The intersection of pragmatics and applied linguistics in teaching speech acts: Apologies perspective

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Abstract

This study dealt with the implication of the pragmatics research to EFL teaching. The study explored the effect of implicit teaching of apology speech act by native English speakers in elementary, intermediate and advanced EFL classrooms during eight successive weeks. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) taken from Tunçel (1999) with reliability of 75% was used as pre-test, and the DCT taken from Bataineh (2006) was used as post-test. The results of the data analysis revealed that learners' use of apology speech act improved. We also observed that intermediate and advance level EFL learners make different use of apology strategies depending on the situation.

Keywords: Speech acts, apology; EFL learners

1. Introduction

In recent years, English as a lingua franca has emerged as a means of communication between speakers with different first languages, which drives English teaching to become increasingly important in non-English speaking countries. At the same time, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers are trying to improve English learners' language competence comprehensively, so that English learners can communicate with English speakers effectively based on polite and proper verbal exchanges. However, despite being able to speak English fluently there is often a pragmatic dissidence in various speech acts that may reduce the communicative intent (Cortazzi & Jin, 2008; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Rao, 1996; Rao, 2002). In other words, a good-willed speech act in one culture may be considered ill-mannered in another, with a potential consequential result of misunderstanding or breakdown of an intercultural conversation, or may even cause offence to the other side. Hence, it is believed that an effective and successful

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communication between interlocutors rests upon proper and polite speech acts. Successful communication not only involves the participants' mutual understanding but also the polite and proper verbal exchanges. Evidence shows that people with different cultural backgrounds find it particularly difficult to communicate with each other (Fielding, 2006); also, the communication involving people from different cultures can go wrong more easily than those who share the same cultural background, because the meanings and understandings in some utterances associated with culturally specific conventions tend to be indirect and implicit. This means that a communicative flexibility is very important for comprehending the implied meanings behind some speech acts to achieve a satisfactory communication between culturally different interlocutors (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Olshtain, 1983).

According to Leung (2005), communicative competence involves both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. In other words, linguistic competence alone is not enough for a language learner to be competent as language is not just about syntax and lexis (Krasner, 1999). Language learners have to know the culturally proper ways to offer greetings, make requests, show apologies, express thanks, agree or disagree with others (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). They should be aware of behaviors and intonation patterns which are appropriate in their own speech community but may be considered differently by others with different cultural backgrounds. Language learners should also acquire pragmatic competence. Possessing this capability, language learners will be able to identify how different communicative functions are realized in English and how these communications can be successful in certain situations (Porter & Samovar, 1991). Therefore, EFL teachers should help students develop both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence (Gass & Neu, 1996).

Teaching English as a foreign language that aims at providing learners with a means to communicate effectively in real life situation cannot be restricted to instilling linguistic competence, but also has to consider the learner's need for acquisition of pragmatic competence, and thus, will reasonably provide contact with the culture related to the language (Rathert, 2013). Unfortunately teaching speech acts as a factor of pragmatic skill is not emphasized in most English institutes, high schools and universities; that can be the reason most EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings (Olshtain, 1983; Eslami-Rasekh et al, 2004).

Regarding the importance of pragmatics and its implication in ELT classrooms, the present study aims to investigate the act of apologizing with subjects from different levels of English proficiency in order to find out whether there are similarities and differences between their usage of apologies and whether they approach native speaker norms in using apologies. For this reason, the present study is designed to investigate the implicit teaching method of apology speech act and we intend to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the formulas used by intermediate and advanced level subjects in apology situations?

2) Are there any similarities and differences between their use of apologies?

3) Do they approach native speaker norms in using apologies?

4) Does implicit teaching of apology speech act by native speakers have any effect on EFL learners' pragmatic awareness?

2. Literature review

The development of applied linguistics has caused more and more focus on the relationship between pragmatics and language teaching. The language philosopher Austin (1962) was the first who introduced the concept of 'speech act', and his theory of speech acts was initially further developed by Searle (1969). Austin (1962) pointed out that, in their ordinary use of language, people not only produce utterances to merely say things about the world but also people produce utterances in order to do things.

Given the speech act as the basic unit of communication, Searle (1969) places speech act at the very crux of the study of the language, meaning, and communication. He proposes some terms that are commonly used for such as request, promise, apology, compliment, complain, or invitation. These descriptive terms for different kinds of speech acts apply to the speakers' communicative intention in producing an utterance.

The act of apologizing is called for when there is some behavior which has violated social norms. When an action or utterance has resulted in the fact that one or more persons perceive themselves as offended, the culpable person(s) needs to apologize. We are dealing here, therefore, with two parties: an apologizer and an apologizee. However, only if the person who caused the infraction perceive himself or herself as an apologizer do we get the act of apologizing. The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to "set things right" (Olshtain, 1983). As Marquez-Reiter (2000) states an apology is a "compensatory action for an offense committed by the speaker which has affected the hearer. According to Bataineh (2006) apologies fall under expressive speech acts in which speakers attempt to indicate their state or attitude. They add that in order for an apology to have an effect, it should reflect true feelings. As Searle (1976) states a person who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A so the apology act can take place only if the speaker believes that some act A has been performed prior to the time of speaking and that this act A resulted in an infraction which affected another person who is now deserving an apology (Olshtain, 1983). Apology speech acts have been investigated cross-culturally in order to find similarities and differences between the languages (e.g. Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Blum Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Cohen et al, 1986; Olshtain and Cohen, 1989; Owen, 1983). The studies have generally been carried out in situations where learners learn the target

language as their second language. The studies have shown that some learners employ language transfer from their L1, some learners approximate native speaker norms or some learners use completely different formulas different from the formulas they use in their L1 or L2. Having carried out a study with 44 college subjects and comparing the use of apologies in Hebrew and English, Olshtain and Cohen (1993) found that native speakers' apology forms are patterned and nonnative speakers deviate from native speaker norms because of transfer and lack of proficiency.

In a study on the use of apologies by Turkish EFL learners, Erçetin (1995) stated that EFL learners transfer the Turkish speech acts into English (cited in Tunçel 1999). She also carried out a study on the use of apologies and thanking with 129 EFL learners at Anadolu University, 50 native Americans and British speakers and 44 native Turkish speakers. He found out that EFL learners exhibited transfer in the use of apologies from their L1 in some situations and he claimed that transfer of the rules of L1 can cause communicative misunderstandings and failures.

Olshtain (1983) carried out a study with 63 college subjects (12 native English speakers, 12 native Hebrew subjects, 12 Russian subjects and 13 English speakers learning Hebrew at Teacher's College in Jerusalem) to compare their apology usage. According to the results obtained from his study, he claimed that English speakers' data differed from native Hebrew data and they employed transfer. He used the categorization of Cohen and Olshtain (1981) such as:

1) An expression of apology (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device IFID)

   a) an expression of regret (e. g. I'm sorry)

   b) an offer of apology (e.g. I apologize)

   c) a request for forgiveness (e.g. excuse me, forgive me)

2) An offer of repair/redress (REPR) (e.g. I'll pay for your damage)

3) An explanation of an account (EXPL) (e.g. I missed the bus)

4) Acknowledging responsibility for the offense (RESP) (e.g. It's my fault)

5) A promise of forbearance (FORB) (e.g. I'll never forget it again)

In another interesting study, Holmes (1995) looked at gender differences in apologies and found both similarities and differences between males and females. The most obvious differences of the study were the following three points:

1. Women used significantly more apologies than men did.

2. Women used most apologies for the hearers of equal power, while men apologized to women of different status.

3. Women used most apologies for female friends, whereas men used most for socially distant women.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

Data are collected from both native and non-native speakers. Subjects of this study are 20 intermediate level EFL learners, 20 advanced level EFL learners and 4 native speakers of English language (Table1). The data gathered from these subjects will be used to find similarities and differences between the groups and data from the native speakers of English will be used to find the native norms. EFL learners are classified according to their proficiency levels. Their ages ranges from 16-25. Native speakers of English are EFL teachers and their ages ranges from 23- 36 and all of them have been in Turkey for more than two years.

Table 1. Information about the subjects

Subjects	Number	Male	Female	Age
Intermediate	20	9	11	16-25
Advance	20	7	13	18-24
Native Speaker	4	3	1	23-36

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Pre-test

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was taken from Tunçel (1999) and it had been adapted from other DCTs used in literature (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981, Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, Tillett & Bruder, 1985 and Bergman an& Kasper, 1993; cited in Tunçel, 1999:57). The original version of the test had been pilot tested before the actual study. The reliability of the test was 75%. The test in this study consisted of 8 situations which were taken from Tunçel and they started with a description of the situation. The subjects were wanted to write the first thing that came into their minds. The situations in this study were organized according to the severity of the offense and social status of the apologizer and apologize (Appendix1).

3.2.2. Post-test

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was taken from Bataineh & Bataineh's 2006. The original version of the test had been pilot tested before the actual study. The test in this study consisted of 8 situations and they started with a description of the situation. The situations were organized according to the severity of the offense and social status of the apologizer and apologizee (Appendix2).

EFL subjects were also given a short background questionnaire to have an idea about their age, sex and if they had been abroad. Native English speakers also completed the background questionnaire, they wrote about their country of origin, age, sex and the duration of their residence in Turkey.

4. Findings

4.1. Pre-test

The aim of this study in Pre-test phase was to compare and contrast the use of formulas of intermediate and advanced level subjects in situations which required apologies.

The data revealed that the apology formulas of these two groups differed according to the situation.

The formulas they mostly used were more or less similar in situations 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

In situations 1 and 2 they mostly employed EXPL and IFID+EXPL, in situation 4 they mostly chose IFID+EXPL, in situations 5 and 6 they mostly preferred IFID+REPR, in situation 7 they mostly chose IFID+EXPL and in situation 8 their choice of IFID+REPR and EXPL+REPR were similar.

In situation 3 the formulas they used differed. Subjects in intermediate level preferred to use EXPL, FORB, IFID+EXPL, and IFID+RESP whereas subjects in advanced level used EXPL+REPR, RESP+REPR, IFID+REPR and IFID+RESP+REPR formulas.
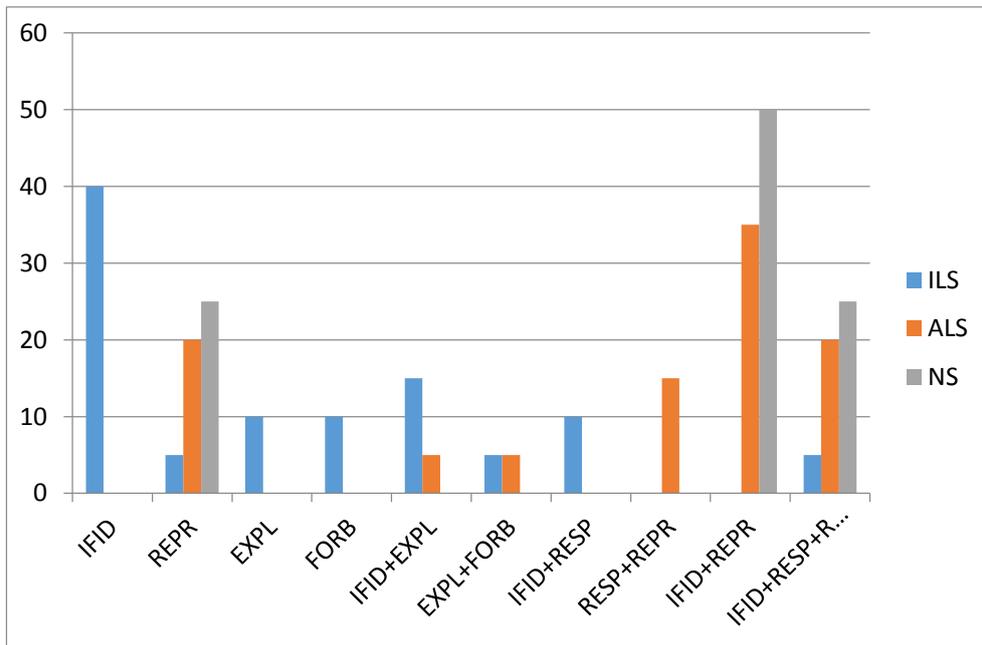
Fig. 1. Situation 3.

Although the formulas they used were similar in situation 4, subjects in intermediate and advanced groups employed other strategies. Intermediate level subjects preferred EXPL category mostly whereas advanced level subjects used IFID, IFID+REPR and IFID+EXPL+REPR. These categories were similar to the categories of native English speakers.
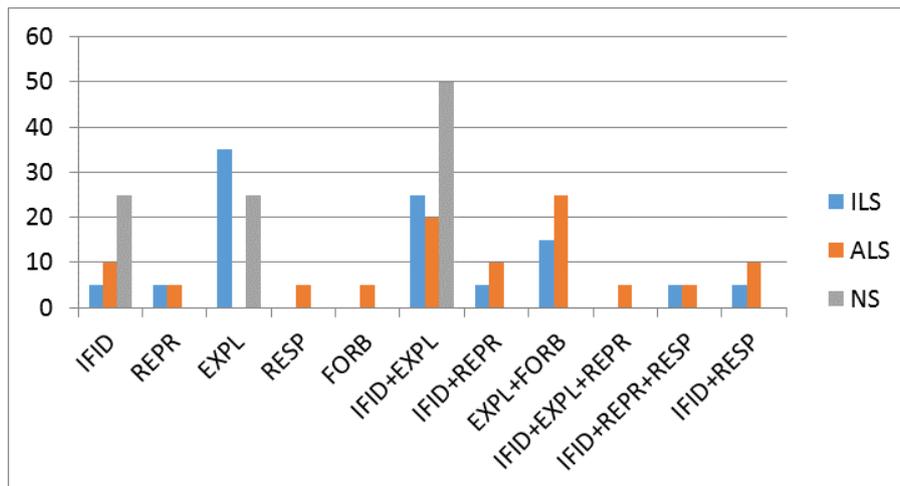
Fig. 3. Situation 4.

In situation 8 intermediate and advanced level subjects' use of formulas showed differences. Subjects in intermediate level preferred REPR, EXPL and IFID+EXPL mostly whereas advanced level subjects preferred IFID+EXPL, IFID+EXPL+REPR.
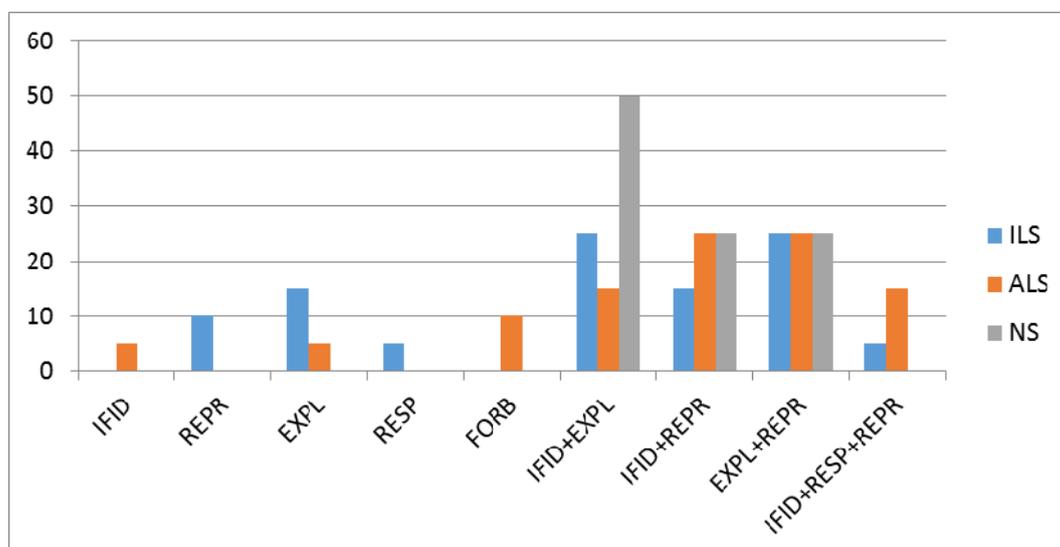
Fig. 4. Situation 8

Comparing the overall percentage of the use of apologies by the three groups, it is clearly seen that advanced level EFL learners involved in this research study, approach the native speakers' norms more than intermediate level learners.
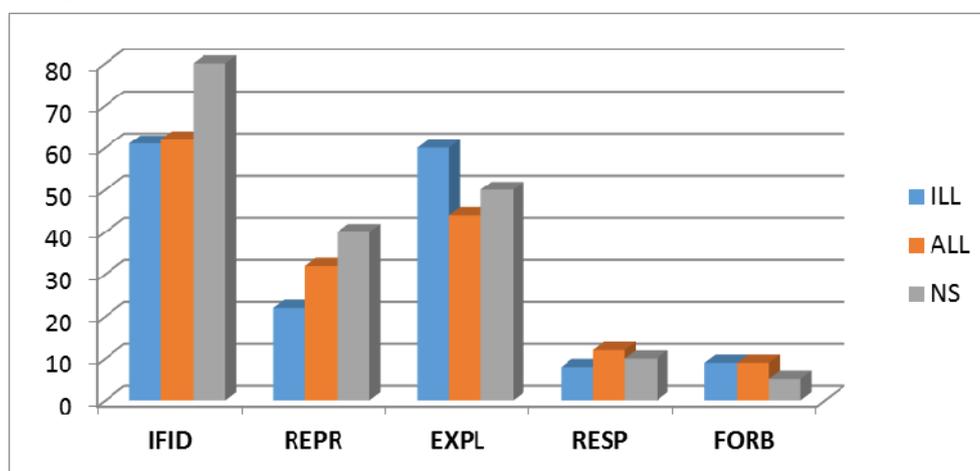
Fig. 5. Percentage of apologies use by elementary, intermediate and advanced learners in pre-test

Native speakers of English language mostly prefer to make expressions of apology rather than promising of forbearance (e.g. I'll never forget it again) or acknowledging responsibility for the offense (e.g. It's my fault).

Intermediate level learners try to explain the situation more than advanced level learners and native speakers; whereas in most cases advanced level learners explain less and prefer to make an expression of apology (e.g. excuse me).

Native speakers of English language are more likely to make an offer of repair than both intermediate and advance level learners.

All subjects are similar in taking the responsibility of the situation or promising of forbearance.

4.2. Post-test

The aim of this study in Post-test phase was to investigate whether implicit teaching of speech acts by native speakers of English language affects EFL learners' use of apologies.

The results show that both intermediate and advance level learners have approached native speaker norms in using IFID (an expression of apology, Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) and REPR (an offer of repair) in post-test.

In using EXPL (an explanation of an account), intermediate level learners approach native speaker norms more than advanced level learners.
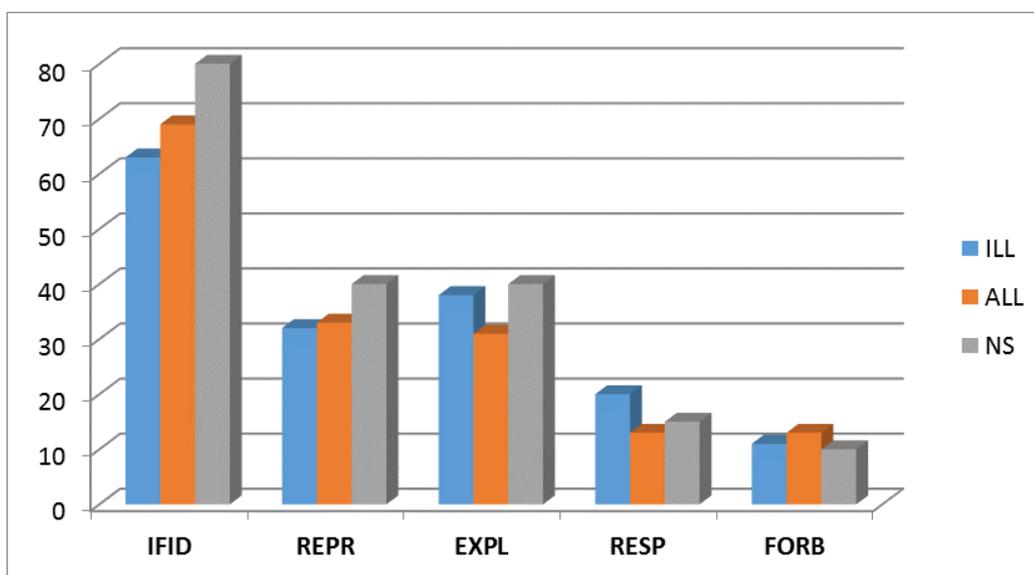
Fig. 6. Use of EXPL by intermediate and advanced learners in post-test

Regarding to results, intermediate level learners approach native speaker norms in using IFID (an expression of apology, Illocutionary Force Indicating Device), REPR (an offer of repair) and EXPL (an explanation of an account) in post-test.
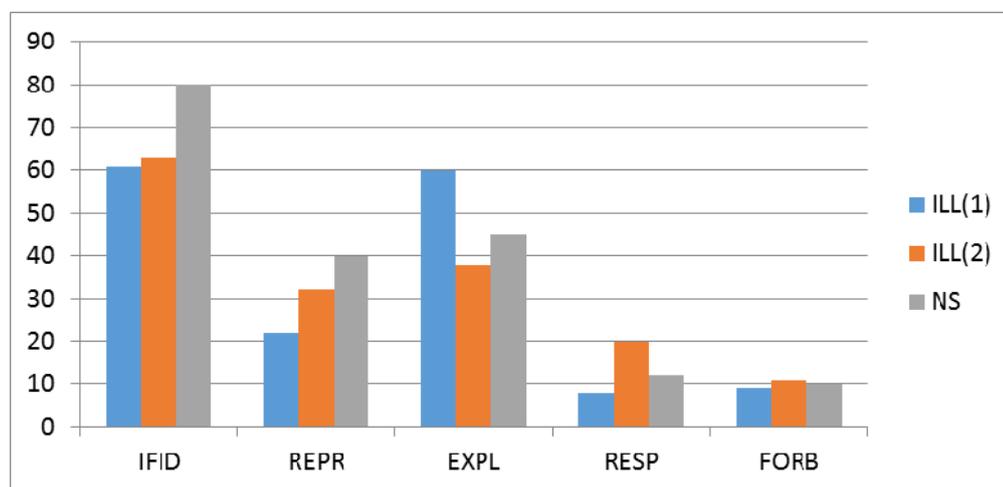
Fig. 7. Use of IFID, REPR and EXPL by intermediate learners in post-test

In case of advance level learners results show the change in using IFID, REPR and EXPL; however this change is not as sharp as in the case of intermediate level learners.
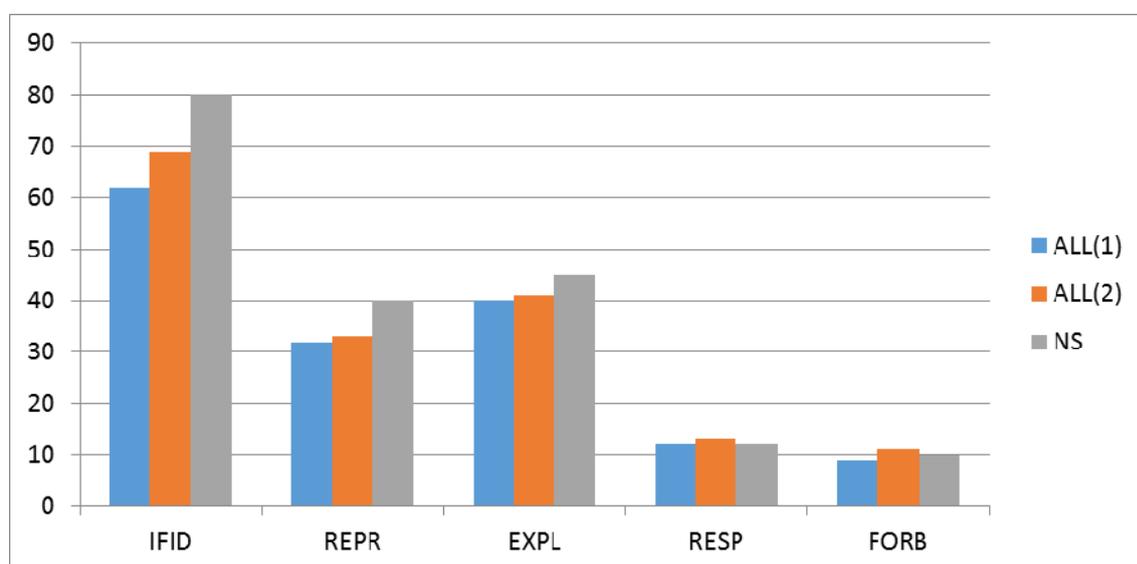
Fig. 8. Use of IFID, REPR and EXPL by advanced learners in post-test

5. Conclusion

This research study was an attempt to investigate the effects of using implicit teaching of apology speech act by native speaker of English language. The findings of the study indicate that implicit teaching of apology speech act was useful. A second finding is that EFL learners lacked pragmatic proficiency in English which makes them use some strategies extensively. Speech act is a language area in which performance is not absolute; therefore, we can't expect all learners to acquire perfect native like performance.

We can conclude that intermediate and advance level EFL learners make different use of apology strategies depending on the situation. In most cases, advance level learners approach native speaker norms better than intermediate level learners; however, in some cases, intermediate learners seem to use apology speech acts closer to native speaker norms. The results of post-test revealed that subjects from both groups changed their use of making apologies after taking lessons from native speakers in an implicit manner.

A tentative list of apology strategies, situations, syntactic and semantic formulas, keywords of apologetic expressions and their sequence will enable syllabus designers to meet the immediate needs of L2 learners for apologizing. The syllabus designers need to expose the learners to the patterns used most commonly by English native speakers. In this way the L2 learners avoid using repetitive use of apology "*excuse me*".

5.1. Implications for teaching

The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to set things right. Whether a specific discourse situation calls for an apology and whether a certain utterance qualifies as such an apology will depend on both linguistic and pragmatic norms. Teaching speech acts enables EFL learners to become aware of the pragmatics conventions of language use and cultural differences which constitutes appropriate use in English.

Trying to realize when, why, and how to make use of an appropriate realization patterns is essential. EFL learners often either fail to recognize these patterns or encounter constraints according to negative transfer in the recognition of various suitable sentences. Teaching speech acts helps the learners choose right and proper reply when faced with a particular speech situation.

5.2. Limitations

Findings of this research study are limited to speech act of apology; different studies on the other types of speech acts or other topics in pragmatics may lead to different findings. Besides, with the low number of participants, the generalizability of the findings should

be interpreted with caution. More reliable and valid results might have been drawn with more subjects participated in the study. The results are limited to a language institution in Turkey; therefore they should not be generalized to all English Learners. Due to lack of time, in the present research study the subject group took English classes with native speakers of English language for eight successive weeks; whereas longer period is needed regarding to the implicit way of teaching speech acts in the study.

5.3. Suggestions for further studies

Findings of this research study are limited to speech act of apology; similar studies can be conducted in the other types of speech acts such as requests, questions, compliments, etc. Other topics in pragmatics can also be studied. Similar studies are suggested with cross-cultural and inter-language aspects;

The effects of using speech acts in L1 and its effect on L2 can be studied. In a more detailed study, the role and frequency of intensifiers (very, really, so, etc.) used by English language learners can be investigated and compared with the native speakers of English language. In this research study we have investigated teaching speech act of apologies with a focus on implicit teaching by native speakers of English language. Similar studies are suggested with focus on explicit teaching by either native or non-native teachers. In the present study the researcher investigated the role of implicit teaching by native speakers of English language as a supplementary activity beside the regular syllabus of the institution. Other modules (e.g. supplementary videos, blogs) can be investigated in similar research studies.

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Appendix A. Discourse completion test

Dear Respondent,

I am conducting a research study in which I will be reviewing apology strategies used by EFL learners and native speakers of English to draw some conclusions regarding the way in which we apologize. The information gathered from this study will be used only for my project. All information gathered for this project will remain anonymous.

Thank you,

Giti Ehtesham Daftari

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME

Sex: ☐ MALE   ☐ FEMALE

Age: _____ years

Nationality:_____

Native Language:_____

Directions: Please write your response in the blank area. Do not spend a lot of time thinking about what answer you think you should provide; instead, please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation. Potential follow-up responses by the other person in each scenario have been left out intentionally.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

1.You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks:

Boss: "What happened to you?"

You:

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……

2.You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him to apologize. This is really the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the telephone:

Friend: "What happened ? "

You:

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3. Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent in the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily.

Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!"

You:

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……

4. You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after xeroxing a chapter. You held onto it for almost two weeks.

Classmate: "I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class."

You:

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5. You accidentally bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her packages all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too. It's clearly your fault and you want to apologize profusely.

You:

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6. Spending an evening at a friend's apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her.

You:

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7. Rushing to get to class on time, you run round the corner and bump into one of your fellow students who were waiting there, almost knocking him down.

You:

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8. You have forgotten to return the book you borrowed from your professor. On the staff corridor you come across your professor.

You:

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Appendix B. Discourse completion test

Dear Respondent,

I am conducting a research study in which I will be reviewing apology strategies used by EFL learners and native speakers of English to draw some conclusions regarding the way in which we apologize. The information gathered from this study will be used only for my project. All information gathered for this project will remain anonymous.

Thank you,

Giti Ehtesham Daftari

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME

Sex: ☐ MALE   ☐ FEMALE

Age: _____ years

Nationality:_____ Native Language:_____

1. You accidentally run into a well-dressed woman while in a department store. What do you say to her?

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2. You showed up an hour late for a meeting with all your colleagues. What do you say to your co-workers and boss?

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3. You borrowed your professor's book but have lost it. Your professor now needs the book back. What do you say to him/her?

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4. You were supposed to go a friend's birthday party but forgot because you had a paper to finish. What do you say to them?

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5. You forgot an important meeting with your boss. What do you say to him/her?

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6. You were playing with a friend's computer and erased the important paper she/he had been working on for the past two weeks. What do you say to him/her?

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8. You accidently knock an elderly lady over when getting off the bus in a hurry. What do you say to her?

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