



*An Inter-Language Pragmatic Study of Request
Acts by Iraqi and Turkish EFL Learners
A Comparative Study*

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Abstract

Inter-language pragmatics, which is concerned with how non-native speakers use and perform L2, has gained more attention among pragmatic researchers in recent years. Request acts are an important event in our daily life; asking someone to do something for you provides an opportunity to enhance social relationships. However, performing requests can differ from one culture to another; each culture naturally involves different views of what is considered a polite request. Based on this hypothesis, making a request can reflect the socio-cultural values of a certain community.

Accordingly, this study investigates the pragmatic competence of Turkish and Iraqi undergraduate students and examines what cultural variables could affect the production and perception of requests in English as being performed by two culturally different learners of English namely the Iraqi and Turkish EFL learners.

In order to carry out this research, the researcher applied the coding scheme for the questionnaire developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984) which addressed undergraduate students of Iraqi and Turkish universities. The results show, both quantitatively and qualitatively, that the Iraqi and Turkish EFL learners showed a high pragmatic competence; also, more similarities than differences have been found between Iraqi and Turkish students request acts due to some factors including religion and the geographical location of Turkey and Iraq.

Keywords: *Inter-language, Speech acts, Request, Culture*

1. Introduction

Inter-language pragmatics is the study of how non-native speakers' use L1 pragmatic knowledge in performing L2 (Kasper, 1996, p.145). In other words, it studies how non-native speakers comprehend and perform linguistic acts in a target language, and how they use L2 pragmatic knowledge.

Recently, multiple studies (Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Bulm-Kulka and House 1989) have addressed how non-native speakers understand and produce speech acts and how they require knowledge of a second language which is called "pragmatic competence". Thomas (1983, p. 92) **defines pragmatic competence** as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in a context". Pragmatic competence can be divided into sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competences (Leech, 1983, p. 10). Leech (ibid, 10-11) says that sociopragmatics includes the appropriate knowledge of using language in different social situations, whereas pragmalinguistics is defined as a more linguistic aspect of pragmatics containing the resources language users possess to express appropriate utterances. Sociopragmatic competence consists, in general, of the understanding of how to use language in different situations such as the knowledge of speech acts which includes politeness conventions, conversation structure and maxims of conversation. On the other hand, the ability to use sociopragmatic competence in interaction is pragmalinguistic competence.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use the language in a proper social and cultural context. Speakers, who are fluent in a second language and have the ability to understand grammar and vocabulary, may still lack pragmatic competence which means they are unable to produce language in a proper social and cultural context, including performing speech acts.

Speakers employ a variety of communicative acts, or speech acts, to achieve their communicative goals. Speech acts refer to actions performed via utterances to complete a specific purpose (Yule, 1996, p. 47) including acts such as apologies, threats,

warnings, and requests. One of the acts which the current study investigates as inter-language contrastive study is the request speech acts. A request act has been defined as an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer do something, or as Trosborg (1995, p. 187) defines it “an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker”. The purpose of requesting is to get the hearer involved in a future action that matches the speaker's goal; therefore it implies cost for the hearer. Because of this fact, request acts were regarded as the face-threatening acts in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1986) since there is no freedom of action or freedom of imposition in which it threatens the hearer's negative face.

Thus, the present study seeks to explore and clarify the nature of request speech acts from an inter-language pragmatic view. The major aspect of the act will be examined is: what request strategies are used by Iraqi and Turkish EFL learners; investigate (FEL) pragmatic competence in inter-language situations and whether the cultural values, norms and beliefs could affect their perception and production of the request speech acts.

2. Significance of the Study

In this mixed study of quantitative and qualitative approaches, an inter-language contrastive investigation on requests in the English language by Iraqi and Turkish undergraduate students had been undertaken. A request is considered as a face threatening act, and performing it in a foreign language is also face threatening because a speaker should take into consideration the culture and linguistic expertise since inappropriate use of a request could lead to a communication breakdown in cross-cultural scenario, that's why mastering a foreign language is not enough. Therefore, it requires a degree of a pragmatic competence and knowledge of social and cultural context.

Many studies conducted request speech acts, but to the best knowledge of the researcher no study has examined the similarities and differences of the request strategies performed by Iraqi and Turkish understudents. With the increasing number of

Iraqi students in Turkish universities, it becomes more important to investigate this area to reach to an appropriate communication so that both the Iraqi and Turkish students can successfully cope with or possibly in the new academic environment.

In this vein, the study aims to:

- (1) Examine the strategies of requests used by group 1 and group 2.
- (2) Examine (FEL) pragmatic competence in the second language, particularly in making requests.
- (3) Investigate what cultural values, norms and beliefs affecting the perception and production of request speech acts.

According to the aims of the study, the researcher lays down the following question:

1. What strategies are used by Turkish and Iraqi EFL learners?
2. To what extent is the Turkish and Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic competence different or similar?
3. What cultural values, norms, or beliefs can affect the performing and perception of request acts?

3. Previous Studies on Inter-Language Pragmatics:

A study presented by Juanda, L. (2006) entitled "Assessing EFL learners' Inter-language

Pragmatic knowledge: Implications for Testers and Teachers". This study explored ways to assess Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence and investigated whether learners of different EFL proficiency levels perform differently on pragmatics tests. The findings showed that there was disparity in pragmatic competence among Chinese students and pointed out the importance of teaching pragmatic knowledge to Chinese EFL learners in classrooms.

Another study by Najafabadi, S & Shamala Paramasivam entitled "Iranian EFL Learners' Inter-language Request Modifications: Use of External and Internal Supportive Moves" in (2012). This study investigated the inter-language pragmatic knowledge of Iranian English learners at three levels of English language proficiency. It focused on learners' ability to perform

request acts and their performance was compared with American native speakers of English to see to what extent they approximated native speakers in using external and internal modifications. The results of external modifications showed that, overall, Iranian learners used more external modifications compared to native speakers, the total use of external modifications decreased toward native norms as language proficiency level increased.

Cai, L. and Yingli Wang (2013) presented a study entitled “Inter-language Pragmatics in SLA”. This study reviewed a number of recent research papers on Inter-language pragmatics in Second Language Acquisition. It presented them in four groups: cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies, research about pragmatic transfer, and instructed learning of L2 pragmatics. It concluded that researchers need to examine the relationship of pragmatic and communicative abilities rather than focusing on each component of communicative competences separately.

A study examined the acquisition of pragmatic competence in English among advanced Polish learners of English entitled “Inter-language Pragmatics: a Study into the Acquisition of Pragmatic Competence in English as a Foreign Language Context” by Kozak, A. (2014). The results showed that the students have mastered the rules of the greeting act in English and they showed a high pragmatic competence.

As has been showed previously, the present study differs from these studies in that it tackles different aspects and tries to answer the following questions; what request strategies are used by the Iraqi and Turkish students, investigate Iraqi and Turkish (FEL) pragmatic competence in inter-language situation and finally what cultural values, norms and beliefs which could affect the perception and production of request speech act.

4. Request Speech Acts

Request speech acts defined by different scholars (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) as an act that the speaker performs to make the hearer does some action which may imply costs to the hearer, or as Trosborg (1995, p. 15) says “it is an illocutionary act

whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker". According to Austin's (1962) classification of speech acts, illocutionary acts belong to the category of directives, and have been described as an attempt that the speaker makes to get the hearer to do something which can be of benefit, or not, for the speaker (ibid). This is why a request is considered an impositive and face-threatening act in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, as the speaker or requester is intrinsically threatening the hearer's negative face. In other words, the speaker is stepping in the hearer's territory and freedom of action. Nevertheless, the speaker can soften the request by raising the degree of politeness of the request by means of making it more indirect (Trosborg 1995, p. 16).

In her book, Trosborg presents types or taxonomy of requests which are based on a number of research papers carried out by (by Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Brown and Levinson (1987), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986).

Table 1. Taxonomy of request realisation strategies (Trosborg, 1995: 205)

REQUEST STRATEGIES	
CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES
(1) <i>Direct:</i>	
-Obligation:	<i>You must/have to lend me your car</i>
-Performatives:	<i>I would like to ask you to lend me your car</i>
-Imperatives:	<i>Lend me you car/Your car (please)</i>
(2) <i>Conventionally indirect (hearer-based):</i>	
-Ability:	<i>Can/Could you lend me your car?</i>
-Willingness:	<i>Would you lend me your car?</i>
-Permission:	<i>May I borrow your car?</i>
-Suggestory formulae:	<i>How about lending me your car?</i>
(3) <i>Conventionally indirect (speaker-based):</i>	
-Wishes:	<i>I would like to borrow your car</i>
-Desires/needs:	<i>I want/need to borrow your car</i>
(4) <i>Indirect:</i>	
-Hints:	<i>I have to be at the airport in half an hour</i>

The first type refers to a direct request form which refers to the interpretation of the sentence meaning that is obvious and leads to a pragmatic clarity (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p.131). Hence, direct

request refers to what a speaker says explicitly what he/she wants the hearer to do. Thus, imperative, obligation and performative forms can be used to perform direct request. However, direct request can be polite and impolite depending on the situation. Direct request can be perceived as polite depending on the rights and obligations of interaction participants and it is used as appropriate for a given situation such as a surgeon asking a nurse for an instrument, or a policeman asking a driver to stop his car. In academic situation, rights and obligation of students and faculty might also make the use of direct request is polite and appropriate more than other situations (Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig, 2006, p. 85).

Conventionally indirect requests can be either hearer-oriented or speaker-oriented. This type, supposes the existence of information between the speaker and the hearer. For instance, when a speaker asserts a hearer's belief state (e.g Do you think, you think), he is establishing the existence of the information he needs, desires, or wants. For example, to the request (Do you Think/know, how about) the hearer can respond either "yes or no" (Macaula, 1998, p. 495). It can be **non-conventionally by using** hints, or partially referring to the object depending on contextual clues; (You have left the kitchen in a right mess), however, is considered impolite because it lacks pragmatic clarity (Rue and Zhang, 2008, p. 28).

There are ways to soften imposition of the requests as claimed by Trosborg (1995, p. 209). Requests consist of two main components; the core of the request and modification devices or we can add elements to soften the act. These elements can be divided into two groups; internal which appears with the same core of the request and external which appears surrounding the core of the requests which are used to soften the force of the request (Trosborg, 1995, p. 215).

Alcon-Soler et al (2005, p. 17) present two taxonomies for both internal and external modification

Table 2. Taxonomy of peripheral modification devices in requests (Alcón et al., 2005: 17)

MODIFICATION DEVICES		
TYPE	SUB-TYPE	EXAMPLES
<i>Internal Modification</i>		
	Openers	- <i>Do you think</i> you could open the window? - <i>Would you mind</i> opening the window?
	Softeners	Understatement - Could you open the window <i>for a moment</i> ? Downtoner - Could you <i>possibly</i> open the window? Hedge - Could you <i>kind of</i> open the window?
	Intensifiers	- You <i>really</i> must open the window. - <i>I'm sure</i> you wouldn't mind opening the window.
	Fillers	Hesitators - I <i>er, erm, er</i> - <i>I wonder</i> if you could open the window. Cajolers - <i>You know, you see, I mean</i> Appealers - <i>OK?, Right?, yeah</i> Attention-getters - <i>Excuse me...; Hello...; Look...; Tom ...; Mr. Edwards...; father... ..</i>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

<i>External Modification</i>		
	Preparators	- <i>May I ask you a favour?</i> ... Could you open the window?
	Grounders	- <i>It seems it is quite hot here.</i> Could you open the window?
	Disarmers	- <i>I hate bothering you but</i> could you open the window?
	Expanders	- Would you mind opening the window? ... <i>Once again, could you open the window?</i>
	Promise of reward	- Could you open the window? <i>If you open it, I promise to bring you to the cinema.</i>
	Please	- Would you mind opening the window, <i>please?</i>

5. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a mixed approach quantitative/qualitative was designed by employing Discourse Completion Test designed by Blum-Kulla et al (1984). As basis of many studies, like Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) study of complaints and Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz' (1990) study of refusals. According to Beebe and Cummings (1985, p. 13) the advantages of using DCT are as follow:

- A. Gathering a large amount of data quickly;
- B. Creating an initial classification and strategies that will occur in natural speech;

- C. Studying the stereotypical, perceived requirements for socially appropriate;
- D. Gaining insights into social and psychological factors that are likely to affect speech and performance;
- E. Ascertaining the canonical shape of refusals, apologies, partings, request, etc., in the minds of the speakers of that language.

Practically, the participants were requested to read the questionnaire carefully and also instructed to imagine themselves as if they were in a real life situation to produce the natural speech act. The material in this research comprises (11) different situations involving opportunities to make a request. The situations, however, contained contextually different elements, including speaker-hearer distance and relationship.

5.1 Data Collection

Before conducting the study, permission was gained by Al-Nisour and Al-Salam universities/ Iraq and Süleyman Demirel University/ Turkey. The instrument used to collect the data of the study is a questionnaire; (DCT) a modified Discourse Completion Test designed by Blum-Kulla et al (1984). The modified questionnaire (DCT) consists of two parts; Part one includes information on the participants, such as nationality, academic degrees, and gender. Part two is composed of 11 simulated situations with the students eliciting requests in various communicative circumstances.

It was requested that participants do not think deeply about what their responses should be, but rather to write their responses according to the situation and the question as closely as possible. Responses were returned to the researcher personally. Participants responded immediately, taking about 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire in the researcher's presence.

It had been used modifying DCT into Open-ended questionnaire in order to elicit responses more natural to daily conversations. More descriptive sentences were added into the situations to be as clear as possible. All scenarios in the modified DCT were anticipated to elicit participants' perceptions of the

relationship with different types of people, including faculty, students, friends, staff, and parents.

The total number of participants is 80; 40 are Iraqi students and 40 are Turkish students which were selected from the Department of English. After a number of interviews made by the researcher, the participants were considered appropriate for the study since they met the following criteria; (1) they have studied discourse analysis and pragmatics, and (2) their level of English language comprehension is good; and (3) all participants were willing to participate. Concerning ethical considerations, research requires not only expertise and diligence, but also honesty (Sami, 2015, p, 90). The ethical aspect of the present study had been fulfilled by meeting the rights of self-determination, anonymity, and confidentiality. For instance, the respondents were given the right to voluntarily consent or decline their participation, or even withdraw at any time without penalty. Moreover, the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and the procedures that would be used to collect the data, and were further assured that there will be no potential risks or costs involved.

5.2 Data Analysis

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher applied the coding scheme for the questionnaire response analysis which refers to the three strategies presented and developed by Trosborg (1995) which is originally by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984). According to Trosborg (1995, p. 205), the request strategies were classified into three major categories, namely direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and non-conventionally indirect strategies. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1984, p. 201), indirect request refers to “syntactically marked as imperatives or by other verbal means that name the act as a request, such as performatives” A 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?) (ibid, p. 201). Non-conventionally indirect requests are realized by “either a partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of

the act” (i.e., Why is the window open?) (ibid, p. 201). The questionnaire responses were analyzed according to the coding scheme developed by Trosborg (1995).

6. Finding and Discussion

A descriptive statistical analysis had been done in response from 40 Iraqi and 40 Turkish students. The following qualitative analysis shows how Turkish and Iraqi EFL learners used the three request strategies in performing them;

Strategy One: Direct request refers to what a speaker says explicitly what he/she wants the hearer to do.

Examples from the data:

Iraqi EFL:

- a. *Give me your notebook please because I missed the lecture yesterday*
- b. *Take me with you please*

Turkish EFL:

- a. *I would like to have your notebook of linguistics please*
- b. *I want to go with you*

Strategy Two: Conventionally indirect request; supposes the existence of information between speaker and hearer.

Examples from the data:

Iraqi EFL:

- a. *Could you please give me your notebook*
- b. *May I come with you*

Turkish EFL:

- a. *can I borrow your notebook please*
- b. *would you take me with you to my house*

Strategy Three: Indirect request, the speaker asks the hearer to do something indirectly by using hints.

Examples from the data:

Iraqi EFL:

- a. *I missed the lecture yesterday*
- b. *I am on my way to the house*

Turkish EFL:

- a. *I was sick and I couldn't come to Dr. Ali lecture*
- b. *my house near to your house*

The analysis also revealed that there were very slight differences between Iraqi and Turkish students in some of request strategies. In situations 3 (asking your friend to help you move to another dept.) and 6 (asking your mom to lend you money) most Iraqis percentage used indirect request strategies, whereas Turkish students used conventionally indirect. In situation 7 (asking your instructor for a ride home), the majority of request strategies applied by Iraqi students were indirect request strategies, but for Turkish students the majority were conventionally indirect request strategies. As we can see from table (3) and (4), significant differences between Iraqi and Turkish students are only in situations 3, 6, and 7:

Table (3) Iraqi Students' Responses

Situations	Direct request	Conventional indirect request	Indirect Request
1	10%	24%	66%
2	2%	25%	73%
3	20%	35%	45%
4	1%	47%	52%
5	18%	58%	27%
6	10%	28%	62%
7	2%	23%	75%
8	13%	68%	19%
9	64%	27%	9%
10	22%	58%	20%
11	74%	16%	10%

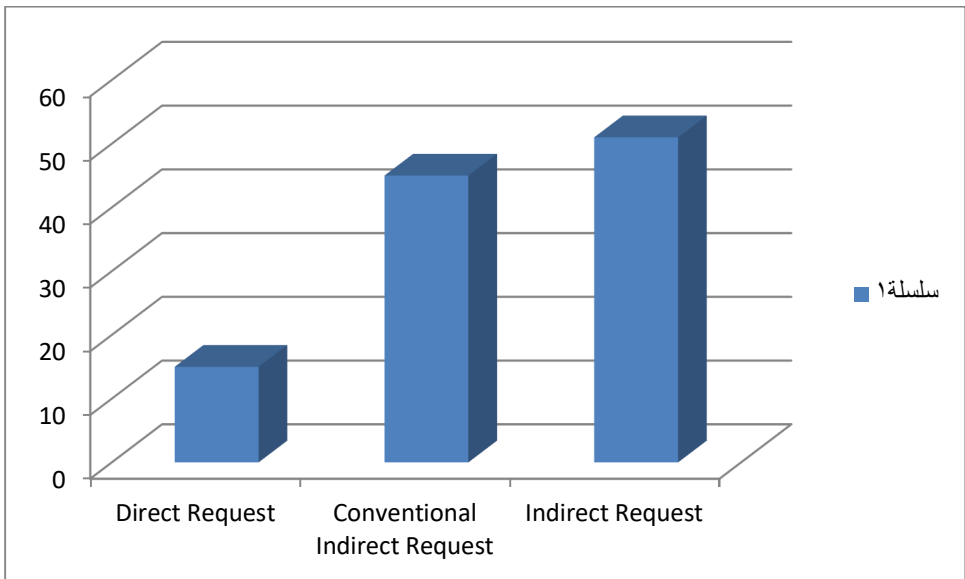
Table (4) Turkish Student's Responses

Situations	Direct request	Conventional indirect request	Indirect Request
1	14%	65%	21%
2	15%	78%	5%
3	4%	71%	15%
4	17%	87%	0%
5	60%	32%	8%
6	18%	72%	10%
7	5%	82%	13%

8	9%	71%	20%
9	62%	34%	4%
10	31%	58%	11%
11	76%	24%	0%

Concerning request strategies, both Iraqi and Turkish participants frequently used conventional indirect request and indirect request strategies and also the word “please” to avoid face threatening acts according Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1986). See the chart below:

Chart 1



Moreover, the data showed that there were no differences between Iraqi and Turkish participants concerning pragmatic competence; they showed a full understanding of the situations and they answered according to their sociopragmatic competence in which they showed appropriate knowledge of English language usage in the different social situations presented in the questionnaire.

As it is obvious, Iraqi and Turkish participants did not significantly differ from each other on performing request speech act. Moreover, most of the participants used modification devices to soften the force of requests and also used indirect requests because they are more polite, especially when there is a social

distance between the requester and requestee, this supports Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory: people tend to choose indirect forms over direct ones to show politeness since being direct is face-threatening (1978, p. 132).

We can say that the similarity between Iraqi and Turkish participants is due to the following reasons; **Turkey and Iraq border each other and** therefore share similar traditions and culture. Additionally, **religion** (Islam) is a major **cultural** marker for many Iraqis and Turkish, who see it as a common identity trait that crosses national boundaries.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the data obtained showed that; there were significant differences between males and females; most females used modification devices to soften a request which is a part of politeness theory and face threatening. Correspondingly, there are studies that examined gender differences in using request speech acts (Macaulay, 2001; Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; Shams and Akbar Afghari, 2001), the results showed that females prefer to use indirect request and males direct which is the same conclusion of this study reached.

Conclusion

Performing and understanding L2 for EFL learners could be affected by certain factors (such as a learning environment, physical condition, and culture) and understanding a language requires a highly level of pragmatic competence on the part of EFL learners. This study aims to investigate the pragmatic competence of EFL learners of Iraqi and Turkish students and the results indicate a deep pragmatic competence from both groups of EFL learners by showing a high level appropriately understanding of effective English language in 11 interactional settings presented in the questionnaire. Concerning request strategies, it seems that both the Iraqi and Turkish participants in this study used indirect and conventional indirect requests rather than direct strategies. This supports Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory: people tend to choose indirect to show politeness. This leads us to conclude that people with different cultural backgrounds usually tend to express their requests

indirectly to avoid communication breakdown. Finally, the findings show that there are similarities than differences between Iraqi and Turkish EFL participants due to **Turkey's geographical** proximity to Iraq and shared traditions and culture.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE ON REQUEST

Nationality:

Native Language:

Gender:

Age:

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?

The number of years: _____

One to five

five to ten

more than ten

2. How would you rate your oral English proficiency?

Very good

Good

Average

Poor

Very poor

Part Two:

Described below are 11 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 Sara, an Iraq student, are classmates. Due to a sudden illness, you missed Dr. Ali Ahmed's class *Modern English Linguistics* yesterday. Today you meet Sara in another class that both of you have. You would like to borrow Sara's notes from yesterday's lecture by Dr. Ahmed. How would you ask her for her notes? Please provide your response in the following box.

Situation 2: Today your friend comes to your university 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.

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 Ali, one of your Iraqi student peers, while walking home on the moving day. Due to a shortage of help, you want to ask Ali for assistance. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

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.

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 Muhammad, your Iraqi roommate and good friend, to buy the computer for you with his credit card. You agree to pay him back with a check right away. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

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.

Situation 7: It is snowing heavily. After class, you happen to meet Dr. Ali Ahmed, 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.

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, Ali, is an Iraqi undergraduate student from the Department of Computer Science. Although you have never spoken to Ali before, you decide to ask him for help. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

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.

Situation 10: It is winter break. You want to go to USA for vacation, and it so happens that your uncle Omar is also working and living there. You hope to stay at his house for several days. As you are

talking with Omar on the phone, how would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.

Situation 11: 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 Iraqi male peer sitting next to you. How would you ask him? Please provide your response in the following box.