



e-ISSN: 2600-7568

Available online at
<https://gadingssuitm.com/index.php/gadingss>

**GADING Journal for
the Social Sciences**

GADING Journal for the Social Sciences 28(2) 2025, 213 – 224

The Role of Culture and Social Relationships in Apology Strategies by Iban ESL Learners in Sarawak

Christine Jacqueline Runggol^{1*}, Kimberley Lau Yih Long²,
Jacqueline Susan anak Rijeng³, Imelia Laura anak Daneil⁴,
Jasmine Vivienne Andrew⁵

^{1,2,3}Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Samarahan Campus, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

⁴Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Mukah Campus, 96400 Mukah, Sarawak, Malaysia.

⁵Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah, Kota Kinabalu Campus, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 July 2025
Revised 18 September 2025
Accepted 26 September 2025
Online first
Published 01 Oktober 2025

Keywords:

apology responses
Iban ESL learners
sociolinguistics
pragmatics
speech acts

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v28i2.653>

ABSTRACT

Since young, the concept of apologising for one's own actions has been ingrained in our heads. When one commits a mistake, intentionally or unintentionally, one is required to say the magic word 'Sorry'. This is done not only to acknowledge one's mistakes but most importantly, to restore trust and further enhance good rapport between individuals. This study investigated the apology responses given by a group of Iban speakers of English in Sarawak as well as to address important issues and implications for English language teaching in Malaysia. Adopting a qualitative research design with two sets of DCT (Discourse Completion Task), the study collected data from 28 Iban undergraduates who responded to both scenarios in both English and Iban. Participants were required to write down their responses based on what they would say in reality. The findings of this study concludes that the Iban ESL learners employed various apology strategies when communicating in both Iban and English. However, certain factors such as the seriousness of the offence, social distance and social status influenced the frequency of certain strategies. Some strategies appear to be more prominent than others in specific contexts. These findings hold significant implications for language educators and curriculum designers. It is important to raise awareness regarding the importance of apologies in English communication and provide targeted instruction on appropriate apology strategies. Integration of culturally sensitive materials and interactive activities into the curriculum can enhance students' understanding and utilisation of apologies. Additionally, incorporating authentic communicative tasks that involve real-life apology situations can foster the development of pragmatic competence and instil confidence in employing apology strategies effectively.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Pragmatics' first appeared during the 70s as a subdivision of linguistics (Ugla & Zainol Abidin, 2016). It refers to the intended meaning of the speaker and the interpretation of that meaning by the

^{1*} Corresponding author. Christine Jacqueline Runggol *E-mail address*: christine@uitm.edu.my

listener (Roberts et al., 1992). Pragmatics explores how language is used in interactions and how meaning extends beyond literal interpretations. According to Leech (1983), pragmatics is made up of pragmalinguistic (how language is used during a conversation) and sociolinguistics (how social contexts influence language use). For example, when a conversation takes place between an employer and employee, the choice of words chosen by the employee will differ in the way he talks to his fellow colleague. This is done to show respect for his employee who holds a higher authority.

Apologies are not only used to show remorse or regret but also to foster social ties and harmony within a society (Holmes, 1990; Leech, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1994). For apologies to be considered acceptable, the perceived offender must firstly acknowledge the mistake made, convey remorse and offer to correct the mistake made (Soon, 2015; Elsafar et al., 2023). These three elements are crucial as it shows that the offender knows the impact of his action, which in turn will help to defuse the situation at hand.

The models of apology strategies have been extensively discussed in frameworks designed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Trosborg's typology (1994), which emphasise direct apology, acknowledgement of responsibility, justification, repair and promise of non-recurrence as key strategies. Reviewing these models is important as they provide a systematic lens for analysing how apologies function across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Prior research in cross-cultural field (Holmes, 1990; Murphy, 2015; Wilson, 2016) have shown that the choice of apology strategies varies significantly depending on sociocultural norms, gender, and the seriousness of the offence. Similarly, ESL and EFL learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their first language, which can result in the differences in apology performance compared to native speakers. This shows the importance of situating apology research within the second language contexts.

Accordingly, having pragmatic competence is essential especially in a multilingual setting like Malaysia. Malaysians navigate daily communication across multiple languages, including Bahasa Malaysia, English, and numerous indigenous languages. Miscommunication can easily occur if learners are unaware of the sociolinguistic conventions of apologies which may differ from language to language. Studies have examined Malay (Maros, 2006), Indian (Jamuna, 2015), and international students in Malaysia (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016), but limited attention has been given to the Iban community. As the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, the Iban have a distinct sociocultural norm, such as the emphasis of 'adat' (customary law) and the respect for elders, which shape communication practices, including apologies (Jawan, 1996; Sandin, 1980).

The importance of learning how to apologise properly has been stressed upon in the Malaysian education system (Yusof et al., 2011; Soon, 2015). Despite this, not much can be said about how the Iban speech community typically express apologies hence making this study meaningful and relatively unexplored area of study. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the pragmatic strategies employed by Iban ESL learners in Sarawak when issuing apologies in both English and Iban. By identifying similarities and differences in their apology practices, the research seeks to enhance knowledge of cross-cultural communication. The study is notable for filling a research void regarding the Iban community's apology strategies, and it offers valuable insights into the sociolinguistic factors shaping these practices within a multicultural context. Its novelty lies in exploring how educated Iban ESL learners navigate linguistic and cultural norms in expressing apologies. To achieve this aim, the present study was guided by the following specific research objectives:

1. to examine the pragmatic apology strategies employed by Iban ESL learners in Sarawak when issuing apologies in English.
2. to examine the pragmatic apology strategies employed by Iban ESL learners in Sarawak when issuing apologies in Iban.
3. to identify the similarities and differences in apology practices between English and Iban among Iban ESL learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies throughout the years, have indicated that the apology strategies employed by native speakers of English are very much influenced by the seriousness of offences (Holmes, 1990; Trosberg, 1994; Murphy, 2015; Wilson, 2016). According to Holmes (1990), in New Zealand English, speakers employ both single apology forms and a mix of different strategies based on the gravity of the situation. In addition, politicians who are native British English speakers tend to resort to more sophisticated and tactful language when they seek forgiveness from the party they have offended (Murphy, 2015). In Malaysia however, Malay speakers of English are very much influenced by their Malay cultural values in the type of apology strategies they choose to employ (Maros, 2006). Unlike their male counterpart, Malaysian women on the other hand tend to incorporate politeness strategies into their apologies (Saad, et al., 2016). Among Indian ESL learners, context has limited impact on strategy choice, except for gender (Jamuna, 2015). The seriousness of the offence also influences apology patterns (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016; Nasrudin, 2018). Malaysians make efforts to diffuse situations and professionally resolve conflicts when offences are committed (Paramasivam & Mohd. Noor, 2013). Apologising after committing a mislead is crucial in Malay culture (Abdullah, 1992), while in the Iban culture, seeking forgiveness is necessary to avoid misfortunes when offending elders (Jawan, 1996).

The term "sorry" in English encompasses various meanings and functions, including expressions of remorse, sympathy, or polite requests for clarification. However, explicit words or expressions for apology are lacking within the Iban ethnic group (Howell, 1908). Instead, alternative strategies are employed, such as non-verbal gestures of kindness and the use of indirect speech that does not explicitly acknowledge the offended person's emotions (Metom, 2013). Adhering to "adat", a set of logical rules and customary laws, is highly regarded in Iban society (Sandin, 1980). Upholding "adat" reflects positively on one's upbringing (Metom, 2001). The Iban culture emphasises respect for elders, as defying them is believed to attract "tulah" (curses) and misfortune (Jawan, 1996). The head of the longhouse, known as the "tuai rumah," plays a crucial role in mediating conflicts and upholding the community's "adat" (custom) (Sandin, 1980; Jawan, 2001). The Iban language has been influenced by neighbouring languages, borrowing terms such as "minta ampun" from Malay and "sorry" from English to convey a similar sentiment (Metom, 2013). These borrowed terms reflect ongoing linguistic interactions and cultural exchanges between the Iban and neighbouring communities, as they interact with people from different ethnic groups.

Despite apologies being extensively studied, there is a research gap regarding apology strategies in understudied speech communities like the Iban community in Sarawak, Malaysia. Sarawak is home to the Iban community, the largest ethnic group in the region and a sub-ethnic group of the indigenous Dayak people (Lim, 2022). The Malaysian Iban community in Sarawak holds a unique position within the country's multicultural setting, with many educated members proficient in several languages, including Iban, English, and Bahasa Malaysia (Ting et al., 2021). Even though English is highly used in educational setting, Iban remains as the dominant language used in the daily lives of its speakers. With the presence of bilingual Iban communities, it is crucial to study the apology strategies used within this particular sociolinguistic setting. Studies focussing on the Iban community, especially among educated undergraduates remains scarce. Much of the existing literature focuses on Western cultural contexts, leaving the Iban perspective underrepresented (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Kashkouli & Eslamirasekh, 2013; Al-Khaza'leh, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to address this gap so as to obtain further insights into apology strategies within a multicultural setting, leading to a rich tapestry of perspectives and practices of the educated portion of the Iban population.

3. METHOD

The study employed an open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as its research method. This approach was selected due to its common use in cross-cultural pragmatics research and its ability to collect a large amount of data efficiently within a short period, as noted in earlier studies (Al-Issa, 2003;

Bergqvist, 2009; Maros, 2006; Wouk, 2006). The DCT featured six scenarios adapted from Maros (2006), designed to mirror everyday interactions (see Table 1). Participants were asked to complete the dialogues, encouraging spontaneous and genuine responses. Factors such as social distance and the relative status between speakers and their interlocutors were considered to explore how these influence the way apologies are expressed. Content validity was ensured by reviewing and editing the DCT items before distributing the questions to the respondents. Two versions of DCT were designed- the English version and the Iban version. The English version was translated into Iban with the assistance of a native Iban speaker and an Iban language teacher. All 28 participants were required to respond to both the English and Iban versions of the DCT. This ensured comparability between the two languages and allowed for cross linguistic analysis of apology strategies. Participants did not have the option to respond in only one language. To enhance clarity, a pilot test was conducted with 10 Iban students to identify and address any issues in the DCT items and instructions. Adjustments were made based on their feedback, ensuring linguistic and cultural appropriateness. Inter-rater reliability was ensured through independent analyses conducted by four researchers, who referred to the conceptual framework adapted from Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Trosberg (1987) (see Table 2). Additionally, an Iban language teacher was consulted as needed to support accurate coding of the Iban language data. The sample consisted of 28 fourth-semester degree students from UiTM Samarahan, selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria. semantic formulas derived from the participants' responses. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Saturation was determined when no new semantic formulas or themes emerged from the data. After analysing responses across the six scenarios, the researchers observed repetition of apology strategies and no introduction of additional patterns, indicating the data adequacy had been reached.

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses was performed using NVivo software. The data underwent iterative coding and refinement to identify meaningful ideas and themes related to apologies. NVivo facilitated data organisation and exploration, revealing relationships and patterns within the coded data. The themes were then categorised into the semantic formulas outlined in the study's framework. Percentages of the semantic formulas were computed using SPSS. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which included the following steps: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This systematic procedure ensured the transparency and rigour in identifying apology strategies. These rigorous analytical procedures enabled the study to derive meaningful insights from the qualitative data collected.

Table 1. Framework of Apology Instrument adapted from Maros (2006)

Situation No.	Situation (Iban version)	Situation (English translation)
1	<i>Nuan siku nemiak Universiti. Nuan udah besemaya enggau Profesor nuan deka betemu enggau iya ba opis. Taja pia, nuan laun 15 minit ari jam ti udah ditetapka laban palan endur engkah entukar udah penuh. Nuan ngetuk pintu opis Profesor lalu tama ke dalam opis iya, Nuan lalu madahka Professor nuan</i>	You are a college student. You made an appointment with your professor at his office. But you were 15 minutes late because the closest parking place was full. You knock on the door, go in, and say to the professor ...
2	<i>Lebuh maya pansut ari palan endur engkah entukar, nuan ngelantak siti entukar sechara enda sengaja. Nya sigi penyalah ti datai ari nuan empu. Pintu entukar ke dilantak nuan tadi bisi balat bebekau. Orang ke beempu entukar nya pansut ari entukar iya lalu bejalai nuju nuan enggau ati ti pedis. Umur orang nya serambau enggau nuan. Orang ke beempu entukar : Nama nuan enda meda jalai? Peda nuan nama utai udah digaga nuan!</i>	Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily. He is an adult, about your age: Driver: Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!

3	<i>Nuan nemuai ngagai siti kedai makai "buffet". Sepengudah ngambi pemakai, maya nuan benung bejalai nuju mija endur nuan duduk, dia nuan teterap lalu sup ti dibai nuan naya ba baju siku indai tuai.</i>	At a buffet restaurant: You are carrying your meal to your table. When you are walking between tables, you stumble and your soup spills over an elderly lady's blouse.
4	<i>Siku kaban nuan ngemai nuan nemuai ngagai rumah apai indai iya. Nuan sigi suah kia. Lebu ba rumah kaban nuan nya, indai iya bisi mantaika siti kek ti chukup manis. Nuan enda ulih ngabiska kek nya, lalu ninggalka setengah ari kek nya. Indai kaban nuan: Enda rindu makai kek nya nuan?</i>	A friend invited you to his parents' house. You always go there. While you were there, his mother served a very sweet cake. You cannot eat it and leave half of it. Mother: Don't you like the cake?
5	<i>Nuan udah besemaya deka betemu enggau kaban nuan ba depan siti kedai kupi tang nuan laun 15 minit ari jam ti udah ditetapka laban nuan tetinduk.</i>	You were supposed to meet your friend in front of a café but you were 15 minutes late because you had taken a nap.
6	<i>Lebu maya dalam lif ti sekut sereta mayuh orang, dia nuan teindikka kaki siku orang. Umur orang nya tadi serambau enggau nuan.</i>	In a crowded elevator, you step on somebody's (adult-your age) foot.

Table 2. Framework of Semantic Formulas adapted from Olshain & Cohen (1983) & Trosborg (1987)

No.	Apology Strategy	Definition	Examples
1.	Avoiding or postponing apology	Speaker neither offers an apology nor acknowledges the need to say sorry. No expressions of apology are used.	<i>The cake is very nice but I am full / I didn't notice you there.</i>
2.	Direct apology	Speaker uses apology expressions.	<i>I'm sorry / Sorry / I apologise.</i>
3.	Use of intensifiers	Speaker employs the use of intensifiers to give force and emphasis.	<i>I'm very sorry / Terribly sorry / Sorry Sorry.</i>
4.	Providing justification	Speaker gives explanations why something happened.	<i>I missed the bus. / I overslept / I saved the wrong file.</i>
5.	Acknowledgement of responsibility	Speaker admits his mistakes	<i>My bad! / It is totally my fault.</i>
6.	Offer of repair	Speaker tries to make up for the unintentional mistake / damage he had caused.	<i>I will pay for the damages caused / Let me get you another bowl of soup.</i>
7.	Denying responsibility	Contrary to providing justification, the speaker avoids admitting his mistake. Instead, he shifts the blame onto others or circumstances	<i>They should have placed a signboard there / The closest parking lot was full.</i>
8.	Promise of non - recurrence	Speaker pledges not to commit the same mistake.	<i>It won't happen again, I promise. I will not be late the next time we meet.</i>

4. FINDING & DISCUSSION

The following section presents the patterns of apology strategies employed by the Iban community in both Iban and English languages. This analysis addresses the research objective of identifying and comparing how educated Iban speakers realise apology acts within their bilingual sociolinguistic context. By examining these patterns, the study uncovers distinct linguistic and cultural features that shape apology behaviours in the two languages, providing valuable insights into the interaction between

language choice and speech act realisation in a multilingual community. Table 3 summarises these key patterns, highlighting the similarities and differences in the strategies used across the two languages.

Table 3. Patterns of Apology Strategies in Iban and English

No	Type	Apology Strategy	Percentage (%)	
			Iban	English
1	Single	Direct Apology	17.9	13.7
2		Direct Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	5.4	12.5
3		Direct Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair	4.2	3.0
4		Direct Apology + Intensifiers + Acknowledgement of Responsibility	0	0.6
5		Direct Apology + Question	3.0	6.5
6		Direct Apology + Denying Responsibility	6.5	11.8
7		Direct Apology + Humour	1.8	0
8		Direct Apology + Promise	0	2.4
9		Combination	Direct Apology + Promise + Offer of Repair	0
10	Direct Apology + Offer of Repair		6.5	10.7
11	Direct Apology + Justification		33.9	23.8
12	Direct Apology + Justification + Offer of Repair		6.0	1.2
13	Direct Apology + Justification + Compliment		0	2.4
14	Direct Apology + Intensifiers + Offer of Repair		0	1.2
15	Avoiding Apology + Justification		13.7	6
16	Avoiding Apology + Justification + Compliment		1.1	3.6
17		Direct Apology + Humour	1.8	0
TOTAL			100	100

Table 3 displays the percentages of 16 different apology strategies in Iban and English, with a total of 168 apology strategies identified. The most common strategy in both languages is the "Direct Apology" (17.9% in Iban, 13.7% in English), where individuals explicitly express remorse and take responsibility for their wrongdoing. An intriguing observation is that the Direct Apology strategy exhibits higher prevalence in Iban compared to English, indicating a cultural inclination towards a more explicit and direct expression of remorse within the Iban community. This finding highlights the significance of accountability and accepting responsibility within the Iban cultural context. It is interesting to note that openly expressing emotions and engaging in direct apologies is not traditionally customary in Iban culture, as suggested by Metom (2013). Therefore, the utilisation of phrases such as "minta ampun" (which shares cognates with the Malay language and translates to "sorry") to seek forgiveness signifies a positive instance of pragmalinguistic transfer. In this case, the Iban speakers have incorporated pragmatic knowledge from their second language (L2) into their native language. This pattern aligns with Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) findings that learners often draw on L2 pragmatic norms to compensate for gaps in their L1, illustrating a process of pragmatic transfer also observed in other bilingual contexts (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). This transfer illustrates how exposure to second language (L2) pragmatic norms influences speakers, leading to the integration of these norms into their speech acts within the Iban cultural framework. The second most frequently used strategy, found in both languages, combines "Direct Apology" with "Acknowledgement of Responsibility," occurring 5.4% of the time in Iban and 12.5% in English. This combination reflects a greater level of remorse and responsibility by clearly admitting fault, consistent with findings in other multilingual and cross-cultural studies (Farashaiyan, 2011). Notably, in English, this strategy is often intensified with additional language (*Promise + Offer of Repair*) to amplify the expression of regret (0.6%), a feature that appears absent in Iban. Similar patterns have been observed in English apology corpora where speakers combine multiple strategies to express sincerity and repair social harmony (Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

The third most common approach includes an "Offer of Repair" along with the direct apology and acknowledgment of responsibility, accounting for 4.2% in Iban and 3.0% in English. This approach demonstrates a proactive intention to rectify the mistake and rebuild trust, highlighting the speaker's

readiness to take corrective action. Similar results were identified in New Zealand English by Holmes (1990), who noted that offers of repair strengthen the sincerity of apologies and enhance interpersonal rapport.

Other combinations, such as "Direct Apology + Denying Responsibility," "Direct Apology + Humour," and "Direct Apology + Question," also appear with varying frequency (see Table 3). In English, it is more typical to see questions or denials of responsibility following a direct apology, while in Iban, humour is more commonly used. These differing strategies reveal subtle linguistic variations in how remorse is expressed and serve different purposes, such as reinforcing sincerity, offering reassurance, or easing tension. This supports Trosborg's (1994) observation that apology realisations often involve complex combinations of strategies, reflecting sociocultural norms of face-saving and politeness.

The findings offer valuable insight into the apology practices of Iban speakers in both languages. When apologising in Iban, humour is often incorporated to build rapport and create a more relaxed and friendly interaction. Although "Direct Apology + Humour" occurs at a modest frequency of 1.8%, this pattern is sociopragmatically important given the risk of pragmatic failure if humour is misinterpreted (Thomas, 1995; Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, the appropriateness of this humorous approach depends greatly on the specific context in which it is used. For example, in Situation 5, the speaker likely intended to engage in friendly banter with a close friend. Nevertheless, if the same response is directed towards someone with whom the speaker has a more distant relationship, who is socially distant, the addressee may feel offended. Below is an example of such an exchange drawn from the data collected:

- Speaker : *Minta ampun wai.* (Direct Apology)
 [English translation: Sorry, friend.]
- Friend : *Ukai te sangat lela nuan nganti aku datai deh.* (Humour)
 [English translation: It's not as if you will melt while waiting for me to arrive]

While humour is not classified as a primary apology strategy in this study, it plays an important pragmatic role in social interactions among Iban speakers. Humour frequently serves to build rapport and create a more relaxed, friendly atmosphere during apologies, especially in close relationships. However, its appropriateness depends heavily on the social context and the relationship between interlocutors. For example, in Situation 5, the use of humorous banter likely functions as a strategy to maintain harmony with a close friend. When used with socially distant individuals, however, the same humour may become inappropriate or even offensive. This pragmatic function of humour complements but does not replace the core apology strategies identified in this study.

In the above example, the apology responses may sound impolite, sarcastic or rude to an English native speaker (Thomas, 1995). Such a response could potentially threaten the hearer's positive face, which refers to a person's desire to be appreciated and approved by others (Brown & Levinson (1987, cited in Ruhi, 2006). Consequently, when a person's positive face is threatened, their self-esteem can be negatively affected. This demonstrates the occurrence of negative pragmalinguistic transfer. Al-Issa (2003) and Kasper (1990) suggest that pragmatic failure can arise when different cultures interpret certain linguistic behaviours differently.

It is noteworthy that the participants tend to incorporate promises (2.4%) and subsequent offers of repair (0.6%) following a direct apology in English; these elements are not as prevalent in Iban apologies. On the other hand, both Iban and English apologies exhibit a similar trend of utilising a direct apology with an offer of repair, without the need for justification or promise, with frequencies of 6.5% in Iban and 10.7% in English.

These findings reveal notable differences in apology strategies between the two languages, emphasizing the need to understand both linguistic and cultural subtleties when expressing remorse. The widespread use of the "Direct Apology + Justification" approach—appearing in 33.9% of Iban apologies and 23.8% of English ones—raises important sociolinguistic questions. It suggests that in these cultures, people often feel compelled to explain or justify their actions even when they apologise. This tendency

likely reflects cultural values that prioritise providing reasons to preserve one's dignity or lessen harm to one's reputation. Comparable tendencies have been documented in Iranian and Jordanian learners, where justifications are frequently paired with apologies to minimise face-threat and maintain social balance (Kashkouli & Eslamirasekh, 2013; Al-Khaza'leh, 2018). However, Table 3 shows that, in English, this strategy is frequently paired with offers of repair (1.2%) or compliments (2.4%). Meanwhile, in Iban, it commonly accompanies offers of repair (6%) and, less frequently, intensifiers appear in English apologies (1.2%).

Table 3 also highlights the use of avoidance strategies, such as "Avoiding Apology + Justification," which occur at rates of 13.7% in Iban and 6.0% in English. Additionally, justifications are sometimes followed by compliments (1.1% in Iban, 3.6% in English). These patterns align with previous research indicating that in many cultures, speakers strategically minimise or shift responsibility to maintain face and preserve social harmony (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Shariati & Chamani, 2010). For instance, justification serves as a way to account for the offense while mitigating blame, a function observed in both native and non-native apology contexts (Chen, Lu, & Wei, 2022). Recognising such avoidance tactics is essential for understanding the underlying cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics prevalent in both Iban and English-language communicative settings, as responsibility acknowledgment norms differ cross-culturally (Holmes, 1990; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

5. CONCLUSION

This study offers meaningful contributions to cross-cultural pragmatics by revealing a variety of apology strategies used by Iban speakers in both their native language and in English. A key finding is that speakers frequently include justifications alongside their apologies, regardless of the language. Moreover, hints of humour are often added, especially in Iban, to help build rapport and strengthen interpersonal relationships. These insights expand our understanding of how apologies function differently across cultures.

The findings successfully addressed the study's objectives by (1) examining the pragmatic apology strategies employed by Iban ESL learners in English (2) analysing their apology strategies in Iban, and (3) identifying the similarities and differences between the two languages. In both languages, participants relied heavily on direct apologies and justifications, but cultural nuances such as humour in Iban and intensified expressions in English highlighted how sociolinguistic context shapes strategy choice.

Regarding English language teaching in Malaysia, the results suggest that instruction should extend beyond grammar alone. Educators need to cultivate students' awareness of the sociolinguistic and pragmatic conventions that govern communication within L2 communities. Such an approach can help minimise misunderstandings and improve communication effectiveness. Moving away from traditional, teacher-centered methods towards more interactive, culturally informed instruction is essential for achieving this goal. Teachers must encourage active student participation through diverse activities that facilitate knowledge transfer. However, it is essential to clarify that this study does not advocate for students assimilating into the target culture or abandoning their cultural identity. Instead, teachers should make students aware of sociolinguistic differences to prevent them from being unfairly judged by native speakers of the target language. Sensitivity is required when teaching cultural pragmatics, ensuring that students' cultural backgrounds are respected. Teachers should never demean students by suggesting that the culture of native L2 speakers is superior to their own.

Despite its contribution, this study has several limitations. The sample was relatively small (28 participants) which may limit its generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, as the data were collected through written responses to DCTs, the results may not fully capture how apologies are expressed in spontaneous spoken interactions. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, integrate oral data collection methods, and compare Iban learner's practices with those of other Malaysian ethnic groups to provide a richer understanding of apology strategies in multilingual settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/FUNDING

The authors gratefully acknowledge the undergraduate students from the Faculty of Administrative Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Samarahan, Sarawak, for their valuable participation in this study. Special thanks are extended to Miss Georgina Gading anak Jimbai, currently teaching Iban in a school in Sarawak, for her significant contribution in verifying and editing the Iban language used in the questionnaire. She also assisted as a secondary data analyst for the Iban language. The authors deeply appreciate the contributions of both the students and Miss Georgina, whose support was instrumental to the success of this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Christine Jacqueline Runggol conducted the research, drafted the manuscript, and contributed to its revision. Kimberley Lau Yih Long co-designed the research, supervised the research process, reviewed and revised the manuscript, and proofread the final version. Jacqueline Susan anak Rijeng contributed to the research design, supervised research progress, reviewed and revised the manuscript, and proofread the final version. Imelia Laura anak Daneil conceptualised the central research idea and developed the theoretical framework. Jasmine Vivienne Andrew contributed to the research design, provided overall supervision, and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, A. (1992). The influence of ethnic values on managerial practices in Malaysia. *Malaysia Management Review*, 3-8
- Al-Khaza'leh, B.A. (2018). Influence of social power on perception of speech act of apology by Jordanian second language speakers. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(1), 211-229
- Al-Issa, A. (2003). Sociocultural transfer in L2 speech behaviours: evidence and motivating factors. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 27, 581601.
- Bergman, M. L., & Kasper, G. (1993). Perception and performance in native and nonnative apology. *Interlanguage Pragmatics*, 4(1), 82-107.
- Bergqvist, T. (2009). *Compliment responses among native and non-native English speakers: Evidence of pragmatic transfer from Swedish into English* (Bachelor's thesis, Umeå University). DiVA Portal. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:291576/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.3.196>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, Y., Lu, Q., & Wei, Y. (2022). Use of apology strategies in emails by Chinese learners of English: Evidence based on naturally occurring data. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 782613. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.782613>

- Elsafar, M. A. M., Mustafa, H. R., Pathan, M. M., & Imani, A. (2023). Speech Acts of Apology and Request by Arab Postgraduates with Malaysian Supervisors. *Arab World English Journal*, 14 (1), 428- 448. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol14no1.27>
- Farashaiyan, A., & Amirkhiz, S. (2011). A descriptive-comparative analysis of apology strategies: The case of Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL university students. *English Language Teaching*, 4(1), 224-236.
- Holmes, J. (1990). Apologies in New Zealand English. *Language in Society*, 155-199
- Howell, W. (1908). The Sea Dyak. *The Sarawak Gazette*, Vol. 38-40, <https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=oc06-002>
- Jamuna, B. (2015). A Study on Speech Act of Apologies used by the Indian ESL Learners in Multicultural classes. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 208-223.
- Jawan, J. (1996). Conflict Resolution Through Consensus Building: Experiences from the Dayak Than Community of Sarawak, East Malaysia. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*. 4(2),121-127 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42990405.pdf>
- Jawan, J. (2001). Randau ruai: looking ahead for community consensus. *Jurnal Pusat Penataran Ilmu & Bahasa (MANU)*. Vol. 6 – 43-55
- Kashkouli, Z., & Eslamirasekh, A. (2013). The Effect of Context-External Factors on Context-Internal Factors in Apology Perception: A Case in Iranian Context. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 1590-1599.
- Kasper, G. (1990). Linguistic politeness : Current research issues. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 193-218
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman.
- Lim, H.P. (2022, Jun 16). Sarawak's population rises to over 2.56 mln in 2020. *The Borneo Post*. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/06/16/sarawaks-population-rises-to-over-2-56-mln-in-2020/>
- Maros, M. (2006). Apologies in English by adult Malay speakers: Patterns and competence. The *International Journal of Language, Society and Culture*, 19, 1-14 <https://aaref.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/19-2.pdf>
- Metom, L. (2001). The cultural life of the Iban: An overview. *Jurnal Pusat Penataran Ilmu & Bahasa (MANU)*,6, 75-87.
- Metom, L. (2013). *Emotion concepts of the Ibans in Sarawak*. Trafford Singapore.
- Murphy, J. (2015). Revisiting the apology as a speech act: The case of parliamentary apologies. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 175-204.
- Muthusamy, P. & Farashaiyan, A. (2016). Situational Variations in Request and Apology Realization Strategies among International Postgraduate Students at Malaysian Universities. *English Language Teaching*, 181-196.
- Nasrudin, N. (2018). Apology Strategies in Malay Among Malaysian University Students. [Master's Dissertation, University of Malaya]. <http://studentsrepo.um.edu.my/9100/8/nasiha.pdf>
- Olshtain, E., & Cohen, A. (1983). Apology: A speech act set. In N. Wolfson, & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 18-35). Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Paramasivam, S. & Mohd. Noor, T.N.H. (2013). Apology Strategies by Malay Learners of English in A Malaysian University. *International Journal of Education Research*, 1-14.

- Roberts, C., Davies, E., & Jupp, T. (1992). *Language and Discrimination: A Study of Communication in Multi-ethnic workplaces*. Longman, 1992.
- Ruhi, S. (2006). Politeness in Compliment Responses: A perspective from naturally occurring exchanges in Turkish. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 16(1), 43-101. <http://elanguage.net/journals/index.php/pragmatics/article/viewArticle/502>
- Saad, N., Bidin, S.J., Shabdin, A.F. (2016, October 25-27,). Refusal strategies used by Malay ESL students and English native speakers to refuse a request. In *Proceeding of International Seminar on Generating Knowledge Through Research*. Universiti Utara Malaysia. <http://ojs.umsida.ac.id/index.php/icecra>
- Sandin, B. (1980). *Iban Adat and Augury*. Penerbitan Universiti Sains Malaysia
- Shariati, M., & Chamani, F. (2010). Apology strategies in Persian. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(6), 1689–1699.
- Soon, L.B. (2015). Malay Sayings as Politeness Strategies. *Journal of Modern Languages*, 65-79.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning In Interaction*. Longman
- Ting, S.H, Tinggang, A. & Metom, L. (2021). Language use and attitudes as indicators of subjective vitality: The Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia. *Language Documentation & Conservation 15*: 190-218. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/24973>
- Trosborg, A. (1987). Apology strategies in natives/non-natives. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11(2), 147-167. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(87\)90193-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(87)90193-7)
- Trosborg, A. (1994). *Interlanguage pragmatics: requests, complaints, and apologies*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Ugla, R.L. & Zainol Abidin, M.J. (2016). A Study of Apology Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL University Students. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, 5(1), 32 - 38. <http://iaesjournal.com/online/index.php/IJERE>
- Wilson, T.J. (2016). The Use of Apology Strategies in English by Japanese University EFL Learners. *Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts*, 75-82.
- Wouk, F. (2006). The language of apologizing in Lombok, Indonesia. *Journal of Pragmatics*. 38, 1457-1486
- Yusof, M., Maros, M., Jaafar, M., & Mohammad Fadzeli. (2011). Oops Maaf : Strategi Kesopanan dan Penebus Kesalahan. *Jurnal Melayu*, 27-50.



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

About the Authors

Christine Jacqueline Runggol a senior lecturer in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan. She has vast experience in teaching students from various academic levels and backgrounds. Her research interest includes teaching and learning of English and sociolinguistics. She can be reached through her email at christine@uitm.edu.my

Kimberley Lau Yih Long is a senior lecturer in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Sarawak. Her main research interests are English language teaching and Applied Linguistics. She is also interested in teaching and learning innovations in ESL Classrooms. She can be reached through her email at kimberley@uitm.edu.my

Jacqueline Susan anak Rijeng is a senior lecturer in the Academy of Language Studies in UiTM Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan. She has been involved in English Language teaching and learning, research, invention, innovation and design as well as consultancy work. Her areas of interest include intercultural communication, assessment and creativity. She can be reached through her email at jacquelinesusan@uitm.edu.my

Imelia Laura anak Daneil is a Senior English Lecturer at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), with over a decade of experience in tertiary education. Her academic and professional interests focus on English language teaching, educational technology, and digital innovation in language learning. Passionate about improving student engagement and outcomes, she is actively involved in research related to digital tools in education, gamification, and 21st-century learning skills. Her work reflects a strong commitment to bridging traditional pedagogy with modern technological approaches. She can be reached through her email at imelialaura@uitm.edu.my

Jasmine Vivienne Andrew, PhD is a senior lecturer at UiTM Sabah since 2014 with a Doctorate in Business Administration in Marketing. She teaches marketing, management, and entrepreneurship, and her research covers Services Marketing, Service Quality, and Digital Marketing. Jasmine is active in international collaborations, consultancy, and has won multiple research awards. She can be reached through her email at jasmineva@uitm.edu.my.