WORLD CONFERENCE ON STUDENT - CENTERED LEARNING APPROACHES

TEACHING SPEECH ACTS TO DEVELOP PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNER

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of speech act instruction in developing pragmatic competence among EFL learners. It focuses on common speech acts, including requests, apologies, refusals, and disagreements, and explores the challenges learners face in using language appropriately. The paper discusses explicit instruction and practical classroom activities, such as role-plays and contextualised dialogues. It concludes that integrating speech act instruction into EFL teaching can help learners communicate more appropriately and effectively in different social contexts.

Keywords: speech acts, pragmatic competence, EFL learners, language teaching.

Introduction

Anyone who has taught or studied a foreign language for long enough has probably witnessed the following situation: a student knows grammar rules, has an impressive vocabulary, and speaks in full, grammatically correct sentences, yet still manages to sound abrupt or inappropriate in a real conversation. For example, "Give me the salt" is a grammatically correct sentence, but in most everyday situations, it may sound impolite. A more appropriate alternative would be "Could you please pass

the salt?" Although both sentences communicate a similar intention, they differ in how the speaker performs a request and how the utterance may be perceived by the listener.

This difference highlights the importance of speech acts in communication. Speech acts are actions performed through language, such as making requests, apologising, refusing, promising, and expressing opinions. Their appropriate use depends not only on grammatical knowledge but also on the speaker's communicative intention, the social relationship between speakers, and the context in which communication takes place. Canale and Swain (1980) included sociolinguistic competence as an important component of communicative competence, emphasising that successful communication involves more than grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Thomas (1983) highlighted the communicative consequences of pragmatic failure, which may lead speakers to be perceived as rude or unfriendly even when their grammatical knowledge is strong.

Despite the importance of speech acts, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction often places considerable emphasis on grammar rules and vocabulary acquisition. As a result, learners may know how to construct grammatically correct sentences but struggle to perform speech acts appropriately in different social situations. For example, they may find it difficult to make polite requests, refuse invitations tactfully, or apologise appropriately. Such difficulties suggest that learners need opportunities to understand not only what language forms mean but also how and when to use them.

This paper examines the role of speech act instruction in developing pragmatic competence among EFL learners. It discusses the importance of teaching common speech acts explicitly and considers how contextualised dialogues, role-plays, and communicative activities can help learners use English more appropriately in everyday interactions.

Discussion

1. Speech Acts and Pragmatic Competence in EFL Learning

Learning a language involves more than mastering grammar rules and vocabulary. Learners must also understand how to use language appropriately to achieve communicative goals in different social situations. This ability is closely related to pragmatic competence, which involves interpreting meaning in context and selecting language forms that suit particular communicative situations.

Speech act theory provides a useful framework for understanding this aspect of language learning. Speech acts are actions performed through language, such as making requests, apologising, refusing invitations, making promises, and expressing opinions. Searle (1969) examined the relationship between language and the actions speakers perform through utterances. From an EFL teaching perspective, understanding speech acts helps learners recognise that the same communicative intention can be expressed in different ways depending on the context and the relationship between speakers.

For example, a learner may say, “Give me the salt” when asking someone to pass the salt. Although the sentence is grammatically correct, it may sound too direct in some situations. A more polite alternative is “Could you please pass the salt?” Both expressions communicate a request, but they differ in their level of directness and perceived politeness. Therefore, learners need to understand not only how to construct sentences but also how to select appropriate expressions for different situations.

This distinction is particularly important in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where learners may have limited opportunities to observe how native and proficient English speakers perform speech acts in everyday communication. Teaching speech acts can help bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and effective communication.

2. Common Speech Acts and Challenges for EFL Learners

EFL learners may experience difficulties when performing speech acts because appropriate language choices depend on communicative intentions, social relationships, and context. Requests, apologies, refusals, and disagreements are particularly useful examples for classroom instruction.

Requests. Learners need to understand how to ask for something appropriately in different situations. For example, “Open the window” may be suitable in some contexts, whereas “Could you open the window, please?” may be more appropriate when speaking to someone with whom the speaker has a more formal relationship. Teachers can help learners compare different request forms and consider how directness and politeness change according to context.

Apologies. Saying “I am sorry” is one way to apologise, but an apology may also involve acknowledging responsibility, explaining what happened, or offering to correct the problem. Learners can practise choosing suitable expressions according to the seriousness of the situation and their relationship with the person they are addressing.

Refusals. Refusing an invitation or request can be challenging because a direct refusal may sound unfriendly in some situations. For example, “No, I cannot” communicates a refusal, while “Thank you for inviting me, but I am afraid I cannot come” combines appreciation with a polite refusal. Classroom activities can help learners explore different ways of declining invitations and requests without causing unnecessary offence.

Disagreements. Learners also need to understand how to express disagreement appropriately. Expressions such as “I see your point, but…” or “I understand what you mean; however…” allow speakers to communicate a different opinion while acknowledging the other person’s perspective.

These examples demonstrate why speech act instruction should include both linguistic forms and the social contexts in which they are used. The objective is not to

teach learners one fixed expression for every situation, but to help them recognise and choose from different language options.

The Importance of Explicit Speech Act Instruction

An important question in EFL teaching is whether learners can develop pragmatic competence naturally through exposure or whether they benefit from direct instruction. Kasper and Rose (2002) discuss pragmatic development in second-language learning and the role of instruction in helping learners understand how language is used in context.

Although exposure to English can provide useful opportunities for learning, learners may not always notice the subtle differences between speech act forms or understand why one expression is more appropriate than another. This can be particularly challenging in EFL settings, where classroom lessons may represent a learner's main source of contact with English.

Explicit instruction can therefore help learners identify and understand the relationship between language forms, communicative intentions, and social context. Rather than simply presenting a dialogue for memorisation, teachers can explain why a speaker chooses a particular expression and how the choice might change in a different situation.

For example, when teaching requests, a teacher can compare "Give me your pen," "Can I borrow your pen?" and "Could I possibly borrow your pen for a moment?" Learners can discuss how the expressions differ in directness and which contexts might make each one appropriate. Such comparisons encourage learners to think about language choices rather than relying exclusively on grammatical rules.

4. Classroom Activities for Teaching Speech Acts

Speech acts can be integrated into EFL lessons through practical, communicative activities. The following approaches provide learners with opportunities to recognise, practise, and reflect on appropriate language use.

Contextualised dialogues. Teachers can present short conversations involving requests, apologies, refusals, or disagreements. Learners identify the speech act, examine the expressions used, and discuss why those expressions may be appropriate in the given context.

Role-play activities. Learners can act out situations involving different relationships, such as asking a classmate for help, making a request to a teacher, refusing an invitation from a friend, or apologising to a colleague. Changing the social context allows learners to practise adjusting their language choices.

Video and audio materials. Authentic or appropriately selected audiovisual materials can expose learners to different ways of performing speech acts. Teachers can ask learners to identify expressions, notice differences in directness, and discuss how speakers communicate their intentions. These materials should be selected carefully and accompanied by tasks that direct learners' attention to pragmatic features.

Discourse completion tasks. Teachers can describe a situation and ask learners to write or say an appropriate response. For example, learners might be asked how they would refuse an invitation from a close friend and how they would respond to a similar invitation from a university lecturer. Comparing their answers can reveal differences in language choices across social contexts.

Reflection and feedback. After each activity, teachers can discuss alternative expressions and explain how factors such as social distance, relative status, and the nature of the request may influence language choices. Feedback should help learners understand the options available to them rather than suggest that only one expression is correct in every situation.

These activities allow speech acts to become a practical part of language learning rather than an abstract theoretical topic. They also provide opportunities to connect grammatical knowledge with the social purposes for which language is used.

5. Implications for EFL Teaching

The discussion suggests that speech act instruction should be incorporated into EFL teaching alongside grammar and vocabulary. Learners need opportunities to understand how language forms function in different social contexts and how communicative intentions can be expressed in more than one way.

Teachers can organise lessons around specific speech acts and gradually introduce a wider range of expressions and situations. For example, a lesson on requests may begin with identifying common request forms, continue with comparing their levels of directness, and finish with role-play activities involving different social relationships.

Speech act instruction should also encourage learners to reflect on differences between their first language and English without assuming that all speakers of either language follow the same conventions. Such reflection can help learners become more aware of how context influences communication.

Rather than treating pragmatic competence as something learners will automatically acquire, teachers can make it an explicit part of communicative language teaching. Through contextualised examples, guided practice, and constructive feedback, learners can develop a broader understanding of how to use English appropriately and effectively.

Overall, integrating speech acts into EFL instruction offers a practical way to connect grammatical knowledge with communicative competence. It helps learners focus not only on whether a sentence is grammatically correct but also on whether it communicates their intended meaning appropriately in a particular situation.

6. Comparing Grammar-Centred and Speech Act-Integrated Teaching

Comparing grammar-centred instruction with teaching that integrates speech acts highlights an important difference between grammatical accuracy and communicative appropriateness. Grammar-centred teaching helps learners construct correct sentences, but grammatical knowledge alone does not explain when, with

whom, or in what way particular expressions should be used. Consequently, learners may perform well in grammar exercises yet struggle to make requests, refuse invitations, or express disagreement appropriately in real-life situations.

In contrast, speech act-integrated teaching treats the appropriate use of language as an essential part of language learning. Rather than expecting learners to acquire pragmatic knowledge through exposure alone, teachers explicitly draw attention to how language forms communicate intentions in different social contexts. This approach allows learners to compare expressions, consider their effects on listeners, and practise selecting suitable forms for particular situations.

Speech act instruction can also make language learning more relevant to learners' everyday experiences. Activities involving requests, apologies, refusals, and disagreements provide opportunities to explore communication problems that learners may encounter outside the classroom. Through contextualised dialogues, role-plays, and guided feedback, learners can develop a better understanding of how communicative intentions are expressed in English.

Grammatical and pragmatic competence do not necessarily develop at the same pace. A learner may construct grammatically accurate sentences but still have difficulty choosing expressions appropriate to a particular social situation. Therefore, EFL curricula should not focus exclusively on grammatical accuracy. Integrating speech act instruction with grammar teaching can help learners develop a more balanced communicative ability.

Conclusion

Grammatical accuracy is an important component of English language learning, but it does not guarantee successful communication in real-life situations. As this paper has discussed, EFL learners may produce grammatically correct sentences while experiencing difficulties in performing speech acts appropriately. Requests, apologies, refusals, and disagreements require learners to consider not only the linguistic forms

they use but also their communicative intentions, social relationships, and the context in which communication takes place.

The discussion highlights the value of explicitly teaching speech acts as part of developing pragmatic competence. Although exposure to English can support learning, learners may not always recognise the social and contextual differences between expressions without guidance. Teachers can address this challenge by using contextualised dialogues, role-plays, authentic or appropriately selected audiovisual materials, and discourse completion tasks. These activities allow learners to practise different speech acts and reflect on how language choices influence communication.

Therefore, speech act instruction should be integrated into EFL teaching alongside grammar and vocabulary. Rather than treating pragmatic competence as an additional skill that learners are expected to develop naturally, teachers should provide systematic opportunities to understand and practise language in context. Such an approach can help learners move beyond constructing grammatically correct sentences towards communicating more appropriately and effectively in different social situations.

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