

# Advanced Chinese EFL Learners' Performance on Request

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## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to investigate the performance of advanced Chinese EFL learners in making requests in different situational contexts. Request, as a sub type of directives, refers to attempts made by a speaker to persuade or dissuade the hearer from performing some kind of action for the benefit of the speaker (Ellis, 2008). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, making a request is considered a face-threatening act since it involves imposing one's will on the hearer. Consequently, indirect request strategies are generally preferred by speakers as they help mitigate any potential imposition on the hearer's face. However, this is not always the case. Brown and Levinson (*ibid.*) argue that the specific semantic formula used by speakers depends on contextual factors such as power dynamics between speaker and hearer, social distance between them, and size of imposition involved. In other words, making requests requires language learners to consider various aspects including linguistic form, communicative function, and situational context; thus placing significant cognitive burden on them due to their limited working memory capacity. As a result, breakdowns in communication often occur when EFL learners attempt to make requests.

Over the past three decades, requests have gradually garnered significant attention in EFL research. The research has been pursued through three main avenues: (1) longitudinal studies investigating the development of request strategies among low-proficiency learners (eg. Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992; Schmidt, 1983); (2) cross-sectional studies examining EFL learners' perception of request strategies (cf. Carrell and Konneker, 1981; Matsuura, 1998; Olshtain and Blum-Kulla, 1985); and (3) cross-sectional studies exploring EFL learners' production of request strategies (cf. Rose, 2000; Trosberg, 1995; Tuguchi, 2006). Most of these studies primarily focus on low-proficiency learners due to their greater need for language learning and scaffolding. Among the limited number of studies conducted on high-proficiency learners, Carrell and Konneker (1981) compare 73 advanced and intermediate learners with 42 English native speakers in terms of their perception regarding the politeness level of request strategies. The findings indicate that advanced learners exhibit a similar understanding of politeness levels as native speakers, suggesting that with sufficient exposure to the target language features, less proficient learners can discern differences in request strategies. Previous studies on request strategy production (cf. Blum-Kulla and Olshtain, 1986; Rin tell and Mitchell, 1989; Jalilifar, Hashemian & Tabatabaee, 2011) have also revealed that high-proficiency learners' selection of request strategies and mitigating devices closely resemble those of native speakers, demonstrating their solid pragmatic competence. However, a distinguishing factor between advanced learners and native speakers is the tendency for the former to employ excessive alterers, syntactic down graders, and particularly supportive moves in their requests. This may stem from various factors such as L1 transfer or different cultural norms influencing language proficiency. Nonetheless, it is evident that there is room for improvement in terms of appropriateness in their use of request strategies.

Existing comparative studies primarily focus on analyzing language forms within specific contexts and overlook the influence of social variables (such as power dynamics, social distance, and imposition size) on learners' appropriate use of strategies. Moreover, there is limited research conducted on advanced Chinese EFL learners. Therefore, this study aims to investigate highly proficient Chinese EFL learners in four distinct situations involving requests through comparison with the performance of native English speakers.

It seeks to address two research questions:

1. What strategies do advanced Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of English employ to mitigate the illocutionary forces of requests?
2. Do the learners possess knowledge regarding how to appropriately adopt different types of request strategies based on contextual variations?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Two groups of college students participated in the present study: one group is 15 EFL learners and the other group is 15 native English speakers. The 15 Chinese EFL learners have nearly ten years of English learning experience. At the time of data collection, They were fourth-year English major studying at a teacher's college in central China. Not long before that, They had achieved a relatively high score of 70-80 (out of 100) on the Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM 8), which is considered as the highest-level English language proficiency test in China. TEM 8 assesses test-takers' language competence in listening, reading, grammar, translation, writing skills as well as English cultural knowledge, but does not include speaking assessment. The informants have limited cross-cultural exposure except for occasional oral communication with foreign teachers during Oral English classes. The 15 native English speakers (from Northern Ireland, Scotland and England) as a comparative group were first-year postgraduates studying Chinese at a comprehensive university in central China. Consent forms were completed by all participants before they took part in the study.

### Data collection

In order to gather request data for analysis, an open-ended role play task is devised encompassing two pairs of situations that vary in terms of the relationship between the speakers and topics. In essence, this task provides an opportunity to examine the impact of two contextual factors — social distance (D) and size of imposition (R) — on language use. The subsequent table illustrates the four situations wherein these contextual factors are investigated.

Table one: contextual factors and situations

D & R	Description
Scenario 1 -D, -R	Asking a close friend to lend you his/her note
Scenario 2 +D, -R	Asking a classmate to lend you his/her note
Scenario 3 -D, +R	Asking a close friend to lend you his/her car
Scenario 4 +D, +R	Ask a classmate to lend you his/her car

The aforementioned four scenarios represent informal situations that the informants encounter occasionally in their daily life, thereby enabling them to possess a general understanding of how to perform the speech act of making requests. However, these scenarios also raise a question for the informants: how can they differentiate between these requests based on subtle differences in each situation? Given that this research aims to assess the pragmatic competence of EFL learners with relatively high proficiency, our objective is to determine whether the learner's language use demonstrates sensitivity towards contextual variants.

Upon receipt of the four scenarios, participants receive instructions to thoroughly read them and understand

that their objective is to engage in a simulated conversation with the researcher for natural elicitation of request strategies. It should be emphasized that explicit information regarding investigation of request speech acts is not provided either during participant briefing or within the scenarios themselves. Nevertheless, if any queries arise concerning either scenario content or task requirements, participants are strongly encouraged to communicate them directly with the researcher. Following completion of these initial procedures, both participants and researchers collaborate on generating four recorded conversations which will later be transcribed for subsequent data analysis.

**Analytical framework**

The data collected from the four conversations were analyzed by employing a coding scheme developed based on a combination of request sequences presented by Ishihara and Cohen (2010), the framework used in Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), and the system applied to request research by Hudson, Detmer & Brown (1995). However, during the process of data analysis, certain problematic areas emerged that were not consistent or parallel with the three coding schemes. As a result, revisions were made to adapt the coding schemes to fit this present study. The revised scheme used for coding at three levels — alerter, head act, and mitigating devices — is presented in the following table. The head act was analyzed from both request perspective and directness level angles while mitigating devices were examined from perspectives of internal modification and external modification. A comprehensive analysis of these four conversations based on this revised coding scheme can be found in Appendix Two.

Table two: coding scheme for request analysis

Request		
<b>alerter</b>	1. Greeting; 2. Names; 3. Apologetic formulae	
<b>Directness level</b>	<b>Direct (D)</b>	1. Mood derivable; 2. performative; 3. Locution derivable; 4. Want statement; 5. Statement of fact
	<b>Conventional indirect (CI)</b>	1. Suggestive formula; 2. preparatory
	<b>Non-conventional indirect (NCI)</b>	1. Strong hints; 2. Mild hint
<b>Mitigating devices</b>	<b>Internal modification</b>	1. Interrogative; 2. Negation; 3. Past tense; 4. embedded <i>if</i> -clause; 5. Consultative device; 6. Under staters; 7. Hedges; 8. Down toners
	<b>External modification</b>	1. Lead-in; 2. Check on availability; 3. Consultative device; 4. Getting commitment; 5. Grounder; 6. Sweetener; 7. Disarmers; 8. Cost minimizer; 9. Gratitude; 10. Endearment; 11. Offering reward; 12. Apology; 13. Showing consideration to hearer

**DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In order to address the first research question, we employ a coding scheme to identify various types of request strategies utilized in the four scenarios. As previously mentioned, requests in English consist primarily of two components: head acts and mitigating devices. Consequently, this section will examine the performance of Chinese EFL learners by comparing it with that of native English speakers.

## Strategies in head act

Cross-cultural scholars posit that the disparities in request speech acts among individuals from diverse cultures are fundamentally manifested through the levels of directness and indirectness (Hudson & Brown, 1995h), which are contingent upon strategic choices. The subsequent presentation illustrates the distribution of primary strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers.

Table three: the distribution of strategies used in head act by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of English

Scenario	strategy	Chinese EFL learners		Native speakers of English	
		No. of informant	frequency /ratio	No. of informant	Frequency /ratio
1	D	3	3 / 20%	4	4 / 26.66%
	CI	12	12 / 80%	11	11 / 73.34%
	NCI	0	0 / 0%	0	0 / 0%
2	D	0	0 / 0%	0	0 / 0%
	CI	15	22 / 100%	15	24 / 100%
	NCI	0	0 / 0%	0	0 / 0%
3	D	4	4 / 26.66%	0	0 / 0%
	CI	11	11 / 73.34%	10	16 / 64%
	NCI	0	0 / 0%	7	9 / 36%
4	D	0	0 / 0%	0	0 / 0%
	CI	13	16 / 80%	9	12 / 54.5%
	NCI	4	4 / 20%	8	10 / 45.5%

The findings from Table three indicate that direct strategy is the least frequently employed by English participants. It is observed solely in Scenario 1 (asking a close friend to lend you his/her note), where both interlocutors share a close relationship and possess equal social status, resulting in minimal imposition of the speech act. Consequently, approximately 26.66% of participants opt for utilizing the direct strategy.

Chinese EFL learners employ direct strategy in both Scenario 1 and 3. In Scenario 1, the perspectives of Chinese EFL learners align relatively well with those of native English speakers. However, in Scenario 3, while four Chinese participants utilize this strategy, none of the native English speakers do so. This could be attributed to a few Chinese participants placing excessive emphasis on social distance while overlooking the imposition factor, which is prominent in Scenario 3 due to the topic being about borrowing a car. The overuse of the direct strategy renders their requests rigid and brusque.

Conventional indirect requests are the preferred strategy among both Chinese and English speakers in all scenarios, particularly in Scenario 2 where it accounts for 100% frequency for both groups. In this scenario, the communicators exhibit a relatively longer social distance compared to Scenario 1, as they are merely classmates. When participants are less acquainted with each other, their social distance increases, necessitating more indirect requests. Consequently, all participants opt for indirect communication in this scenario. Furthermore, due to the low level of imposition associated with these requests, no one employs unconventional indirect strategies.

The difference between Chinese and English subjects lies in the utilization of unconventional indirect requests. Among Chinese EFL learners, this strategy is least commonly employed, with a frequency of only

20% observed in Scenario 4 (asking a classmate to lend a car). The speakers opt for this strategy due to its higher degree of imposition and greater social distance. But among English participants, its frequency is second only to the conventional indirect strategy, as it appears in Scenario 3 and 4. This is due to the fact that these scenarios involve borrowing a car, which entails an extremely high level of imposition. In individualistic Western societies, cars are considered private property and the interior of a car is regarded as an individual’s personal space. Violating these boundaries is seen as equivalent to infringing upon personal rights and privacy. Consequently, borrowing a car is perceived as highly invasive behavior. However, in Chinese culture where collectivism prevails, discussions on privacy rights have emerged only in recent decades. Borrowing cars has little impact on privacy concerns and therefore EFL learners from China do not recognize it as an action with extreme imposition. This explains why no Chinese subjects choose this particular strategy in Scenario 3.

**Mitigating devices**

The mitigating devices employed in requests can be categorized into two distinct groups: external modifiers and internal modifiers, which have also garnered significant attention from scholars engaged in cross-cultural studies. These devices function akin to lubricants, imparting a gentler and more polite tone to the requests.

External modifiers refers to adding additional clauses to lay the groundwork for head act, which make the request more easily accepted by others. The commonly used external modifiers in English include grounder (“*I have asked my classmates and they told me that you are the only one who owns a car*”); disarmer (“*Not too long. Just a week.*”); getting commitment (“*Can you do me a favor?*”); offering reward (“*After the exam, we can eat out. I will pay the bill.*”). The following table lists the use of external modifiers by the two groups.

External modifiers refer to the inclusion of additional clauses that lay a groundwork for the head act, thereby enhancing the likelihood of others accepting the request more readily. Commonly employed external modifiers in English encompass grounder (e.g., “*I have asked my classmates and they told me that you are the only one who owns a car*”); disarmer (e.g., “*Not too long. Just a week.*”); getting commitment (e.g., “*Can you do me a favor?*”); offering reward (e.g., “*After the exam, we can eat out. I will pay the bill.*”). The subsequent table presents an overview of how these external modifiers are utilized by both groups.

Table four: the distribution of external modifiers by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of English

External modifiers	Chinese EFL learners	Native speakers of English
grounder	102	136
Getting commitment	47	66
disarmer	10	47
Offering reward	6	12

It can be observed that grounder strategy is highly favored among both groups, as it effectively implies the necessity of the request to the other party, thereby reducing any sense of compulsion associated with the request. This strategy aligns with positive politeness in speech act (Brown & Levison, 1987). Additionally, employing a getting commitment strategy allows the requester to establish a solid rapport with the requested party, which proves beneficial for making successful requests. By utilizing a disarmer technique, the requester demonstrates their understanding of the situation and consequently eliminates potential reasons for rejection. Furthermore, offering rewards serves to pique interest in engaging in the request speech act by eliciting motivation from participants. Although Chinese EFL learners adopt all four strategies and exhibit a

preference order similar to native English speakers', these strategies are employed less frequently.

Internal modifiers are employed in request speech acts through the use of grammatical and lexical means. This study specifically focuses on the lexical strategies utilized by the subjects, revealing that frequently used strategies include down toner ("*I wonder if you could possibly help me*"); hedges ("*Do you mind if I kind of sit here*"); under stater ("*Could you lend me your car for a while?*"). The findings indicate that native English speakers employ these devices up to 56 times, whereas their Chinese counterparts only utilize them 11 times, aligning with He's research (2003) suggesting that these small words are among the most commonly used words by native English speakers in daily life; however, Chinese learners demonstrate less frequent usage and limited variation. Despite not directly impacting grammatical accuracy or sentence completeness, the significance of these linguistic markers is often overlooked by students and teachers in oral communication. Consequently, many learners struggle with appropriate usage of them in spoken language.

### Appropriateness of request strategy use

To address the second research question, a deeper analysis of the corpus is necessary to determine whether the speaker exhibits sensitivity towards situational variants. By utilizing a comparative approach across different role plays, it was found that the speaker adapts his request strategies based on varying situations, demonstrating their sensitivity. This can be further expounded upon in three aspects: (1) alterer. When conversing with close friends in situation one and three, speakers use "*Hi, Ming*" or "*Hello, dear*" (greeting + first name / endearment address), or even directly address the name of the interlocutor, whereas when speaking with classmates in situation two and four, they either employ "greeting + first name" or "*sorry, Wang Xin*" or "*Excuse me, Wang Xin*" (apologetic formula + full name). This research result aligns with Liu's (2014), who discovered that the use of both "Excuse me" and "Hi / Hello" is to draw the other party's attention, and apologetic formula and greeting form appropriately show diverse social distance between interlocutors; (2) level of directness. In situations one and two, which revolve around the topic of borrowing notes from someone (a less imposing situation), speakers present the requests more directly as "*Can you lend your note to me?*" and "*you can help me to prepare for the exam*", whereas in situations three and four, where asking to borrow a car from someone is considered more imposing, Informant Eight slightly disguises the requests to make them less imposing by saying "*Can we drive your car in turn on our way to Enshi?*" and "*then how about we going together?*". In these two requests, the informant transforms lending a car (hearer-oriented) into driving it together (both hearer-and speaker-oriented), which is a cunning yet typical Chinese approach to making a request that compensates for any potential offense. Therefore, we can observe L1 transfer's influence here, indicating that the informant understands that when making a request, it is often perceived as an imposition on the hearer; thus avoiding explicitly naming it as responsible for performing the action helps soften its impact (Blum-Kulka & Olshta in, 1984); (3) External modifications. In situation three, when requesting to borrow a car from a close friend, Informant Eight justifies her request by stating that "*but driving your car can save us a sum of money*", thereby highlighting the potential benefit for herself while subtly attempting to create an inclusive perspective using the word "us". Conversely, in scenario four, the same informant provides a reason for borrowing a car from one classmate as 'I have asked my classmates and they informed me that you are the only one who owns a car', which serves to rationalize her behavior and minimize any imposition "*I have asked my classmates and they told me that you are the only one who owns a car*", which serves to rationalize her behavior and minimize any imposition. (4) Internal modifications. Due to the limited and scattered use of internal modifiers by Chinese EFL learners, we were unable to identify any consistent patterns or rules governing their usage. Therefore, these modifiers are not discussed here.

Although Chinese EFL learners are sensitive to various contextual factors, his language use sometimes is inappropriate, which is shown in two respects: (1) alterer. While informants employ different address terms based on context, their choices are sometimes not appropriate, for example, in situation two, when

Informant Eight said “*Sorry, Wang Xin*”. His intention was to display politeness towards his classmate; however, the interjection “*sorry*” does not carry such connotation, instead it indicates apologizing for something or asking someone to repeat something they haven’t heard properly (Hornby, 2004). Therefore, a more appropriate alternative here would be “*excuse me*”, which serves as an apology when interrupting, disagreeing, disapproving or behaving impolitely (ibid.). And in situation four, Informant Five said “*Excuse me, classmate*”. In English, the word “*classmate*” primarily denotes a relational connection between communicators rather than serving as an address term. The misuse of these two words can be attributed to negative transfer from the learners’ first language (L1). When learners of English encounter difficulties in finding appropriate address terms or apologetic formulas, they tend to instinctively resort to options available in their L1 system, which may not be a proper equivalent as such choices may come across as disrespectful and offensive to native English speakers. Consequently, this not only hinders the intended communicative purpose (displaying politeness at the moment of talking, and borrowing note or car in the end), but also leads to displeasure and conflicts (Liu, 2014); (2) level of directness. When comparing situation one with situation two, it becomes evident that the request made in situation one should be more direct than that in situation two due to the conversational context being with a close friend as opposed to a classmate. In role play one, for example, Informant Six employed a conventional indirect request of “*Can you lend your note to me?*” and a direct request of “*I really need someone good at it to help me to review the course together*”. On the other hand, role play two featured two direct requests: “*you can help me to prepare for the exam*” and “*but I have to borrow your notebook*”. According to Brown and Levison (1987), higher levels of indirectness indicate greater politeness. In this sense, the speaker displayed more politeness towards their close friend compared to their classmate, which deviates from real-life language use.

The above analysis indicates that the speaker demonstrates awareness of the correlation between social factors and their language use, and exhibits a considerable level of proficiency in controlling their language use. In other words, this speaker possesses a relatively strong command of socio pragmatic knowledge. However, it is important to note that exposure to real-life language use is necessary for further enhancement of their socio pragmatic competence, as indicated by the identified problematic areas in the role plays.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data analysis above reveals a prominent characteristic of Chinese EFL learners’ language use in different contexts, namely, a higher frequency of external modifications compared to internal modifications employed as an attempt to mitigate the illocutionary force of requests. This finding aligns with previous studies on pragmatic competence in language learners. Hassall (2001) asserts that regardless of their proficiency level, learners tend to employ fewer internal modifications than native speakers. Furthermore, when they attain advanced language proficiency, they tend to excessively rely on external modifications as a means to demonstrate politeness and preserve face-saving efforts. According to Nguyen (2013), this phenomenon can be attributed to the characteristics of internal modifications, which (1) possess pragmatic meanings that are less transparent compared to external modifications; and (2) as an additional component of a speech act, it contributes to increased complexity and requires greater cognitive effort from the speaker. Therefore, in this research, the informant – a relatively proficient EFL learner – naturally tends to rely on abundant external modifications at his disposal in order to demonstrate sensitivity towards face-saving and politeness, rather than engaging in intricate information processing associated with internal modifications.

In this regard, it is imperative for language instructors to guide learners in achieving a harmonious balance between external and internal modifications, thereby facilitating concise conversations while mitigating the assertive impact of requests. A study conducted by Nguyen (ibid.) suggests that explicit instructions coupled with diverse activities prove highly beneficial for advanced learners to proficiently employ internal modifiers. It can be conducted in the following way: firstly, engage learners in guided discovery sessions, which by providing a conversation, teachers ask learners to make judgment on the relationship between the

interlocutors. It is an awareness-raising activity which tries to make learners have a clear idea that the difference in power and distance determines the linguistic forms people choose to make a request; secondly, subsequent controlled practice involving modifiers are presented. More specifically, the teacher can ask students to compare two sample request conversations made by EFL learners and native speakers, which is a form searching and comparing task, requiring students to find out which modifiers are more appropriate in the target language culture. The teacher should summarize the features explicitly after students' self-exploring, and offer some additional semantic formulas. The activity further raises students' metacognitive awareness and offers them the linguistic resources to realize the speech act; thirdly, different scenarios are provided to give enough opportunities to practice the speech act that they have learned. Through request production exercises accompanied by explicit corrective feedback from the instructor, students can reinforce and consolidate the target feature.

This study presents a comparative analysis of the speech act of request based on transcribed language data obtained from four role plays conducted by 15 Chinese EFL learners and 15. However, in order to establish generalization, further research involving a larger sample is required to validate the findings and inform appropriate pedagogical interventions.

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