THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN GRADUATE STUDENTS AT AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

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With globalization of the world economy and cultural communication, more and more Chinese students have entered American universities to pursue academic success in higher education. However, coming from a country where English is spoken as a foreign language, Chinese students may encounter difficulties in adjusting to the new social and academic environment in the U.S. The purpose of the present study was to investigate one pragmatic competence of Chinese graduate students in English communication settings—how they apply English request strategies in various social and cultural contexts. Request, according to Byon (2004), is “a directive that embodies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (p. 1674). Making requests in a foreign language is face threatening because it requires considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the speaker. Inappropriate request strategies can easily cause breakdowns in cross-cultural communication. Building upon a mixed-methods research design, the researcher conducted a comparative study of English requests between Chinese and American graduate students at one mid-western American university. The instrument used to collect data was a modified Discourse Completion Test (DCT)—a questionnaire composed of 14 request eliciting situations, and follow-up interviews. Study findings revealed that significant differences exist between Chinese and American graduate students in directness and imposition of the request, and social distance in some social situations. No significant differences were discovered in relation to relative power of the hearer. Social distance, imposition of the request, and relative power were all positively correlated with each other.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Since the early 20th century, with globalization of the world economy and cultural communication, more and more Chinese students have entered American universities to pursue academic success in higher education. Coming from a country with different cultural attributes, social values and educational management system, Chinese students may need time to adjust to the new social and academic environment. While living in the U.S., Chinese students have to use English as their major means of communication in their daily life and study. However, this is quite challenging because China is not an English speaking country, and English is only taught as a subject in the school curriculum. It is claimed that students from different cultures learn in different ways, and that they differ in cognitive styles, self-expression, and communication (Bennett, 1995). When Chinese students are placed into authentic communication situations in the English speaking environment, they undoubtedly encounter many differences in their ways of expression than the native speakers, which may render their communication as either successful or unsuccessful.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this mixed-methods study, a cross-cultural investigation on English requests applied by Chinese and American graduate students in American universities has been undertaken. Request, according to Byon (2004), is “a directive that embodies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (p. 1674). Making requests in a foreign language is face threatening because it requires considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the speaker. Inappropriate request strategies can easily cause breakdowns in cross-cultural communication. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), different aspects of speech act of request have been explored in different language learning contexts, such as cross-cultural contexts (Blum-
Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as in Ao (2005), learning English as a Second Language (ESL), as in Lin (2008), and Chinese (Zhang and Wang, 1997). These studies contributed to the request literature in many different ways and have resulted in the creation and modification of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), taxonomy and coding scheme of request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984; Zhang & Wang, 1997). These studies are discussed in detail in the literature review in Chapter Two.

While the request literature is still developing, no studies have examined the similarities and differences of the request strategies applied by Chinese and American graduate students in cross-cultural settings. With the increasing number of Chinese graduate students in American universities, it becomes more important to investigate this area because appropriate communication style constitutes the cornerstone of Chinese students’ successful adjustment to the new social and academic environment in the U.S. Through comparison and contrast of the request strategies applied by Chinese and American participants, I sought to discover the differences that lie between them and the reasons for these differences. These differences might be the difficulties that Chinese students encounter in their social and cultural communications while studying in the U.S. Although some scholars have incorporated the study of the three social variables, namely social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request, in their research designs, no one has compared the different perceptions on these factors between Chinese and American graduate students at American universities, and no correlation study has been conducted on these factors. The purpose of the present study here is to address this void in the request literature. Due to the limited scope of the study, all participants were selected from one mid-western American university.
Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the present study, three research questions were explored:

1. Do Chinese and American graduate students differ from each other in terms of the directness of the request?

2. Do Chinese and American graduate students differ from each other in the three following social variables: social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request?

3. Are the three social variables, namely social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request, correlated with each other?

Based on these research questions, three null hypotheses were proposed:

1. Chinese and American graduate students do not significantly differ from each other in terms of the directness of the request.

2. Chinese and American graduate students do not significantly differ from each other in the three following social variables, social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request.

3. The three social variables, namely social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request, are not correlated with each other.

Definition of Key Terms

The following section provides descriptions of key terms that appear in the present study.

Pragmatic competence. As defined by Canale (1983), pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of “the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of interaction, and norms of conventions of interactions” (p. 7). Therefore, effective
communication requires more than just linguistic knowledge. Rather, the ability to use this linguistic knowledge appropriately in the given socio-cultural context is more important. Intercultural communication will sometimes break down not because the non-native speakers have trouble with their English grammar or pronunciation, but because they cannot use the English language appropriately in different social settings.

Second language and foreign language. As stated by Ellis (1994), second language “plays an instructional and social role in the community (i.e., it functions as a recognized means of communication among members who speak some other languages as their mother tongue)” (p. 12). For example, English is acquired as a second language by Chinese students if they come to study in the U.S. because they use it for daily communications, whereas English is learned as a foreign language in China because Chinese students learn it inside the classrooms under their teachers’ instruction.

Pragmatic failure. The first study of pragmatic usage of language in socio-cultural communication was conducted by Thomas (1983). Thomas termed second/foreign language learners’ inability to understand what is meant by others in socio-cultural settings as pragmatic failure, which is categorized as pragma-linguistic failure and sociolinguistic failure. According to Thomas (1983), pragma-linguistic failure was closely linked with language itself, denoting that second/foreign language learners’ pragmatic failure resulted either from their mother tongue interference or their inability to idiomatically use English expressions. Sociolinguistic failure, in contrast, referred to second/foreign learners’ inappropriate linguistic behaviors caused by their different perceptions of the norms of the target language cultural community.

Speech act. According to Schmidt and Richards (1980), “speech act theory has to do with the functions and uses of language” (p. 129). In the broadest sense, speech acts are all the human
activities that people perform when they speak. For example, they use language to consolidate political regimes, to entertain, and to communicate. In the narrowest sense, as proposed by Hymes (1972), this refers to the situations associated with speech, such as “fights, hunts, meals, parties, and the like.” However, different from Hymes’ argument (1972), Schmidt and Richards (1980) maintained that such situations were interchangeable with speech event, which is restricted to “activities directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech, such as lectures or introductions” (p. 130). According to Schmidt and Richards (1980), speech acts are the minimal terms of setting the speech situation/event, such as giving reports, making statements, and asking questions.

Speech act of request. The speech act of request, according to Byon, is “a directive that embodies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something, generally for a speaker’s goal” (2004, p. 1674). Making request is face threatening because it requires considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the speaker. Moreover, as stated in Byon (2004), requests have great cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variation, whose realization requires identifiable formulae.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research study and discusses the study’s significance and purpose, research questions, hypotheses, limitations, and definitions of key terms. Chapter Two provides an overview of the request literature. Chapter Three addresses the methodology applied in this study. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, while Chapter Five provides a discussion, conclusion and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of related literature will be presented in this section. Four parts are included: the first part addresses the request related literature in cross-cultural settings, the second part deals with the request study conducted in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Learning English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, the third part discusses the request related literature in unique linguistic contexts (i.e., Chinese, Mexican, and French), and the last part is a summary and critique of the literature.

Request Study in Cross-Cultural Context

Due to the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation features of requests, a considerable amount of studies have been conducted regarding their realization patterns in different socio-cultural settings. For example, the Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Patterns (CCSAPP) by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) enables investigation of the realization patterns of two speech acts, requests and apologies across different languages. Seven languages were incorporated into their study, namely Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, and Hebrew. The participants of Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1984) study consisted of 400 undergraduate students in each of the seven countries, namely the U.S., Britain, France, Denmark, Germany, and Israel. All participants were freshmen or sophomores in some subject but linguistics. Half of the participants were native speakers and half non-native speakers of English. Data were collected through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which consisted of incomplete discourse sequences eliciting requests to people with different social relationships, such as policeman, classmates, or parents. After data were collected, the researchers developed a coding scheme for analyzing the speech acts under study. According to the degree of directness, all request strategies were classified into three major categories, namely
direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and nonconventional indirect strategies, which were later coded into nine sub-strategy types. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), direct request refers to those “syntactically marked as imperatives or by other verbal means that name the act as a request, such as performatives” (p. 201). Conventionally indirect request is realized by “reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language” (i.e., Could you do it/Would you do it?) (p. 201). Non-conventionally indirect request is realized by “either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act” (i.e., Why is the window open?) (p. 201). Their research results revealed that participants’ way of expressing the request varied with the variation of languages and cultures, and non-native speakers were less proficient in applying non-conventionally indirect request strategies. However, conventionally indirect request strategies were preferred by both native and non-native speakers of English in different countries (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Ueda (2006) investigated how Japanese EFL learners used request strategies in interactive discourse and how their pragmatic competence developed with the increase of their English proficiency levels. Participants of the study were intermediate-level Japanese EFL learners (Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid) and native speakers of American English who had been living in Japan for about one year when participating in the study. Data obtained from these three groups of participants were compared after being collected from the role play section of the Standard Speaking Test (SST) corpus. According to Ueda (2006), since “the SST rates speakers’ oral proficiency in English and not merely their grammatical competence, it is considered as the best method for evaluating the pragmatic development of learners” (p. 286). The coding scheme applied in this study was revised by the researcher according to Blum-Kulka et al’s. (1984).
research findings indicated that Japanese EFL learners preferred to use conventionally indirect request strategies and that their ability to use indirect requests would increase with their increasing English proficiency levels. However, Japanese EFL learners did not indicate that they preferred to use a wider variety of strategies as their English proficiency level increased. Moreover, lower-level Japanese EFL learners did not use more hints than higher-level learners did.

Unlike Ueda (2006), Fukushima (1996) did a comparative study of request strategies in British English and Japanese. In this study, two Situations with different degrees of imposition were used. In order to make a more precise evaluation on the imposition of the request, the factors of social distance and relative power of the speaker and hearer were set as equal in these two Situations. In addition, the request situations were also considered similar from the cultural perspective. Participants selected for this study included 16 British undergraduates and 15 Japanese undergraduates, who were compatible in terms of age, level of education, and occupation. Participants were first presented with cards where request situations were written in their native languages. Then they were expected to respond to these situations in their native language. All the responses were tape recorded. Data were analyzed by the coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984). In order to cater to the characteristics of the participants, the researcher also made some modifications, such as adding more categories or defining each category for the Japanese participants in Japanese. The focus of analysis was the structure of the head act and supportive moves. As explained in Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), head act of the request is the part of the sequence which might serve to realize the act independently of other elements (i.e., Could you do it?). Supportive moves refer to those address terms to the hearers or explanations for making the request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984). Results indicated that, for both
British and Japanese participants, the higher the degree of imposition of the request, the more indirect the request strategies applied. However, compared with the British participants, the Japanese participants used less supportive moves and their expressions were more direct and straightforward. This result was not consistent with that discovered by Ueda (2004).

Hassall (2003) conducted a comparative study of requests between Australian learners of Indonesian (learner subjects) and Indonesian native speakers (native speaker subjects). The learner subjects included 20 Australian students undertaking their second or third year of an undergraduate degree program in Bahasa Indonesian. The native speaker subjects were 18 students enrolled in a degree program in a range of disciplines at an Australian university. Most of the native speaker subjects came from the main island of Java, and none of them had been in Australia for more than three years. Data were collected through interactive oral role play, through which the participants communicated with a native Indonesian speaker on a given situation and a written cue. Each student performed 12 or 13 of the total 24 situations, as well as a number of non-request (distractor) situations. All the role plays were audio-recorded. Data were analyzed according to the coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984). Analysis results indicated that the learner subjects made a larger proportion of direct requests than the native speaker subjects, especially the Want statement (one subcategory of Blum-Kulka et al.’s request strategy conventions, characterized by the explicit statement of the speaker’s wish in request making). For example, they preferred to use requests such as “I want to buy two envelopes and stamps” instead of “Can I have two envelopes and stamps?” This type of request strategy consisted of more than one quarter of the overall requests by the learner subjects (25.7 percent or 61/237) (Hassall, 2003). The second research finding is that both learner subjects and native speaker subjects preferred to use conventionally indirect request strategies in
conversations (over 40 percent). However, no contrastive differences were discovered between these two groups of learners in the selection of the request strategy types when the situation changes.

Request Study in EFL and ESL Contexts

The investigation of speech act of request was also conducted in EFL context in China. In order to discover how Chinese college students make the English speech act of request, Ao (2005) conducted a study on a group of non-English major undergraduate students in China. She designed an open-ended DCT with four Situations. The purpose of her study was to investigate the characteristics of three components of the request, namely alerters (i.e., addresses), head acts, and supportive moves. The result of her research indicated that social power and degree of difficulty of the request had different influences on the composition and sequence of the request. When the speaker and hearer are on an equal social status, they seldom use supportive moves in making the request, and their alerters are very diversified. When the speaker is in a relative lower social position to the hearer, the alerters mainly focus on “Excuse me” and Sir/President/Manager/Mr.”, and the speaker uses various supportive moves in expressing respect to the hearer (Ao, 2005, p. 480). Apart from the influence of social power, the degree of difficulty of the request also influences the request strategies the students use. When social distance and social power remain constant, the more difficult the request, the more diversified the supportive moves used in making the request. The head acts are more inclined to be modified with hedges and overt acts (i.e., Could I interview you suppose you have time sometime next week?).

The study of English requests was also made on Japanese EFL learners. Reinbold (2004) selected 10 Japanese EFL learners whose TOEFL scores were all above 600 and five American
English speakers as the informants. All participants lived in Japan. Similar to that by Hassall (2003), the method used to collect data was an oral role play. Participants were expected to respond verbally to a DCT questionnaire, which was composed of 10 request eliciting situations. Two variables were incorporated when the author designed the questionnaire. The first is social status of the hearer and the second is the imposition of the request. In 10 Situations on the questionnaire, participants were expected to make either high-imposition or low-imposition requests to people of three levels of social status: higher, equal, and lower. Reinbold (2004) utilized two coding schemes to analyze the data collected: one is Takahashi’s (1993) indirectness level of taxonomy (cited in Reinbold, 2004), and another is Blum-Kulka’s CCSARP (1984). Consequently, similar results were obtained by using these two coding schemes: American English speakers were more direct than Japanese EFL learners when making low imposition requests to listeners of equal status, but were more indirect when making low-imposition requests to listeners of lower status; for medium- and high- imposition requests, no matter if the status of the listeners were lower or equal, Japanese EFL learners were more indirect than American English speakers when making the requests. When speaking to a stranger, American English speakers were more direct than the Japanese EFL learners. In most situations, therefore, the Japanese EFL learners were more indirect than American English speakers.

Different from the previous quantitative research design, Lin (2008) conducted a qualitative study comparing the speech act of requests and compliments between five Chinese graduate students and five native English speakers in a British university. The purpose of Lin’s study was to investigate the pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in expressing requests and compliments in intercultural communication settings. Chinese students were asked to respond to a written DCT composed of five different situations involving compliments and
requests. The native English speakers’ responses were regarded as a baseline to evaluate the quality of Chinese students’ responses. After their completion of the DCT, a follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted among the Chinese students in order to elicit “talk about their real experiences as foreigners in real-life interactions with native speakers” (Lin, 2008, p. 48). Data analysis of the speech act of request was based on the request taxonomy made by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1984). Lin’s research results were consistent with those of Blum-Kulka (1984) in that both Chinese students and native speakers tended to employ conventionally indirect strategies. However, their ways of expressing the requests are slightly different from each other. Chinese students were less capable of applying more complex syntactic structures to mitigate the degree of request, using more sentences like “Could you…?” or “Can I…?” when they spoke to their teacher compared to “Would you mind if…?” or “Is there any chance that I could…?” by native English speakers (Lin, 2008, p. 48). From the interviews, Lin (2008) concluded that, although Chinese students can respond to the situations with relatively appropriate request strategies, they sometimes failed in their real life experiences. For example, a student reported that she said “Stop, stop” directly to a taxi-driver when she expected the driver to drop her off at some place instead of applying more polite and indirect request strategies (Lin, 2008).

Request Study in Chinese and Other Languages

The research result of Blum-Kulka et al. (1984) was also evidenced by the native speakers of Chinese. For example, in order to discover how request strategy is reflected in Chinese, Zhang and Wang (1997) investigated 100 Chinese participants from various backgrounds, such as college teachers, students, and doctors. Their research instrument was a modified DCT with 16 different social situations. The closing sentence in the conversation was deleted so that the
participants could freely express their opinions without any situational constraints. Their findings revealed that the Chinese speakers also considered the conventionally indirect request as the most appropriate strategy in expressing politeness. However, apart from this universal feature, request strategies adopted by Chinese users were also characteristic of Chinese cultures and traditions. That is, when the speakers are in a superior position relative to the hearers, they use more direct request strategies than conventionally indirect strategies; when the speakers are in an inferior position relative to the hearers, they use more conventionally indirect request strategies than direct strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) believed that the speakers’ request strategies were influenced by three social variables, namely social distance, social power, and imposition of request. Social distance refers to the degree of familiarity between the speakers and the hearers; social power refers to the power or status of the hearers relative to the speakers; and degree of imposition refers to the degree of difficulty in fulfilling a request in a certain social context. Zhang and Wang’s (1997) study indicated that these three social variables were positively correlated with the directness of request strategies.

In order to find more suitable instructional methods in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, Hong (1996) related the research of Chinese request to Chinese language teaching from a socio-pragmatic perspective. Participants selected in the study were two groups of American college students; 12 had home exposure to Chinese and eight had not. All of them were Americans and all had learned Chinese for four semesters. The DCT that the participants were presented with was composed of five close conversations concerning campus and college life. Participants were expected to initiate a conversation according to a situation and provide a closing sentence to the conversation. Data analysis indicated that students with home exposure to Chinese (HEC) did not make any non-accessible request, while students with non-home
exposure to Chinese (NHEC) made six percent of them. The non-acceptable requests made by NHEC students were 35 percent, which was much more than those of the HEC students (seven percent). Hong’s (1996) research results revealed that classroom teaching of the Chinese language failed to satisfy the pragmatic demand of learning a language. Comparatively speaking, the social and cultural environment was more important for successful acquisition of pragmatic competence of a foreign language.

Although Hong (1996) discovered that American students’ pragmatic competence was influenced by their social and cultural background, Sun and Zhang (2008) believed that she failed to include a cross-linguistic comparison between native Chinese and American students. To ascertain the differences and difficulties that American students encounter while learning Chinese, Sun and Zhang (2008) conducted a comparative study on the directness of Chinese request strategies between a group of 12 native Chinese graduate students and eight American undergraduate students. The instrument used in their study was a modified DCT, which was composed of eight request eliciting situations. Three social variables were involved in designing the questionnaire, namely social distance, relative power of the hearer, and imposition of the request. Participants were expected to respond to these situations with an appropriate request. After analyzing the data, they concluded that although both native Chinese and American students applied more conventionally indirect request strategies than direct and non-conventionally request strategies, the percentage used by American students was much higher than that of the native Chinese. This overuse of conventionally indirect request strategies was also an indicator of inappropriate pragmatic competence for the American students. In terms of the imposition of the request applied, American students did not show much difference from the native Chinese speakers. However, Sun and Zhang (2008) discovered that American students
were less capable of adjusting their request strategies when the social distance and power relationship between the hearer was changed.

Similar to the studies made by Ao (2005), Felix-Brasdefer (2005) studied the indirectness and politeness of Mexican requests from a discourse level. Participants of the study were 10 native speakers of Mexican Spanish studying at an American university as part of a study abroad program. Data were collected through an open-ended role play questionnaire with five experimental and five distractor items. Each participant role played the situations verbally with two native speakers of Mexican Spanish. All role plays were tape recorded. Factors considered while designing the experimental situations include level of familiarity and the power relationship with the listener. Request strategies were coded according to Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1984) request coding manual. Repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and paired t-test were used to analyze the data collected from participants. Analysis results indicated that the means of strategy use was significantly different across the five situations (p<.01). Among the three types of request strategies, conventionally indirect request strategies was the most frequently used one, followed by direct requests, and a lower preference was given to the use of non-conventionally indirect requests or hints.

Harlow (1990) added to the knowledge base of speech act of request realization patterns in French. The purpose of her study was to compare the similarities and differences of the speech act strategies for requesting, thanking, and apologizing. Factors considered include age, sex, and familiarity with the addressee on realization of these speech acts. A questionnaire with written role play situations was used as the method of data collection. Participants of the study included 28 native speakers of French and 32 non-native speakers who were enrolled at an American university. Native French speakers were international graduate or undergraduate students and
non-native French speakers were undergraduates enrolled in four upper-division French courses during the same term. The demographic data analysis indicated that the participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 39, with 25 as the mean age for the natives and 22 the mean age for the non-natives. A gender disparity existed between these two groups, for 61 percent of the native speakers were males and 84 percent of the nonnative undergraduates were females. Chi-square tests were applied to test the distribution of the request (thank/apology) strategies across the different situations and the differences between native and non-native French speakers in the application of these strategies. Paired t-tests were used to compare the mean number of words used by the two groups of speakers. Data analysis results revealed that age is an important factor influencing the choice of request strategies. Indirect requests were applied with older strangers instead of the younger addressees. According to Harlow (1990), this partly reflected “the French value system of respect for their elders manifested by the use of a higher degree of politeness” (p. 347). Familiarity with the listener is another important factor that affected the length of the statements used for making requests. If the speaker was less familiar with the addressee, he/she would tend to minimize the imposition of the request by lengthening the request structure, such as by adding more reasons for making the requests.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the relevant research related to request making in communication settings was reviewed. It is concluded that request study was mainly conducted in three contexts, namely cross-cultural context, EFL and ESL context, and unique linguistic context (i.e., Chinese or French). In cross-cultural context, researchers were mainly intended to discover whether native English speakers and non-native English speakers applied different request strategies while making requests in English. In EFL or ESL context, researchers’ sole interest relied on
discovering the characteristics of request structure applied by these EFL or ESL learners, and whether they are influenced by their native language or culture. In unique linguistic context, such as in Chinese or French, researchers were also interested in discovering the relationship between the participants’ request structure and their traditional culture.

Instruments applied to collect data are divided into two types, written role play questionnaire and oral role play interactions with native speakers. Both written and oral instruments have advantages and disadvantages. Written role plays are more appropriate for large-scale data collection, and oral role plays are more effective in collecting data similar to those in natural conversations. In most previous request related research, researchers mainly applied descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages of distribution of the request strategies. Few applied quantitative methods, such as ANOVA, t-test, and chi-square. None of them applied a mixed-methods research design by combining the quantitative and qualitative methods.

Researchers made comparative studies of requests between English and Hebrew, English and Japanese, British English and Japanese, but no comparative study was made between English and Chinese. It is generally believed that contrastive differences exist between Chinese and English in terms of request making. For example, in English, past tense of the verb may be used to express politeness while making the request. The request such as “Could you please pass me the book?” is more polite than “Can you please pass me the book?” However, Chinese language is not a tense sensitive language. It is very possible that Chinese students might be incapable of distinguishing the usage of “could” and “can” in making requests. Chinese and English requests are also different in some other aspects, such as sentence structure and the position of auxiliary verbs. Therefore, a comparative study on English requests between Chinese
and American graduate students will facilitate our understanding of Chinese students’ pragmatic competence in sociocultural communication settings.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the mixed-methods research design, data collection process, participant selection, and data interpretation procedures applied in the study.

Mixed-Methods Research Methodology

In this study, I applied a mixed methods research design in data collection. According to Creswell and Clark (2007), mixed methods research is “a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry” (p. 5). As a method, it is designed to collect and mix both quantitative and qualitative data in the research study. As stated in Creswell and Clark (2007), “Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone” (p. 5).

According to Mertler and Charles (2008), research that produces narrative data (i.e., verbal descriptions and opinions) is called qualitative research, and research that produces mostly numerical data (i.e., scores and measurements) is called quantitative research. Each approach has its strengths and drawbacks. Qualitative research is advantageous in that it can be applied to explore the distinctive and unique situations of individuals in specific social and cultural settings. But this advantage can also be a pitfall because it may focus too closely on individual results and fail to make connections to the whole target population. Comparatively speaking, quantitative researchers are able to make generalizations across populations in large scale research, but they may fail to respond to individual differences in specific social and cultural settings. In order to avoid the weaknesses of applying either a quantitative or qualitative approach, I applied a mixed methods research design, which is explanatory in nature. According to Creswell and Clark
(2007), the explanatory design is a two-phase mixed methods design, in which the qualitative
data explains or builds upon the quantitative data interpretation and results.

Theoretical Framework and Researcher Perspective

Within the context of mixed-methods research, I chose to interpret the results of the
present study from a critical perspective. As one member of critical pedagogists, I concur with
the belief that life is a “virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and
gender values crystallized over time” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 7). Due
to the complex and dynamic nature of life, I believe that one cannot find a universal truth and
fact that is appropriate in all social contexts. Some values may hold true in a certain historical
context, but will disappear in another context or will be modified and replaced by other values as
time progresses. Take my personal experience as an example. As Chinese, I witnessed many
dramatic social and economic changes that happened to China in the past decades. After the
enforcement of opening-to-the-outside-world policy in the late 1970s, along with rapid economic
development, many of Chinese people’s beliefs have also undergone modification or
supplementation. In my eyes, life entails both transmission and transformation of traditional
sociocultural values. The same is true in conducting research. As a critical researcher, I
understand the importance of being objective in designing research and being contextual in
analyzing the results. Holding this belief, I determined to conduct the present study by
employing a mixed-methods research design, exploring the request study from different
perspectives. Qualitative study results might compensate for the drawbacks of quantitative study
by offering some invaluable insights from different types of individuals in the target population.
Data Collection

Prior to conducting the present study, I obtained permission from Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). The instrument used for collecting quantitative data in this study is a questionnaire, a modified Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which was designed by referring to Blum-Kulka et al. (1984) and Sun and Zhang (2008). The modified DCT was composed of two parts. Part One is mainly concerned with the demographic information of the participants, such as their nationality, gender, major, degree, and grade. An additional section was added for Chinese students to rate their oral English proficiency, degree of difficulty in making English request, and the years of exposure in the U.S. Part Two is composed of 14 simulated situations eliciting students’ request in various communication settings on campus (See Appendix A). Participants were expected to respond to the situations by writing down appropriate English requests. After each situation, multiple choice responses concerning an evaluation of the participants’ relationship to the hearers and the imposition of the request are provided. For example, participants were expected to select from a four-point Likert scale on social distance with the hearer, ranging from “familiar” to “distant”.

The Rationale for modifying Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1984) DCT into an open-ended questionnaire was to elicit responses more similar to naturally occurring conversations. In order to state the situation as clearly as possible, more descriptive sentences were added into the scenario. All scenarios in the modified DCT were anticipated to elicit participants’ perceptions on the relationship with different types of people, including faculty, students, friends, staff, and parents. The three-point Likert scale in Sun and Zhang’s (2008) DCT was modified into a four-point Likert scale because it will elicit more detailed and accurate ratings from the participants.
In the study, the modified DCT was presented to the graduate students in the form of a web-based (SNAP) questionnaire. Prior to the study, I conducted a pilot study with five Chinese graduate students and five American graduate students in order to refine the questionnaire and to elicit the framework for the interview questions. The process of the pilot study included questionnaire distribution and interviews. After the participants completed the questionnaire, I interviewed six of them, including three Chinese and three Americans. The questionnaire was modified according to the participants’ suggestions. To see whether the modified version of the DCT was appropriate or not, I redistributed it to all participants for completion. No other suggestions were made.

The in-depth interview questions (See Appendix B) in the present study were based on the analysis of participants’ responses to the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted in English with American students and in Chinese with Chinese students, considering that Chinese students would better understand the questions and express themselves more clearly if they responded in Chinese. All interviews were conducted in quiet classrooms or conference rooms on campus, and all were recorded with a digital recorder. I took notes during the interviews. It was anticipated that each interview would take about one hour. However, in reality, the interview time ranged from one hour to two and a half hours. Before the interviews began, all interviewees signed the consent forms. In addition, I also asked the interviewees’ permission for recording the interviews. Each participant agreed to be recorded.

A total of 1,511 graduate students in the College of Education and Human Development, and the College of Arts and Sciences at one mid-western American university were invited to participate in the study. An invitation letter was delivered to these graduate students’ e-mail boxes through the SNAP software, explaining the purpose of the study, the responsibilities of
being a participant, and the possible risks and benefits of their participation in the study.

Students’ completion of the web-based questionnaire indicated their consent to participate. With the first delivery of questionnaire, I obtained 62 responses. After the delivery of a reminder e-mail over one week, 28 more participants were added. A total of 90 of 1,511 students chose to participate in the research study. Among all participants, 21 are Chinese, 56 are American, and 13 are other international graduate students. The years of exposure to American culture for the 21 Chinese students ranged from less than one to four years.

All Chinese and American students who responded to the questionnaire were considered study participants. Students who were willing to participate in the follow-up face-to-face interviews would choose “yes” to the last question of the survey and provide their names and e-mail addresses as correspondence. Twenty-two participants responded positively to the interviews, among which 10 were chosen in the follow-up interviews. The 10 interviewees reflect 10 percent of all participants in the present study. Factors being considered while selecting the interviewees include: age range, gender, major, and number of years exposed to English speaking communities. The criteria for selecting the Chinese interviewees was based on the ratings the participants identified in their SNAP questionnaire in relation to their oral English proficiency, which ranges from “poor” to “very good”. The American interviewees chosen were matched with the Chinese interviewees in terms of major and gender. The interview questions were designed to test the results obtained from the quantitative study.

Data Analysis

The coding scheme for the questionnaire response analysis in this study was developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984). According to the authors, the request strategies were classified into three major categories, namely direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and
nonconventional indirect strategies, which were later coded into nine sub-strategy types. Direct strategies include mood derivable, performative, hedged performative, obligation statements, and want statements. Conventionally indirect strategies include suggestory formulae and query preparatory. Nonconventional indirect strategies include strong hints and weak hints.

Descriptive analyses were used to analyze the questionnaire results, such as frequencies and percentages in relation to participants’ application of certain strategies. Pearson correlation was used to indicate the relationship between social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request. Non-parametric chi-square analyses was conducted to indicate whether a significant difference exists between Chinese and American students in terms of the directness of the request strategies, as well as whether there are any significant differences in terms of the three social variables. Before all inferential statistics were calculated, I conducted a reliability test on the three social variables in the questionnaire. The questionnaire responses were coded according to the coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984). I added a category “opt out” if the participants made no responses to the question. All analyses were conducted under SPSS 16.0.

In order to increase the validity of the present study, in coding the directness of the request strategies, I also found three other faculty members and one peer to serve as co-raters. All co-raters are Americans. One of the three faculty members is a proficient English linguist, so her rating was considered as the main reference for analyzing the results. Another faculty has a college degree in English, and the peer is a fourth-year doctoral student in English linguistics, so their ratings were also considered reliable references. The rating of the third faculty is considered as an additional source for reference since he has no professional training in English linguistics. When there was a difference in the rating assigned to a particular sentence, I would select the one
that was agreed on by at least two of the co-raters. If no agreement was reached among all co-
raters, I would rely on the proficient linguist for the deciding point.

In interpreting the qualitative data, the interviews of Chinese students were first
transcribed and then translated into English. However, it is inevitable that some sense of
meanings were lost during the process of translation. The interviews of American students were
also transcribed. After the transcriptions were done, I coded them according to the interview
questions. Each participant had an individual record which included his/her responses to the
questionnaires and the corresponding interview transcripts. The interview results were then
compared with the results obtained from the quantitative analysis to see whether or not they were
consistent with each other. Comparison was also made between the interviewee’s questionnaire
responses and interview results.

Limitations

It is inevitable that the study has some limitations. One limitation is that the sample size is
small. Although 55 American students participated, only 21 Chinese students did. They are
mainly limited to graduate students in the College of Education and Human Development and
College of Arts and Sciences at one American university. Due to the limitation of the scope of
the present study, the statistical results obtained from the questionnaire analysis might not be
generalized to the whole target population. In addition, although the interviewees were carefully
chosen, it is still very hard to include every portion of the whole participant population, and some
individual differences might still be ignored. Secondly, the modified DCT applied in this study
is still not ideal enough to elicit responses similar to those in natural conversation settings.
Although it has been modified to include open-ended questions, it is still not as interactive as the
real conversations in natural settings. In the pilot study, many interviewees expressed that their
request strategy depended to a large extent on what response they would obtain from the hearer after some tentative questions, such as information about their willingness to help or their availability. To some extent, participants’ consciously written responses to the questionnaire might be quite different from their unconscious oral responses in natural conversation settings. Many confounding variables, such as anxiety and motivation, might influence participants’ oral English performance in their real life communications.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the study. Findings are organized and discussed in two parts (i.e., quantitative study results and qualitative study results) according to the three hypotheses posed: 1) Chinese and American graduate students do not differ significantly from each other in terms of the directness of the requests; 2) Chinese and American graduate students do not differ significantly from each other in the following three social variables, social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request; 3) The three social variables, namely social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request, are not correlated with each other. As the study is explanatory in nature, the qualitative study results are used to explain or support the quantitative study results.

Quantitative Study Results

Quantitative study results are presented in order of the three hypotheses posed. Both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were applied in analyzing the questionnaire responses collected from the participants. Among the 77 responses, one American participant’s response was left out in the analysis because she/he only responded to 7 situations on the questionnaire. A total of 21 Chinese graduate students and 55 American graduate students were entered for final statistical analysis. The results obtained from the questionnaire analysis are presented next.

Hypothesis One

A chi-square test was conducted between Chinese and American graduate students to see whether they were significantly different from each other in directness of request strategies. Results of chi-square analysis revealed that these two groups of participants significantly differed from each other in directness of request strategies in the following three situations: Situation 4,
Situation 11, and Situation 13. For the remaining situations, no significant differences were discovered between them.

In Situation 4, participants were required to ask the librarian for a specific book. Chinese and American students’ responses were significantly different from each other, $X^2 (2, n = 76) = 8.39, p<.05$. No request strategies applied by Chinese students are non-conventionally indirect, whereas 31 percent of those applied by American students belong to this request strategy type. The majority of the request strategies applied by Chinese students (86 percent) are conventionally indirect request strategies. Although the majority of the request strategies applied by American students (58 percent) are also conventionally indirect request strategies, the percentage is much less than that of the Chinese students. In terms of the direct request strategies, Chinese students did not present contrastive differences with their American counterparts. These results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below.

Table 1

*Distribution of the Request Strategy Category by Nationality (Situation 4)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Request Strategy Category</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>18 (86%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
<td>32 (58%)</td>
<td>17 (31%)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 (12%)</td>
<td>50 (66%)</td>
<td>17 (22%)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1= Direct Request Strategy  
2= Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy  
3= Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy
Results of chi-square analysis for Situation 11 also indicated that Chinese and American graduate students significantly differed from each other in the application of the request strategy categories, $X^2 (2, n = 71) = 6.96, p<.05$. In this situation, participants were required to ask their uncle in Florida for temporary housing because they would go there for winter vacation. Similar to the results in Situation 4, Chinese and American students’ responses were significantly different from each other in that no request strategies applied by Chinese students are non-conventionally indirect, whereas 16 percent of those applied by American students belong to this request strategy type. The majority of the request strategies applied by Chinese students (85 percent) are conventionally indirect request strategies. Although the majority of the request strategies (53 percent) applied by American students are also conventionally indirect request
Table 2

*Distribution of the Request Strategy Category by Nationality (Situation 11)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request Strategy Category</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1= Direct Request Strategy  
2= Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy  
3= Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

*Figure 2.* Distribution of the Request Strategy Category by Nationality (Situation 11)
strategies, the percentage is much less than that by the Chinese students. On the contrary, the percentage of direct request strategies by American students (31 percent) is much higher than that by Chinese students (15 percent). These results are shown in Table 2 and Figure 2 above.

Results of chi-square analysis for Situation 13 indicated that Chinese and American graduate students significantly differed from each other in the application of request strategy categories, \(X^2 (1, n = 74) = 8.05, p<.01\). In this situation, participants were required to ask an unknown student for a pen and a piece of paper while attending a lecture. Different from the above two situations, neither Chinese nor American students used non-conventionally indirect request strategies in Situation 13. However, they significantly differed from each other in conventionally indirect request strategies and direct request strategies. For instance, the majority of request strategies applied by Chinese students (95 percent) were conventionally indirect ones. Although the majority of the request strategies applied by American students (62 percent) were also conventionally indirect request strategies, the percentage is much less than that by the Chinese students. Similar to Situation 11, the percentage of direct request strategies by American students (38 percent) is much higher than that by the Chinese students (5 percent). These results are shown in Table 3 and Figure 3 below.
Table 3

*Distribution of the Request Strategy Category by Nationality (Situation 13)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request Strategy Category</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1= Direct Request Strategy  
2= Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy  
3= Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

*Figure 3.* Distribution of the Request Strategy Category by Nationality (Situation 13)
In summary, the first null hypothesis is partially rejected. Chinese graduate students and American graduate students do not significantly differ from each other in some situations in directness of request strategies. For some particular situations, such as Situation 4 (participant-librarian scenario), Situation 11 (participant-uncle scenario) and Situation 13 (participant-peer scenario), Chinese students still present significant differences compared with American students in the preference of request strategy types.

Hypothesis Two

Before testing the second hypothesis, a reliability test was run to see whether the scales for social distance, relative power and imposition of request were reliable. Although reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed in the pilot study, it is still necessary to test the Cronbach’s alpha to see whether it is reliable when being tested with a larger number of participants. Cronbach’s alphas for social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request are .70, .75 and .71 respectively, which indicate that the scales for testing the three social variables are reliable.

Chi-square tests were run between Chinese and American graduate students to see whether they were significantly different from each other in rating of the three social variables mentioned in the questionnaire. Results of chi-square tests for social distance and relative power for all 14 situations indicated no significant differences between Chinese and American students. Results for imposition of the request displayed significant differences in some situations: Situations 3, $X^2 (3, n = 75) = 10.52$, $p<.05$; Situation 5, $X^2 (3, n = 75) = 9.58$, $p<.05$; Situation 6, $X^2 (3, n = 76) = 13.62$, $p<.01$; Situation 7, $X^2 (3, n = 75) = 8.91$, $p<.05$; and Situation 11, $X^2 (3, n = 76) = 11.85$, $p<.01$ (See Table 4 below). No significant differences were discovered in the remaining nine situations for imposition of the request in chi-square analysis.
Table 4

*Chi-Square Test of Imposition between Chinese and American Graduate Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation (Addressee)</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>$Df$</th>
<th>$N$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 (Student)</td>
<td>10.52*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Roommate)</td>
<td>9.58*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Mother)</td>
<td>13.62**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Teacher)</td>
<td>8.91*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (Uncle)</td>
<td>11.85**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.*

In Situation 3, participants were required to ask one of their students to help them move to a new apartment. Table 5 indicates that for Situation 3, about one third of Chinese students (38 percent) believed that it is “somewhat easy”, and about one third of Chinese students (33 percent) believed that it is “somewhat easy” to make the request. Comparatively speaking, the majority of American students (59 percent) believed that it is “moderately difficult” to make such request. In Situation 5, participants were expected to borrow their roommates’ credit card for purchasing a laptop. For this situation, 43 percent of Chinese students believed that it is “somewhat easy”, while the majority of American students (52 percent) believed that it is “very difficult” to make the request. In Situation 6, participants were required to borrow money from their mother in order to buy a used car. In this situation, the majority of Chinese students (57 percent) believed that it is “very easy”, while 37 percent of American students believed
Table 5

*Distribution of Imposition between Chinese and American Graduate Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation (Addressee)</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Very Easy</th>
<th>Somewhat Easy</th>
<th>Moderately Difficult</th>
<th>Very Difficult</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 (Student)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5 (24%)</td>
<td>8 (38%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>13 (24%)</td>
<td>32 (59%)</td>
<td>7 (13%)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
<td>39 (52%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Roommate)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>9 (43%)</td>
<td>6 (28%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>10 (19%)</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>28 (52%)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>19 (25%)</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
<td>32 (43%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Mother)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>12 (57%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>9 (17%)</td>
<td>10 (18%)</td>
<td>20 (37%)</td>
<td>15 (28%)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
<td>23 (31%)</td>
<td>17 (23%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Teacher)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>9 (43%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>18 (33%)</td>
<td>24 (45%)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>20 (27%)</td>
<td>25 (33%)</td>
<td>27 (36%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (Uncle)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>12 (57%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>22 (40%)</td>
<td>16 (29%)</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23 (30%)</td>
<td>29 (38%)</td>
<td>18 (24%)</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that it is “moderately difficult” to make the request. In Situation 7, participants were expected to ask one of their teachers for a ride home on a snowy day. In this situation, 43 percent of Chinese students believed that it is “somewhat easy”, whereas 45 percent of American students believed that it is “very difficult” to make such request. In Situation 11, participants were expected to ask their uncle for temporary housing for winter vacation. In this situation, the majority of Chinese students (57 percent) believed that it is “very easy”, whereas 40 percent of American students believed that it is “somewhat easy” and 29 percent believed it is “somewhat difficult” to make the request.

In summary, the second hypothesis is also partially rejected. Chinese and American graduate students presented no significant differences in rating of social distance and relative power. For imposition of the request, significant differences were discovered in some situations: Situation 3 (participant-student scenario), Situation 5 (participant-roommate scenario), Situation 6 (participant-mother scenario), Situation 7 (participant-teacher scenario), and Situation 11 (participant-uncle scenario).

Hypothesis Three

For the third hypothesis, Pearson correlation was run to see whether social distance, relative power and imposition of the request were correlated with each other. Results of correlation between the three social variables indicate that social distance was positively correlated with imposition of the request, and the correlation was statistically significant (p<.01). This means that the more familiar the speaker is with the hearer, the less difficult it is in making the request. Relative power was positively correlated with social distance and imposition of the request. However, the correlations were not statistically significant (p>.05) (See Table 6). It is concluded from this result that the third hypothesis is rejected: The three social variables, namely
social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request, are positively correlated with each other.

Table 6

*Intercorrelations for Social Distance, Relative Power, and Imposition of the Request*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Social Distance</th>
<th>Relative Power</th>
<th>Imposition of Request</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Distance</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposition of Request</td>
<td>.344*</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=75. *p*<.01.*

*Qualitative Study Results*

Five Chinese and five American graduate students were interviewed. Six are females and four are males. Their age ranges from 22 to 50, with an average age of 31.7. Four of the interviewees are science major graduate students, and six are arts major graduate students. Six are M.A. students, one is a M.S. student, and three are Ph.D. students. Five of the interviewees are teaching assistants, two are research assistants and two are administrative assistants. Chinese interviewees’ exposure to American culture ranges from less than one to three years. The location of interviews was chosen by the interviewees, such as conference rooms, classrooms, and offices in the buildings of their field of study. All interview locations were quiet and nobody else was present except for the one interviewee and myself. All interviews were recorded by a
digital recorder with the interviewees’ permission. The following interview analysis results correspond with the quantitative questions posed.

*Interview Results Corresponding to Hypothesis One*

Based on the analysis of interviewee’s responses to the questionnaire and interview transcriptions, it can be concluded that the interview results are consistent with the quantitative analysis results (See Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). For some situations (See Table 7), Chinese and American graduate students significantly differed from each other in terms of directness of the requests. In Situation 4, two Chinese interviewees (40 percent) applied direct request strategy, three (60 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy, and nobody used non-conventionally indirect request strategy. Comparatively speaking, no American interviewees applied direct request strategy, four (80 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy, and one (20 percent) used non-conventionally indirect request strategy. In Situation 11, one Chinese interviewee (20 percent) applied direct request strategy, four (80 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy, and nobody used non-conventionally indirect request strategy. In comparison, one American interviewee (25 percent) applied direct request strategy, two (50 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy, and one (25 percent) used non-conventionally indirect request strategy. In Situation 13, all Chinese interviewees (100 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy and nobody used direct or non-conventionally indirect request strategies. Comparatively speaking, two American interviewees (40 percent) applied direct request strategy, three (60 percent) applied conventionally indirect request strategy, and nobody applied non-conventionally indirect request strategy.
### Table 7

**Distribution of the Request Strategy Category for Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation (Addressee)</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Request Strategy Category</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (40%)</td>
<td>2 (60%)</td>
<td>3 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (Librarian)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (80%)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (Uncle)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
<td>6 (67%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (Peer)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>8 (80%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 1= Direct Request Strategy  
2= Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy  
3= Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

When asked why non-conventionally indirect request strategies were chosen for Situation 4 and Situation 11, one interviewee said he hated to ask people for things and preferred to ask indirectly what he meant. As in Situation 11, if he were required to ask his uncle for temporary housing, he would say “Hey, Richard, I was thinking about going down to Florida for vacation. Do you know of any cheap places I could stay at while down there?” By asking for information about hotels, he anticipated that his uncle would invite him to his own house for a temporary stay. He would rather not ask any more if his uncle showed no interest in inviting him to his house. In this interviewee’s opinion, independence is always the thing that one should be proud of. For
Situation 13, when being asked why direct request strategy was chosen for this situation, one American interviewee expressed that it is more polite to use direct request strategies because it is easier to make their meaning come across and save both the speaker and the hearer’s time and efforts. For the same reason, for some situations with higher imposition of the request, they also preferred to use direct request strategies. On the contrary, Chinese interviewees (100 percent) said that they preferred to use indirect request strategies in almost all situations (except that to their mother) because it is always the safest way of expression. Different from the American interviewees, no Chinese interviewees indicated that they would choose to use direct request strategies when the imposition of the request is high.

*Interview Results Corresponding to Hypothesis Two*

Quantitative analysis of participants’ opinions on social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request revealed that Chinese and American graduate students significantly differed from each other in five (Situation 3, 5, 6, 7, and 11) out of 14 situations in the questionnaire. In the qualitative portion, all interview questions were designed to elicit participants’ perceptions on the different relationships with people in these five situations. As a result, the interview results revealed that they were all partially consistent with the quantitative study results (See Table 5).

In Situation 3, all Chinese interviewees (100 percent) believed that it is very easy to ask their students to do something for them, especially when the request is class related, such as distributing the handouts or setting up the projector. But if the request is related to their personal life, such as asking the students to help them move, all Chinese interviewees (100 percent) would consider it more difficult. American interviewees expressed slightly different opinions. Most of them (80 percent) said that they considered it difficult to ask their students to do something for
them. If it is class related, they would rather do it themselves, such as erase the chalk board or set up the projector unless some students volunteer to do so. They will never ask their students to help with their personal issues because they hope to keep a professional line with their students.

In Situation 5, 80 percent of Chinese interviewees believed that it is very easy to ask their American friends for help if the request is related to their study or work. But if the request is related to their personal life, such as borrowing a credit card from their American roommates, it will become more difficult unless they pay by check right away. Comparatively speaking, none of the American interviewees agreed that they would borrow a credit card from their roommate, even if they are good friends. Several reasons were given for their decision. Firstly, credit cards are very important. If something wrong happens to one’s credit history, the influence will be extended to many aspects of their life. Secondly, they did not consider a laptop as a life necessity, so they would prefer to go to the computer lab if they temporarily couldn’t afford to buy one for themselves. A third reason given is that they considered it acceptable to borrow a credit card from their family members, but to ask their roommates for such a big imposition seemed inappropriate.

In Situation 6, all Chinese interviewees (100 percent) believed that it is very easy to borrow money from their mother because they enjoy a very close relationship with their parents. They considered paying the money back to their parents later, but it is very probable that their parents will never accept. All American interviewees (100 percent), however, considered it a shame to borrow money from their parents because that indicated a lack of independence. If they had to borrow money from their parents, many considered it a responsibility to pay the money back. Some even thought it appropriate to write a contract with their parents and set up a plan for
monthly payment. In contrast, no Chinese interviewees believed it a necessity to set up a formal contract with their parents for repayment.

In Situation 7, 60 percent of Chinese interviewees believed that it is very easy to ask their teacher for a ride home because they thought their American teachers are very friendly and approachable. Some Chinese interviewees (40 percent) believed that it is not easy to make such a request because they believed that students should have a professional line with their teachers.

Slightly different from the quantitative results, all American interviewees (100 percent) expressed that the imposition of this kind of request is so high that they would never consider making it to their teacher. In their view, students and teachers should separate their professional life with their personal life. It is considered inappropriate if the teacher and student are interacting with each other outside the classroom on an individual basis.

In Situation 11, 80 percent of Chinese interviewees believed that it is very easy to ask their relatives for help, such as borrowing money or asking for temporary housing. One interviewee (20 percent) believed that whether it is easy to make such a request depended on his relationship with the relatives. A close relationship would make things easier. However, the majority of American interviewees (80 percent) expressed that they would never make the request directly to their relatives. What they preferred was to ask indirectly and then to decide whether to make the request or not based on their relatives’ response. For example, they might mention that they would stay at a nearby hotel which was expensive. One American interviewee (20 percent) believed that whether to ask their relatives for temporary housing depended on their relationship.

In the interviews, participants were also asked to rank the relative power of all types of hearers, such as teachers, staff, parents, relatives, friends, and students, in order to see whether the results are consistent with the quantitative ones. Results of chi-square analysis indicated
significant differences between Chinese and American interviewees in two types of addressees, namely staff, $X^2 (2, n = 10) = 6.67, p<.05$, and students, $X^2 (2, n = 10) = 10.00, p<.01$ (See Table 8 below). Table 9 shows that all Chinese interviewees (100 percent) believed that staff members are relatively high and students are relatively low, whereas the majority of American interviewees (60 percent) believed that both staff and students are equal with each other. Compared with the distribution results of relative power in the quantitative portion of the study, the majority of both Chinese students (81 percent) and American students (71 percent) believed that staff was equal with them in terms of social status. Similarly, the majority of Chinese students (57 percent) believed that students are equal with them in terms of social status, and the majority of American students (58 percent) believed that students are lower than themselves.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>6.67*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>10.00**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.}
### Table 9

*Distribution of Relative Power for Chinese and American Interviewees*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Power Relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, the qualitative results are basically consistent with the quantitative ones except for part of hypothesis two mentioned above. The interviewees are representing the participants in terms of age, major, grade, gender (both Chinese and American participants), exposure to English speaking and English proficiency (Chinese participants only), so their responses are generally, if not completely, reflective of the opinions of all participants.

*Interview Results Corresponding to Hypothesis Three*

To address the third hypothesis, interviewees were asked to express their opinions on the relationship between social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request. The interview results were consistent with the results obtained from the quantitative portion. All interviewees (100 percent) indicated that social distance is positively correlated with imposition of the request, that is, the more familiar they are with the hearer, the less difficult the request will be. They also
believed that the higher social status the hearer has, the more difficult the request will be. However, the interviewees did not indicate any correlation between social distance and social status of the hearer. This finding is consistent with the quantitative result because no significant difference was found between social distance and relative power of the hearer in Pearson correlation test.

In the interviews, I also asked the participants which factor they believed to be more important in deciding the imposition of the request. The 10 interviewees (100 percent) all indicated that social distance is more important than social status of the hearer. This result is also consistent with the Pearson correlation result, which shows that correlation between social distance and imposition of the request is statistically significant, while that between relative power and imposition is not statistically significant.

Summary

In summary, the first and second null hypotheses were partially rejected, and the third hypothesis was completely rejected. Chinese and American graduate students significantly differ from each other in the following situations in directness of request strategies: Situation 4 (participant-librarian scenario), Situation 11 (participant-uncle scenario) and Situation 13 (participant-peer scenario). No significant differences were discovered in the remaining situations. As far as the three study variables are concerned, Chinese and American graduate students presented significant differences in rating imposition of the request for the following situations: Situation 3 (participant-student scenario), Situation 5 (participant-roommate scenario), Situation 6 (participant-mother scenario), Situation 7 (participant-teacher scenario), and Situation 11 (participant-uncle scenario), but presented no significant differences in rating social distance and relative power for all 14 situations. The three study variables were positively correlated with
each other. Correlation between social distance and imposition of the request was statistically significant \( (p<.01) \) and that between relative power, social distance and imposition of the request were not statistically significant \( (p>.05) \) (See Table 6). The qualitative results are basically consistent with the quantitative ones except for part of hypothesis two in terms of imposition of the request and relative power of the hearers.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Interpretations of the results are discussed in three separate parts. The first part is dedicated to discussing both quantitative and qualitative results in relation to the three hypotheses posed before. The second part is devoted to the discussion of Chinese and American students’ different perceptions on different relationships in their social and cultural communications. In the third part, the major findings of the present study are summarized, limitations are discussed, and some suggestions for future research are provided.

Addressing the Three Hypotheses

The quantitative results showed consistency with the interview results in addressing Hypothesis One and Hypothesis Three, and partial consistency in addressing Hypothesis Two. Consistency is addressed as partial here because the percentage of interviewees who believed in a certain idea is far apart from that obtained from the quantitative study. For example, for Situation 3, 38 percent of Chinese students believed that it is “somewhat easy” and 33 percent believed it is “moderately difficult” to ask their students to help them move. Whereas 100 percent of Chinese interviewees believed that it is difficult to make such a request.

Reasons for this inconsistency lie in the format of interviews. When being asked their opinions on imposition of certain request, interviewees not only talked about the current situation, but also compared it to some other student situations. For example, when being asked whether they believed it difficult to ask their students to help them move, they said it was more difficult compared to some class related requests. Similarly, to borrow a credit card from their American friends is more difficult than asking them for help with study or work-related issues. Since the interviews are semi-structured, it is not possible to rank their answers on a four-point Likert scale as that used in the quantitative study. Therefore, although the qualitative results are not 100
percent consistent with the quantitative results in terms of figures, they are considered as supportive evidence to the quantitative results.

*Result Interpretations in Relation to Hypothesis One*

To sum up the results of the present study related to Hypothesis One, Chinese and American graduate students are significantly different from each other in terms of the directness of request in certain situations: Situation 4 (participant-librarian scenario), Situation 11 (participant-uncle scenario), and Situation 13 (participant-peer scenario). Thus, Hypothesis One is partially rejected. In Situation 4 and Situation 11, Chinese students did not use non-conventionally indirect request strategies, and the majority of the request strategy type for both groups of participants is conventionally indirect. In Situation 13, the percentage of direct request strategies applied by American students is much higher than that by Chinese students. Similarly, the majority of the request strategy type for both groups of participants belongs to conventionally indirect ones. The preference for conventionally indirect request strategies for both Chinese and American graduate students is consistent with that in Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), Lin (2008), Zhang and Wang (1997). Overuse of the conventionally indirect request strategy by Chinese students, as displayed in Situation 13, is consistent with the result in Sun and Zhang (2008). Avoidance of the use of non-conventionally indirect request strategy by Chinese students, such as in Situation 4 and Situation 11, is also consistent with the previous research (i.e., Blum-Kulka et al., 1984). These findings reveal that Chinese students are still not proficient in applying different types of request strategies according to different social and cultural communication settings.

*Result Interpretations in Relation to Hypothesis Two*

In terms of Hypothesis Two, results of the quantitative study indicated that Chinese and American graduate students significantly differ from each other in imposition of the request for
some situations, but not in relation to social distance and relative power for all situations. Results of the qualitative study are basically consistent with the quantitative results except for relative power in two types of addressees, namely staff and students. Interviewees’ opinions on the social status of staff can account for the inconsistency between quantitative and qualitative results. As teaching, research or administrative assistants, some interviewees believed that they were equal with staff because both were working for the faculty or students in their university. Some interviewees believed that staff was higher than them because they were more experienced and knowledgeable in certain aspects. As for the relationship with the students, all interviewees said they were equal with their students outside the classrooms, but a little bit higher than them inside the class because teachers were expected to be more knowledgeable and professional.

It was anticipated that differences were to be discovered in rating of social distance between Chinese and American participants because people from different cultures tend to have different opinions on such factor. However, no differences were found in both quantitative and qualitative analysis. An obvious reason for this finding is that maybe these two groups of participants are influenced by the scenario descriptions in the situations. For example, in some situations, social distance is clearly indicated by the descriptions like “Although you have never spoken to Mike before, you decide to ask him for help.” Another possible reason is that Chinese students’ opinions are influenced by their living environment in the U.S., and their ideas on social distance with all types of people have become similar to that of Americans.

Result Interpretations in Relation to Hypothesis Three

The research result also addresses the third hypothesis, which indicates that making request does not depend on a single factor, but a combination of the following three factors: familiarity with the hearer, the social status of the hearer, and the imposition of the request.
Imposition of the request depends more on speaker’s familiarity with the hearer than on the hearer’s social status (See Table 6). In another words, if the speaker is very familiar with the hearer, even if the hearer has a relatively higher social status, the imposition of making requests is not very high. On the other hand, unfamiliarity with the hearer will increase the imposition of the request, even if the hearer has an equal or lower social status than the speaker.

Different Perceptions on Relationships in Communication

The situations in which Chinese and American students differ from each other in terms of imposition include the speakers’ relationship with their teachers, students, parents and relatives, and friends. The results of descriptive statistics (See Table 5 earlier) indicate that Chinese students believed that it is easier to make requests to these parties than do American students. This finding implies that students’ cultural background influences the imposition as well as the way of expressions in making the request. Based on the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative study, in the next section I will discuss both similar and different cultural values that underlie participants’ choice of request strategies. The discussion is organized by three aspects: teacher-student relationship, parent-child relationship, and peer relationship.

Teacher-Student Relationship

Results from both quantitative and qualitative study revealed that Chinese and American students hold both similar and different attitudes towards their teachers. The similarity lies in that both groups of students showed esteem to their teachers for their knowledge, teaching and research expertise. Both Chinese and American students tend to use conventionally indirect request strategies when asking their teachers for some help. However, differences also exist in their opinions on imposition of the request. For example, in Situation 7, 43 percent of Chinese students believed that it was very easy to ask their teacher for a ride home because they thought
the American teachers are very friendly and approachable. However, 45 percent of American students believed that it was very difficult to make such requests.

A Chinese interviewee said she thought it easy to ask the faculty for a ride home because all the American teachers that she had contacted in her university are more approachable than her teachers in China. She said: “In China, we are expected to respect the teachers and superiors, but in the U.S. everyone seems to be equal.” The belief of equal relationship between teachers and students is also reflected in the majority of the American interviewees’ (60 percent) responses. As Ao (2005) states, China is influenced by Confucianism which is premised on a hierarchical society in which everyone has his/her particular position in the social scale. Confucius is reported to have said that “to honor those higher than ourselves is the highest expression of the sense of justice” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 92). Influenced by Confucian doctrine, teachers in China enjoy prestige in the society as well as esteem inside the classroom. Due to respect, students usually have a quite distant relationship with their teachers in China.

Having been exposed to American culture for a certain period of time, however, some Chinese students’ beliefs are also undergoing changes or modifications. For example, in Situation 7, 43 percent of Chinese students believed that it is easy to ask their teacher for a ride home. One Chinese interviewee explained that if she were to ask a Chinese teacher for a ride home in China, she would be more intimidated in making the request. Viewed from the critical theory perspective, Chinese students’ slight changes in their attitudes towards teachers is easily understandable. As stated by Lincoln and Guba (2000), life is a “virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values crystallized over time” (cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 7). Due to the dynamic nature of social reality, some values may hold true in a
certain cultural context, but will disappear in another or will be modified and replaced by other values in that cultural context. So to some extent, the exposure to American culture may have facilitated the changes of some Chinese students’ attitudes towards their teachers.

However, it should be mentioned that due to the relatively short period of exposure to American culture, many Chinese students still do not have a thorough understanding towards campus culture in American universities. In the interviews, I discovered that many American interviewees expressed that asking faculty for a ride home is an inappropriate behavior. In the U.S., students are not supposed to have close contact with their teachers outside the class, especially when they are interacting with each other on an individual basis. Several reasons were given by these interviewees. Firstly, to ask the faculty for a ride home is inappropriate if they don’t have the company of the third party. Secondly, the student might be suspected to gain favor of the faculty by engaging in some personal relationship with them outside the class. Additionally, it is generally agreed that students and teachers’ professional and personal lives should be clearly distinguished. In this case, request making is even harder because it is not the problem of what types of expressions are appropriate, but the problem of whether to make such a request or not. Many Chinese students believed that they should apply indirect request strategies or add more reasons in making such a request. However, although their expressions are grammatically appropriate, their language behavior might still be considered as sociolinguistic failures by some linguists (i.e. Thomas, 1983). It should be added that 19 American participants (35 percent) chose not to respond to Situation 7, and almost every student gave some reasons for not asking, such as “It is inappropriate to request a ride from someone in that position of authority” or “If he saw me and offered me ride, I would take it.”
It’s just weird to ask that.” Only three Chinese participants (14 percent) said they would not ask the faculty for a ride, and only one gave the reason that “he/she could do it by him/herself”.

**Parent-Child Relationship**

As far as the parent-child relationship is concerned, the majority of Chinese (52 percent) and American participants (63 percent) felt that they have a moderately close relationship with their parents. Similarly, all Chinese (100 percent) and the majority of American interviewees (80 percent) indicated that they are very close to their parents. However, when asking their mothers for help, such as borrowing money for a used car, such closeness is displayed in many different ways. Chinese students preferred to use direct strategies, whereas American students preferred to use conventionally indirect or non-conventionally indirect request strategies.

As indicated in Table 5, the majority of Chinese students (57 percent) believed that it is “very easy” to borrow money from their mother, whereas 28 percent of American students held that it is “moderately difficult” to make such request. Many American students (16 percent) refused to respond to this situation. Some American interviewees expressed that they would never consider borrowing money from their mother unless they had to. By contrast, many Chinese interviewees said they seldom consider borrowing money from their parents because they would always voluntarily “give” them money whenever they needed it.

Underlying the different attitudes towards their parents is the different social and cultural constructs for both Chinese and American students. China, as maintained by Hofstede (1999), is a collectivist society in which “people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups” (cited in Segall et al., 1999, p. 207). The patriarchal extended family has been the traditional form in China, where parents live together with their children and grandchildren. Guided by this social construct, Chinese parents maintain an interdependent relationship with their children. Inside the family, children’s requirements are parents’
responsibility and vice versa. By contrast, the relationship between American parents and children is independent because Western culture is nestled under the construct of individualism. According to Hofstede (1999), individualism stands for “a society in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his immediate family only” (cited in Segall et al., 1999, p. 207). Being independent, either financial or spiritual, is considered a virtue in American society. This is why many American participants chose not to respond to Situation 7, and many chose to ask in a very indirect way.

Similar to Situation 7, in Situation 11, participants were expected to ask their uncle for temporary housing in Florida. In this situation, no Chinese students applied non-conventionally indirect request strategies. Comparatively speaking, 16 percent of American students applied this request strategy. In China, relatives are also considered part of the whole family. Although they are relatively distant from the children compared with their parents, many of them enjoy an interdependent relationship with the family. The majority of Chinese interviewees (80 percent) believed that it was very easy to ask their relatives for help, and it was not necessary to use hints while making the request because that would make them feel uncomfortable. On the contrary, American interviewees (80 percent) said that asking their uncle for temporary housing is an indicator of their dependency and even a shame. They hoped their uncle would offer them temporary housing. If not, they would rather not ask.

Peer Relationship

Although Chinese and American participants did not show difference in relation to social distance with their classmates/friends, they displayed a significant difference in imposition of the request. For example, in Situation 5, when they are expected to ask their roommate for a credit card, 43 percent of Chinese students believed it is “somewhat easy,” whereas the majority of American students (52 percent) believed it to be “very difficult”. Many
American participants (36 percent) chose not to respond to this situation, compared to only one Chinese participant (4 percent) who failed to respond in this case.

Reasons for Chinese students’ attitude towards borrowing a credit card might be due to their short exposure to American culture. In China, a credit card is not popularly used, so the importance of a credit report or a clear credit history is still vague to many Chinese students, especially to those who stayed less than one year in the U.S. As addressed by all American interviewees (100 percent), a clear credit history is very important for their social life. If something wrong goes with it, their life will have trouble, so people seldom ask others for a credit card. Even if they pay their friends by check right away, it is possible that the check might not be legitimate, which will cause potential trouble for others. So similar to Situation 7 discussed above, even if Chinese participants chose to use indirect request strategies while making the request, it is still considered socio-linguistically inappropriate.

Chinese students’ inappropriate choice of request strategy is also associated with Situation 14 where participants are expected to borrow a pen and a piece of paper from their student peer. For this situation, the majority of request strategies applied by Chinese students (95 percent) is conventionally indirect and only five percent of them are direct. Compared to 62 percent of conventionally indirect strategies and 38 percent of direct strategies applied by American participants, Chinese students tended to overuse the conventionally indirect request strategies. Actually the imposition of making such kind of request is very low and the addressee is at the same social status with the speaker, so to make elaborate and indirect request strategies seems inappropriate.

In sum, to make appropriate requests in different social and cultural settings requires not only linguistic proficiency but also sociolinguistic and cross-cultural competence. Failure in any one aspect will easily lead to breakdowns in social and cultural communications.
Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

Results of the present study are consistent with previous research in many aspects. For example, the preference for conventionally indirect request strategies by both Chinese and American graduate students is consistent with the results in Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), Lin (2008), and Zhang and Wang (1997). Overuse of the conventionally indirect request strategy by Chinese students in some situations is consistent with the result in Sun and Zhang (2008). Avoidance of the use of non-conventionally indirect request strategy in some situations by Chinese students is also consistent with the results in Blum-Kulka et al. (1984).

However, new findings were also discovered in the present study. Although previous researchers incorporated social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request into their research design (i.e., Sun and Zhang, 2007), nobody has investigated the different perceptions on these factors by Chinese and American graduate students. The present study contributed to the request literature by adding this comparison. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, it is evident that Chinese and American graduate students differed from each other in imposition of the request and relative power in some communication scenarios. No difference was indicated in relation to social distance in any communication scenario. The differences in perceptions on different relationships by Chinese and American students, such as the teacher-student relationship or peer relationship, may be due to cross-cultural differences between Eastern culture and Western culture, which, in turn, might be the cause for socio-linguistic or socio-pragmatic failures for Chinese students in communication. The present research also added a correlation study between social distance, relative power, and imposition of the request to the literature. The positive correlation between factors provided some hints as to what type of request strategy is preferred when social distance and relative power with addressees varies greatly.
Since the ability to make English request is part of Chinese ESL learners’ pragmatic competence, the research findings provide some suggestions for ESL and other instructors in American universities. For example, in ESL oral English classes, instructors might first assess their Chinese as well as other international students’ pragmatic competence by asking them to respond to some simulated scenarios in real life. Cultural relevant teaching is suggested if students’ pragmatic competence is diagnosed as low. Similarly, in many other classes where Chinese or other international students are involved, instructors are suggested to consider their cultural backgrounds while evaluating their class performance. As we know, to adjust to a completely new cultural and academic environment takes time. In order to help the international students adjust to the new social and academic environment more smoothly, instructors also need to pay closer attention to the points where their international students’ home culture are conflicting with the American one. If contrastive differences are diagnosed, some clear guidelines about the American culture are suggested to be delivered in class. These guidelines might be delivered through class activities, such as group discussion on a cultural related topic. In a word, the instructors’ encouraging attitude, understanding of their international students, and appropriate instructions for American culture will greatly facilitate the process of their adjustment to the new social and cultural environment in the U.S.

However, findings of the present study should be taken with caution because it is limited in several ways. Firstly, the sample size, especially the number of Chinese participants, is relatively small. A larger number of Chinese participants will constitute a better comparison group with the American participants. Secondly, all participants were chosen from one mid-western American university. Although participants and interviewees were carefully chosen in order to better represent the target population, due to the nature of the present small-scale study, it is still very hard to make generalizations to the target population in similar socio-cultural
communication settings. Even within the present study, due to the limited scope, it is hard to comprehensively include all questionnaire scenarios into the interviews. It is inevitable that some individual differences might be ignored in the process of qualitative study. Thirdly, although the DCT has been modified to be an open-ended questionnaire, it is still not ideal enough to elicit responses from naturally occurring conversation settings. Lastly, due to the limitation in the scope of the present study, more detailed linguistic analysis of participants’ responses was not included.

For future research, researchers might consider choosing a larger number of participants from a variety of universities. Chinese participants might be extended to undergraduate students with different English proficiency levels. Longitudinal study is also suggested because researchers can get a more comprehensive picture of how the pragmatic competence of Chinese students develops with their increasing exposure to American culture. In conducting the research, researchers have the option of choosing either a pure quantitative or a pure qualitative research approach, within a cross-cultural context or a unique linguistic context. Researchers are also encouraged to conduct a qualitative study to ascertain why most participants prefer to use conventionally indirect request strategies in making requests. An alternative of the written DCT, namely the oral role play questionnaire, may be applied in order to elicit responses more similar to the naturally occurring conversations. Researchers interested in linguistic analysis may also incorporate the comparative study of the linguistic features of participants’ responses into their analysis. Through exploring the different request strategies applied by Chinese and American graduate students in English speech communication settings, this study has also shed light on differences between their English pragmatic competence. The topic is worthy of study even for native speakers of English because potentially different
individuals might have different pragmatic competence in communication. Similarly, the topic is worthwhile to pursue among native speakers of Chinese. Whatever the research paradigm or language chosen to study, certainly there is considerable work to be done by future researchers.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS ON REQUEST STRATEGIES

Nationality: Native Language: Gender:
Age: Major: Degree Seeking:
Grade:

Part One:

Please respond to the following questions by checking ONE box in the listed choices below.

1. How many years have you been learning English?
   - □ One to five years  □ Five to ten years  □ Ten to 15 years  □ More than 15 years

   The number of years: ________________

2. How long have you been in the U.S.?
   - □ Less than one year  □ One year  □ Two years  □ Three years  □ Four Years  □ More than four years

3. Before coming to the U.S., what was your major? ________________

4. When speaking English, do you find it difficult to ask an American to do something for you?
   - □ Not difficult  □ Moderately difficult  □ Difficult  □ Very difficult

5. How would you rate your **oral** English proficiency?
   - □ Very good  □ Good  □ Average  □ Poor  □ Very poor

Part Two:

Described below are 14 situations in which College students make a request in their daily life and study. Your reply to each situation can be of any length. If you choose not to give any response, please write “No response,” and the explanation for your decision. Thank you for your participation!

Situation 1: You and Maria, an American student, are classmates. Due to a sudden illness, you missed Dr. William Smith's class *Modern English Linguistics* yesterday. Today you meet Maria in another class that both of you have. You would like to borrow Maria's notes from yesterday's lecture by Dr. Smith. How would you ask her for her notes? Please provide your response in the following box.
Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 2: Today your friend comes to school to visit you. You show him around campus and want to take a picture with him. At that time you see a woman walking by who is a professor at your university. You want to ask her to take a photo of both you and your friend. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 3: You are a teaching assistant in a university. At the end of the academic year, you want to move to a new apartment. You happen to meet Jason, one of your American student peers, while walking home on the moving day. Due to a shortage of help, you want to ask Jason for assistance. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant
Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult

Situation 4: In the library, you are looking for a specific book. In the catalog, you find that the book is available. However, you cannot find the book on the designated shelf no matter how hard you try. You come to the circulation desk and want to ask a female librarian to help you find this book. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
☐ Very close ☐ Close ☐ Moderately close ☐ Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult

Situation 5: You need to buy a laptop from the website. But since you do not have a large enough credit line on your credit card, you decide to ask David, your American roommate and good friend, to buy the computer for you with his credit card. You agree to pay David back with a check right away. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
☐ Very close ☐ Close ☐ Moderately close ☐ Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult
Situation 6: You want to buy a used car with your own money. But due to various reasons, you cannot afford it. You want to borrow $1,000 from your mother. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- Very close
- Close
- Moderately close
- Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- High
- Moderately high
- Equal
- Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Moderately difficult
- Very difficult

Situation 7: It is snowing heavily. After class, you happen to meet Dr. Thomas Brown, one of your instructors at the gate of your department, and he is also going to head home. You want to ask him for a ride home because you are living on the same street. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- Very close
- Close
- Moderately close
- Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- High
- Moderately high
- Equal
- Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Moderately difficult
- Very difficult

Situation 8: Your computer crashed and refuses to work. You feel worried because you still have a lot of homework to do. Through a friend, you learn that the man living downstairs, Mike, is an American graduate student from the Department of Computer Science. Although you have never spoken to Mike before, you decide to ask him for help. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.
Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 9: It is summer vacation. You want to find a part-time job on campus in order to increase your work experience. You come to the Career Center and meet Ms. Diana Oliver, a member of the staff. You want to ask her what part-time job opportunities are available. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 10: You are a student journalist for your school newspaper. For a report, you need to interview Dr. James Harrison, a famous professor in the Department of Chemistry, but he is always very busy everyday. You know the interview will take at least 1 hour. Although you know what he looks like, you have never spoken with him before. You call him by phone today to arrange a meeting with him. How would you ask him for the interview? Please provide your response in the following box.
Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 11: It is winter break. You want to go to Florida for vacation, and it so happens that your uncle Richard is also working and living there. You hope to stay at his house for several days. As you are talking with Richard on the phone, how would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
- [ ] High
- [ ] Moderately high
- [ ] Equal
- [ ] Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
- [ ] Very easy
- [ ] Somewhat easy
- [ ] Moderately difficult
- [ ] Very difficult

Situation 12: Your paper for a cross-cultural communication class is lost due to the attack of some unknown virus on your computer. When you meet Dr. Jane Cook, your instructor of that class, on Thursday, you want to ask her to extend the paper’s deadline to next Monday. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
- [ ] Very close
- [ ] Close
- [ ] Moderately close
- [ ] Distant
Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult

Situation 13: You are attending a lecture, but you forgot to bring your notebook and pen with you. You want to borrow a pen and a piece of paper from an American male peer sitting next to you. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
☐ Very close ☐ Close ☐ Moderately close ☐ Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult

Situation 14: You are a teaching assistant in the Department of Education. In one of your classes, you want your American student, Ruth, to distribute the handouts for you. How would you ask her? Please provide your response in the following box.

Please evaluate the following three factors (i.e., social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition) when making the above request. Check only ONE box per factor.

Social Distance (familiarity between you and the hearer)
☐ Very close ☐ Close ☐ Moderately close ☐ Distant

Relative power (the social status of the hearer compared to you, the speaker)
☐ High ☐ Moderately high ☐ Equal ☐ Low

Degree of imposition (the degree of difficulty in making the request)
☐ Very easy ☐ Somewhat easy ☐ Moderately difficult ☐ Very difficult
Contact Information

Name: ________________________
E-mail address: ____________

Follow-Up Interview

Would you like to participate in a one hour face-to-face interview about your survey responses?

☐ Yes  ☐ No

Thank you for your participation in this study!
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Suppose you were a teaching assistant at an American university, what would be your viewpoint on the relationship between you and your American students?

2. Can you tell me your opinions on the relationship between you and your American friends?

3. Can you describe the relationship between you and your parents?

4. What is your opinion on the relationship between you and your American teachers?

5. What is your opinion on your relatives, such as your uncle, aunt etc?

6. Can you say something about the relationship between you and the staff in your university?

7. If you are asked to rank the following people (teacher, staff, students, classmates, parents, and relatives) on a scale of “High, relatively high, equal, low”, how will you rank them?

8. Do you believe the imposition of making the request is related to your relationship with the hearers?

9. When judging about the imposition of making a request, which factor do you believe is more important, your familiarity with the hearers or their social status? Why?

10. In your opinion, is there any relationship between the hearer’s social status and the degree of imposition?