

A Comparative Study of Request Strategies In Mongolian And English

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ABSTRACT

The current study focused on the necessity to expand the current level of speech act studies in inter-language and cross-cultural pragmatics in Mongolia. It compared request realization tactics used by native speakers of Mongolian (n=86) and those of English (n=87) based on directness classifications identified by Blum Kulka et al. (1989). The data was gathered through the discourse completion test (DCT) in which the participants completed the discourse with request patterns depending on eight different social situations. All request expressions were classified into three major categories according to the degree of directness: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. The results of the study show that Mongolian participants generally preferred direct strategies in situations where they knew the hearer well not depending on his or her social status, while English-speaking participants tended to use more conventionally indirect speech in the same situations.

Keywords: *Speech act of request; Mongolian; American; undergraduate students*

1 Introduction

Due to globalization, people around the world increasingly find it necessary to learn a particular foreign language in their pursuits. However, learning a language is not an easy task, and besides knowing the grammar and mechanics of the language, a learner also needs to know how to use it appropriately. An expatriate working in Mongolia for a company with foreign investment once said that Mongolians often make a request too directly and she feels inconvenient every time. Even a proficient user of English may encounter a failure to communicate his or her thoughts properly due to incomplete knowledge of culture or pragmatics in the classrooms at our university. In Mongolia, there exists a proverb that states: '*He who begs is a disgrace, he who is begged feels arrogance.*' As such, compared to other speech acts, making a request is considered a shameful act. This is not only true among Mongolians, but also for other nations and ethnic groups — Brown and Levinson (1978) identified request as a face-threatening act (FTA) by nature because the requester wants the requestee to perform an action that is for the benefit of the requester (Trosborg, 1995). Therefore, the person who is making a request needs tactfulness to fulfill his or her desire and needs to express the request using an appropriate strategy; otherwise, not only the hearer, but also the speaker, may occur in an inconvenient situation and the communication may fail. The right strategy to use in order to express the request will depend on several social, cultural and situational factors. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a request strategy the speaker uses can be influenced by three variables, specifically social distance, social power and imposition of request. Depending on these variables, the speaker may choose

one of the three strategies that are commonly used in many languages when making a request: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect, as identified by Blum Kulka and Olshtein (1984).

The direct strategies are usually achieved by requests which are syntactically marked, such as imperatives, performatives and ‘hedged performatives.’ In many languages, a direct strategy is generally used between people who have a close relationship with each other. Mongolian people frequently use a direct strategy in requests resulting from their cultural background. Cultural collectivism, in which “relationships with other members of the group and the interconnectedness between people play a central role in each person's identity” (Cherry, 2020), may mainly cause Mongolians to make direct requests. However, there exist many conventionally indirect request expressions used by Mongolians (Urtnasan, 2010), especially when they address older adults, socially distant people and people with a higher rank in society. This approach to making requests may also be linked to Mongolian custom where elders in the family are highly respected. However, despite the general custom, it also depends on where and by whom an individual is brought up. Different family backgrounds, level of acquired education, and social status in society all affect the type of request strategy a person uses in conversation. Mongolians also widely use non-conventionally indirect request strategies, as identified by Blum Kulka et al. As they are formulated, this type of strategy is interpreted by the context. Indeed, as in many languages, non-conventionally indirect strategies in Mongolian include “the concept of encoder and decoder” (Schramm, 1960): in other words, messages need to be encoded using common symbols in the “same field of experience” for both the speaker and hearer. Thus, “from the message starting to ending, there is an interpretation that goes on” (Osgood-Schramm model of communication, 2020) which requires the hearer to interpret the request depending on the situation where the conversation takes place. As we see, the three request strategies—direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect—are used widely in different cultures; however, which strategy to choose in conversation may depend on different social, cultural and contextual factors. As such, acquiring knowledge of pragmatics in language classrooms may greatly aid in preventing misunderstandings and conversation failures when communicating in a foreign language. As the request is the most complicated speech act studied widely in cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum Kulka et al., 1984, 1989; Lihong, 2009; Urtnasan, 2010; Krulatz, 2012), performing research in cross-cultural and inter-language pragmatics, specifically in the strategies which are selectively used in requestive speech acts in terms of the three variables in the languages of Mongolian and English, is the main focus of this study. Since teachers in language classrooms mainly focus on mechanics and grammar and learners often leave courses without sufficient knowledge of how to use the language appropriately in a particular situation or context, the findings of this study will be of great importance in involving pragmatics concepts in language curricula.

2 Methodology

The study aimed to compare the realization of requestive speech acts in Mongolian and English in eight situations using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and to determine if there exist any differences between Mongolian and English participants in terms of directness when expressing requests. The slightly modified DCT questionnaire that aimed to collect quantitative data in this study refers to Blum-Kulka et al. (1984) and Lihong Yang (2009). It also tried to identify whether the three variables used in the study — social distance, social power and imposition of request — influence the strategy the participants choose to realize requests in the given situation. These are the key factors considered by speakers when they realize a request, and vary from culture to culture. Because of the limitations of the study, the authors used only the quantitative study method in data collection. According to Kasper and Dahl (1991), although the DCTs cannot elicit genuine responses in the given situations, they can initiate productive answers. Before using the DCT in the study, we checked it for clarity and appropriateness with some colleagues. We included eight situations in the DCT, in which the participants needed to complete a discourse with a requestive speech act. The Mongolian participants (n=100) were first and second-year students at the National University of Mongolia majoring in different fields (2022 fall) and the data was collected by the authors in their classrooms. The participants were given 20 minutes to complete the discourse with a request. However, 14 students’ responses did not meet the requirements, and only 86 results were included in the analysis. As for English-speaking participants (n=100), 1st and 2nd-year students at different colleges and universities in Illinois, USA (2021) were involved in DCT during one semester and the data was collected by six

Mongolian students, whose valuable efforts the authors appreciate enormously. They collected the data from 100 participants by asking them to fill in the DCT in their spare time. Out of that number, 87 students provided complete and effective requests which were included in the analysis. The data (n=173) was then processed using Microsoft Excel.

3 Results and Discussion

As the findings of the study suggest, the request strategies used by the participants of the two groups in the first, fourth, fifth and sixth (total of 4) situations significantly differ in directness. As for the remaining five situations, the request strategies both groups used illustrated no noteworthy differences and they chose the strategies depending on the three variables used in the study.

Situation-1

In this situation the speaker and listener are of the same social status; they are both students. One of them gets sick and misses Mongolian/American History class, and asks the other student to lend their notes. The participants had to complete the DCT with a request.

Table-1

Request Strategy by Nationality (Situation 1)

Nationality	Request Strategy			Total
	Direct	Conventionally indirect	Non-conventionally indirect	
Mongolian	59 (68.6%)	24 (27.9%)	3 (3.5%)	86
American	8 (9.2%)	77 (88.5%)	2 (2.3%)	87
Total	67 (38.7%)	101 (58.4%)	5 (2.9%)	173

1- Direct Request Strategy

2- Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

3- Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

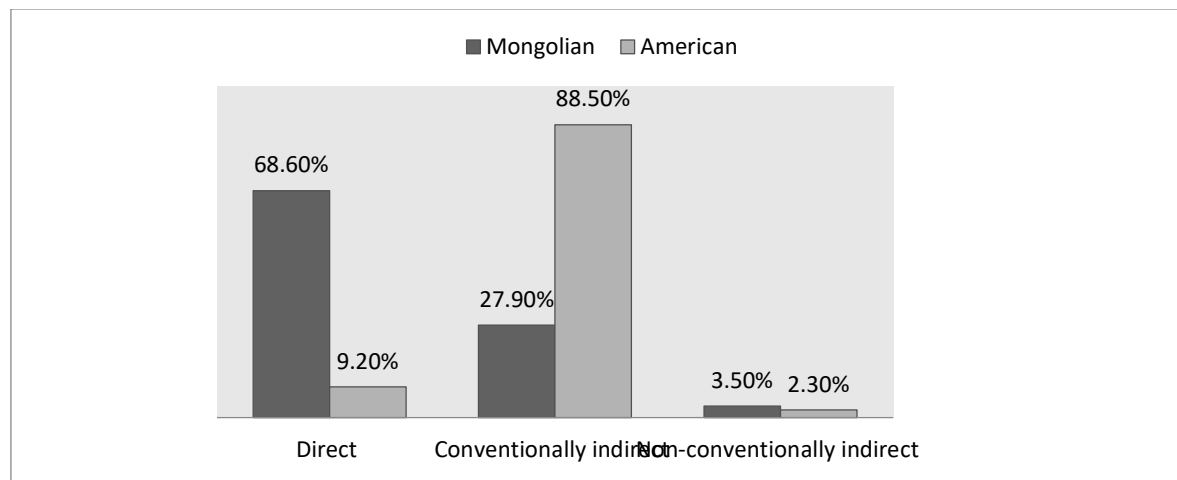


Figure 1. The request strategy by nationality (Situation 1)

In this situation, 68.6% of Mongolian participants used the direct strategy, while only 9.2% of American students used this strategy. Of the Mongolian participants, 27.9% used conventionally indirect strategies common in Mongolian. However, a large percentage of the American participants—88.5%—used conventionally indirect requests.

Situation-4

In this situation, the speaker is a student and the hearer is a librarian, and the social status of the hearer is slightly higher than the speaker. The speaker needs a book, but cannot find it on the shelves. The participants were asked to complete the DCT with an appropriate request.

Table 2.

Request Strategy by Nationality (Situation 4)

Nationality	Request Strategy			Total
	1	2	3	
Mongolian	67 (77.9%)	16 (18.6%)	3 (3.5%)	86
American	10 (11.5%)	75 (86.2%)	2 (2.3%)	87
Total	77 (44.5%)	91 (52.6%)	5 (2.9%)	173

1- Direct Request Strategy

2- Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

3- Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

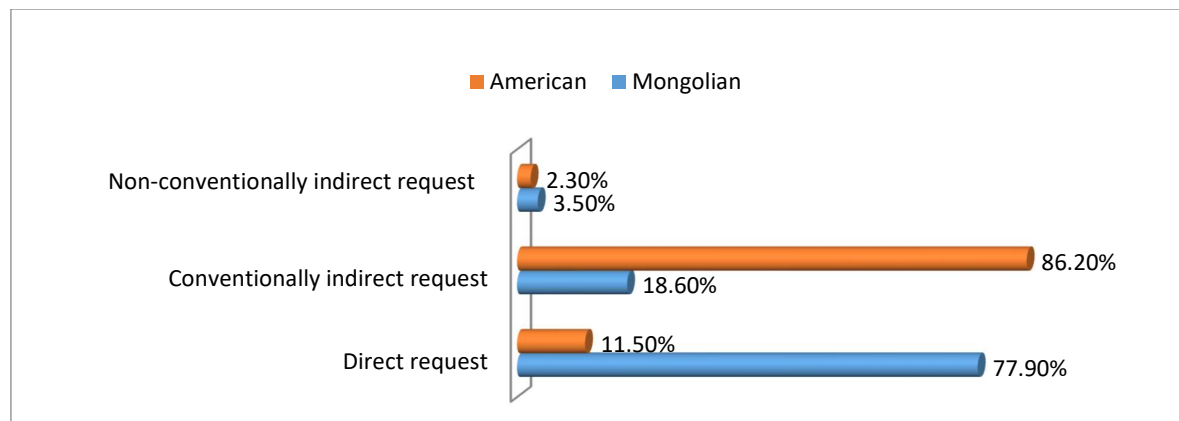


Figure 2. The request strategy by nationality (Situation 4)

The strategies used by both groups differ significantly in this situation. 77.9% of Mongolian participants used direct strategies, mainly using imperatives (*Please, help me to find this book/ Find me this book, please*), while only 11.5% of American students used this strategy. Of the American participants, 75 students, or 86.2%, used conventionally indirect strategies such as *Could you find me this book or Would you help me to find this book?* whereas only 16 Mongolian students (18.6 %) used conventionally indirect strategies where they sought the hearer's possibility such as *Ta надад тэр номыг олоод өгч болох уу?*, or *Танд тэр номыг надад олж өгөх боломж байна уу?*. Two American students (5.7%) used non-conventionally indirect strategies: *This book isn't on that shelf. I was wondering if you had any ideas, unless I am blind and I couldn't find this book. Are you busy?* whereas only three Mongolian students (3.5%) used non-conventionally indirect strategies in this situation.

Situation-5

In this situation, the speaker is a student and the hearer is their roommate in a dormitory which means their social status is the same. The speaker wants to buy a secondhand laptop but does not have enough money, and needs to borrow the needed amount from the roommate. The participants were asked to complete the discourse with a request.

Table 3

Request Strategy by Nationality (Situation 5)

Nationality	Request Strategy			Total
	1	2	3	
Mongolian	45 (52.3%)	37 (43%)	4 (4.7%)	86
American	4 (4.6%)	80 (92%)	3 (3.4%)	87
Total	49 (28.3%)	117 (67.63%)	7 (4.07%)	173

1- Direct Request Strategy

2- Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

3- Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

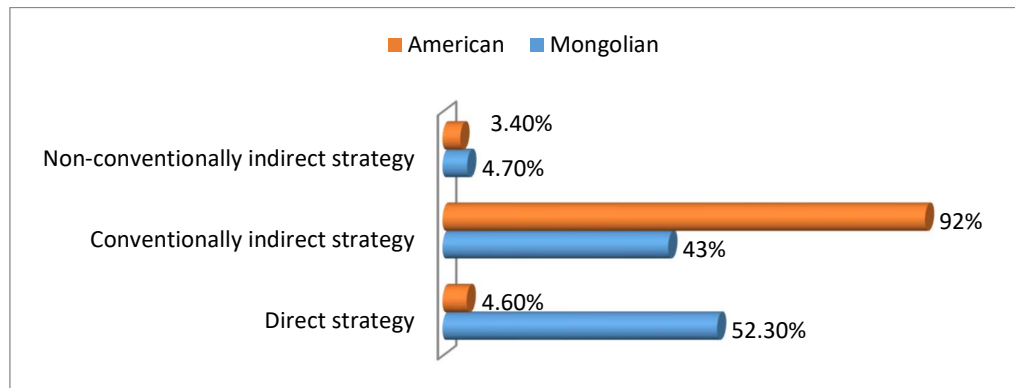


Figure 3. The request strategy by nationality (Situation 5)

Although the social statuses of the interlocutors are the same in this situation, it is predicted that the imposition of the request might be somewhat difficult since this request refers to financial matters. However, 43 Mongolian participants (40.7%) considered it 'very easy' and 26 (30.2%) said it was 'easy', while 20 American respondents (23%) said it was 'very easy' and 28 (30.2%) considered it 'easy'. While only two Mongolian participants considered the request 'very difficult', 14 American respondents considered it 'very difficult'.

As for the strategies the respondents applied in this situation, 52.3% of Mongolians used direct strategies while 92% of Americans applied conventionally indirect strategies.

Situation 6

In this situation, the speaker is a student and the hearer is his or her father. The authors predicted that social status might vary depending on cultural differences and the relationship pattern of the family members. In this situation, the student needs to borrow some money from his or her father to buy a used car, for his or her savings cannot afford it.

Table 4

Request Strategy by Nationality (Situation 6)

Nationality	Request Strategy			Total
	1	2	3	
Mongolian	68 (79.1%)	10 (11.6%)	8 (9.3%)	86
American	9 (10.3%)	76 (87.4%)	2 (2.3%)	87
Total	77 (44.5%)	86 (49.7%)	10 (5.8%)	173

1- Direct Request Strategy

2- Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

3- Non-Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy

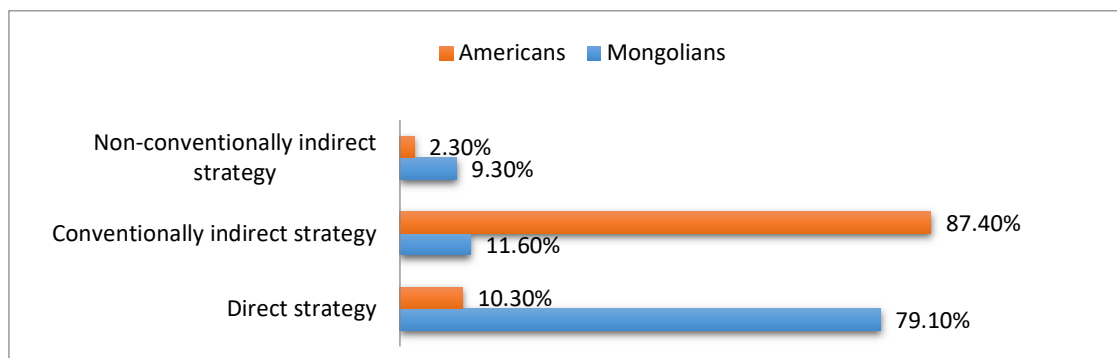


Figure 4. The request strategy by nationality (Situation 6)

In this situation, the request strategies applied by the two groups contrasted considerably. Direct strategies, mainly in the imperative form, were used by 68 Mongolian students (79.1%), while only 9 American students (10.3%) applied this strategy. While conventionally indirect strategies were applied by 10 (11.6%) Mongolian respondents, 76 American participants (87.4%) used this strategy. Non-conventionally indirect strategies were used by 9 (9.3%) Mongolian students and only 2 (2.3%) American participants used this strategy.

4 Conclusion

This study aimed to identify similarities and differences in requestive strategies as applied by Mongolian and American respondents in eight situations with three variables, using a DCT. In the strategies used by the two groups to perform the requestive speech acts in situations 2, 3, 7, and 8, there were no significant differences observed. However, in situations 1, 4, 5, and 6, Mongolian participants mainly preferred direct strategies, while American respondents did not. In the situations where the interlocutors have close relationships (social distance) and the same social status (relative power), the majority of Mongolian respondents ticked 'easy' and 'very easy' options in the variables and therefore preferred to use direct strategies to make the request, while most American participants tended to apply conventionally indirect request strategies in the same situations and mainly chose 'difficult' and 'very difficult' options. In the situations where the respondents of both groups have a distant relationship with the hearer and the hearer has a higher status, the majority of the Mongolian and American participants tended to apply conventionally indirect strategies to complete the questionnaire, and answered that the request was 'difficult' and 'very difficult'.

In conclusion, the participants of both groups demonstrated similar behaviors, in that they did consider the three variables when choosing from direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies to make the request. The authors suggest that the findings of the study may be useful in revising English and Mongolian language curricula to prevent pragmatics failures in communication in both languages and enhance the pragmatics competence of the learners.

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