

# Speech Acts Analysis among Second Language Learners: Basis for an Enhanced English as Second Language (ESL) Instruction on Pragmatics

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**Abstract:** The study aimed to determine the speech acts performed by student-participants through requesting; asking permission; invitation; complaining; refusing or rejecting; and communicating different people in the society and lastly, to develop an enhanced learning plan on teaching pragmatics. The study revealed that the student – participants have a high – degree usage of directive speech acts especially on imperatives, performatives and personal need/want statement in terms of requesting something. In the communicative activities performed by the students, it has been observed that participants can be very expressive especially if they are in a situation of confronting someone. Students lack the ability to hold on their emotions while in a conversation process and there is a limited use of polite words. There were less hedges and indirectness words utilized by the students. Due to the students' limited linguistic resources, knowledge and ability to use appropriate request expressions, the students failed to include appropriate framing expressions to mitigate directness. This gives an implication to ESL instruction on Pragmatics that in order for the ESL learners to attain good command of their second language, learners should be exposed to English language.

## **1. Introduction**

Speakers who may be considered fluent in their second language in terms of their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary in English language, may still lack pragmatic competence or in other words, they may still be unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate. Pragmatic competence is “the ability to use language appropriately in a

social context” which involves both innate and learned capacities and develops naturally through a socialization process (Taguchi, 2009).

As added also by Castillo (2009), this concern requires learners to spend long hours working to sound like a native speaker thinking that pronunciation might be the reason for the misunderstanding. Although, elements such as fluency and accuracy are important for effective performance in

communication, learners of English as a second language may encounter themselves in a difficult position when they have to interact with native speakers of English because they have focused more on grammar, listening and speaking, reading and writing, but not on the correct usage of language which is significant part of a day-to-day communicative activities. Pragmatic knowledge helps language users construct linguistic messages that are context-appropriate and polite, and it can be considered “one of the most complex and challenging aspects of communicative competence” (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

English language is also used in a variety of settings where learners will be required to interact not only for basic interpersonal communication, but also in academic and business settings. As a consequence, many pragmatic elements might need to be known by the speakers in order to avoid inaccuracies or misunderstandings (Deda, 2013).

Pragmatic knowledge can be defined as the speaker’s ability to formulate and comprehend messages that are appropriate in a given context. Language users utilize pragmatic knowledge to relate their utterances to the language-use settings, such as to use and comprehend various registers and to comprehend cultural allusions (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Pragmatics became significant to many linguists and researches since it ought to determine on how and what language do speakers especially second language (L2) learners use depending on the social context to communicate and even how they express ideas using non – verbal communication.

Speech act is one of the pragmatic studies. Speech act was first developed by Austin (1962) that explains the utterances with a natural language to get a feedback

(Flor & Juan, 2011). Speech act is a phrase that consists of two words that embodies speech and act. Further, speech act can change the social reality through the meaning and the kind of utterances being performed and how language is produced to perform an action. Speech act is usually used for making statements, giving commands, asking questions or making promises (Muhartoyo & Kristani, 2013).

When speakers particularly the L2 learners speak, they usually perform certain acts within a speech event in a situation. Speech acts aspects of language being use would differ in terms of different social situations, languages, and cultural background. This would give an idea that even learners who have high language proficiency, still learners encounter problems in communicating using their second language because they might be misunderstood and judged with the delivery of their speech acts which are sometimes being influenced by cultural background (Kim, 2000).

From the study of Kasper & Rose (2002), pragmatics researches has demonstrated that the pragmatic knowledge of non-native language learners and that of NSs can be quite different and production of speech acts plays an important role in pragmatic knowledge of the speakers. Cohen's (2008) stated that speech acts refer to the ways in which people carry out specific social functions in speaking such as apologizing, complaining, making requests, refusing things/invitations, or complementing.

L2 learners should know who they are talking to and the relationship they have, what makes them talk, what they are talking about, and which way of speech fulfils the goal of communication. According to Borer (2018), through analyzing the speech acts

being used by the learners, teachers will be able to determine on how they perform in social communicative acts and this now gives emphasis on the teaching of pragmatics in language teaching since the teaching of pragmatics can facilitate the learners' competence to find and produce socially appropriate language for the situations that they encounter.

From the different perspectives mentioned above, these mean that in understanding speaking, interpreting meanings of certain sentences is not enough because identifying an act also must be done. So, by this component, the researcher sought to answer what utterances do, how they can be used, and how learners used them in a conversation.

## **2. Objectives**

This study aimed to determine the speech acts performed by L2 learners during requesting, asking permission, invitation, complaining, refusing or rejecting and communicating people in the society.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The researcher employed the qualitative research design. This research employed descriptive qualitative method since it emphasizes on describing the phenomenon of the use of language in its context by interpreting the data. According to Denzin (2005) stated that qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own rights. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter. Morse (1994) added that this method will try to cover the language, the analysis, and description of interpretation.

Furthermore, Lithcman (2010) mentioned that its purpose is to describe and understand human phenomena, human

interaction, or human discourse. This type of research attempted to describe or explain why a phenomenon happens. The performance of the student-participants such as utterances and verbal and non-verbal expressions were used as bases to analyze the speech acts performed by the student-participants. English Discourse Completion Oral Test was the main instrument used in the conduct of the study through role – play presentations and there were eight (8) prompts they performed. The researcher served as the observer to elicit the speech acts of the learners through the production of their language according to social context.

### **3.2 Sampling Procedure**

The researcher adopted the theoretical saturation method. Since there were no new speech acts being produced by the participants from the discourse completion oral test was ended by having ten (10) participants because majority of the participants used and produced the common speech acts and this, the saturation level was met.

The respondents of the study were the 3<sup>rd</sup> Year BSEd English Students in Catbalogan City, Samar. There were twenty (20) participants who were randomly chosen to perform the following discourse completion oral test. This group of student-respondents have acquired English language skill. Furthermore, the participants are future English teachers and may be have discrepancies towards their pragmatic competence. It is also considered that being the future English teachers, they are expected to be good and effective users of English language.

### **3.3 Data Collection Method and Analyses**

This study used the English Discourse Completion Oral Test. It contains

eight (8) situations and the students performed the different prompts through a role – play presentation and able to produce communicative activities. The said instrument was adopted from Rose (1994). The utterances of the student-participants were captured through audio-video recorded. The actual performances of the student-participants were conducted during the performance activity in the classroom. The student-participants were unaware that their performances and utterances were used for research purposes to avoid scripted and prepared utterances. The purpose of doing actual performance of the different prompts given to the student-respondents was to provide authentic responses from them. Narrative analysis was sought in the study to cluster analytic methods for interpreting utterances of the participants.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings, discussion and evaluation based from the objectives of the study. This section also features implications and salient findings which are significant to the understanding of the answers from the questions of this study.

The framework of speech act theory has two or more participants speaking the language and making their own intentions known. The addressor is the source of the message, examination of this message will make other people understand the intention or the implication of the addressor. The addressee is the receiver of the message. They interpret the message and perform actions accordingly. The following are the prompts and utterances of the student-respondents.

1. You are studying in your room and you hear loud music coming from a room down the hall. You don't know the student who lives

there, but you want to ask him/her to turn the music down. What do you say?

*“Turn off the volume of your radio.”*  
(Student A)

*“Excuse me, please switch off the music. I am studying so hard for the examination!”* (Student B)

*“Please, switch off the music.”*  
(Student C)

*“Hey! I do not like it. Your loud music really disturbs me a lot!”* (Student D)

The common utterances produced by the student-respondents, the student - participants used performative/declarative speech act. It causes someone to do an action or change a situation. It is noticeable that the common utterances produced by the student-participants are direct command. Also, this shows that the utterances did not contain any hedges or indirectness and utterances were freely performed directly. However, there were utterances wherein, the use of ‘Please’ was used. It suggests “begging” utterance which is most likely shows to be polite.

Mostly of the student-participants produces expressive speech act because they expressed their feelings and emotions towards the loud music. The attitude of the student-participants as speakers indicated that they were angry because during the performance, the student-participants were shouting with their facial expression which really described that they were really irritated and disturbed. Further, this gives an implication that the expression of emotions either liking or disliking has been part of the system of the student – participants for self – expression in communicating other people.

2. You are talking to your friend after class. You missed the last class and you want to borrow your friend's notes. How do you ask for help in this case?

*"I've heard that our teachers made some notes on the upcoming finals. May I ask for a request if I could borrow your notes?"* (Student E)

*"I guess our professor discussed important topics, right? And so, I need to get your notes."* (Student G)

*"I need to get your notes"* (Student H)

For the first utterance, it indicates the use of assertive speech act which is reporting and confirming an information. While the second statement employed the use of conventional indirect request speech act. It has been observed that the speaker used first an indirect statement before requesting on borrowing the notes. Indirect request expresses the illocutionary force by using fixed linguistic conventions (Taguchi, 2006).

Same with the previous response, it also indicated the use of assertive speech act specifically on predicting because of the statement used *"I guess"* and the used of the term *"right?"* which is also an indicator confirming an answer. Meanwhile, the third common utterance produced by the student-participants employed the use of directive which is on the use of personal need/desire statement. The utterance is a direct statement without asking first permission to the owner of the notes and during the role-play presentation the voice and attitude of the student-participants while delivering the utterances were somewhat inappropriate manner in a case like borrowing or requesting something.

3. There is a test in class in two weeks, but you'll miss class that day because you have to go to an out-of-town wedding. Class has just ended, and you want to ask your professor whether you can take the exam on another day. How do you go about doing so?

*"Sir, I am very sorry, I really felt sad for I cannot take the exam. Sir, can I take the exam on the other day? That is a promise."* (Student G)

*"Sir, I want to take the exam next week. I cannot take the exam on your schedule given."* (Student H)

For the first utterance, this indicates the use of expressive act. Another finding on the statements of the student-participants were they tend to be expressive on their emotions. Also, the utterance used commissive particularly in giving promises.

For the second utterance, the student-participants were unaware on the appropriate approach to be performed while talking to the professor. Taking in consideration that they were communicating to their professor and the expected statement should be appropriate, the students lack pragmatic competence. It has been observed that majority of the participants would use direct request which their linguistic features do not match to the social context and do not use polite words. In relation to this, Taguchi (2006) stated that appropriateness of pragmatic performance depends on sufficient linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Being too direct in asking permission or request to a professor is considered to be inappropriate for the situation.

4. A friend from out of town is visiting you at school, and you are showing your friend around

the campus and city. You want someone to take your picture together. You see a man dressed in a suit carrying a briefcase and you want to ask him to take your picture. What do you say?

Majority of the student-respondents performed the utterances below:

*“Please take us a picture.”*  
(Student I)

*“Can you take us a picture?”*  
(Student J)

The first utterance indicates that in requesting, the participants used imperatives or even commands. Students did not even use an expression to acknowledge the man they wanted to take a photo and the students did not even ask the man if it is okay for the man to take picture taking in consideration that a man is wearing a dressed in a suit carrying a briefcase. In other words, it can be depicted that a man is working in an executive company. However, the student-participants failed to communicate to the man appropriately.

According to Trosborg (1995) using a role – play, it was revealed that majority of L2 learners normally used imperatives like direct requests and commands. Only few L2 learners used indirect expressions like using mitigated requests which minimizes the use of being direct.

5. Next week there is a test in a class that is difficult for you. The student you usually sit next to — not a friend but rather an acquaintance — seems to understand the course material better than you. You happen to see this person outside of class a week before the test, and you want to ask him/her to help you

get ready for the test. How do you go about doing this?

*“I am having difficulties in understanding and studying. Could you possibly help me? Or I really want you to help understand this lesson.”* (Student A)

The student-participants in this scenario started their statement by using assertive speech act in which the students commit them to something that is true or them experiences that are happening. It appears here that the participants were informing their acquaintance. For this scenario, the participants used permission directive and another statement like, *“I really want you to help understand this lesson”* this is a personal need/wants statement which is a direct expression to address immediately the concern of the participants. Again, participants in this study were not familiar with mitigated – preparatory expression.

*“I would appreciate and grateful if you will help me in our lesson because it is difficult.”* (Student B)

This statement used mitigated wants. However, there were only few student-participants knew how to use mitigated statements because there were overuse of direct expressions especially on imperatives. This concludes that, majority of the student – participants are more familiar with direct expressions.

6. You get on the bus to go home and you are carrying a lot of books. You are tired and you want to sit down. At first glance, it seems that there are no seats left, but then you notice that a student is taking up two seats. How do you ask this student to move over so you can sit down?

*“Would you mind moving a bit so that I can sit?”* (Student C)

*“Can I sit here?”* (Student D)

The utterances reported above are an example of imbedded imperatives. However, the student-participants would usually include their face – threatening approach and so, it made the communicative action became less polite. According to Liu (2004), any failure in L2 learners’ comprehension and production of the idiosyncrasies of either component in any language use situation would lead to pragmatic failure or communication breakdown.

7. You are having dinner with your friend’s family. The food is delicious, and you want to ask your friend’s mother/father for more. What do you say?

*“Wow, this food is really delicious. I want more.”* (Student E)

*“Can I ask for more food?”*  
(Student F)

The above reported utterances are the common language production that used expressive by the student-participants which are an expressive speech act and this presents appreciation about the food. The statement, *“I want more”* used personal need/want and this is also considered to be some implicit performatives because this is an implied request or command to make someone give you some more food.

The utterances of the student-participants are direct request. From these examples, it would give a notable explanation the reason why students perform these strategic devices. Due to the students’ limited linguistic resources, knowledge and ability to use appropriate request expressions, the learners tend to ask directly

or do request and command during the interaction process for the learners to successfully perform their request.

8. You go to the library to return a lot of books, and your hands are full. There is a man who looks like a professor standing near the door of the library. How do you ask him to open the door for you?

*“Sir, can I ask to open the door, please?”* (Student D)

*“Sir, will you open the door for me?”*  
(Student G)

These statements are another proof that there is a high degree in terms of the use of direct speech acts especially in asking for request. The delivery of this statement *“Sir, will you open the door for me?”* was not appropriate because of the use of the tone of voice and intonation. Student-participants used rising intonation and this would affect the impression and understanding of the hearer of this statement. There is a need to consider the emphasis of perlocutionary act which is the reaction of the hearer, consequences of saying something, intended or not. From the example above, it may cause the hearer to react negatively because on how the utterance was performed by the speaker. According to Alamdari et al. (2010), commonly ESL and EFL learners are unaware of their utterances whether they are using polite expressions or not. They also stated that the main reason why learners tend to be impolite because of their limited linguistic background.

Further, the analysis led to major themes based on the significant utterances produced by the student-participants:

*Theme 1: Being direct speaker*

Being direct in terms of utterances, it shows that in a situation which involved lesser power meaning, with the speaker being of a lower rank, plus social distance in which the speaker and the hearer did not know or identify/recognize with each other, and plus, degree of imposition wherein, on the part of the hearer to carry out the request, a greater degree of politeness was required. In contrary, when the speech act involved a lower degree of imposition and addressed a person in an equal relationship like apologizing a friend, a lesser degree of politeness was required. Learners frequently underuse politeness marking in second language even though they regularly mark their utterances for politeness in their first language (Kasper, 1981).

Being direct speaker sometimes could give negative impression towards the speakers because being direct speakers can be offensive. It has been noticeable that being direct especially in asking for a request, their linguistic features do not match to the social context and they do not use polite words.

*Theme 2: Limited linguistic resources lead to inappropriate and impolite terms/expressions*

The speaker's exposure to second language input triggered some important developments in their use of routines, syntactic, and lexical downgraders. These give an implication that if learners are dominantly pragmatic competent, then it shows that learners would have higher proficiency and tend to use appropriate and polite terms and expressions during communicative setting. Sociopragmatic failure, on the contrary, originates when non-native speakers unknowingly abide by their L1 rules of speaking and their communicative behaviour is therefore

influenced by their sociocultural competence in the L1. This in many cases prevents them from correctly identifying social situations (Riley, 2006).

*Theme 3: Speaker's intent, sentence meaning and hearer's interpretation are not always the same*

Speaker and listener utter sentences that mean more than or are even sometimes different from what they actually say, as in ambiguities or sarcastic and ironical comments. Listeners understand the additional or altered meaning and communication is achieved. Communication does take place in such situations because meaning is not created solely by linguistic codes, but also by the commonality of the context of the speakers. Gumperz (1996) commented that speakers and listeners have the ability to convey pragmatic intent indirectly and infer indirectly conveyed meaning by utilizing cues in the utterance, context information, and various knowledge sources. Meaning, it assumes that an implicit or implied understanding vary according to context.

**5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The student – participants have a high – degree usage of directive speech acts especially on imperatives, performatives and personal need/want statement in terms of requesting something. Participants also performed variety of emotions. However, in the communicative activities performed by the students, it has been observed that participants can be very expressive especially if they are in a situation of confronting someone. Students lack the ability to hold on their emotions while in a conversation process and use of polite words. There were less hedges and indirectness words utilized by the students.



Further, the voice and attitude of the student – participants while delivering the statements were inappropriate manner in a case like borrowing or requesting something. Student-participants were unaware on the appropriate language to be used in social context. It has been observed that majority of the participants would use direct request which their linguistic features do not match to the social context and do not use polite words. Only few students used indirect expressions like using mitigated requests which minimizes the use of being direct and use of face – threatening approach was evident on some scenarios being performed by the students this made the interaction became less polite.

Due to the students' limited linguistic resources, knowledge and ability to use appropriate request expressions, the students failed to include appropriate framing expressions to mitigate directness (e.g. asking the professor to re schedule the exam without giving an explanation and asking someone to take picture and requesting someone to open the door). Moreover, this gives an implication to ESL instruction on Pragmatics that in order for the ESL learners to attain good command of their L2, learners should be exposed to English language. Therefore, pragmatic embodies speech act and in teaching grammar and vocabulary, both can be integrated in teaching pragmatics.

ESL teachers can pay attention to grammar rules and other aspects of grammar like focusing on the use of parts of speech and sentence pattern. Pragmatics can be taught in English classroom instruction by utilizing the learners' first language as well as the target language, demonstrating in the L1 or L1 language samples which include the use of space, such as where people stand in a line, or nonverbal gestures that accompany certain types of talk, such as

shaking hands during greetings or introductions and role – play using different life – like scenarios where in the students will be able to think critically and able to produce functional and appropriate language in different social context. Importantly, pragmatics is an area of language instruction where teachers and students can genuinely learn together using varied approaches and methodologies.

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