study employed a mixed methods design which is defined as an amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single research study (Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, it is a procedure of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell, 2008). The quantitative aspect of the study includes the evaluation of International postgraduate students' interlanguage pragmatic knowledge through the production of the speech acts. To this end, the Written Discourse Completion Tests/Tasks (WDCT) were administered to the students in order to gauge their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge. The qualitative part of the study, on the other hand, expands and elaborates on the quantitative results. With regard to the best way of expanding and exploring the quantitative results, Creswell (2008) claims that the best way to identify the additional or complementary information is asking the participants directly. This was conducted through an interview with a group of students who voluntarily participated in the interview in order to find out what difficulties they faced in the production or comprehension of speech acts. The respondents were asked to expand and elaborate on the responses they had given to the WDCT.

### 2.4 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

#### 2.4.1 The Written Discourse Completion Task/Test (WDCT)

A Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT), previously pilot tested by Liu (2005), was the main elicitation instrument of the study and interviews were also conducted to complement the data. The original questionnaires were adapted from Liu (2005). He reported the internal consistency reliability values for the two tests, 0.90% for request and 0.89% for apology and the values were basically satisfactory (above .86). To capture the reliability of the questionnaires in this study, 20 international postgraduate students were voluntarily chosen for the pilot testing. The inter-rater reliability estimates for WDCTs (apology and request) were satisfactory at around 0.92%

and 0.94%, for apology and request respectively which are acceptable indexes. For further evaluation of the reliability and validity, six students were requested to participate in the semi-structured interview. After that, the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. All of the participants stated that the tests are reliable and fair for tapping the pragmatic knowledge of the students. The two WDCTs were also showed to the three professors whose expertise was the pragmatics field at UPM university and they confirmed the tests' validity.

The WDCT was designed to elicit requests and apologies in verbal communication in the English language. A total number of 4225 expressions of request and apologies and 2700 mitigating devices altogether 6925 expressions were collected, coded and analyzed by means of the WDCT. The WDCT consisted of two parts. The first part comprised 11 social situations (1-11) to elicit requests and the second part, 9 situations for apology (12-20). The pilot study had already proved that they could effectively elicit request and apology strategies and a number of these situations had already been successfully used in other studies (Liu, 2005). Participants were given a short description of the situation, which specified the setting, the familiarity and the social power between the participants. Then, they were asked to complete the situation by responding to the situations. The social situations represented by this questionnaire varied along the dimensions of social power, familiarity and imposition.

#### 2.4.2 The Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted in relation to the students' production of the speech acts. These interviews aimed to gain some qualitative insights into the participants' views, beliefs and opinions regarding the issues of requests and apologies in a second language. Thirty students were interviewed and it was used as a complimentary tool. The interviewees were asked to comment on the difficulties they encountered in the production and comprehension of the speech acts. The interviewees were asked to take a few minutes to read their copy of completed questionnaire in order to familiarize themselves with the situations and their own responses again. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The total interview time collected was therefore approximately 600 minutes. The interviews were carried out in quiet places in the library. Before each interview, the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the interview, the estimated amount of time the interview takes, as well as the use of a voice-recorder. The researcher also asked the participants the permission to have the interview audiotaped. All the interviews were recorded by a voice-recorder.

#### 2.5 Data Analysis

The request strategies were analyzed based on analytical framework or taxonomy of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Patterns (CCSARP) for request and Olshtain and Cohen (1983) taxonomy for apology. The coding framework for requests distinguishes nine types of expressions that differ according to the level of directness. The nine expression types were classified into three main categories: direct requests, conventional indirect requests, and nonconventional indirect requests. A direct request was indicated in the utterance by grammatical, lexical, or semantic items (e.g., please lend me a pen.). A conventional indirect request expresses the illocutionary force by using fixed linguistic conventions (e.g., Could you lend me a pen?). A nonconventional indirect request is expressed by speakers making partial reference to the requested act (e.g., Do you have a pen?). For the analysis of the mitigating devices in request, a taxonomy developed by Alcon-Soler, Safont-Jorda, and Martinez-Flor (2005) was used in this study. The data were analyzed by two raters (researchers themselves) and inter-rater-reliability was established through consensus for both request ( $r=.87$ ) and apology ( $r=.92$ ). After transcribing all the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the analytical framework of Braun and Clare (2006).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Situational Variation of Request Strategies

With regard to the first research question, Table 1 shows that 65% of the strategies employed by the international participants belonged to the conventional indirect strategy level, 26% to the nonconventional indirect and only 8% of the whole strategies belonged to the directness level.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of main request strategy types in each situation

Situations	Strategy Type	Percentage
1	Most direct	20.8
	Conventionally indirect	75
	Non-conventionally indirect	4.16
2	Most direct	0
	Conventionally indirect	82.1
	Non-conventionally indirect	417.8
3	Most direct	0
	Conventionally indirect	95.8
	Non-conventionally indirect	4.1
4	Most direct	3.3
	Conventionally indirect	73.3
	Non-conventionally indirect	23.3
5	Most direct	32.2
	Conventionally indirect	41.9
	Non-conventionally indirect	25.8
6	Most direct	13.8
	Conventionally indirect	38.8
	Non-conventionally indirect	47.2
7	Most direct	0
	Conventionally indirect	84.6
	Non-conventionally indirect	15.3
8	Most direct	0
	Conventionally indirect	65.7
	Non-conventionally indirect	34.2
9	Most direct	3.3
	Conventionally indirect	66.6
	Non-conventionally indirect	30
10	Most direct	28
	Conventionally indirect	62.8
	Non-conventionally indirect	34.2
11	Most direct	13.8
	Conventionally indirect	52.7
	Non-conventionally indirect	33.3

The results also indicated that the participants strongly favored conventional indirectness in most situations (2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). In other words, the use of the three main strategy types (direct, conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect) follows a similar trend across the majority of the situations. As a whole, conventional indirect strategy occupies the first place and is opted out as the most frequently used strategy in most situations by the participants. Nonconventional indirect and direct strategies are the second and third strategies frequently used by the students. This finding is in line with the previous studies (Awad, 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Hiba Qusay & Salasiah, 2011) and it upholds Blum-Kulka's (1989) claim regarding the generalization on the conventionality of indirect request. This confirms the universality of pragmatic principles proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975).

There are two exceptions in this regard. Concerning situations one and five, the trend across these two situations is the conventionally indirect as the most frequent strategy, then direct strategy and finally non conventionally

indirect.

Looking at each situation more specifically, although situations one and six have the same social variables (imposition -, power =, distance -), conventional indirect strategy is the most frequently used strategy followed by direct and nonconventional indirect in situation one but regarding the situation six, this trend is not the same and nonconventional indirect, conventional indirect and direct strategies are the first, second and third most utilized ones. Although most situations have different degrees of social variables, they follow the same trend: conventional indirect, nonconventional and direct. This shows that the three social factors of imposition, power and distance had not that much effect on the students' performance. The exception is just situations four and eleven which the students made use of the same trend for both situations.

### 3.2 Situational Variation of Apology Strategies

In answering the first research question, as indicated in Table 2, the use of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), I'm sorry garnered the highest percentage of use (54% of the whole strategies) with an expression of regret (34%), an offer of apology (16%), and a request for forgiveness (4%) respectively. Taking on responsibility (35%), offer of repair (6%), and explanation or account (4%) comprises the second, third and fourth most frequently used strategies. Concern for the hearer and promise of forbearance (0.39%) are the strategies with almost similar frequency of occurrence among the subjects.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of main apology strategy types in each situation

Situations	Strategy Type	Percentage
12	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	56.8
	2) Explanation or Account	3.4
	3) Taking on responsibility	32.7
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	6.8
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
13	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	44.2
	2) Explanation or Account	4.9
	3) Taking on responsibility	50.8
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	0
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
14	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	54.5
	2) Explanation or Account	16.3
	3) Taking on responsibility	21.8
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	7.2
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
15	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	61
	2) Explanation or Account	5
	3) Taking on responsibility	33.8
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	0
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
16	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	61.5
	2) Explanation or Account	0
	3) Taking on responsibility	28.8
	4) Concern for the hearer	0



	5) Offer of repair	9.6
	6) Promise of forbearance	0.5
17	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	55.7
	2) Explanation or Account	0
	3) Taking on responsibility	37.7
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	6.5
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
18	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	58.6
	2) Explanation or Account	0
	3) Taking on responsibility	30.4
	4) Concern for the hearer	4.3
	5) Offer of repair	2.1
	6) Promise of forbearance	4.3
19	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	39.5
	2) Explanation or Account	3.5
	3) Taking on responsibility	37.5
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	19.2
	6) Promise of forbearance	0
20	1) Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	52.4
	2) Explanation or Account	1.6
	3) Taking on responsibility	40.9
	4) Concern for the hearer	0
	5) Offer of repair	4.9
	6) Promise of forbearance	0

Considering each situation, almost in most situations “IFID” strategy is the first most used strategy, except situation thirteen which taking on responsibility has the highest percentage of use and “IFID” is the second strategy used by all of the students. In addition, in situation 19, “IFID” strategy and taking on responsibility have the same percentage of use as the most frequent utilized strategy among participants. The strategy that was not utilized in all of the situations, except situation 18, is the promise of forbearance. In certain situations, the students have had similar tendencies in utilization of apology strategies. IFID, taking on responsibility, explanation or offer of repair as the most used strategies respectively.

In answering the second research question, the findings of the participants’ variation of request and apology strategies are illustrative that the three social or contextual factors of imposition, power and distance did not have so much effect on the students’ choice of strategies and the cultural and other situational factors may be intervened in this matter. While the subjects made the variations in their request and apology strategies by situation, they differed in their specific choices within each situation. This finding is in agreement with Blum-Kulka and House’s (1989) findings whose study of Australian English, German, French, Hebrew and Argentinian Spanish speakers’ requests showed that “while the overall distribution along the scale of indirectness follows similar patterns in all languages, the specific proportions in the choices between the more direct and less direct strategies are culture-specific” (p. 133).

Moreover, the results showed that the participants were significantly more indirect in most of the situations without paying much attention on the differences in situations in terms of three social variables. This confirms the fact that indirectness can have direct association with politeness which is tentatively in support of Brown and Levinson’s key argument (1978, 1987) that the social factors of social distance, power, and imposition are factors which can affect the selection of politeness strategies. This matter is in line with other studies (Abdolrezapour, 2012; Ballesteros Martin, 2001, 2002; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Fukushima, 2000;

Kwong, 2004; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012; Yang, 2009) on request and (Guan, Park, & Lee, 2009; Thijittang, 2010) on apology which showed that the speakers' strategy in each specific situation is affected by these social/contextual factors.

Noticeably, the findings of the interview from the participants regarding their perceptions of the effect of social variables on their strategy showed that the learners had difficulties or problems in choosing the appropriate form or strategy for the situations with different degrees of imposition, power, and distance; the participants had different perceptions of appropriate linguistic behavior. It can thus be claimed that they are deficient in the native-like sociopragmatic competence and their perceptions revealed an example of "sociopragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1983, p. 99). Such failure or incompetency takes place when learners assess and perceive the germane situational variables of social power, distance and imposition based on their native sociopragmatic norms instead of the target culture norms. Jaworski (1994) claims that correcting and overcoming the sociopragmatic failure, which is a social breakdown, is often much more complex and harder than linguistic one as this would entail "making changes in the students' own beliefs and value system" (p. 51). Therefore, they need to have more instruction and awareness in this regard.

### 3.3 Situational Variation of Request Mitigations

In answering the third research question, as can be seen in Table 3, the participants employed a higher number of external modification devices (66.66%) compared to their use of internal modifiers (33.33%).

Table 3. Percentage distribution of request mitigation types in all of the request situations

Modifications	Percentage
Internal Modifications	33.33
1) Openers	5
2) Softener	6
a. Understatement	0
b. Downtowner	6
c. Hedge	0
3) Intensifiers	1
4) Fillers	
a. Hesitators	0.18
b. Cajolers	0.50
c. Appealers	0.18
d. Attention-getters	21
Total	33.3
External Modifications	66.66
1) Preparators	3.5
2) Grounders	25
3) Disarmers	7
4) Expanders	3
5) Promise of reward	0.5
6) Please	27
Total	66.6

The most frequently used mitigating devices were please (27%) and grounders (25%) respectively among external modification resources. This finding is in line with Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1986) and Vilar-Beltran (2008) studies in that the use of external devices such as please or grounder is easier for nonnative speakers to produce. The use of please as the most frequently used mitigator shows that it is the most common and clearest marker of politeness. With regards to grounders, as it is used in most situations justify the request and use of it is easier since they don't require the good knowledge to be included in the request head act (Vilar-Beltran, 2008). It

also agrees with Sifianou's (1999) and Salazar-Campilo (2008) studies that please is one of the commonest mitigators in requests.

However, comparing the use of mitigators in each situations having different levels of power, familiarity and impositions, the results illustrate that the participants employed the most devices in situations eleven (+R, +P, +D), situation seven (-R, +p, +D), situation nine (-R, =p, +D), situation three (+R, +P, -D) and situation four (+R, +P, +D) respectively. R refers to imposition, P as power and D as distance. Our results suggest that the three contextual variables have some effects on the utilization of modification devices. The findings of this study is in line with previous studies (Ellis, 2003; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2009; Nahar & Rami, 2010) suggesting that the students tried to soften the threatening force of the requesting behavior.

### 3.4 Interview Results

In answering the fourth research question, the first question the respondents were asked was to know if they have difficulties producing speech acts in formal or informal situations. Twenty eight respondents believed to have more problems in formal situations than informal ones. Two interviewees just mentioned that they have more problems in informal situations. As mentioned above, most of the respondents (28 out of 30) declared that they have more problems in formal situations to perform speech acts. In addition, in order to realize difficulties the learners perceived in the production and comprehension of the speech acts, the researcher asked the respondents' own opinions. Having analyzed the data generated from the interviews, the researcher came up with a number of categories that are described below.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of factors affecting their production of speech acts

Factors	N/30
Grammar	13
Expression	10
Vocabulary	5
Structure	1
Comprehension	1
Total	30

As can be seen in the above table, most of the interviewees (13 out of 30, 43%) mentioned that they have problems in grammar in order to produce the language functions. The reasons they mentioned in this regard were lack of sufficient input, practice and also feedback, impracticality of workbooks as a source for practicing the grammar and more importantly insufficient knowledge of instructors. Another factor that the interviewees described as contributing to their weak production is using the appropriate expression. Ten respondents stated that they did not know the correct expression to use. They were either not fully familiar with the expression or couldn't distinguish the expression with a similar one in terms of politeness and face saving speech acts. The interviewees mentioned several reasons affecting this problem such as lack of knowledge in distinguishing formal and informal expressions, lack of exposure to different expressions, lack of awareness of contextual characteristics, impracticality of the expressions of textbooks, lack of practice and also feedback.

Another important factor the interview interviewees referred to is their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Five interview respondents stated that they had difficulties knowing the word they must use and mentioned vocabulary as their main problem. The reasons they stated are lack of exposure to enough input, the fossilization of some words, overuse of some words and forgetfulness of some words due to lack of practice. Among the interviewees, one of them stated that she has problem in structure. Moreover, only one respondent stated that she could not comprehend what the speaker says. She argued that she could not comprehend some situations due to her lack of general knowledge of English.

## 4. Discussion

As a whole, it can be discussed that the use of the three main strategy types of request follows a similar trend across the majority of the situations among the students. More specifically, as stated earlier, the use of a high degree of indirect strategies in requests and IFID strategies in apologies by the participants in most situations can also be credited to the idea of universality of pragmatic principles which is claimed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975). The discrepancy in the strategy choice which occurred in the apology and request situations can be

feasible variations in verbalization and conceptualization across diverse cultures as claimed by Green (1975) and Wierzbicka (1985) because the participants were from different cultures such as Iraq, India, Iran, and so forth and individuals from different cultures often have different viewpoints with regard to the social and situational parameters they are involved in and the relative effect that they associate with the factors (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Fukushima, 2000; Spencer-Oatey, 1992, 1993, 1997). This suggests that the different perceptions in terms of the social reality or norms hold by the participants can also result in the diverse linguistic choices made by them. (i.e., the request and apology strategy selections and the degree of directness/indirectness). The variations of the frequency or use of some apology and request strategies over others can be attributable to the different cultural values and norms of the subjects since language is to a great extent correlated or connected to its culture, and obviously there would be some problems to acquire the nuances in language that are so culture-dependent. As a result, this may bring about diverse frequency of the use of pragmatic strategies; especially speech acts strategies among different cultures.

With regard with the type of the strategy selection, some forms or strategies are more conventional employed more frequently than others, such as I'm sorry in English which is the most frequent used form or strategy for the apology situations disregarding the contextual variables and the preparatory questions such as could you or would you for the request situations with the highest use in all of the situations (Blum- Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Delen & Tavit, 2010). Blum-Kulka and Kasper (1993) state that speech acts are different in the extent to which conventionalized linguistic forms are utilized; some speech acts, such as apologizing and requesting, show more conventional usage than others do. The expression I'm sorry is the most necessary strategy in the apology speech act, which was observed by the findings of the present study and several other studies (e.g. Bardo, -Harlig & Hartford, 2005; Chang & Haugh, 2011; Garcia, 2009; Kasang & Lwanga, 2007; Thijittang, 210,) illustrating that it is the most commonly used apology strategy, and therefore is acquired earlier. On the other hand, the request for forgiveness strategy may only be necessitated for the situations with higher severity of offense. Trosborg (1995) also found out that the forgiveness strategy was less frequently used by both the native speaker and the nonnative speaker groups among IFID strategies.

In addition to the above-mentioned arguments and factors, Cohen (2008) asserts in this respect that there are factors on the learners' side which may hinder their ability to perform speech acts appropriately for the certain situations in which they find themselves (e.g., their language proficiency, learning style preferences, and personality). In this study, the participants were the low-proficiency postgraduate students and therefore, their language proficiency can be an important factor that had influenced their choice of appropriate strategy or form. Due to their lack of linguistic competence, they mostly made use of the same strategies for request situations regardless of the three situational factors which they had to pay attention to vary their strategies.

The findings of this study support the universality of pragmatic principles claimed by Austin (1962), Searle (1975), Blum-kulka (1989) and Delen and Tavit (2010). In addition, the pragmatic performance of the students may attribute to other factors other than language proficiency. According to Ellis (2008), it is highly possible that lower proficiency L2 learners lack the sufficient knowledge or have some difficulties to choose appropriate request and apology strategies in different situations. The participants were to a large extent of the same level of proficiency, in certain cases they dealt with identical apology and request situations differently. Such discrepancies might be attributed to other factors such as socio-economic and sociocultural backgrounds of the students, different cultural values and norms, lack of native-like sociopragmatic knowledge, negative transfer of pragmatic norms from their L1, the EFL/ESL status of the learners, to name a few. Moreover, the variations in the participants' performance can be attributable to the characteristics of the respondents such as their learning style preferences, test-taking strategy preferences and personality.

It can additionally be argued that the three contextual/situational parameters of power, distance, and imposition were not influential or significant on the students' request and apology production to a great extent. This finding challenges Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) claim that the variables of power, distance, and imposition are the most important factors influencing speakers' linguistic choices. Following the results of the study, a number of other situational and cultural factors can be also suggested as being more influential and significant on the participants strategy selection.

The findings of this study noticeably point towards an intricate concept relying on the culture-boundness of sociolinguistic factors. As Blum-Kulka and House (1989) point out, "the cultural factor operates in determining general levels of indirectness; it explains the differences between the indirectness means obtained between languages and cultures over and beyond situational variations" (p. 150). The picture which obtained from this study is a compound one and illustrates that a number of other overriding social, contextual and cultural factors interact with one another in order to give explanation to speakers' linguistic choices. Further research is required

for the complex ways with which these parameters intervene.

The findings of interview showed that the problems international postgraduate faced in producing the speech acts include grammar, expression, vocabulary, and structure. One respondent just mentioned that she had problem in the comprehension aspect. This finding can be justified by this fact that the learners encounter the production or use of the speech acts more commonly than the interpretation or comprehension of them (Khodareza & Lotfi, 2012).

The findings of interview can be discussed with another angle. As the findings of research question two showed, the students mostly made use of the same strategies across all the situations, although the situations varied in terms of the three situational factors of the power status, social distance and imposition. In other words, learners did not pay enough attention to the mentioned factors. Therefore, it can be concluded that they lack enough both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. The findings of the interview also support the WDCT findings since students had problems mostly in formal situations and they also lacked the grammatical or linguistic knowledge including grammar, expression, vocabulary and structure. In this regard, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) argued that “although grammatical competence may not be a sufficient condition for pragmatic development, it may be a necessary condition” (p. 677).

Referring to the limitations of the present study, a number of points need to be noticed in order to call for attention for future research studies. The first and foremost point concerns the size of the population which was small in number and the participants were solicited from the university students majoring in different academic fields, namely, postgraduate students at UM, UKM and UPM universities. As such, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this group and it might not be generalisable to other social groups. Therefore, one can widen the findings by incorporating other participants out of the academic context. Further research with other social groups and perhaps with a wider range of different social situations is necessary in order to draw more general conclusions.

Secondly, the data were cumulated by means of a WDCT as the main methodological instrument; therefore, it cannot be claimed that the data collected are exactly similar to naturally occurring interactional data. Last but not least, in this study gender of the participants and the residency duration of the postgraduate students in Malaysian context were not considered, therefore it is suggested that the future studies should take care of such variables.

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