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The Realisation of Request Strategies among Malaysian Chinese Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

The speech act of request is the most generally employed speech act in social interaction (Wang, 2011) and one of the essential areas in the field of study (Muthusamy, 2016). This study focusses on the realisation of the speech act of request in the academic context. Specifically, this paper aims to address the request strategies, level of directness and request perspectives employed by the Malaysian Chinese ESL undergraduates. Written Discourse Completion Task was adapted to collect responses from 60 undergraduates at a private educational institution in the state of Johor, Malaysia. The results showed that most participants prefer query preparatory strategy at the conventionally indirect level and used the hearer-oriented perspective in most of their requests.

Keywords: Request strategy, Malaysian Chinese, Speech acts

1.0 INTRODUCTION

On account of Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual polity, its people encounter various social interactions using diverse languages and dialects. With this composition, the language of communication often involves two or more languages. English language mixed and condensed with multilingualism forms a unique politeness perspective in daily communication. It plays an integral part in connecting people from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

Rose *et al.* (2006) pointed out that face concerns are significant within the Malaysian context, signalling that face-saving in a conversation is highly valued. The concept of face is an indispensable element in Malaysian culture, just like most Asian cultures, especially the Chinese community. In social interactions, politeness is essential, and people often expect it in any society, including Malaysia. Hence, being polite in making requests is critical to saving one's face to foster harmonious relationships and avoiding conflicts.

In Malaysia, speaking straightforwardly is often perceived as a rude and unpleasant act. On the other hand, if a message is conveyed indirectly, the message is regarded as polite or refined (Ramli, 2013). Malaysians are more implicit and indirect in communicating with others (Asma & Pedersen, 2003) to avoid offending or threatening their faces. In contrast, the United States and other western countries prefer direct and explicit communication to avoid confusion (Ramli, 2013).

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The speech act of request is the most generally employed speech act in social interactions (Wang, 2011) and the essential covered area in the field of study (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016). "A successful request requires pragmatic competence in performing speech acts" (Taw, 2014). How a speech act of request is realised concerns the politeness phenomena in a specific communication context. The realisation of the speech act significantly contributes to understanding one's culture in the speech community. Each speech community culture consists of social norms, values, and worldviews, leading to diverse speech act behaviours and preferences.

For second language learners, one of the primary objectives of learning English is achieving successful communication. However, pragmatic failure is one of the factors that can hinder such contact. Malaysian students undergo eleven years of formal English language learning (Darmi, 2013). Nevertheless, the lack of motivation, interests, cultural and psychological factors often inhibited students' English use (Yahaya, 2011). They may fail to acquire an appropriate linguistic form in a different social-cultural context, including making a request.

The lack of pragmatic knowledge, especially in request strategies, may lead to communication breakdown and causes misunderstandings. Furthermore, the complex and contradictory changes in society and economy demand more innovative educational responses from universities in Malaysia (Lie, 2008) to cater to the heterogeneous language background.

Previous studies on request strategies also mentioned that non-native speakers have inadequate pragmatic knowledge that hinders appropriately constructed requests (Zhu, 2012). Non-native speakers tend to transfer their first language socio-pragmatic norms into the target language. Lack of awareness of different socio-pragmatics rules and cultures can easily cause a misunderstanding of the speaker's intention (Kotani, 2002; DeCapua, 2004; Qin, 2003). In a practical and ethical approach to second language teaching, as Riley (2006) points out, the ultimate aim should not be cloning native speakers but creating competent foreigners who can express themselves effectively and acceptably.

While there has been much research on request speech acts across the countries (Taw, 2014; Yassin, 2018; Zhu, 2012), few have explicitly focused on how Malaysian undergraduates express their requests in academic contexts. To better understand how undergraduates formulate a request, the present study argues that there is a need to investigate the realisation of request strategies to provide practical solutions to the related problems. In the case of Chinese ESL learners' undergraduates in Malaysia who may have inconsistent pragmatic competence, identifying the request strategies, level of directness and request perspectives are the first step in addressing the problems and better understanding the request realisation patterns.

Therefore, the present study investigated the realisation of the request speech act among Chinese ESL undergraduates of a university in south Malaysia. In line with this, the study aims to address the following questions:

1. What is the preference of Malaysian Chinese ESL undergraduates with regard to request strategies in the academic context?
2. Which level of directness do the Malaysian Chinese ESL undergraduates prefer in the academic context?
3. Which request perspectives are most employed by Malaysian Chinese ESL undergraduates in the academic context?

Theoretical Perspective

The Speech Acts Theory forms the groundwork of this study. Austin (1962) mentioned that actions of words or utterances are 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous'; it depends on the success of the speech acts performed. When one asserts to make a request, it depends not only on the literal meaning but also on the social convention and institutional setting. Searle (1969) eventually refined his foundation theory. The current study's theoretical framework connects the speech act theory and the proposed construct of pragmatic competence from Lauglin *et al*. (2015).

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act of Request

Request, the speech act selected for the present study, belongs to the category of directive speech acts. It has the intended meaning of affecting the actions of the hearer in such a way as to get the hearer to do something (Blum-Kulka, 1991). The hearer can or most likely behave the actions implied by the directives. As a requester, he or she may hesitate to request due to the fear of exposing needs and making both parties lose face. In this case, the request serves as a face-threatening act to the hearer and speaker. The request act consists of two main parts: the head act, which performs the function of requesting. Another part is the modifier, which was initially known as supportive moves, further divided into external and internal modifications to mitigate or aggravate the force of request (Safont-Jordà, 2011).

   Considering that the requests have the potential to be invasive and challenging, there is a need for the speaker to mitigate the imposition involved in the request. Hence, the level of directness and the request perspectives have different impacts and interpretations on the hearer. In a more formal case, the speech act has high imposition when addressing an individual with more social power. In such a case, a higher degree of indirectness is needed to protect the interlocutor's face. On the other hand, where a speech act is with low imposition and produced for an individual in an equitable relationship, the degree of indirectness required is minimal.

Proposed Construct of Pragmatic Competence Model

The model proposed by Laughlin *et al*. (2015) constitutes the necessary underpinnings of pragmatic competence. The model provides a multi-componential perspective of the ability in language use generally. The proposed model is illustrated in Figure 1.1.
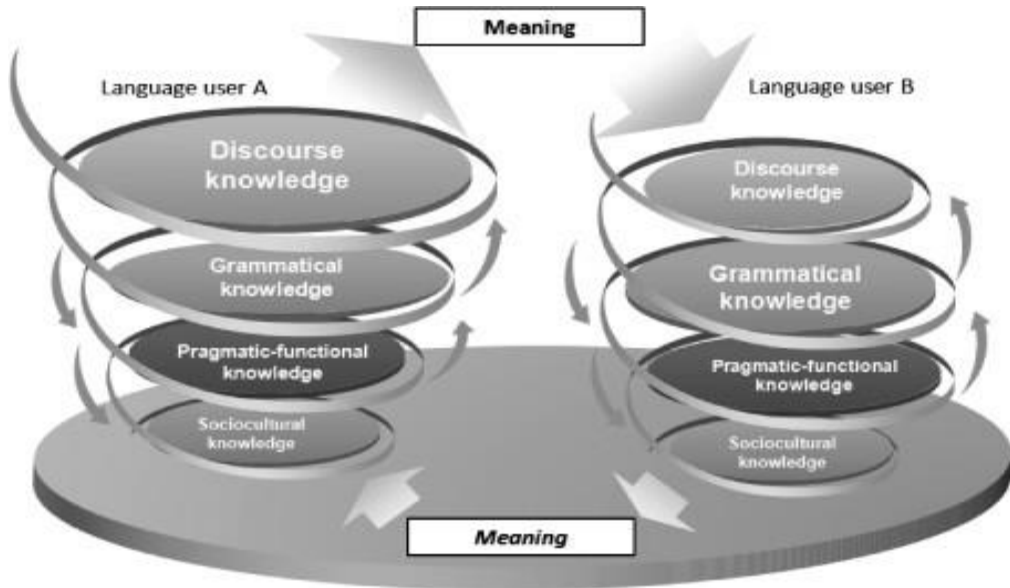
Figure 1.1 Proposed Construct of Pragmatic Competence (Laughlin *et al.,* 2015)

The model above illustrates that pragmatic competence consists of different sub-components of knowledge, primarily socio-cultural knowledge utilised explicitly in the realisation of the speech act in requests. The components of sociolinguistic are crucial to realise request speech act in a polite manner. According to the authors, the target knowledge in sociolinguistic knowledge encompasses "topic, role of participants, setting, norms of conventions and interaction, power relations, gender and age (p.16)", which are the factors that influence the choice of request strategies. Hence, the researcher refers that these subcomponents may affect the request strategies made by the participants.

Blum-Kulka Coding Scheme

Edmondson (1981), who first came out with the idea of the main act and supportive move, devised this coding scheme, and it was later modified by Blum-Kulka (1982), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and used in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) project. The coding scheme can universally manifest in three major categories: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (hints).

Firstly, is direct strategies, the most explicit request realised by syntactically marked, request precise demands, such as imperative. Secondly, conventionally indirect strategies: realised by referring to contextual preconditions inevitable to perform in conventionalised language. Third, non- conventional indirect strategies (hints): the open-ended group that realises he request partially refers to objects by relying on contextual clues. It requires more inferences from the hearer to derive the speaker's intent.

Request Perspectives

When making a request, a reference to the hearer, the speaker, and the act to be performed is generally involved (Haddad, 2018). The speaker possesses the power to select the request perspectives (Blum-Kulka *et al*., 1989). The responses from DCT are categorised into the types of request perspectives proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). As Blum- Kulka & Olshtain (1984); Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1989) identified, Australian English Hebrew, Canadian French and Argentinean Spanish speakers mainly take the hearer-oriented perspective.

In a request, the speaker-oriented perspectives indicate wishes for consent, and the power to control the speaker's wants belongs to the hearer. When the speaker chooses hearer-oriented, which uses the pronoun 'I' instead of 'you', the request is considered more polite as it prevents the hearer from regarding the request as controlling or imposing (Blum- Kulka *et al*., 1989). Given that request is a face-threatening act, avoiding naming or addressing the person involved softens the act's imposition. Thus, it is vital to include request perspectives in analysing the results to understand the request strategies better.

Using the abovementioned model, the findings of Al-Marani (2018) showed that native Yemeni Arabic speakers who made direct head requests tended to do so from the hearer's point of view. To demonstrate their comradery and consideration for others, the respondents used hearer-oriented perspectives in both direct and usually indirect techniques. However, the indirect head act of request made use of a number of viewpoints, including impersonal, hearer-oriented, speaker-oriented, and inclusive. To avoid external pressure, the respondents used speaker-oriented perspectives that were either inclusive or impersonal. A similar study conducted in The Republic of Macedonia revealed that query preparatory methods, which are a subset of conventional indirect strategies, are the most often employed types of strategies in both formal and informal settings (Daskalovska, 2016). In line with this, the study conducted by Karagoz (2018) in Turkey showed that, with the exception of one circumstance in which they asked a higher-level interlocutor for something instead of a person of equal status, ELT students tended to prefer traditional indirect request tactics. In other words, they seemed to struggle more with making a proper or polite request of a higher-status interlocutor.

3.0   METHOD

A qualitative approach was adopted to describe the phenomenon of language use in six request contexts. The data collected was interpretive and open-ended, allowing more in-depth and further probing to achieve the research aims. The qualitative approach aims to gain in-depth information about the realisation pattern of the speech act of request. Through voluntary participation, the participants were 60 Malaysian Chinese English as Second Language (ESL) learners. The purposive sampling technique was based on the first language and their willingness to participate.

This study utilised the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) adapted from Billmyer and Varghese (2000), a data elicitation method that collects vast amounts of "contextually varied and comparable cross-linguistic speech act data, used predominantly in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics" (Ogiermann, 2018). All 360 request utterances were placed under the appropriate directness level to gather the data, and the frequency for each situation was calculated. The frequency of request

perspectives was also tabulated. Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1989) coding scheme from the CCSARP was adopted to categorise the directness level and further analysed into respective request perspectives.

4.0   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This part is devoted to the representation of the results obtained from the WDCT.

Table 1.1 Types of Request Strategies Employed in Each Scenario

Strategy	Situation						Total
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**(%)**
Mood Derivable	2	1	2	22	2	0	29 (8.1)
Explicit Performative	0	2	0	1	2	0	5 (1.4)
Hedged Performative	4	2	2	1	6	2	17 (4.7)
Obligation Statement	0	0	0	5	0	1	6 (1.7)
Want Statement	1	4	0	2	1	6	14 (3.9)
Suggestive Formulae	5	3	2	1	4	2	17 (4.7)
Query Preparatory	41	44	52	26	39	44	246 (68.3)
Strong Hints	5	2	1	1	1	4	14 (3.9)
Mild Hints	2	2	1	1	5	1	12 (3.3)

Based on Table 1.1, it could be seen that the participants used the query preparatory strategy most frequently for the six situations. This strategy belongs to the conventionally indirect level; it is conventional because it is used typically across various languages. After classifying all request strategies

uttered, the findings show that participants demonstrated a marked preference for this strategy, 246 requests (68.3%) were made. This strategy was employed predominantly across six situations. For instance, when participants seek to ask for the permission of the hearer, the request utterances contained the ability modal, "Can" or "Could", as in situation 1 and situation 6, "Could you explain to me about the mistakes I've made in this paper?"

As seen below, the highest frequency of directness level is conventionally indirect (73%). A total of 263 requests were made in a total of six situations. The results indicated that the participants strongly favoured conventionally indirectness in all situations. Non-conventionally indirect request is the least common directness level employed by the participants. The findings found that the participants made only 26 requests (7%) under strong hints and mild hints. The highest usage of requests was found in situation 1, where the student requested the professor to explain the reasons for low carry marks. The findings indicated that the participants tried to use hints to realise the request. The use of hints can posit that the requester avoids the request's responsibility or intention. Thus, the addressee is obliged to make an inference to interpret the intended meaning of the hints. It is also difficult to consider hints as to the more polite form of requests, even though the intention is to avoid damage to the hearer's face.

Level of Directness

As inferred from Table 1.2, the participants produced 71 requests directly as their secondary preference for the use of direct strategies. Although less prominent, direct strategies still weighted 20% of the total requests. Among 71 requests, 21 direct requests (20%) were produced in Situation 4, where the students were asked to remain silent by the librarian. It is involved in a request from the superior status to the inferior status.

**Table 1.2** Frequency and Percentage of Level of Directness in Requesting

Level of Directness	Situation						Total (%)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Direct	9	9	5	21	13	14	71 (20)
Conventionally Indirect	44	47	53	37	41	41	263 (73)
Non- conventional Indirect	7	4	2	2	6	5	26 (7)

Request Perspectives

As inferred from the findings, the participants frequently emphasised the hearer's role in realising the request. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), the hearer is "under threat" from the speaker, so avoidance of mentioning the addressee (hearer) is to soften the imposition of the request. However, the findings show that most of the requests produced are from a hearer-oriented perspective. There are 245 requests (68%) that favoured the hearer-oriented perspective. This finding is consistent with Al-Marrani

(2018) findings where Iranian EFL learners preferred the hearer-oriented perspective more than other perspectives.

The highest frequency of this perspective occurred in Situation 4 and Situation 6, where the request was done by someone superior from someone inferior. This might contribute to the requester's social power because the requester is less concerned about the face loss on the hearer and the imposition of the requests. The superior status may cause the participants to think they have the obligations or rights to request from the hearer in an inferior position.
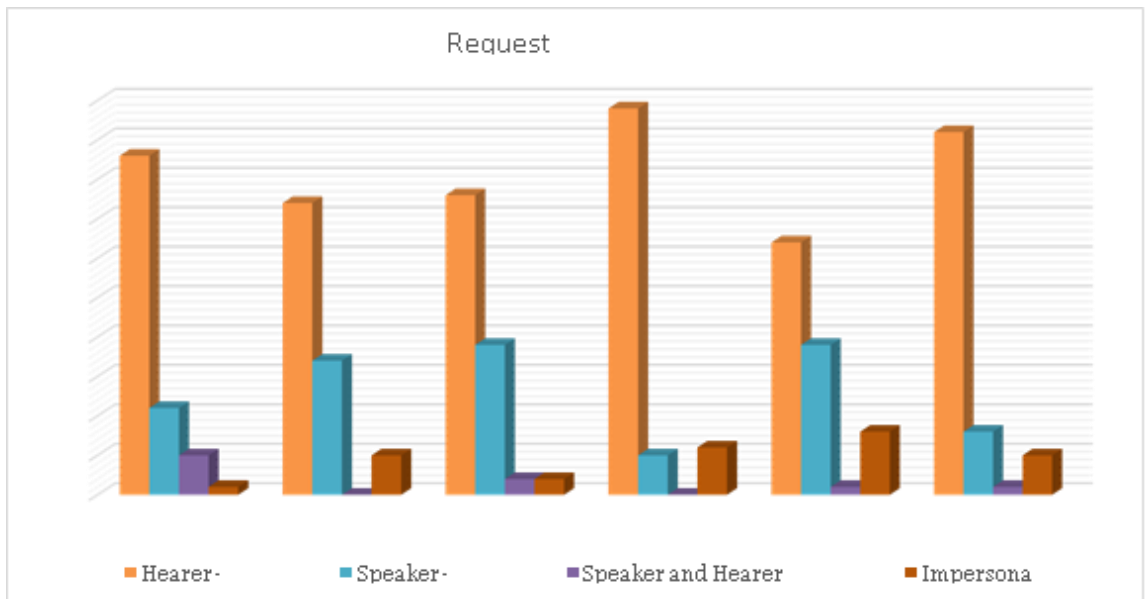
Note. Number of participants = 60, number of situations = 6, total number of requests = 360.

Figure 1.2 Request Perspectives across Situations

It could be seen from Figure 1.2 that the participants used the hearer-oriented perspectives in most of their requests. With the use of the hearer-oriented perspective, the speaker demonstrated to the hearer their desire to perform the request and stressed the hearer's role in his request. The participants might not be aware of using the pronoun "You" or "I" to minimise imposition, and the request does not threaten the hearer's face.

5.0   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Most participants showed somewhat limited use of modal verbs in the head act from the request strategy analysis, "Can you" and "May I". This might attribute to the negative transfer of the first language, the Chinese language, which might be translated from "Nǐ kě bu kě yǐ," i.e., "Can you…" and "May I…" i.e., "Wǒ ké yǐ…?" The expression indicates a request or hope for permission (Jiang, 2014).

Explicit performative is the least employed strategy for the participants. The studies conducted by Daskalovska (2016) and Karagoz (2019) seem to uphold that participants barely used explicit performative to perform the request. Both direct strategies ranked the lowest employed strategies, namely explicit performative and obligation statements. The result indicates that the participants were concerned about the interlocutor's face by avoiding the use of direct strategies. It could be inappropriate to request from someone with higher social power in an academic context.

The present study also revealed that the participants favoured direct strategies when they posed higher social power over the interlocutor. Besides, they choose to make the request indirectly when they pose lower social power over the interlocutor and interact with the equal status interlocutor. Hence, it can be inferred that social power influences the choice of request strategies. This may be due to the request's nature as a face-threatening act for the interlocutors involved in the situation. Hence, the participants vary their language use according to the interlocutor's social power.

The results reflected that Chinese culture specifically influences Chinese ESL undergraduates because of Chinese society's hierarchical structure. In social communication, the interlocutors generally have the prescribed roles in a relationship (Li, 2015). The lower social status is expected to show politeness and respect for the higher social status. In this study, the superiors are the professors, and the inferiors are the students. According to Li (2015), the correct judgment of social power and social distance is crucial for successful communication.

Taw (2014) suggested that the primary races share collectivist cultures, but there is a need to focus on using request strategies among primary races individually. Other ethnicities in Malaysia may not use the same request strategies and request perspectives. Communication may vary due to different cultural origins and expressions and the first language's interference. Hence, future studies could compare the use of request strategies between Malay, Chinese, and Indians to find out whether a similar pattern exists.

This research clearly illustrates the choice of request strategies, the level of directness and request perspectives among Chinese ESL undergraduates. However, there is a possibility to further develop the research by analysing other aspects of the speech act of request. Due to the time constraint on the research duration, other linguistic elements in the speech act of request, such as internal and external modification, are not ventured into in this research. While the number of participants may limit the generalizability of the results, this study still provides new insights into pragmatic competence by choosing one of the major races, Chinese, in Malaysia.

For further research, the researcher may provide clearer and more detailed instruction on the WDCT so that the participants can answer easily because the instruction was confusing for some participants. The researcher may explain each situation to the participants of the ESL or EFL learners to avoid misunderstandings. Furthermore, future research may include the factors influencing the choice of request strategy in a more robust methodology without the limitation of time consumption of research. The request utterances collected reflect a certain extent of the linguistic behaviour of Malaysian Chinese. For example, the pragmatic transfer that occurred, as mentioned in the findings and discussions chapter. Thus, it is recommended that future studies should address the interference of Chinese culture and the interference of L1 on the request utterances produced.

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