

Japanese Speakers' Comprehension of Indirect Refusals Used in American English

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Abstract

The present study investigates Japanese speakers' comprehension of indirect refusals among equals used in American English (AE). First, a discourse completion test (DCT) was conducted with native speakers (NSs) of AE to obtain naturally occurring indirect refusal statements. Based on this production data, the multiple-choice questionnaire (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Bouton, 1988; Chui, 1990; Robinson, 1992) was developed for the present study to examine the comprehension of indirect AE refusals by Japanese speakers. Sixty-one freshmen majoring in Education at the Japanese University and learning English as a foreign language (L2) participated in the study. A one-way ANOVA with repeated measures consisting of four levels of situations (*Request*, *Invitation*, *Suggestion*, and *Offer*) were employed. The results have shown that there are significant differences among four situations: *Offer* = *Request* > *Suggestion* > *Invitation* situations.

0. Introduction

One of the particular interests in cross-cultural pragmatics has been the comprehension of indirect speech (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, Danet, & Garson, 1985; Searle, 1975; Sperber &

Wilson, 1986; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989; Takahashi, 1992; Tannen, 1981). Research on speech act comprehension is based on psycholinguistic work on the interpretation of literal and non-literal meanings. To date, many studies related to indirect speech (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, et al., 1985; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; House & Kasper, 1981; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989; Takahashi, 1992) have examined request behaviors. However, none of the studies has focused on the comprehension of indirect refusals by Japanese L2 in English learners particular, although an increasing number of studies have done production research on refusals (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Beebe, et al., 1990). Since NSs soften directness to maintain politeness, they sometimes use the words that are not too direct. Although some speech acts are universal, others are culturally determined. Different production, interpretive, and signaling strategies (Gumperz, 1982a, b) are used among different cultures. These indirect utterances literally mean something different from the actual intention of speakers. Thus, NNSs fail to pick up appropriate illocutionary meanings, and they have difficulty in comprehending the actual intention of speakers correctly. NNSs may take the literal meaning of indirect speech; therefore two interlocutors may arrive at a different conclusion about what is said. These different interactional styles can lead to intercultural miscommunication (Kasper, 1989). Therefore, the present study examines the comprehension of indirect AE refusals by Japanese L2 English learners. Although there is a strong interest in investigating how AE speakers comprehend Japanese refusals, the present study focuses on the comprehension of AE refusals by Japanese speakers. This paper discusses the comprehension of indirectness, the speech act of refusals, American and Japanese cultures, and the study of the comprehension of AE refusals by Japanese speakers.

1. Review of Literature

1.1. The comprehension of indirectness

Conversational indirectness is associated more with politeness than direct speech (Yule, 1996), although it does not necessarily entail in all situations and in all cultures (Kasper, 1989). Social perceptions of indirect speech also differ. Since it is the speech act that people mean more than what they say (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), it tends to be vague and ambiguous especially for NNSs. It contains multiple meanings, so listeners have to share a fair amount of knowledge of a situation with speakers to understand correctly. They have to infer the conveyed meanings by utilizing cues in the utterance, contextual information, and various sources. When comprehending indirect speech, NNSs may take the literal interpretation of words that speakers use by taking utterances at face value, due to the lack of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. Thus, NNSs fail to comprehend the intended meanings of indirect speech, the meaning of extralinguistic information hints, and its politeness value of other cultures. NNSs will arrive at different interpretations than NSs.

There are some other factors that affect perceptions and performances of speech act behaviors. Kasper (1992) lists learning contexts, proficiency, developmental effects, and familiarity to situations, and Robinson (1992) states that instruction has an effect on speech act performances. In addition, the age and personal characteristics may have effects on comprehending indirect speech.

Bouton (1988) compared NSs and NNSs about the ability to interpret implicatures in English. If people are from the same background, NSs draw one possible implicature in a given utterance in a particular context. If two people from a different background, they will draw different implicatures from the same utterance. NSs are likely to draw the same interpretation with other AE speakers; however, Bouton (1988) states that even if people share the same

understanding of the Cooperative Principle and Maxims, the inference that each person draws will vary with each person's world view. In other words, people with the same cultural background may sometimes miscomprehend the intended meaning of indirect speech.

In this study, Bouton (1988) designed a multiple-choice instrument to determine the extent to which NSs and NNSs interpret the same implicatures in the same way. The test was administered to 436 NNSs entering the University of Illinois and 28 American NSs as a control group. There were seven different groups altogether. The results show that a cultural background has an important role in predicting their relative success on the implicature test. However, not all types of implicatures seem to be of equal difficulty, and some types are definitely easier than others. The results also indicate that the multiple-choice instruments can be effective tools in a study like this.

Among indirect speech studies, Takahashi (1992) investigated indirect request behavior. She examined the transferability from Japanese to English of five conventionally indirect request strategies in four contexts. Native speakers of Japanese provided rating-scale judgments in English and Japanese for the pragmatic acceptability of each request strategy in each context. She found that transferability of the conventionally indirect request strategies she examined were highly context-dependent. It was also influenced by learner factors, such as proficiency and familiarity with different situational contexts.

1.2. The speech act studies of refusals

The speech act of refusals is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1978), and a negative face act. Since there are differences in the degree of saving face, the function of politeness, and the use of directness and indirectness in different cultures, the interpretation of refusals in other cultures may be entirely different. Some factors that influence how directly or indirectly people refuse include the imposition of tasks, distance, and a power relationship between two

interlocutors (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). These factors affect how people produce and interpret refusals depending on their cultural backgrounds.

To date, an increasing number of production research has been done on refusals (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Beebe et al., 1990). For example, Beebe et al. (1990) did a study on the pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals with the use of DCTs. They found that the pragmatic transfer from Japanese influenced English of Japanese speakers in the United States on at least three levels: the order, frequency, and intrinsic content of the semantic formulas they selected to make their refusals. However, the focus of their studies was not on comprehension.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989) examined the acts of disagreements between speakers of AE and Japanese. They studied the situations where higher status people disagreed with lower status people, and lower to higher status. They found that Americans used more positive remarks, more softeners, and fewer explicit criticism in English. On the other hand, Japanese made explicit criticism. Furthermore, Japanese ESL speakers often used a questioning strategy to show disagreement and Americans often failed to pick up the intent of this strategy. Another difference was that Japanese repeated the questioning strategy when they failed to get results. In that situation, Americans may turn to the statement of opinions, when their initial questioning does not seem to work (Imai, 1989).

Chui (1990) replicated the study by Beebe et al. (1990) partially, and she studied the similarities and differences among the Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan, and speakers of AE in business situations. The four types of stimulus questions used in her study were refusals of invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions. She found differences between these groups, except similarities outweighed differences. In all groups she compared, excuses were preferred in more than half of the responses, and the expression of gratitude was the second most frequent.

1.3. Cross-cultural comparison on politeness

Americans belong to a positive politeness culture, and direct speech is considered polite. Scollon and Scollon (1983) have stated that Americans emphasized equality of opportunity, and that this has led to a positive politeness culture. American speakers provide more specific, personalized information (Beebe & Takahashi, 1990). Although there are agreed rules, there are own variations in their use. Nash (1983), however, argues that Americans prefer negative politeness strategies in his study, reflecting individualism. For NNSs, it is difficult to understand various functions of refusal use by AE speakers. According to Imai (1981), when superiors in the West are faced with a difficult question to which they do not have an answer, they often employ the following strategy. First, they may say, "this is a good question," and look at the other person squarely in the eye and say, "What do you think?" Although AE emphasizes directness, this is the area where NNSs of AE may fail to comprehend the intended meaning of indirect speech. This type of speech has culturally determined rules; hence, NNSs have to acquire this pragmatic competence.

On the other hand, Japanese belong to a negative politeness culture. In refusing, Japanese follow a negative politeness, go off record, and avoid responsibility for the potentially face-damaging interpretation (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Japanese learners' refusals show highly formulaic structure with little specific meaning, leaving much room for inference. For example in the Japanese culture, there are several ways to say *no*. First of all, when people refuse, they might say *yes* meaning *no*, which might be confusing to NSs of AE. For instance, Imai (1981) has given several examples. The first way to imply *no* is to say *yes* and then to follow this with an explanation. The second way to imply *no* is to be vague, ambiguous, and so evasive in reply that the other side loses track of what the issue was. The third way is to imply not to answer the question, and to leave the

matter unattended. If Japanese businessmen make a comment that has a negative tone to it during negotiations, this means a refusal.

In summary, many studies have focused on the production of refusals; however, none of studies have done in the area of the comprehension of indirect AE refusals by Japanese speakers. It is important to understand the intended meanings of indirect speech to gain sociogrammatic competence for successful intercultural communication. In order to do this, L2 learners need to notice a necessary hint and the function of directness and indirectness, and comprehend the correct intentions of speakers. The present paper focuses on the comprehension of AE indirect refusals by Japanese L2 English learners.

2. The study

2.1. Research questions

The recent issue in pragmatic is indirectness (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, et al., 1985; Searle, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989; Takahashi, 1992; Tannen, 1981). To date, many studies related to indirect speech (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, et al., 1985; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; House & Kasper, 1981; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989; Takahashi, 1992) have examined request behaviors. Refusal production research has been done (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Beebe et al., 1990); however, none of the comprehension studies has been done on indirect refusals by Japanese speakers learning English as L2. Therefore, the present study examines the comprehension of indirect AE refusals. Based on studies of refusals (Beebe et al., 1990; Chui, 1990; Robinson, 1992), the following research questions were formulated:

1. Are there any differences in the comprehension of indirect AE refusals among four situations (*Request, Invitation, Offer, and Suggestion*) ?

2.2. Research hypotheses

1. H1a: Indirect refusals in *Requests* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Invitation*.
- H1b: Indirect refusals in *Requests* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Offer*.
- H1c: Indirect refusals in *Requests* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Suggestion*.
- H1d: Indirect refusals in *Invitation* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Offer*.
- H1e: Indirect refusals in *Invitation* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Suggestion*.
- H1f: Indirect refusals in *Offer* situations are easier to comprehend than *Suggestion*.

3. Method

3.1. Design

A one-way ANOVA with repeated measure with four levels of *Situation* (*Requests*, *Invitation*, *Suggestion*, and *Offer*) was employed to investigate the comprehension of indirect AE refusal realizations by Japanese L2 English learners.

3.2. Participants

Sixty-one freshmen majoring in Education at a Japanese University in a metropolitan area participated in the present study. They were mostly non-English majors. The average TOEFL score was 408, and it was their first proficiency test. This might have resulted in lower scores since they were not familiar with this type of tests. In addition, participants have never been taught about how to comprehend indirect refusals or other speech acts at the time of this study. There were 21 males and 40 females.

3.3. Procedures

The multiple-choice questionnaires on indirect refusals were administered in two intact classes. Participants were provided with questionnaire materials written in Japanese, except for refusal statements and multiple-choice options. The descriptions of the situations were translated into Japanese in order to avoid miscomprehension of the situations. Questions were randomized to avoid possible guessing or learning effects. After participants had training procedures using example questions in the testing material, they were asked to complete questionnaires in the classroom. The task of participants was asked to read 20 situation questions and select the interpretation that closely matched the intended meaning of the indirect refusal statement from four multiple-choice options. No time limits were imposed on them, but it took approximately 40 minutes.

3.4. Materials

3.4.1. The DCT to NSs of AE

Before the multiple-choice comprehension was developed for the present study, the DCT was conducted to gather indirect refusal statements from five native speakers of AE as a first step (Yamaai, 1994). In this production study, situations were adopted from previous refusals studies (Beebe et al., 1990; Chui, 1990; Robinson, 1992). These situations consisted of four requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions with some modifications. A few of the situations were modified and applied to the Japanese culture and classmates' interactions. In addition, only status-equal situations were presented, since situations in this questionnaire needed to be neither too direct nor indirect. Thus, interlocutors were among friends, who were not too intimate and not too unfamiliar. Furthermore, other speech-act situations were incorporated (Bouton, 1988; Gibbs, 1987), functioning as distracters from the previous studies. Each situation was presented without joinders. The task of the participants was to

provide refusals as indirectly as possible. The following is the example DCT question for NSs of AE:

An American classmate, Jennifer who is graduating, asks Stuart to take over her responsibilities as secretary of the student association in your department for the next semester.

Jennifer: I really need to find someone to take over as secretary of our student association for next semester. You'd be perfect. Could you possibly do it?

Stuart: _____

3.4.2. The multiple-choice questionnaire to Japanese learners of English as L2 to assess comprehension

On the basis of indirect refusal responses gathered from NSs of AE on DCTs (Yamaai, 1994), a written multiple-choice comprehension questionnaire for the present study was developed for Japanese learners of English as L2. A few pilot studies were done to Japanese speakers both in ESL and EFL situations to create a reliable questionnaire. In this multiple-choice questionnaire to Japanese learners of English, situations were given first, followed by initiating statements and responses. Response statements were directly adopted from the previous DCT studies (Yamaai, 1994). In addition, gender differences were randomly assigned to each situation type: 1) female to male 2) male to female 3) male to male and 4) female to female. Then, four alternative interpretations for each situation were constructed. They consisted of two totally different interpretation options, one literal meaning, and the other was the correct interpretation. Two AE female native speakers teaching at Japanese universities checked whether these multiple options included the correct, the literal, and the two incorrect interpretation options for

each AE refusal statement. The following is an example question:

Kurt and his friend have formed a study group to prepare for the final exam in a difficult class. Their classmate, James, asks Kurt if he can also join his group.

James: I understand that you and Richard are studying together. I'm having some real problem in this class and I wonder if I could join you? It would sure help me.

Kurt: Well..., we haven't really finalized anything yet, and schedules are really crazy. But if we get it together, I'll try to get back to you.

What does Kurt mean?

- (1) When Kurt sets the schedule, he will let James know*
- (2) Kurt is good at mathematics.*
- (3) Kurt is busy these days.*
- (4) Kurt doesn't want to work with James.*

The content of these items are summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix A). The previous pilot study with different population produced 0.81, and the reliability of this present test was 0.76.

3.5. Scoring

This questionnaire was scored based on the total number of correct answers (correct 1; incorrect 0). The total questions were twenty. Four distracter questions were deleted for main analyses, because they were not targeted situations to be investigated for the present study. Thus, the maximum score was sixteen. Each situation (*Request, Invitation, Suggestion, and Offer*) had four questions.

3.6. Analysis

A one-way ANOVA with repeated measure with four levels of

Situation (*Request*, *Invitation*, *Suggestion*, and *Offer*) were employed. The SuperAnova program on a Macintosh was used to conduct statistical analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Means

Sixteen situations were scored and analyzed, while the other situations were not included for the main analyses (the total score, 16). The results of the descriptive statistics were summarized in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for Correct and Literal options

	Correct	Literal
Mean	7.213	6.885
SD	2.224	2.450

The mean for correct answer was 7.21, and the literal answer was 6.89. As a whole, participants chose correct and literal options at the same percentage rate (43%). This might be the reason why the mean score of correct options was low.

The mean scores were analyzed by *Situation*.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for four situations

	<i>Request</i>	<i>Invitation</i>	<i>Offer</i>	<i>Suggestion</i>
Mean	2.003	1.148	2.426	1.607
SD	1.016	0.601	0.957	1.021

Figure 1 shows the means for four situations.

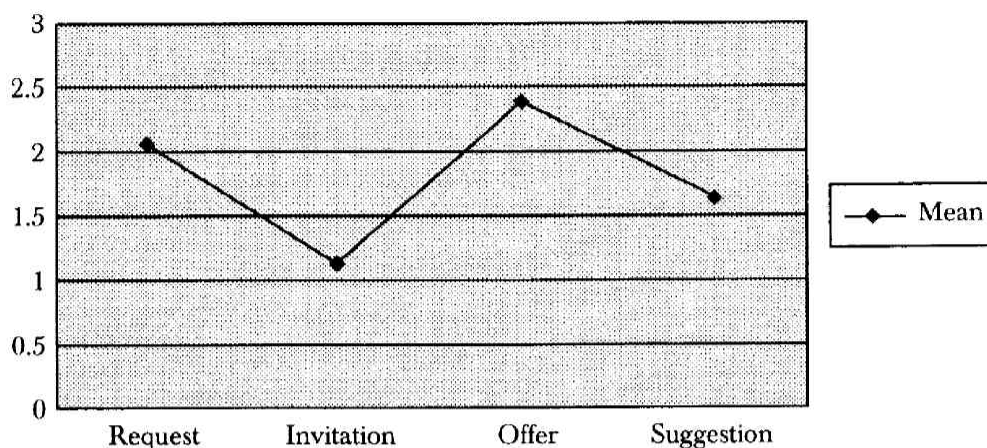


Figure 1. Means for four situations

On the basis of mean scores, participants scored higher in the order of *Offer*, *Request*, *Suggestion*, and then *Invitation* situations.

4.2. Main analyses

Table 4 shows the results of a one-way ANOVA procedure by the *Situation* within-subject effect (see Appendix B).

Table 4. One-way ANOVA results - Tests of within-subject effects - Situation effect

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig. of F
Situation	55.475	3	18.492	22.071	0.0001
Residual	201.082	240	0.838		

0.05 < p

A significant difference was observed for the *Situation* effect, $F(3,240) = 22.071$, $p < 0.05$. Scheffe's test was conducted to locate where significant differences occurred. There were significant differences between *Request* and *Invitation*, between *Invitation* and *Offer*, and between *Offer* and *Suggestion* situations. However,

significant differences were not observed between *Request* and *Offer*. In summary, there were significant differences among four situations: *Offer = Request > Suggestion > Invitation*. Refusals in *Offer* and *Request* situations were easier to comprehend, and *Invitation* was the most difficult for Japanese speakers among four situations.

5. Conclusion and discussion

On the whole, hypotheses were partially supported. Among four situations compared, participants comprehended indirect refusals in *Offer* and *Request* situations more correctly than *Suggestion* and *Invitation*, and the most difficult situation was *Invitation*. The results of each hypothesis are discussed.

H1a: Indirect refusals in *Request* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Invitation* situations.

This hypothesis was supported. There was a significant difference between *Request* and *Invitation* situations. Since refusal statements in *Request* situations tended to be more direct than *Invitation* due to the nature of situations, it was easier for participants to understand the intended meaning of refusals in *Request*. Although NSs of AE provided the most indirect way of refusing in the previous DCT, NSs refused more directly in *Request* than *Invitation*. The reason might be that it was more polite to refuse requests directly, compared to invitations.

H1b: Indirect refusals in *Request* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Offer* situations.

This hypothesis was not supported. There was not a significant difference between these two situations.

H1c: Indirect refusals in *Request* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Suggestion*.

This hypothesis was supported. There was a significant difference between these two situations. Refusals in *Suggestion* situations were more difficult to comprehend than *Request*. It

appeared that speakers were not required to refuse directly in *Suggestion* in comparison with *Request* in terms of politeness; thus, *Request* was easier for NNSs to comprehend. This situation-specific characteristic may have influenced this result.

H1d: Indirect refusals in *Invitation* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Offer* situations.

This hypothesis was not supported. The result turned out to be opposite, and *Offer* situations were significantly higher than *Invitation*. Refusals in *Invitation* situations were more difficult than *Offer* in the present study. This might be due to the fact that NSs refused more indirectly in *Invitation*.

H1e: Indirect refusals in *Invitation* situations are easier to comprehend than those in *Suggestion* situations.

This hypothesis was not supported. *Suggestion* situations were instead significantly higher than those of *Invitation*. Refusals in *Suggestion* were more difficult than *Invitation*.

H1f: Indirect refusals in *Offer* situations are easier to comprehend than *Suggestion* situations.

This hypothesis was supported. *Suggestion* situations were more difficult than *Offer*, because refusals in *Suggestion* situations tended to be more indirect than *Offer*. It was more polite to refuse directly to *Offer* than *Suggestion*, which did not forcefully require speakers direct refusal responses. Thus, refusals in *Offer* situations were easier to comprehend than *Suggestion*.

In summary, the level of comprehension differed among four situations. There was a significant difference between 1) *Offer* and *Request*, and 2) *Suggestion*. There was also a significant difference between *Suggestion* and *Invitation*. However, there was not a significant difference between *Offer* and *Request*. That is, both *Offer* and *Request* situations were significantly higher than *Suggestion*, which was then significantly higher than *Invitation*. Easier situations to comprehend the intended meaning of speakers were both *Offer* and *Request*, and the most difficult situation was *Invitation*. Inherent

natures in each situation might have caused this result. For instance, it seemed to be more polite to refuse directly in *Request* and *Offer* than *Suggestion* and *Invitation*, and refusal statements in *Request* and *Offer* situations were more direct than those of *Suggestion* and *Invitation*. Thus, it was easier for learners to comprehend correct interpretation for the first two situations. Furthermore, when NSs used accepting-like statements in *Suggestion* and *Invitation* situations, NNSs had difficulty in comprehending the correct meanings.

The average score for choosing intended interpretations ($\bar{x} = 7.213$, the total score = 16) was about half of the total score (see Table 2). This was due to the fact that participants chose the literal meaning options at about similar percentage rates of the time as the correct answers (43%) (see Table 2). They failed to choose the intended meaning of indirect refusals and took the literal meaning instead, which made scores lower. This tendency was especially observed in accepting-like refusal statements.

The written questionnaire has a limitation to include all cues available for understanding indirect refusals, since there are a variety of cues for refusing (e. g., pauses, facial expressions) in a real situation. It would be easier to comprehend indirect refusals better if extralinguistic information were provided. Some combinations of other measures (e. g., role-plays, qualitative research) could be incorporated to investigate comprehension of refusals in future research.

Since speech acts represent a highly complex mapping of meaning onto form (Olshtain & Cohen, 1989), learners need to notice rules or be taught the function and meaning of indirect speech explicitly, especially in limited input environments as in the EFL classrooms. In order to develop learners' sociopragmatic competence, teachers can provide consciousness-raising activities or explicit instruction. As Schmidt (1993) has claimed, consciousness and awareness are important factors in establishing rules and patterns of pragmatic knowledge and developing pragmatic competence. He

(1993) has stated that noticing is the necessary condition for converting input to intake, and consciousness learning is effective. Learners should also observe what NSs say and behave in similar situations. For example, the use of videos seems to be a good option (Rose, 1994), which familiarizes learners to context-based variations in language use. Teachers also need to provide much input to learners, and they begin to notice the rule of indirect speech in a real life communication situation. In addition, some possible pitfalls of miscommunication among people from a different cultural background may be avoided. Finally, since there are various ways of refusing, the comprehension of Japanese indirect refusals by AE speakers is a fruitful area for further research.

Note:

The earlier version of this paper was presented at 12th World Congress of Applied Linguistics in 1999 in Tokyo.

Appendix A

Table 1. Contents of the questionnaire

Situation	Comp.* Q. No.	Content	Gender	Reference
Request #1	Q 6	Helping moving	Female-female	Robinson #3
Request #2	Q 11	A secretary	Female-male	Robinson #1
Request #3	Q 14	A study group	Male-male	Robinson #2
Request #4	Q 17	Notes	Male-female	Robinson #6
Invitation #1	Q 3	A dinner	Male-female	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #10
Invitation #2	Q 7	A dinner	Female-female	Chen #12
Invitation #3	Q 12	A jazz concert	Male-male	Yamaai
Invitation #4	Q 19	A party	Female-male	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #4
Offer #1	Q 2	A china base	Male-male	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #7
Offer #2	Q 5	A snack	Female-male	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #5
Offer #3	Q 10	A cake	Male-female	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #9
Offer #4	Q 15	Offering a ride	Male-female	Robinson #5
Suggestion #1	Q 4	A desk	Male-male	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #6
Suggestion #2	Q 9	A purple clothe	Male-female	Chen #4
Suggestion #3	Q 13	Ties	Female-male	Chen #5
Suggestion #4	Q 18	A teacher	Female- female	Beebe, Takahashi, Uliss-Weltz #15
Others #1	Q 1	Computer center	Male-	Gibbs
Others #2	Q 8	Singing	Male-	Bouton #18
Others #3	Q 16	Chili	Female-female	Bouton #22
Others #4	Q 20	International food	Female-female	Bouton #15

* Comp. Q. = Comprehension questionnaires

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