

# Request Strategies in Role-Plays

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## 1. Introduction

There are different ways of collecting data in pragmatics and the choice of data collection methodology has great influence on the results of studies. Several comparative studies on data collection methods have been conducted. For example, Rose (1994) compared discourse completion tests (DCTs) and multiple choice questionnaires (MCQs). A comparison between discourse completion tests (DCTs) and role-plays was made by Sasaki (1998). Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) conducted a study on questionnaire data and authentic data. There are, however, no comparative studies between the data collected through closed role-plays and the data collected thorough open role-plays. This paper attempts to fill this gap, investigating whether there are any differences between the data in closed role-plays and those in open role-plays. This paper concentrates on data regarding requests, investigating which request strategies are employed by Japanese participants in role-plays.

After reviewing data collection methodologies in pragmatics in section 2, request strategies, including the classification of request strategies, are discussed in section 3. The data collection of this study is explained in section 4 and the results are presented in section 5. Discussion and conclusion are presented in sections 6 and 7 respectively.

## 2. Data Collection Methodologies in Pragmatics

There are following methodologies to collect data in pragmatics: authentic discourse, elicited conversations, role-plays, discourse completion tests (DCTs), multiple choice questionnaires (MCQs), rating scales, interviews, diaries and think-aloud protocols (Kasper, 2000: 316-341). Through authentic discourse, spontaneous data can be gathered. In elicited conversations, the data are collected through conversation tasks or sociolinguistic interviews (Ibid.: 320-321). DCTs are open-ended written questionnaires (Ibid.: 326). With the use of DCTs, it is easy to collect adequate data for analyses, because there is no need for transcription and researchers can control the contextual variables. Multiple choice is a versatile questionnaire format which can elicit information on production, comprehension, and metapragmatic judgements (Ibid.: 330). Rating scales are used for knowing how people assess strategies and their linguistic realizations (Ibid.: 331). Interviews are useful and often indispensable when the research goals are to establish the cultural meanings (Ibid.: 334). Diaries are entirely participant-directed (Ibid.: 335). Think-aloud protocols are verbalizations of thought processes during

engagement in a task (Ibid.: 336).

Role-plays can be interpreted as participants take on and act out specified roles within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint. The situation is described to the subject orally by the experimenter(s), who then ask the subject to say what the person they are role playing would say in the situation (Crookall and Saunders, 1989: 15-16; Rintell and Mitchell, 1989: 250).

In role-plays, there are different types: closed role-plays and open role-plays. Kasper (2000: 322-323) explains them as follows:

In closed role-plays, the actor responds to the description of a situation and, depending on the communicative act under study, to an interlocutor's standardized initiation. ... Open role-plays, on the other hand, specify the initial situation and each actor's role and goal(s) on individual role cards, but the course and outcome of the interaction are in no way predetermined.

Furthermore, Kasper (Ibid.: 323) points out that unlike closed role-plays, an open role-play such as one based on the role descriptions will evolve over many turns and different discourse phrases.

### 3. Request Strategies

The classification of request strategies varies from researcher to researcher. Brown and Levinson (1987: 68-71) classify them into five: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record and don't do the FTA. There were, however, many studies which classified request strategies into the following three: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, non-conventionally indirect requests (e.g., Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Fukushima, 2000; Fukushima and Kimura, 2001; Hiraga and Turner, 1996; Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999; Trosborg, 1995)<sup>1</sup>. This indicates that in many previous studies in pragmatics, positive politeness strategies have been neglected. The study by Fukushima (2004), however, showed that young Japanese people often used positive politeness strategies. Therefore, we think it is necessary to include positive politeness strategies in the investigation of requests by Japanese participants.

In Fukushima (2004), request strategies were classified into the following eight: bald-on-record (1), bald-on-record (2), positive politeness (1), positive politeness (2), negative politeness (1), negative politeness (2), off-record (1) and off-record (2). In this study, we combined bald-on-record (1), positive politeness (1) and positive politeness (2), having categorized them as direct requests (1). This is because these three had similarity in

Fukushima (2004), being informal. Bald-on-record (2) was categorized as direct requests (2) in this study. Negative politeness (1) and negative politeness (2) were categorized as conventionally indirect requests, as these two had similarity, being rather formal in Fukushima (2004). Off-record (1) and off-record (2) were categorized as non-conventionally indirect requests (1) and non-conventionally indirect requests (2) respectively. As a result, we have the following five classifications: direct requests (1), direct requests (2), conventionally indirect requests, non-conventionally indirect requests (1) and non-conventionally indirect requests (2). Following are the features, functions and forms of each strategy.

By using direct requests (1), S (speaker) states requests informally. Direct requests (1) include imperatives, want statements (informal), imperatives with suffixes (showing familiarity) and interrogatives. As for direct requests (2), S states requests explicitly and formally. The form of direct requests (2) is imperative plus *kudasai* [Please plus imperatives]. With conventionally indirect requests, S states requests formally. Want statements (formal) and interrogatives are included in this strategy. By using non-conventionally indirect requests (1), S states requests inexplicitly and informally. With non-conventionally indirect requests (2), S states requests inexplicitly and formally. There are no conventional linguistic forms in non-conventionally indirect requests (1) and (2).

According to Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989), request strategies consist of head acts<sup>2</sup>, supportive moves<sup>3</sup> and alerters<sup>4</sup>. In this study, we concentrated on head acts and supportive moves, as they are essential in making requests. We have explained our classification of head acts in the above. Next, we will examine the classification of supportive moves.

In analyzing supportive moves, we first tried to use the classification of CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 287-289), i.e., mitigating supportive moves (preparatory, getting a precommitment, grounder, disarmer, promise of reward and imposition minimizer), and aggravating supportive moves (insult, threat and moralizing), however, in our data there were some more supportive moves which were not included in CCSARP. Therefore, we added the following four classifications to CCSARP (*Ibid.*): 'apology', 'sweetener' (Trosborg, 1995), 'confirming common information' and 'question.'

As for 'apology', we followed Hiraga and Turner (1996: 621) who included 'regret or apology for the cause of request' in their supportive moves.

According to Trosborg (1995: 217), sweetener is defined as follows:

If you want somebody to do something for you, a possible strategy is to flatter the requestee accordingly. You can praise his/her skill as a cook if you want help when giving a party, you can admire a collection of records, books, etc., if you want to

borrow some, and so on.

We classified the utterances which confirmed common information as 'confirming common information'. As for 'question', S asks H (hearer) in order to get information.

As a result, we have thirteen supportive moves, which are summarized in Table 1. Supportive moves 1 to 6 (mitigating supportive moves) and 11 to 13 (aggravating supportive moves) were included in CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, et al. 1989). The four supportive moves (7-10) we added are considered to be mitigating supportive moves.

**Table 1. Supportive Moves**

	Supportive Moves	Function
1	Preparatory	To ask about the potential availability for carrying out the request To ask for H's permission to make the request
2	Getting a precommitment	To check a potential refusal before making a request
3	Grounder	To give reasons or justifications for the request
4	Disarmer	To remove any potential objections from H
5	Promise of reward	To announce a reward due on fulfillment of the request
6	Imposition minimizer	To reduce the imposition placed on H
7	Apology	To apologize
8	Sweetener	To praise H
9	Confirming common information	To confirm common information
10	Question	To get the information
11	Insult	To increase the impositive force of his or her request
12	Threat	To threaten H with potential consequences arising out of noncompliance with the request
13	Moralizing	To invoke general moral maxims

#### 4. Data collection

The data were collected in 2002.

##### 4. 1. Instruments

Five request situations which were likely to occur in students' life were used (See Appendix) to elicit data. Since the participants in this study were all university students, they did not have to play the roles which were so distant to them (e.g., the role of policeman in Blum-

Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

#### **4. 2. Participants**

The participants were thirty-six Japanese university students (Mean age: 20.7; eight males and twenty-eight females).

#### **4. 3. Procedure**

The participants were divided into eighteen groups of two. Nine groups carried out closed role-plays and the other nine groups carried out open role-plays. They were asked to read the situations (See Appendix) and utter how they would make requests in each situation in their mother tongue, i.e., Japanese. Their utterances were tape-recorded and transcribed.

#### **4. 4. Data Analysis**

The transcribed utterances were analyzed according to the categorization of request strategies (head acts and supportive moves) as noted in section 3. Moreover, distribution of turns in closed role-plays and open role-plays was counted.

There may be some differences between the head acts and supportive moves which occur before compliance and those which occur after compliance. That is, there may be some differences in the quality of head acts and supportive moves depending on their location in a sequence. The data in this study were confined only to the head acts and supportive moves before compliance.

### **5. Results**

#### **5. 1. Head Acts**

One of the distinctive features of the results was that direct requests (1) were used most frequently (77%). Non-conventionally indirect requests (2) were not used at all. A few direct requests (2), conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests (1) were used (2%, 5% and 16% respectively). Table 2 shows the distribution of head acts in closed role-plays and those in open role-plays.

**Table 2. Request Strategies in Closed Role-Plays and Open Role-Plays**

	Closed Role-Plays		Open Role-Plays		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
D1	34	41%	30	36%	64	77%
D2	2	2%	0	0%	2	2%
CI	1	1%	3	4%	4	5%
NCI1	7	8%	6	7%	13	16%
NCI2	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	44	53%	39	47%	83	100%

D1=Direct requests (1) D2=Direct requests (2) CI=Conventionally indirect requests NCI1=Non-conventionally indirect requests (1) NCI2=Non-conventionally indirect requests (2)

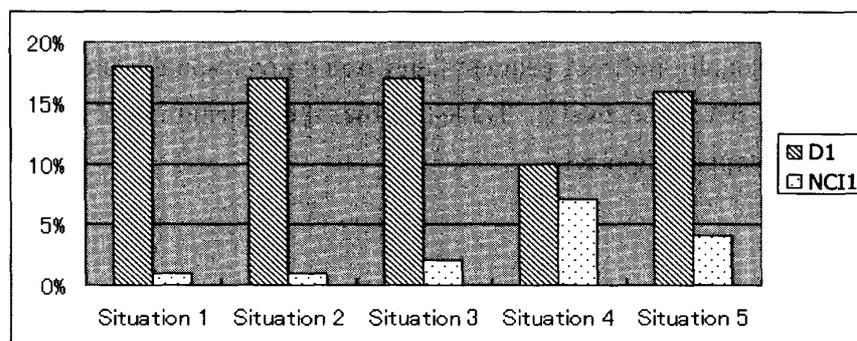
When we look at the results in five situations, the most frequently used strategy in all the situations was direct requests (1) (e.g., *Kashitehoshiindakedo* [I want you to lend me the book.] *Kashitekurena?* [Can't you lend me the book?]). In situation 4, non-conventionally indirect requests (1) (e.g., *Imakarasa chotto netainndayo* [I want to sleep from now.]) were more frequently used than in other situations. These results are shown in Table 3 (See also Figure 1).

**Table 3. Request Strategies in Five Situations**

	Situation1		Situation2		Situation3		Situation4		Situation5		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage								
D1	15	18%	14	17%	14	17%	8	10%	13	16%	64	77%
D2	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%	0	0%	2	2%
CI	1	1%	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%	4	5%
NCI1	1	1%	1	1%	2	2%	6	7%	3	4%	13	16%
NCI2	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	17	20%	16	19%	17	20%	16	19%	17	20%	83	100%

D1=Direct request (1) D2=Direct requests (2) CI=Conventionally indirect requests NCI1=Non-conventionally indirect requests (1) NCI2=Non-conventionally indirect requests (2)

**Figure 1. Frequency of Direct Requests (1) and Non-conventionally Indirect Requests (1)**

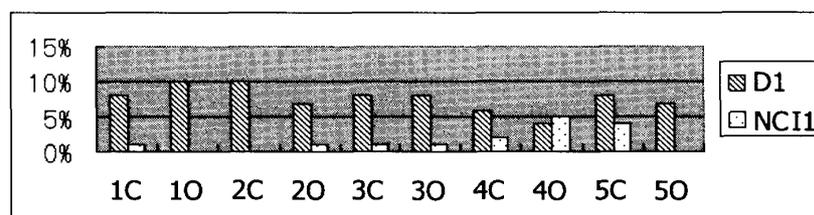


D1=Direct requests (1) NCI1=Non-conventionally indirect requests (1)

The strategies other than direct requests (1) and non-conventionally indirect requests (1) were excluded, as the frequency of those strategies was very small.

In comparison between closed role-play data and open role-play data, there were no differences between them in all the situations concerning the request strategies, direct requests (1) being most frequently used except situation 4 in open role-plays (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Frequency of Direct Requests (1) and Non-Conventionally Indirect Requests (1) in Closed Role-Plays and Open Role-Plays**



D1=Direct requests (1) NCI1= Non-conventionally indirect requests (1)  
 1C=Situation1, Closed Role-Plays, 1O=Situation1, Open Role-Plays, 2C=Situation2, Closed Role-Plays, 2O=Situation2, Open Role-Plays, 3C=Situation3, Closed Role-Plays, 3O=Situation3, Open Role-Plays, 4C=Situation4, Closed Role-Plays, 4O=Situation4, Open Role-Plays, 5C=Situation5, Closed Role-Plays, 5O=Situation5, Open Role-Plays

## 5. 2. Supportive Moves

Among thirteen supportive moves, grounders were most frequently used (58%) (e.g., *Toshokan shimattete* [The library is closed.]), followed by preparatories (17%) (e.g., *Hon mottetayone* [You have the book, don't you?]). Supportive moves 11-13 in Table 1, i.e., insult, threat and moralizing, are aggravating supportive moves. No aggravating supportive moves were found in this study. Frequency of supportive moves is shown in Table 4.

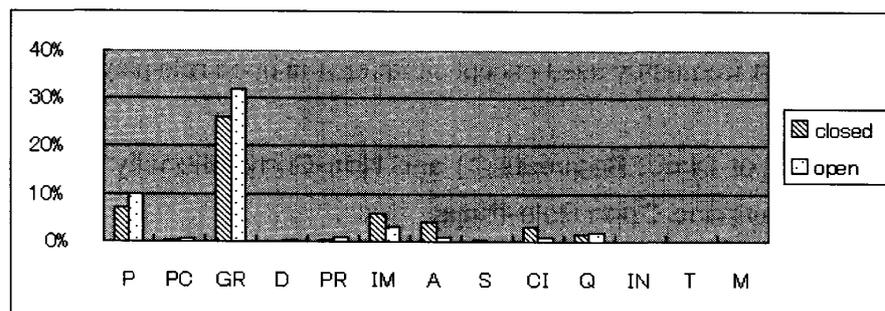
**Table 4. Frequency of Supportive Moves**

P	PC	GR	D	PR	IM	A	S	CI	Q	IN	T	M	Total
17%	1%	58%	0.4%	1.4%	9.5%	5%	0.4%	3.8%	3.5%	0%	0%	0%	100%

P=Preparatory, PC=Getting a Precommitment, GR=Grounder, D=Disarmer, PR=Promise of Reward, IM=Imposition Minimizer, A=Apology, S=Sweetener, CI=Confirming Common Information, Q=Question, IN=Insult, T=Threat, M=Moralizing

The participants in open role-plays used preparatories (e.g., *Kadai mou owattayone* [You have finished with your assignment, haven't you?]) and grounders (e.g., *Watashi sonohon mottenainone* [I don't have that book.]) more than those in closed role-plays. The participants in closed role-plays used the following supportive moves more than those in open role-plays: imposition minimizers (e.g., *Moshiyokattara* [If it is all right]), apologies (e.g., *Waruindakedo* [Sorry to bother you, but...]) and confirming common information (e.g., *Toshokan kyoumo shimatterujan?* [The library is closed today, isn't it?]) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Frequency of Supportive Moves in Closed Role-Plays and in Open Role-Plays

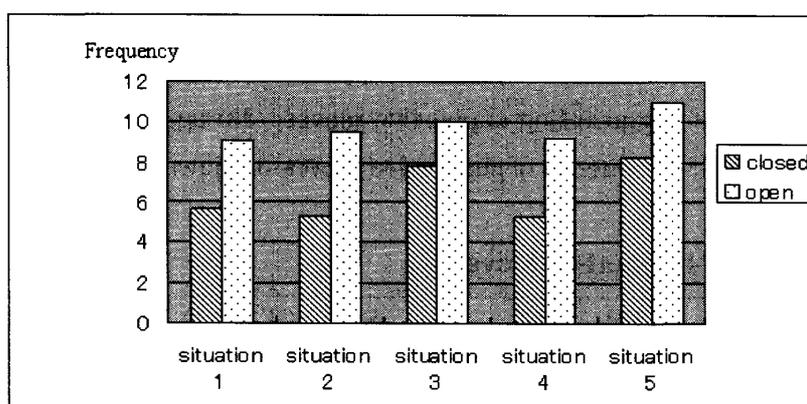


P=Preparatory, PC=Getting a Precommitment, GR=Grounder, D=Disarmer, PR=Promise of Reward, IM=Imposition Minimizer, A=Apology, S=Sweetener, CI=Confirming Common Information, Q=Question, IN=Insult, T=Threat, M=Moralizing

### 5. 3. Turns

As noted by Kasper (2000: 323) in section 2, more turns were found in open role-plays than in closed role-plays in all the situations in this study (See Figure 4). The difference was found before S made requests to H, that is, there were more turns in open role-plays before Head Acts were made than in closed role-plays.

Figure 4. Frequency of Turns in Closed Role-Plays and Open Role-Plays



### 6. Discussion

The participants in this study chose direct requests (1) most frequently among the request strategies. In all the situations in this study, S and H were equal, only the degree of imposition varying among situations. In such situations they used direct requests (1), showing closeness between S and H. A closer look at direct requests (1) shows that interrogatives (e.g., *Kashitekurenai?* [Can you lend it to me?]) were most frequently employed, followed by want statements (informal) (e.g., *Kashitehoshinndakedo* [I want you to lend it to me.]) and there were no direct requests (1) using imperatives with suffix (showing familiarity). Contrary to this result, in Fukushima (2004), which elicited data through e-mails, imperatives with suffix (showing familiarity) were used after interrogatives. This may be

because in written medium, there are no intonations or facial expressions, which can mitigate the requestive force. Suffixes showing familiarity, such as *ne*, may have served this function in written medium. This indicates that different data collection methodologies, the one being face-to-face, i.e., role-plays, and the other being written, i.e., e-mail, may have influenced the results.

Non-conventionally indirect requests include non-conventionally indirect requests (1) and non-conventionally indirect requests (2). The participants did not use non-conventionally indirect requests (2), which indicate formality, at all, because it was not necessary to express formality in the situations used in this study. The participants, however, used non-conventionally indirect requests (1), by which S states requests inexplicitly and informally, particularly in situation 4 (See Figure 1). It may be said that the request in situation 4 is somewhat different from the requests in other situations, that is, S claims that H has caused some problems by playing loud music, and S has the right to ask that request. In such a situation, the participants attempted to state the requests indirectly. Even though S had the right to ask H to turn down the music, it is conjectured that S did not want to hurt H. If the relationship between S and H is different from the one depicted in this situation, i.e., S and H were close, S would have used other request strategies than non-conventionally indirect requests (1). Japanese people may have tried to keep the harmonious relationship with the neighbor, who was close, rather than insisting his/her own right. We may obtain different results if it is in other cultures. Cross-cultural comparison may be interesting in future studies.

As for the supportive moves in this study, grounders were used most frequently. By the use of grounders, S gives reasons, justifications and explanations for the face threatening acts. Being given reasons and explanations, H would understand why S are requesting and H may be willing to comply with the requests (Trosborg, 1995: 218). Faerch and Kasper (1989: 239) state that grounders are efficient mitigating strategies with a wide range of application. Therefore, it is not surprising that grounders were most frequently used. All the supportive moves found in this study were mitigating supportive moves, and no aggravating supportive moves were found. This shows that the participants in this study used mitigating supportive moves so that they could obtain compliance from H without any problems, e.g., without threatening H.

Whereas in closed role-plays what S says is predetermined in the role specifications, in open role-plays it is up to S what s/he will say. In other words, the participants in closed role-plays were asked to make a request, but the description to make a request was not included in open role-plays. This means that the outcome and course were determined in closed role-plays, but this is not the case in open role-plays. This may have influenced the result that there were more turns in open role-plays than in closed role-plays. This suggests that it is more suitable

to use open role-plays when the research purpose is to examine aspects of conversation. This is in the same line with Kasper and Dahl (1991: 228), who state that open role-plays have the advantage that they allow examination of speech act behavior in its full discourse context.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated request strategies collected through role-plays. One of the major findings was that direct requests (1) were most frequently chosen by the participants. As for the supportive moves, grounders were most frequently used, followed by preparatories. In terms of head acts and supportive moves, no differences were found between the closed role-play data and open role-play data. In the use of turns, there was a difference between the data collected through closed role-plays and open role-plays, that is, more turns were used in open role-plays than in closed role-plays. In future studies, it may be interesting to have more varieties in the relationship between S and H, and cross-cultural comparison may give us more insights on request strategies.

<sup>1</sup> Researchers use different terms to mean these three strategies. Blum-Kulka and House (1989) classify request strategies into impositives, conventionally indirect strategies and hints. Fukushima (2000) classifies them into direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and off-record requests. Fukushima and Kimura (1999) classify them direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests. Hiraga and Turner (1996) classify them into direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and hints. Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) classify them into direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests. Trosborg (1995) classifies them into direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and indirect requests (hints).

<sup>2</sup> A Head Act is the minimal unit which can realize a request; it is the core of the request sequence (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 275).

<sup>3</sup> A Supportive Move is a unit external to the request, which modifies its impact by either aggravating or mitigating its force (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 276).

<sup>4</sup> An alerter is an opening element preceding the actual request, such as a term of address or an attention getter (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 276).

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## Appendix

### Situations used in this study

#### Situation 1

A  
You need a book to finish an assignment, but you do not have it. The library is closed and you only know of one person who has the book: your friend B. B has already handed in the assignment. You meet B in the corridor.

Closed Role-Plays: You ask B for the book.

Open Role-Plays: You speak to B.

B  
A is a good friend of yours. A is finishing the assignment which you have already handed in. You meet A in the corridor.

Closed Role-Plays: A asks you for a book. You respond to A.

Open Role-Plays: A speaks to you.

#### Situation 2

A  
You have missed your English Linguistics lecture. Your good friend B has attended that lecture. You see B in class.

Closed Role-Plays: You ask B for her/his lecture notes.

Open Role-Plays: You speak to B.

**B**

Your good friend A has missed her/his English Linguistics lecture. You have attended that lecture. You see A in class.

Closed Role-Plays: A asks you for the lecture notes. You respond to A.

Open Role-Plays: A speaks to you.

### **Situation 3**

**A**

You have an appointment with Professor X today. You realize that you will not be able to make it. Your good friend B will see Professor X today. You meet B in the photocopying room.

Closed Role-Plays: You ask B to let Professor X know that you won't be able to make it.

Open Role-Plays: You speak to B.

**B**

You have an appointment with Professor X today. Your good friend A has also an appointment, but A won't be able to make it. You see A in the photocopying room.

Closed Role-Plays: A asks you to let Professor X that A won't be able to make it. You respond to A.

Open Role-Plays: A speaks to you.

### **Situation 4**

**A**

You've been trying to sleep. Your good friend B who lives upstairs is playing loud music. You knock on B's door.

Closed Role-Plays: You ask B to turn down the music.

Open Role-Plays: You speak to B.

**B**

You are listening to music at home. Your good friend A knocks on your door.

Closed Role-Plays: A asks you to turn down the music. You respond to A.

Open Role-Plays: A speaks to you.

### Situation 5

A

You are moving out. You have a lot to pack and have to move in a few days. You have invited your good friend B for dinner.

Closed Role-Plays: You ask B to help you out.

Open Role-Plays: You speak to B.

B

You are having dinner at A's (a good friend of yours) house. A is moving out and has to pack in a few days.

Closed Role-Plays: A asks you for help. You respond to A.

Open Role Plays: A speaks to you.