

The Pragmatic Strategies Adopted by an Advanced Chinese EFL Learner in Realization of Request Speech Act—A Case Study

Yanfei Su

Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, China

Abstract—Under the guidance of the analytical framework of speech act proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), the utterances, produced by a Chinese advanced EFL learner under four different situations in which the speech act of request was realized, are analyzed so as to examine the advanced EFL learner's pragmatic awareness and corresponding features of pragmatic strategies adopted in realization of the request speech act. The findings of the study suggest that the Chinese advanced EFL learner does have certain pragmatic awareness and adopts different pragmatic strategies to realize the request speech act in different situations; however, her pragmatic strategies are comparatively limited to certain ones, showing no variety, which are likely to be impacted by various factors.

Index Terms—request, speech act, situations; pragmatic strategies, pragmatic awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

As SLA research develops vigorously, researchers and teachers who previously focused on learners' linguistic competence now begin to attach great attention to learners' pragmatic competence. In terms of the pragmatic aspects of SLA, the performance and acquisition of speech acts "has received the greatest attention in SLA research" (Ellis, 2008, p. 160). Speech acts were classified by Searle (1975) into five classes according to different patterns of felicity conditions, that is, representatives, directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations (as cited in Ellis, 2008, p.160). This research aims to investigate one type of speech act belonging to the class of directives, namely, request. Ellis (2008) defined requests as "attempts on the part of a speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action in the interests of the speaker" (p. 172).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a large number of studies on the speech act of request (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's, 1984; Taguchi, 2007; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; Han, 2013; Langer, 2013; Ho, 2014). Moreover, their study focuses vary from various pragmatic strategies used to realize the request to different individual's specific strategy use. Some studies focused on contrasting similarities and differences of pragmatic strategies between different languages, for example, Han (2013) conducted a research on politeness of request speech act by contrasting request strategies adopted by native British English speakers and Mandarin speakers. A number of studies devoted themselves to studying a specific aspect of request speech act, for instance, Ho (2014) explored grounders in request, one type of external modification, by using Martin and White's Appraisal Theory to analyze and compare inter-cultural and intra-cultural request grounders produced in workplace emails by Chinese professionals and non-Chinese professions in business and education. There were studies investigating two or more speech acts in one research. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) examined two speech acts—requests and apologies—in one study by developing a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing the realization patterns of request and apology and demonstrating the exact procedures for analyzing speech act. Taguchi (2007) examined the effects of task difficulty caused by different social situations (power, distance and degree of imposition) on L2 oral output via analyzing the produced utterances of Japanese EFL students and native English speakers in realization of request and refusal speech acts. The relationship between second language proficiency and realization of request speech act was explored by some studies such as Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012). They studied whether and how L2 learners' language proficiency would affect the sequential organization of request in a cross-sectional study. They collected data through role-play in which requests in different social situations had been performed by L2 learners at four language proficiency levels. And finally, there are research studying pedagogy of request speech act. Langer (2013) conducted a research on whether it is effective or not to explicitly teach requests to L2 learners of Spanish at three language levels, namely, beginning, intermediate and advanced levels.

Comparatively speaking, there are studies in China contributing to analyze request speech act performed by Chinese EFL learners, whose research perspectives are narrow. Under the framework of speech act theory, Liu Senlin (2003) explored pragmatic strategies adopted by the speaker. Learning from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing the realization patterns of request and apology, Xiao Yupin (2011) studied the

request strategies used by modern business professionals and Liu Huipin and Zhan Shaojie (2012) analyzed request strategies employed by Uyghur English learners, Uyghur Chinese learners, and Uyghur native speakers respectively. Li Chengtuan (2013) analyzed orders and requests strategies used by Chinese, Japanese and American speakers. Based on corpus, Liu Mantang (2008) and Liu Chenyan (2014) conducted studies in terms of speech act.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) stated that “a number of studies have established empirically that second language speakers might fail to communicate effectively (commit pragmatic failures), even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language” (p.196). Whether do advanced Chinese EFL students share the feature stated by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984)? Studies in China in terms of this perspective are few. Therefore, as a preliminary step to research Chinese EFL students’ pragmatic competence development, this research aims to analyze the utterances produced by an advanced Chinese EFL participant in realization of the request speech act and identify her pragmatic strategies in realization of the quest. In order to guide this research, two research questions were proposed:

1. Did the advanced Chinese EFL participant demonstrate any pragmatic awareness in realizing the request speech act?
2. What kind of pragmatic strategies did the advanced Chinese EFL participant use in realization of request speech act in different situations?

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Participants

The participant was a female Chinese EFL learner who was also an EFL teacher at a tertiary school in China. She taught EFL student English who were non-English majors in her college. She was about 31 years old when she participated in this research. She was once studied abroad for her master degree of translation major in Australia for two years and seized an opportunity to further her study in English teaching in Singapore for a short period with about 10 months. Her English language proficiency could be regarded as reaching advanced level.

B. Data Collection

In order to identify what pragmatic strategies the participant adopted in realization of the request speech act, the researcher used the method of conducting role-play between the participant and the interlocutor to obtain the data. In the field of research on speech acts, there are several ways to collect data such as Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), natural discourse, elicited discourse and role plays. It’s obvious that there is not a panacea way to collect relevant data because each way has its own advantages and disadvantages. Nonetheless, as Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012) pointed out, “On balance, role plays allow a decent degree of standardization while eliciting extended interactive data” (p. 44).

The role-play was conducted in different situations. Taking time and words limit into consideration, this research designed four situations according to different social variables first proposed by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) (the participant and the interlocutor’ power difference, social distance and degree of imposition). The detailed description of the four situations was attached in appendix B, which had been presented to the participant each time before the role play began. Situation 1 was adapted from Taguchi’s (2007) role-play situations for the pragmatic speaking task, that is, to ask your teacher to reschedule the exam (for detailed description, please see appendix B). In situation 1 (P-, D+, R+), the interlocutor is a teacher who has just given only 3 lessons to the student, who is the participant, so the power between them is not equal, with the participant having lower power, and the distance is far; the request is to ask the teacher to reschedule the exam, which exerts great face-threatening effect on the teacher, so the degree of imposition is high. Situation 2, 3, and 4 were adapted from Han (2013). In situation 2 (P=, D-, R+), ask a friend to lend money, the interlocutor and the participant are friends, so their power relationship is equal, and their distance is small; the request is to ask her friend to lend 300 dollars, which is a large amount for a student, so the degree of imposition is high. The situation 3 (P=, D+, R+) is to ask a new neighbor for help. In situation 3, the neighbor and the participant have the equal power, and because they are not familiar with each other, their distance is far; and asking a new neighbor to help with the gas valve would cause inconvenience to the neighbor, so the degree of imposition is high. Situation 4 (P+, D=, R+) is to ask an employee to help with making PPT. In situation 4, the employer/participant has more power than the employee; they are acquaintances, so the distance is neutral; and the request is to ask the employee who is busy with typing to help the boss prepare the PPT, which is the boss’ own business, so the degree of imposition is high.

The procedure for this data collection which was recorded from beginning to end is as follows. The recording was conducted at a quiet place on campus. Firstly, the researcher obtained the participant’s consent to participate in this research and asked her to sign the written consent form. Secondly, the researcher explained the guidelines for the role-play tasks to the participant, and then a pilot role-play was conducted in order to ensure that the recording equipment worked smoothly and the participant knew clearly the guidelines and procedure of the role-play. If the participant encountered something unclear, the researcher made detailed explanation. Thirdly, after the pilot role-play, the four situations of role-play were conducted one by one. The description of each situation was presented to the participant one after another, and for each description reading, there was enough time for the participant to make preparation mentally.

Then, the interlocutor asked whether the participant was ready and the role-play began. The last but not the least, the recording was transcribed.

C. Analytical Framework

This research focused on speech act of request realized by one advanced Chinese EFL participant, aiming to identify what pragmatic strategies she adopted in performing the request in four situations. Only the participant/requester's utterances were analyzed. Therefore, the researcher thought Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) analysis framework in this regard was suitable and adopted their framework, namely, from perspectives of head act, internal modifications and external modifications. Internal modifications consist of request perspectives (hearer oriented, speaker oriented, speaker and hearer oriented, and impersonal), syntactic downgraders (interrogative, negation, past tense, and embedded 'if' clause), other downgraders (consultative devices, understaters, hedges, and downtoner), and upgraders (intensifiers and expletives). External modifications are composed of checking on availability, getting a precommitment, grounder, sweetener, disarmer, and cost minimizer.

D. Data Analysis

In order to shape a clear outline of analysis of pragmatic strategies adopted by the participant in the four situations, this research analyzed the four situations one after another from perspectives of head act, internal modifications and external modifications. The transcription of the participant's utterances was numbered by lines (please see appendix A).

Situation 1:

1) Head act

The participant didn't propose the head act of request until several rounds of conversation were finished. The head act was proposed in line 9 and 10, "so could you please (how to say) reschedule the time?" This is a conventionally indirect request, which the participant tried it to minimize the degree of imposition. After several rounds of negotiating, the participant once again projected the request (line 15, 20, 21), which could be treated as adjunct to head act because of its later sequence.

2) Internal Modifications

A. Request perspectives: The participant in her head act of request adopted a hearer oriented point of view, "so could you..."

B. Syntactic downgraders: The participant used an interrogative sentence to present her request. The use of such strategy was likely to show the participant's pessimistic attitudes towards the outcome of the request.

C. Other downgraders: The understater, "how to say (line 9)", was used to lessen the impact of the participant's utterance. Although "how to say" was just a filler used by the participant in the whole conversation, she might also use it here to imply her hesitation to project her request.

3) External Modifications

A. Checking on availability: Although the participant did not use an obvious expression to check the teacher's availability, the researcher thought she used a mild one, "so if you are busy... (line 14)". This sentence may be implied that if you are busy at that time, can we change it to another time when you are free. And another one is in line 15, "Is that OK for...?"

B. Grounder: Although the participant did not use sweetener, disarmer or cost minimizer, she did use several grounders to make explanation and implied to the teacher rescheduling the exam time was very important to her (line 5, 7 and 8).

Situation 2:

1) Head act

In this situation, the participant also presented her request after several rounds of conversation so as to pave the way for projecting the request. The head act, "If I buy it, could you please lend me some money?" (line 11 and 12), was featured by the conventionally indirect request.

2) Internal Modifications

A. Request perspectives: A hearer oriented perspective was adopted by the participant in her head act, "could you..."

B. Syntactic downgraders: The participant used interrogative to downgrade the request. At the same time, she used an embedded "if" clause to mitigate the request, "if I buy it" (line 11).

C. Other downgraders: The participant adopted an understater of "some" to minimize the request action of borrowing money, "lend me some money".

3) External Modifications

A. Getting a precommitment: The participant first discussed style, color and price of the dress with the interlocutor before she proposed her head act of request (line 1, 3, 5, and 9). The researcher thought this strategy might be regarded as a getting a precommitment, or in other words, to pave the way for the request.

B. Grounder: The participant used grounder (line 11) to explain why she wanted to borrow money.

C. Cost minimizer: The participant offered a compensation plan, namely, to return the money to her friend next day, which could be regarded as a cost minimizer to show her consideration of the inconvenience to the hearer (line 21).

Situation 3:

1) Head Act

The participant projected her head act of request in line 9 (“so, could you, how to say, help me? Because I can’t open the gas in our house.”), which means she did not directly present it until several rounds of conversation (greeting and self-introduction) were completed in order to lay a foundation of trust. And then later, after she made a detailed explanation of the problem she met, she once again projected the request (line 11 and 12), which could be regarded as the adjunct to head act. The head act is a conventionally indirect request.

2) Internal modifications

A. Request perspectives: The participant adopted a hearer oriented perspective to project her head act of request.

B. Syntactic downgrader: The participant used an interrogative to lessen the influence of the request (line 9).

C. Other downgrader: The participant used the understater, “how to say” (line 9), to show her hesitation to make the request, or she made a tentative try.

3) External Modifications

A. Checking on availability: The participant checked whether the interlocutor was available at that time, “You know, are you available now? (line 7)”.

B. Getting a precommitment: The participant’s “so, could you, how to say, help me?” in the head act might also be regarded as functioning as a precommitment.

C. Grounder: The participant used grounder in line 11.

D. Cost minimizer: The participant knew the interlocutor was taking care of his baby girl at the beginning of conversation, so she proposed a compensation plan for the interlocutor’s help to minimize his “cost”, “I will take care your baby.” (line 16)

Situation 4:

1) Head Act

The participant proposed her head act of request in line 11, “I need someone to help me to do the PPT”. This head act is characterized by the most direct, explicit level of request. After several rounds of conversation, she presented the request again (line 16) which also could be seen as adjunct to head act, “so you will make the details, and produce the PPT”.

2) Internal modifications

A. Request perspectives: The speaker oriented perspective was adopted to make a request, “I need...”

B. Other downgraders: The participant did not use any syntactic downgraders, but adopted a hedge to mitigate the imposition. However, this hedge was used to refer to the requestee.

3) External modifications

A. Checking availability: The participant used an interrogative to check the interlocutor’s availability (line 3).

B. Getting a precommitment: The participant confirmed with the interlocutor that whether the interlocutor knew a meeting would be held next day (line 9).

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through a detailed analysis of an advanced Chinese EFL learner’s utterances of realizing request speech act in four different situations, this research found that the participant had cultivated certain awareness of pragmatics, which could be exemplified in the following aspects. Firstly, the participant projected head act and adjunct to head act in situation 1, 3 and 4, except for 2. It is possibly that she noticed the short distance in situation 2 (they are friends). Secondly, she adopted conventionally indirect head act in situation 1, 2 and 3, not 4, which was the most direct, explicit request. It is very likely that she was aware of the different power between them (boss and employer). Thirdly, as for the request perspective, she adopted hearer-oriented perspective in situation 1, 2 and 3, while she used speaker-oriented perspective in situation 4. This would like to imply once again that she noticed the different power. Moreover, her use of speaker or hearer-oriented perspective might be influenced by her first language pragmatics because in Chinese, people usually use “you” to show their respect in certain situations, while using “I” often implies that the speaker excels the hearer in certain aspects, which is different from English. Last but not least, the use of “please” and interrogative in Chinese obviously shows the speaker is very polite, which might be different from English. She used “please” and interrogative in situation 1, 2 and 3, except 4.

The findings of this research imply that the participant adopted different pragmatic strategies to realize requests in different situations, which indicates her awareness of pragmatics. The reasons behind it might be very complicated because although she used different pragmatic strategies, some of her strategies shared certain characteristics with Chinese pragmatics. The overseas study experiences in Australia for two years and Singapore for 7 months might make contribution to the awareness of pragmatic strategy use. The advanced language proficiency is also likely to play a part. However, she was an adult when she went abroad for further study, so this might be the factor for her not to adopt native-like pragmatic strategy use. Moreover, the interlocutor conducting role-play with her might be another factor because the interlocutor is a native Chinese EFL learner whose non-native utterances possibly influenced the participant’s reaction to the role-play. This is also one of the limitations of this research. Another one is the way of data collection. Using role-play between two non-native speakers to collect data is lack of authenticity. This research only aimed to identify the pragmatic strategies adopted by the participant, but it did not compare the participant’s utterances with those of native speakers so that it cannot suggest whether the participant’s pragmatic strategy use is native-like or

not. Many studies showed that advanced L2 learners do not grasp a native speaker's way of requesting. Therefore, efforts could be made to further study on whether the advanced Chinese EFL learner in this research acquired a native speaker's way of requesting by comparing with native speakers' utterances. Even if the advanced Chinese EFL learners had some problems in pragmatic strategy use, it is reasonable for EFL teachers to teach pragmatics in SLA explicitly or implicitly.

APPENDIX A. DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SITUATIONS

Situation 1: At the end of one class, your teacher, who has just gave you three lectures, suddenly informs you that an exam will be held on Wednesday, but that day is the eve of the Chinese Spring Festival. Chinese people attach great significance to the day and usually have a reunion dinner with family members, relatives or friends. Therefore, you want to beg her to reschedule the exam.

Situation 2: It is 10:00 AM on Saturday. You and your good friend are shopping in downtown shopping mall. You want to buy a beautiful dress, but find that you don't have enough money. You decide to ask your friend to lend you 300 dollars.

Situation 3: On the first day when you arrive at the new house in Singapore, you want to do cooking, but suddenly you find that there is no gas and you don't know where and how to open the gas valve, so you resort to your new neighbor who is playing with his baby daughter and ask him for help.

Situation 4: You are the boss of a company. You haven't prepared the PPT for tomorrow's meeting. Preparing the PPT is your own business. However, because of the urgency, you need someone to help you make the PPT. You resort to an employee who is busy with her typing work assigned by you for help.

Pilot situation: Pilot situation, asking your room-mate to clean up the messy kitchen, was adapted from Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984), namely, "a student asks his room-mate to clean up the kitchen which the other left in a mess" (p. 211). The other day when you come home, you find that the kitchen is in a total mess and you know your room-mate cooked yesterday, so you want to ask her who is studying in her room to clean up the kitchen.

APPENDIX B. TRANSCRIPTIONS OF SITUATIONS

Situation 1:

1The interlocutor (hereinafter as I): Hi, guys, we are going to have an exam 2tomorrow.

3The participant (hereinafter as P): tomorrow!!! Oh, no!

4I: oh, what?

5P: because tomorrow is the eve of the Spring Festival.

6I: Yes, I know. But our exam will be held in the afternoon

7P: You know, we need to buy something. We will go shopping and prepare for the 8dinner of the eve, you know. The Chinese Spring Festival is so important for us, 9Chinese people. So we want to cook, so could you please (how to say) reschedule 10the time?

11I: but this is the plan and our course outline stated this point.

12P: en, hum

13I: It's very difficult to reschedule it.

14P: You know, so if you are busy, we can reschedule it after the Spring Festival. Is 15that Ok for...?

16I: After the Spring Festival, you still will take the exam.

17P: Ya

18I: and during the Spring Festival, you may still think of the exam, which would 19affect your enjoying it.

20P: No, I think it's Ok. I think we can accept. Maybe tomorrow morning? Can we 21just have the exam tomorrow morning?

22I: Ok, so tomorrow morning is good for you, right?

23P: yes,

24I: ok, I will check the room and exam time.

25P: um, hum

26P: we don't have any class tomorrow morning, so I think it's ok for us.

27I: ok, we change it to tomorrow morning.

28P: ok, thank you so much, thank you.

Situation 2:

1P: oh, Sophie. Look, do you think this dress is beautiful?

2I: en, you mean this color?

3P: yes, do you think it's suitable for me to wear.

4I: oh, en, I think maybe you can have a try.

5P: yeh, I have already tried it. I think it's good, but just look at the price.

6I: so how much?

7P: it's expensive. It's 500.

8I: oh, yes, it's really expensive.

9P: but, I really want to buy it.

10I: ok, so buy it.

11P: but, I didn't bring a lot of money. If I buy it, could you please lend me some 12money?

13I: so how much do you need?

14P: you know, I bring with me 200, so maybe you can lend me some, how to say,

15300. Is that ok?

16I: 300, that's too much. You see, I want to buy some dress, but I don't bring too 17much cash.

18P: en, hum. Maybe you can just use your credit card. So you bring your credit card, 19right?

20I: yes, yes, ok.

21P: so tomorrow, I will just give the money to you. Ok?

22I: ok, no problem.

23P: thank you.

Situation 3:

1P: knock, knock!

2I: yes, who is it?

3P: um, hello! I am the new neighbor. I just arrive here.

4I: new neighbor? Oh, you mean that house?

5P: yeh, yeh. I come from China.

6I: oh, nice to meet you.

7P: nice to meet you, too. You know, are you available now?

8I: en, yes. I am just playing with my daughter.

9P: so, could you, how to say, help me? because I can't open the gas in our house.

10I: gas, oh, you mean the gas valve?

11P: ye, ye. Maybe there is something wrong with it, so I can't open it. So could you 12please come and help us?

13I: ok, but I am not sure whether it's the same as mine.

14P: uhum

15I: I just have a try. Ok?

16P: ok, ye, you just come and I will take care your baby.

17I: ok

18P: thank you.

Situation 4:

1P: Sophie.

2I: Yeh.

3P: Could you just come to my office?

4I: I am busy with the typing work now.

5P: ok, just come here. I have something to talk with you.

6I: something important?

7P: yeh, yeh.

8I: ok.

9P: tomorrow, we will have a meeting. You know that?

10I: yes.

11P: um, hum. But I haven't done the PPT. I need someone to help me to do the PPT.

12I: so what's the topic of tomorrow's presentation?

13P: about our company's future development. We need to plan it and make some 14graphs.

15I: ok

16P: so you will make the details, and produce the PPT. Ok?

17I: but you told me to the typing work. Maybe I don't have enough time.

18P: um, hum. Really? Ok, I will ask someone to help with the typing work. After that, 19you two do the PPT together, is that ok?

20I: ok. I will try my best.

21P: ok, thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported in part by a grant from 四川省 2016 年省级大学生创新创业训练计划项目 (201610644029).

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Gahtani, S. & Roever, C. (2012). Proficiency and sequential organization of L2 requests. *Applied Linguistics*, 33.1, 42-65.

- [2] 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.
- [3] Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (second edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Han, X.P. (2013). A contrastive study of Chinese and British English request strategies based on open role-play. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4.5, 1098-1105.
- [5] Ho, V. (2014). Evaluating while justifying intercultural requests. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 11.4, 575-602.
- [6] Langer, B.D. (2013). Teaching requests to L2 learners of Spanish. *Journal of language teaching and research*, 4.6, 1147-1159.
- [7] Li, Chentuan. (2013). A contrastive analysis of rapport management and identity construction in responses to the speech acts of orders and requests in Chinese, Japanese and American languages. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 269.2, 51-55.
- [8] Liu, Chenyan. (2014). An analysis of learners' errors in speech act of request based on markedness-error hypothesis. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 22.4, 56-60.
- [9] Liu Huiyin & Zhan Shaojie. (2012). A contrastive study of the request strategies. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 264.3, 24-28.
- [10] Liu Mantang. (2008). A corpus-based comparative analysis of formulas of thanking and requesting. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 16.2, 13-18.
- [11] Liu Senlin. (2003). A study of pragmatic strategies and their theoretical basis. *Foreign Language Education*, 24.3, 10-15.
- [12] Taguchi, N. (2007). Task difficulty in oral speech act production. *Applied Linguistics*, 28.1, 113-135.
- [13] Xiao Yupin. (2011). An investigation of the requesting strategies by modern business professionals in business emails. *Foreign Language Education*, 32.6, 33-37.

Yanfei Su was born in Meishan City, Sichuan Province, China in 1986. She received her Master's Degree in Foreign Language and Literature from Sichuan International Studies University, China in 2010.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Sichuan, China. Her research interests include translation teaching and English language teaching.